

From Christian education to FAITH FORMATION: a journey in PROCESS

BY CATHY HOPKINS

I was sitting in a cramped, dingy nine-by-sixteen-foot room with seven children ranging in age from four to seven. In front of me was a wall-to-wall bookcase filled with old hymnals and Bibles and outdated curriculum. Behind me was a cabinet cluttered with castoff toys, old costumes, and boxes full of various craft supplies. I wondered how we got in this mess, and more importantly what could be done about it.

We were stuck in the trap of “the way we’ve always done it.” We have been trying to use an historic Christian education model in a world that has changed in its priorities and focus. This presented a number of challenges. Years ago our educational space was leased to a pre-school program. We have been using a closely age-grouped curriculum for children that called for 60- to 90-minute sessions, with a third of that time available. And, after a remodel of the fellowship hall to accommodate our outreach programs, we were left with a new nine-by-sixteen-foot classroom and the conference room for Sunday school space. In other words, we had a small but growing number of children, too little time, too few leaders, and too little appropriate space.



Before: Space at the north end of the fellowship hall was designated for children's education space. It was also a large enough space for storing the extension ladder!



Before: The older children met in the conference room, which also houses a “put and take” library for church members

Early this year I took my concerns to the pastor, who suggested a meeting with some church leaders to discuss the problems. I wondered with them how our life together would change if we shifted our focus from a traditional schooling-model of Christian Education to a focus on the life-long process of faith formation. What would we do differently if, rather than teaching lessons, we devoted ourselves to experiencing the awe, wonder and mystery of faith built on relationships within our faith community and beyond?

First, I suggested to the group that we were suffering from a “scatoma,” a blind-spot created by the passage of time. I reminded the group that the church teaches in everything it does, intentionally and unintentionally. How rooms and buildings look, feel, and smell teaches what we believe about worship, the church, and how we value the people who use the space. Looking together at some photos taken around the fellowship hall and the spaces used by the children opened our eyes to what we were missing and what the children were experiencing.

Those few photos prompted a work day for cleanup and touchup projects that opened and brightened up the hall and the spaces the children were using. But, the space was still too small. With the addition of a portable wall that folds and moves easily, we created an additional fifteen-by-thirty-foot space for Sunday morning use.

Within this new space, we have brought the children together and embarked on a rotational model for sharing stories of the faith. Working and sharing together allows us to maximize the leadership and encourages the children in their development of relationships with one another and with the adults who work with them. From time to time, various members of the congregation are invited to share their special talents and interests. For example, during our study of the creation stories in Genesis, the usually low-key moderator of the congregation was asked to share James Weldon Johnson’s creation sermon with the children. His surprising flare for the dramatic allowed all of us to hear the story in a new way and to experience him in a different role and learn more about him.

The rotational model also provides an opportunity for the children to work on stories and projects over a period of weeks. In this way, fluctuations in attendance have less of an impact on the children's sense of belonging and on the leaders' energy for preparation.

Because words carry so much power, our next action was to reframe the language we use to describe what we are doing. The Christian Education Committee has become the Faith Formation Committee, and Sunday school is becoming Adventure Time. This is easier said than done because language habits are so deeply engrained, but I believe it is essential to changing the paradigm. Too often Christian Education is understood to be a program for children and youth, with adult programming non-existent or incidental. Changing our language strengthens our vision of faith formation as a life-long process that is intentionally encouraged and nurtured in the relationships of the faith community.

Our next priority was the intentional integration of worship and the time spent with the children. The pastors



After: In the new space, marked off by portable dividers, the children use hand tools and over the course of several weeks build an ark 10 feet by 4 feet by 7.5 feet high.

Building NOAH'S ARK ...

For the past several weeks we have been studying the Noah story in Genesis. Utilizing a rotational model and taking full advantage of our new flexible space, we have been building our version of the ark. It measures 10 feet by 4 feet and is 7 ½ feet high, nearly filling our small classroom space. The ark was initially built of 2 x 2 lumber on my patio, disassembled for transport, then "built" by the children using old fashioned hand tools. We did a lot of pre-drilling to make it easier for even the 3-year-olds to feel they had a part in the process. In less than a month, with a few hours mid-week work, we have brought the project to the point where 13 of us could climb inside, close the door and

and I meet on a regular basis to coordinate themes and explore possibilities for new and meaningful approaches to faith formation. Special children's worship bulletins have been developed that highlight the lectionary text for the day and any special themes or projects. They encourage the children to focus on various parts of the worship service and concepts that are sometimes difficult for them to understand. In addition to the traditional pastor's time with the children, we occasionally reverse the roles and have the children share a message with the pastor and the congregation.

As we continue this journey, there are challenges to overcome. Building on the developing programs for children, we will need to close the youth gap. We don't have many teens at this time, but we have a number of twelve-year-olds who will need a path to continue in their faith formation. As we identify topics of interest and areas of study for adults, we need to develop them as adventures in faith, each one a step in the life-long process of faith formation.

In a world where Sunday morning sports programs are valued more highly than participation in the life of the church, I believe that this change in emphasis from schooling to faith formation is essential for equipping and sustaining our community of faith.



After: Adult supervisors work with children as the ark begins to take shape. The dividers mark off the children's space from the rest of the fellowship hall. Grown-ups had as much fun tracking the progress of the ark as the children had building it!

...In Adventure Time

experience Noah's story from yet another perspective. In a couple of weeks, the children will share their work with an "open house" after worship.

Was it worth the effort? Yes, indeed! Last Sunday instead of rushing off for refreshments, the children lingered, working, playing, and sharing with the adult helpers in the various interaction areas.

For our next big adventure, we're going to study the story of Joseph, and I think we'll make a movie.