

## GS3000

### Grad Project Presentation

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#### Introduction

Picture it.

It's Pentecost Sunday, 2000... and the wide-angle lens of the camera is not wide enough to capture an image of *all* the children gathered at the front of the sanctuary in this suburban United Church. Over 250 children are registered in the Sunday School program here, and as many as 150 are present on any given Sunday.<sup>1</sup> The wonderful Spirit-filled challenge of ministering to this many children means that every week is electric with the energy and excitement of barely-controlled chaos. Staff is hired, volunteers trained, and resource materials purchased. A great deal of effort and thousands of dollars are invested in supporting this children's ministry.

And yet, less than a dozen years later, the number of children gathered at the front of the sanctuary in this same church is much, *much*, smaller. Seventy children are registered in the Sunday School program, and a typical Sunday sees about 24 of them.<sup>2</sup> Those with a passion for children's ministry in this congregation look around in confusion and ask, "What went wrong?"

The story of this congregation's ministry with its children may be startling, but it is not unique. It is indicative of the reality facing many United Churches today.

As with other mainstream Christian denominations across Canada, the United Church today is struggling with a new reality. Exterior factors, including sociological, economic, and political pressures have seriously eroded the church's traditional place of prominence in Canadian society. That the United Church is navigating through the wilderness is obvious in its shrinking demographic of children: the total number of children involved on a regular basis with United Church congregations across Canada today is less than 1/3 of what it was in the late 1980s<sup>3</sup> when a new approach to children's ministries became a national focus.

But in today's reality of smaller congregations and fewer children, have the efforts of the past born fruit in unexpected ways? What are children actively involved in congregations today saying about their experiences of Church? What aspects of the ministry offered to them has supported their faith formation? What has not? How does the United Church encourage the faith formation of its children?

These are the questions I set out to investigate in this project.

#### Theological Themes

Whetting my appetite in this exploration was an appreciation of key principles evident in the Biblical narrative. Within the overarching story of our faith, there are clear expectations of religious education, spiritual development, hospitality, and inclusion: the Deuteronomist calls Israel to recite

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<sup>1</sup> Janice Frame, "Bucking the Trend," *Imprints: A Newsmagazine for the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada*, Spring 2001, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Arseneault, e-mail message to author, November 29, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> In 1986 membership in the United Church's 3565 children's Sunday Schools totalled 231,996. By 2008, the number of children's Sunday Schools had shrunk to 2344, with a membership of 74,453. *The United Church Year Book and Directory 2009, vol. 1, Pastoral Charge Statistics* (Toronto: General Council Office, 2008), 16-17.

the Shema, the Jewish daily prayer, to its children (Deut 6:5-7); the psalmist sings to God in times of celebration (Ps 47) and in times of despair (Ps 42); Jesus welcomes children to him and affirms their place in the kingdom of God (Mt 19:13-15, Mk 10:13-16, Lk 18:15-17); and Paul calls *all* the baptized “one in Christ” (Gal 3:27-28).

In the reality of a new wilderness, has the United Church been faithful to Biblical narrative’s expectation? Have concepts of religious education, spiritual development, hospitality, and inclusion remained a priority so that children today feel welcomed and supported, their faith nurtured and deepened? Have “child theologies” emerged that affirm both a commitment to children and a desire to reinterpret Christian theology and practice as a whole in light of attention to children?<sup>4</sup> Do United Church children sense God’s presence in their lives? I hoped they themselves would tell me.

## Methodology

I interviewed eight children, ranging in age from 9 to 11 years. I introduce to you Isabella, Lindsay-Anne, Leanna, Rachel, Karah, James, Sam, and Beau. These names are names the children chose for themselves, and are not their real names. This is small sampling of interviewees, but it is a reasonable number within the expectations of a qualitative study.<sup>5</sup> Qualitative study allows for a “narrow but deep” investigation through conversation and storytelling rather than a “broad and shallow” investigation through statistical measurement and analysis.

Each of these children is active in one of three different United Church congregations – one urban, one suburban, and one rural. Each congregation itself has an average Sunday attendance of between 50 and 100 worshipers<sup>6</sup>, and each is ministered to by one ordained female clergyperson.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the children’s home churches, and all took place in the presence of an adult “silent observer”.

This study was not intended as a Sunday School review. Although for most children, a substantial portion of their time at church is spent in Sunday School, I was more interested in a holistic approach, inquiring about the children’s overall experience of church, in both the worship space and the Sunday School area. My thinking is influenced by the late Jean Olthuis, former Program Consultant for the Ministry with Children unit of the United Church, who wrote in 2002,

If [children] are to grow in faith and hope, it is as important for them to interact with the total faith community – to be nourished regularly in communal worship, pastoral care, community outreach, stewardship and social justice activities – as it is to participate in their own Sunday School.<sup>7</sup>

And so the interviews began.

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<sup>4</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and ‘Best Practices’ for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* vol 47, no 4 (winter 2008), 350. See also Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and religious Understandings of Children and Childhood,” *Journal of Religion* vol. 86, no. 4 (October 2006), 563-572.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2007), 40.

<sup>6</sup> *The United Church Year Book and Directory 2009, vol. 1, Pastoral Charge Statistics* (Toronto: General Council Office, 2008), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Olthuis, “Winds of Change: Faith Formation in a New Age,” *Ecumenism* No. 148 (December 2002), 24.

## The Interviews

### “What do you feel when you come into your church?”

The first question I asked the children was, “What do you feel when you come into your church?”

They responded:

**Peace. I feel happy.**

**Safe.**

**It's like, “I've been here before. It's okay.”**

All the children expressed a sense of comfort when they entered their churches. Deeper conversation made it clear that this comfort was based on familiarity of three things: familiarity of space, familiarity of faces, and familiarity of ritual. When the children crossed the threshold of their churches, they knew where they were going, who would be there, and what would happen. None expressed feelings of resistance or nervousness. Rather, their comments spoke of both security and anticipation:

**I get to see my friends from church and I'm going to learn something new.**

**[I'm] excited of what we're going to do.**

**I know that God is there and we're going to talk about God.**

Rachel made a point of saying that coming to church made her feel “a little different.”

**I feel like God is closer to me than usual. When I'm out of the church I don't feel as close to him. When I come into the church I feel a little different. I don't know why.**

Although Rachel's church was a *familiar* place, for her it was not an *ordinary* place. Her church provided holy ground where she could sense God's presence.

### Familiarity of Space

Several of the children took me on a tour of the sanctuary of their churches. They were comfortable with the space, and none of them demonstrated hesitation: there was no indication that they felt they were standing where they shouldn't stand or touching things they shouldn't touch. Clearly they did not see their churches as museums of relics or ritual objects.<sup>8</sup> Rather, as Leanna said...

**I really like this church... it just feels special... it feels like another home.**

The children were confident about the function of various areas and pieces of furniture in the sanctuary, even if they didn't use traditional language to name them. So...

the narthex is **the lobby**

the bulletin is **the little booklet**

the pulpit is where **the minister reads things out**

the pews are **the benches**

the chancel is **the stage where the choir is**

and the font is **the bath-tize thing.**

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<sup>8</sup> Richard S. Vosko, *God's House is Our House: Re-imagining the Environment for Worship* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2006), 3.

## **Familiarity of Faces**

All the children could name their minister by her first name. Only Karah referred to her minister as Reverend. Some of the children could remember a few of their congregation's previous ministers, and told stories about most of them. This familiarity with clergy, present and past, gave the impression of friendship and ease, an impression that was strengthened by the children's total confidence that their ministers knew *them*, and could call *them* by name.

The children also appeared certain that other adults in their congregations knew who they were...

**I've been here since I've been, like, four months old, so everyone knows who I am. Not each and every single one of them, but probably most of them know what my name is.**

**Yeah, other people know me who come to church.**

Only sometimes did those adults speak directly to the children. The children gave no indication that they felt slighted or ignored by this lack of communication.

For their part, the children demonstrated difficulty in naming any adult other than their ministers, their regular Sunday School teachers, and a few others with whom they had regular contact. A simple recognition of faces was enough for the children to decide that they "knew" the adults in their congregations.

**I don't know everyone in the church, but I know most people.**

**I recognize them. I don't know all their names.**

**They look familiar.**

## **Familiarity of Ritual**

Except for special occasions, the format of the worship services in all three congregations is the same: the children are present in the sanctuary for the first 15-20 minutes of the service before moving to the Sunday School area. As Lindsay-Anne described...

**We stand up and sing songs... and then when we come up for Children's Time, I come over here and I sit... I listen to the story... and then we pray and then we go downstairs [to Sunday School].**

Routine appeared to be important for the children, extending from the comfort of sitting in the same place every Sunday...

**I usually sit at the very front. I don't know why. Just for some reason.**

**The sixth row on the right, on the wall: I just like sitting there.**

to the predictability – and enjoyment – of congregational singing.

**I like when we sang at the beginning.**

The children had an obvious familiarity with the opening rituals in their congregation's worship services. Many routinely participated in specific aspects of those opening rituals by presenting symbols of worship – the Bible, candle, and cross – or by reading. Although none participated directly in a children's choir, Karah assisted with a younger children's choir, and Lindsay-Anne and Leanna provided occasional music ministry by singing with in an intergenerational worship band.

Familiarity of ritual continued when the children moved to their Sunday School areas. Even though each of the three congregations relied on a different commercially-prepared Sunday School curriculum, the children identified common elements in their Sunday School experience...

**Usually we read the story... and then we'll do an activity.  
We do a lot of activities. God-related activities.  
Mostly we'll do crafts the whole time and learn a little bit.**

Most of the children spoke of story, and most spoke of colouring sheets or crafts. Some spoke of music and prayer, a few spoke specifically about being with friends. All implied that Sunday School was a comfortable time.

**It's fun.  
Safe, protective, joyful. Pretty much just like the church.**

While most children looked forward to moving to their Sunday School area, James preferred to remain in the sanctuary...

**'Cause I like singing.**

Beau sometimes took advantage of the freedom to choose, saying...

**I'm in Sunday School a lot and I just wanted to take a short break for once.**

**“How would you describe God?”**

The second question the children considered was, “How would you describe God?”

All of the children used positive imagery to articulate their concept of God: God was a good guy. And make no mistake, God was a *guy*. All of the children used the masculine pronoun in relation to God – for them, God was definitely a human-like “he”. Some of the children immediately jumped to a detailed physical description...

**An angel-like man with a robe, maybe a harp.  
Really, really tall, with short brown-black hair and a little short beard and moustache.  
And he's wearing one of those Greek god big white sheet things.**

while others first went to a functional description...

**God wouldn't hurt you... he doesn't do bad things.  
The man who created us and watches us.  
Protective.**

Most consistent among all the comments was the children's conviction that God's primary role was that of “helper.”

**He would probably help you.  
He tries to help people, solves their problems with a prayer.  
I've never seen him, but he usually helps people.**

The children's anthropomorphic descriptions of God are consistent with Ronald Goldman's findings in the 1960s, that visualising God in human and physical terms, sometimes with special

human features such as gentleness or kindness, continues until about age 11.<sup>9</sup> Also consistent with Goldman's findings is Leanna's statement that God and Jesus are synonymous...

**I think he resembles [Jesus]. I think they're the same person for some reason. I think they resemble the same and have almost the same personalities.**

Most of the children said they felt connected to God when they were in church, and almost as many said they felt close to God in other places as well. A couple specifically felt a connection to God through church music, sometimes while participating in congregational singing and sometimes while listening to the choir's anthems. Some felt connected to God when they were helping others, or when they were being helped. A couple said they felt close to God when they thought about people from their families or communities who had died, or when they attended Remembrance Day services.

A few of the children spoke – albeit hesitantly – about connecting with God through personal prayer. They preferred to speak of prayer as something led by adults as part of the corporate worship experience. This unease with prayer highlights Rebecca Nye's critique of contemporary ministry with children, which, she says, tends to approach spiritual life as something that begins only after children have been "filled up" with religious knowledge. She argues that children have an innate spirituality that can be nurtured by integrating spiritual practices into children's ministries, and it is through regular attention to silence and prayer that children can relate to the mystery and immanence of God.<sup>10</sup>

#### **"Who helps you feel connected to God?"**

Almost all the children gave to any adult who had a teaching or leadership role in their church credit for helping them feel connected to God. These adults included Sunday School teachers, parents, family friends within the church, summer Day Camp leaders, church choir members. However, the children assigned to their ministers more specific aspects of connection...

**She helps me remember that Jesus and God are important.  
She tells examples of what God does and sometimes it reminds me of myself.  
She helps us pray.**

None of the children acknowledged learning about God from their peers, and only Leanna acknowledged influence from an adult beyond the church setting. Karah said that she would like to see the sharing and helping that she saw happening within her church become common practice in society. Her church, then, demonstrated for her the ethos of a compassionate and caring community, an ethos she did not see in other places. For Karah, God was primarily a helper, so her church helped her feel connected to God by itself being a "helping community."

#### **"What would you like to change in your church?"**

When asked what one thing in their church the children would like to change, most said...

**Nothing.  
I don't really think you should change anything.**

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<sup>9</sup> Ronald J. Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 92.

<sup>10</sup> See Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London UK: Church House Publishing, 2009).

The children appeared content with how things were – they were content with the familiar – and most were reluctant to think beyond what was for them the norm. A couple of children, however, did open their imaginations. Lindsay-Anne said...

**I'd put some more kids in our Sunday School... because we don't really have a lot of new kids in our Sunday School... And make more Communion. I like the Communion.**

When I asked her why she liked Communion, she said...

**We have one loaf of bread through the whole church, and I like the fact that Jesus kind of broke up his body and gave it to, like, 12, 19, 20 people.**

In her own way, Lindsay-Anne was expressing a theology of sacrament and a theology of community. Being invited to the Communion Table as part of the whole people of God clearly had had a profound effect on her, and it was an act that she wanted to experience with more regularity.

When asked what *she* would like to change in *her* church, Leanna said...

**A bit more singing. I know that we sing a lot, but I love singing. And I wish that during Sunday School that we could listen to music while we're doing stuff.**

She went on to say that a previous Sunday School teacher played recorded music while she did colouring sheets and other "seat work", and she sang along with...

**songs about Noah's Ark and stuff like that.**

Leanna said she remembered the Biblical stories better because of the songs. This draws attention to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences<sup>11</sup>, which identifies the different ways in which children – and adults – learn, and how the integration of that learning into one's overall development takes place. Of the eight intelligences Gardner identified, Leanna's comments imply that she gravitates toward the musical/rhythmic intelligence: she learns comfortably and well through music.

**"What would you want to stay the same?"**

When asked, "What would you want to stay the same?" the children's responses re-iterated their comfort with familiarity of space, familiarity of faces, and familiarity of ritual. Leanna particularly appreciated, and wanted to maintain, her church's efforts to be inclusive of all age groups.

**Young kids, babies, teens, pre-teens, young adults, adults, elders... yeah, they include everyone... [But] my grandmother's four hour church with no Sunday School? I'm ready to fall asleep. I would say to her, "I'm sorry, but I cannot go to church today because... I love church, but yours is four hours long and it's all for adults."**

**So What?**

I began my investigation asking how the United Church encourages the faith formation of its children. I wondered if in the reality of a new wilderness, the United Church continued to honour

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<sup>11</sup> See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

the Biblical narrative's expectation of religious education, spiritual development, hospitality, and inclusion so that children felt welcomed and supported, their faith nurtured and expanded.

Based on my conversations with these eight children, it appears that their congregations are attempting to do just that. The children spoke of a hospitable environment that welcomed both their presence and their participation. However, I suggest to you that although the children expressed comfort with church as it was, it is possible that with a few minor tweaks, the children's experience in church could be richer and their relationship with God further enhanced.

1) The children spoke predominantly of colouring sheets and crafts in their Sunday School. Leaders acquainted with Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences could explore other types of activities that would touch different learning styles.

2) The children spoke of activities, but they were reluctant to speak of prayer. Leaders acquainted with the work of Rebecca Nye, Jerome Berryman, and others, could begin to integrate spiritual practices such as silence and prayer into their programs, enhancing the children's natural, in-born spirituality.

3) The children spoke of parental influence in helping them connect with God. Leaders acquainted with the work of Marcia Bunge, Merton Strommen, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and others, could develop strategies to encourage faith development of the whole family so that religious education in the church does not operate in isolation from the home.<sup>12</sup>

4) The children spoke of participating regularly in the opening, intergenerational moments of their worship services. Leaders acquainted with the work of Brian McLaren and others from the emerging church movement could experiment with a broader approach to intentional intergenerational communities of faith.

By listening to our children speak of their experiences of church, maybe we in the United Church can hear in their voices echoes of our own adult stories. And then maybe we can remember that while we minister to our children, *they* minister to *us*... and maybe they can help us navigate through the wilderness of our 21<sup>st</sup> century reality, so that we not only come to know *about* God, but we come to *know* God.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation," 349.

<sup>13</sup> See John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publications, 2000).

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