

**FAITH FORMATION STUDY
AND STRATEGIC
RECOMMENDATION REPORT**

HOSANNA! LUTHERAN CHURCH



A Non-Profit Consulting Partnership

Research completed: 19 October 2021

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Introduction and Purpose of the Report

Introduction

Hosanna! Lutheran Church is a family-oriented congregation located in Liberty, Missouri. The church is known for its connectional outreach to the community and depth of faith formation programming for members and visitors of all ages. The website indicates that “Hosanna! is a joyful faith community welcoming, honoring and serving all people. In our community of Christ, we belong, learn and serve.”

This mission is expressed in simplified language in worship as “Joy and faith for all.” Indeed, “joy” is a theme of the church, expressed by members in every conversation!

The church campus includes a beautiful sanctuary and spaces for children’s and faith formation ministry programming, music, childcare, and recreation. The facilities are around 20 years old, and there is some mortgage debt associated with the church property. The educational rooms of the church are located in the basement, although many faith formation activities and events are held in the Fellowship Hall, the Sanctuary, and on the campus outside the church building. These spaces are furnished appropriately.

Pastor Mike Kern has served as the Lead Pastor since August 2016. He arrived at Hosanna! Lutheran Church after some previous pastors stayed for less than five years. The theme of pastoral changes was shared several times during listening sessions held between MLI and church members. Many members noted how Pastor Mike was energetic and visionary, but that he took care to build relationships before making any big changes. One member summed this up by saying, “He wanted to get to know us first, and he still does.”

Some changes in the faith formation program were initiated before the pandemic. The church experimented with a rotation model, with combined classes, and with different ways to engage the youth and the Confirmation students. The Church Council indicated that the faith formation program had become “underwhelming.” Therefore, the Church Council had begun to think about retooling the ministry prior to the pandemic, but additional disruptions from the pandemic over the last two years revealed how fragile some aspects of the program had become.

Purpose of the Faith Formation Study and Report

In August 2021, the Church Council invited a non-profit consulting and teaching organization, Ministry Leadership Initiative (MLI), to engage in a consulting partnership with the congregation. The purpose of this partnership is to evaluate and help revitalize the church’s faith formation program.

Several challenges were identified in these initial conversations between the Church Council and representatives from MLI:

- Is the current faith formation model sustainable, both now and in the future?
- How will the church engage families in returning to weekly faith formation programming (as well as worship) as the pandemic winds down?
- How might the church motivate additional members to become involved in the faith formation ministry in 2021 and in the future?
- What innovative ways of providing Christian nurture and education for young people, families, and members, should the church consider?

MLI agreed to enact the following action items and timeline in order to best interpret data and suggest solutions to these challenges:

- Conduct a congregational survey to gather data about the interest, engagement, and impacts of the current faith formation model(s) and gauge interest in new strategies.
- Lead listening groups (focus groups) at the church in order to foster dialogue between members and the consulting organization. MLI would include two practitioners in order to better facilitate conversation and gather data.
- Engage in a research phase to learn how other congregations are innovating and enacting faith formation programming in the midst of similar challenges.
- Formulate possible outcomes that could include the redevelopment or revitalization of the faith formation program.
- Present the findings to the church council, pastor, and to the congregation in one or multiple settings.

The report represents the culmination of this research. Many church members contributed to the findings of the report, including 35 online survey submissions and nearly 30 participants who engaged in conversations during seven online and on-site listening sessions with MLI facilitators.

The online survey included a static list of questions and short answer inquiries. Author's note: we use the words "say" or "said" to encompass written input from the online survey. In this way, written comments, in-person conversations, and Zoom chats are all referenced equally.

The MLI consultants and authors are:

- Matt Vaughan serves as the MLI executive director. He also acts as a lead consultant, facilitator, researcher, and writer. Matt served as a public-school teacher, youth minister, and Christian educator in the Kansas City area for 17 years prior to founding the Ministry Leadership Initiative, a non-profit organization, in 2013. He served four churches in his ministry career, each ranging from 100 to 1000 in worship on a Sunday morning. He earned an M.A. in Specialized Ministry from Southwestern College, a school where he also serves as an adjunct professor. Matt and his wife, Amy, live in Prairie Village, Kansas, with their two teenage boys and their chocolate Labrador Retriever. Matt enjoys hiking, carpentry, photography, and chocolate chip cookies.
- Emily Nelson Dixon serves MLI as a listening session facilitator and writer. For the past 21 years Emily's vocation has been in youth and children's ministries at PC(USA) and ELCA churches in the KC area. She has served many national and regional conferences by leading and teaching recreation and several other workshops. She completed her Youth Ministry Certificate at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. She believes strongly in collaboration and never stops being amazed at how God can move in groups. She remains inspired and delighted by the young people God calls her to walk alongside. She lives in Olathe, Kansas, with her husband and three children and their puppy. She adores musical theatre and snickerdoodle cookies.

Ministry Leadership Initiative (ministryleading.org) is a non-profit organization. MLI specializes in youth and children's ministry training, adaptive leadership coaching, and church consulting. The organization's mission is to develop authentic, intentional, and highly proficient leadership, sharing the love and grace of Jesus Christ with young people.

MLI faculty are supported by coaching and consulting resources from the Kansas Leadership Center. More information about MLI is included at the end of this report.

Outline of the Report

The faith formation report includes the following sections:

- Introduction and Purpose of the Report
- Data Analysis of the Church and Ministry
- Observed Strengths of Hosanna! Lutheran Church
- Identifiable Challenges of the Faith Formation Program
- Two Primary Interpretations from the Study
- Strategic Recommendations from MLI
- Suggested Timeline and Conclusion
- Faith Formation Case Studies from Other Congregations
- MLI Resources and Contact Information

Data Analysis of the Church and Ministry

MLI classifies Hosanna! Lutheran Church as a mid-sized, multi-staff congregation.¹

- According to the Central States Synod 2019 Report², Hosanna! Lutheran Church had 248 baptized members. Prior to the pandemic, the church saw a congregational average of 100-115 people in weekly worship. This number has been reduced since early 2020, and now includes online and in-person attendance.
- Approximately 95 people in-person plus some online participants attended the outdoor worship service on September 12, 2021. That number includes at least 19 young people (children through teenagers). Attendance at subsequent worship services has been slightly lower than this figure.
- It is anticipated that around 8-10 young people (Pre-K through 6th grade) could participate weekly in some aspect of the faith formation ministry, which includes Pre-K through 12th grade youth. This attendance may be a little fragile as the pandemic progresses, but the data is based upon children who have been active in the ministry of the church since Spring 2021.
- The Confirmation program will return this Fall, and will include seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students. Around six students are expected to enroll and participate.
- A healthy and vibrant ministry for young people, according to MLI peer data, typically equates involvement of young people to around 15 percent of the worshiping attendance of the congregation. With a weekly attendance of around 90 to 110 people, Hosanna! Lutheran Church could anticipate seeing 12 to 17 young people, from Pre-K through 12th grade.
- It is reasonable to plan for around seven weekly participants in youth ministry, which matches the combined anticipated attendance of young people and Confirmation students. Attendance in this age group has been lower as of late, which could be attributed to the dynamic nature of the pandemic.
- Some additional high school students have indicated interest in participating in additional faith formation programs at the church. Specifically, mission and service projects were identified as areas of interest. This interest is in addition to the God Squad programming that is already in place.
- Recruiting volunteers to teach faith formation classes was more successful in 2016, 2017, and 2018, as an average of 11 volunteers led classes for young people each week in those years. Recruitment began to wane in

¹ Most mainline churches in the United States have fewer than 70 people in attendance on a Sunday morning (2012 statistic). Source: Chaves, Mark (2015). National Congregations Study (page 5). Published by Duke University. Retrieved on October 11, 2021 from: https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/files/2019/02/NCSIII_report_final.pdf

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations showed similar trends. Specifically, 30 percent of ELCA congregations “reported an average worship attendance of fewer than 50 people in 2010.” Study reported by Living Lutheran, a reporting initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Source: Radziszewski, Nicole (January 7, 2013). Retrieved on October 11, 2021 from: <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2013/01/shrinking-church/>

² Summary of Congregational Statistics (December 31, 2019). Published by the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Retrieved on October 11, 2021 from: http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/4B_Central_States_data_kit.pdf

2019 to eight volunteers, and the program was retooled at that time to utilize a smaller leadership team and a rotational education model. The roster for volunteers in 2020 and 2021 was disrupted by the pandemic. As a result, volunteer numbers have dropped significantly. Historically, some volunteers have been known as “assistants” and “teachers.”

- MLI recommends that two adult volunteers who are screened, with background checks, be in place for all faith formation programs that involve young people. This limitation may be adapted when multiple groups of young people are present in the same physical space (i.e. two adult leaders with two small groups in one combined meeting space). Additional, unscreened adults could be present, alongside the screened and approved adults.
- The church has a Christian Education committee that meets on occasion to approve curriculum, recruit volunteers, plan events, and make adaptations. The committee functions more as an “ad hoc consultation group,” as membership and participation in the group is not formalized.

Observed Strengths of Hosanna! Lutheran Church

Rev. Mike Kern is a Gifted Pastor

Congregational members, parents, and volunteers expressed appreciation for Pastor Mike Kern, who has served in this role since 2016. Many appreciate his focus on having children serve in worship and credit Pastor Mike for keeping the children engaged, as well as enhancing the worship experience for everyone. When asked, most folks immediately said, “We LOVE Pastor Mike!” Another parent said, “Pastor Mike worked so hard to keep us connected this last year, from visits to helping distribute Bless Boxes, he does so much and he is wonderful!”

Indeed, it was apparent in the listening session that Pastor Mike has an excellent rapport with parents and young people alike. He is an ideal pastor to the church, adding creativity, passion, spirituality, and gifted guidance during a difficult pandemic era. One congregation member said, “I love his positive energy and obvious love for us [the congregation].”

One member shared they loved having Pastor Mike lead the weekly adult Bible study and marveled how his gifts are so wide-ranging from children’s ministry, to adults and worship leadership, to his expertise in audio and video production, which has been used heavily this last year.

Pastor Mike has strong self-awareness about his role with the congregation as its pastor and spiritual leader, and he is intentional about including others in leadership and key decisions. He said, “This ministry will be strongest when leadership is shared by everybody.”

Exemplary Intergenerational Worship

Children participate and engage in worship at Hosanna! Lutheran Church. This is one of the key metrics evaluated by MLI consultants during visits to partner churches, and Hosanna! excels!

One member succinctly said, “This church really supports having kids in worship.” Another parent responded and said, “I really want my kids there! They are welcome and loved, and that encourages us to attend each week.” Others said, “We love that the kids are in worship,” “The children being in worship is the main reason why our family is here,” and, “Even during the pandemic my kids would want to watch worship at home and hear what Pastor Mike had to share.”

Several respondents noted ways that children are included in worship, noting they can serve as acolytes, crucifiers, help with the “barn” offering collection time, and “they can help pretty much anywhere, because Pastor Mike is creative about involving our kids.”

The MLI consultants attended worship at Hosanna! Lutheran Church on September 5, 2021, and noticed that many young children were present in worship instead of sitting in a nearby nursery or classroom, which is extraordinary. The consultants also visited with several families after worship that morning and observed the grape harvesting event. This event has been occurring for several years, and it is a highlight for the children, as the grapevines are low enough to be easily accessible by many children. This is one of many events, tied to worship, that uniquely involves all ages at Hosanna.

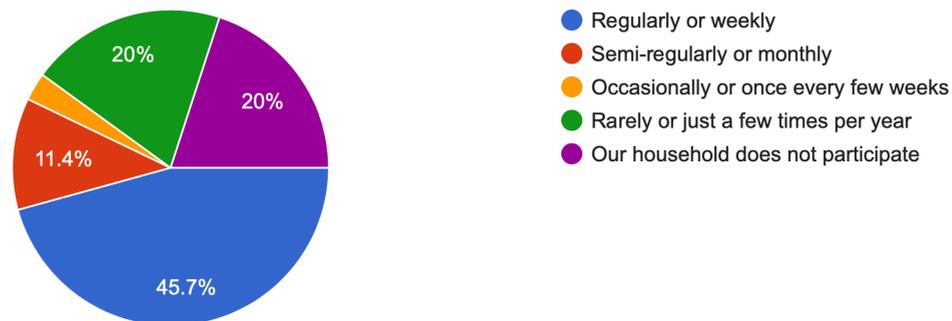
Regular and Repeatable Special Events

A strong percentage of church attendees indicated involvement in faith formation events and programs at the church (these programs are in addition to worship).

As shown, 57 percent of survey respondents indicated at least semi-regular, or monthly, involvement in the faith formation programs at Hosanna! Lutheran Church. This percentage is admirable and exceeds participation at peer-sized congregations.³

Do members of your household regularly participate in the faith formation events and programs (for children and teenagers) at the church?

35 responses



The Church hosts several annual events as part of its overall faith formation program. These include, in a general chronological order: Back to School Blessing, Harvesting of the Grapes, Rally Day, Presentation of Bibles, Trunk or Treat (which may not happen every year), Youth Group Cookie Drive (which may not happen every year), Christmas Eve Vineyard Singing (a new tradition), Christmas Play, Valentines for Veterans, Hosanna! Day, First Communion, Confirmation (which is October 31 this year, due to COVID), Graduation Recognition, and Vacation Bible School (which may not happen every year, or offered for a few days, or shared with another congregation).

Communication

Survey respondents and participants in listening sessions reacted positively to the communication methods practiced by the staff and lay leadership at the church. Specifically, participants shared appreciation for the accurate information posted on the website, for announcements printed in worship bulletins and shared in weekly emails, for the easy-to-find information on Facebook, and for the worship broadcasts shared on

³ MLI has limited, definable statistics about involvement in Christian Education programming for many churches. However, the trends in the data typically show less engagement in monthly programming and special events than these survey results.

YouTube. The church has also previously used a texting service to communicate in added ways, and this process could always be reintroduced as a benefit to the ministry, if necessary. Pastor Mike and several of the committee chairs informally used texts to communicate changes and reminders to small groups of people, although a third of survey respondents indicated an interest or preference in receiving text message communications.

Overall, 64 percent of survey respondents indicated satisfaction in finding information easily, and an additional 14 percent indicated that the communication processes in the church were relevant.

Think about the communication regarding ministry events for young people. How effective is the communication (website, email, newsletter, texts, social media, mailed information)?

35 responses



Additionally, survey respondents ranked their preferred methods of communication in this order (note that respondents could choose up to two methods of communication):

1. 74 percent of respondents read and utilize email communication.
2. 37 percent of respondents read and utilize the newsletter.
3. 34 percent of respondents respond well to text messaging.
4. 29 percent of respondents regularly checked the website for information.

The data show that a much lower percentage of respondents utilize other forms of communication:

5. 9 percent of respondents preferred mailed information.
6. 6 percent of respondents regularly checked social media for information about the church.

Church Campus and Location

Another advantage for this congregation is that the church campus is located in a great geographic location. The church campus has some land and beautiful green space. It is close to the city, but feels apart. Additionally, there are many neighborhoods close to the church, but the building feels separated from the busyness of the surrounding community. One person said, “While you are there, you are able to focus and the space draws you in.” Another person said the church is “almost retreat-like.”

The sanctuary is a well-equipped and flexible space, and there is ample meeting space in the Fellowship Hall and in classrooms in the adjacent building.

Members of All Ages Love and Support Children

It is clear that the entire congregation embraces intergenerational ministry that places an emphasis on children. Specifically, 40 percent of survey respondents indicated they were adults with grown children and eight percent of survey respondents indicated they were adults without children. Therefore, nearly half of the

survey data referenced in this report was reported by those who do not presently include children in their households.

An adult without children in the house said, “I really appreciate how our church plans activities in which the young are able to participate... not just reading and discussion.”

Identifiable Challenges of the Faith Formation Program

The Pandemic has Created a Difficult Era

Nearly every person in the study shared a comment about the disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic over the last 17 months. Worship and Sunday morning programming were the two ministry offerings most impacted. Weekly music and Bible study programs were also cancelled.

Sadly, the church had to lead a significant amount of memorial services. One member said, “There’s been so many deaths over the last year and a half. Every month or so it seems like we’re planning another memorial service, which has been hard.”

Another member said, “I hate to say it, but the amount of grief we’ve experienced has been a distraction from the joy that we normally feel.”

The tragedies encountered in the pandemic also brought many members of the church together. Specifically, the church learned how to find ways to bring back many ministry opportunities. For example, Pastor Mike was unable to visit many families in-person early in 2020 when the crisis emerged, so he communicated by phone and on Zoom. As time passed, the church led worship in a parking lot at the nearby school. Most faith formation events took more time to return to the calendar. Pastor Mike responded to this challenge by working with the Christian Education Committee to prepare “Bless Boxes” of educational materials for the children to utilize at home.

Hosanna! Lutheran Church continues to be challenged by the pandemic. In 2020, the church instituted a mask policy for all indoor events. That policy was relaxed in 2021, as initially recommended by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). However, some members expressed concern that the optional mask policy doesn’t feel safe, especially as the Delta COVID-19 variant spread quickly through the summer months in 2021.

Sunday School Model

Sunday School is regarded fondly by many people. It is equally regarded as important as a point of concern. The main worry is there aren’t enough teachers and volunteers to make Sunday School happen each week. It appears that, even pre-pandemic, some volunteers were tip-toeing close to burnout and felt like they were putting in more effort than they had bandwidth. One mentioned not minding doing the work, but then only having one or two children in attendance. That felt deflating and made them feel like it wasn’t a great use of their time. One volunteer in particular would like to move on to volunteering in other parts of the church from children’s Sunday School, but feels if they were to do that, they would leave a hole that might not be filled.

There is a general consensus that by volunteering for Sunday School, one will end up committing to an every Sunday commitment without the possibility of relief. This was being addressed before the pandemic by implementing a rotation model with differing levels of participation by volunteers. It was shut down because

of the pandemic before much helpful data could be collected about its success in getting more volunteers engaged.

Volunteer recruitment seems to still be an issue and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. A few members expressed they “didn’t know where they could help” or “what they could do to be helpful.” Others indicated they hadn’t been asked directly. There were a few participants in this study who didn’t feel they were up to the commitment or felt underqualified. One person said they don’t “know what is expected of volunteers.”

The Spark curriculum being used is appreciated by many teachers and families, although some would like to use a curriculum that was similar to what they’ve used in the past. One volunteer expressed that the Spark curriculum was easy for volunteers to use without much preparation and could be modified comfortably. The children were in classes that were divided into Pre-K through 2nd grade, 3rd and 4th grade, and 5th and 6th grade.

When Confirmation (which normally includes 7th and 8th grade) is in session, that class meets with Pastor Mike. Confirmation had not met since March of 2020, although many members of the current 10th grade class will be Confirmed on October 31, 2021. Therefore, there are multiple classes that have yet to affirm their baptism and two classes have yet to begin the confirmation process.

Recruiting, Nurturing, and Retaining Volunteers

The church utilizes many volunteers in many programs, including worship, Sunday School, and annual events. Some respondents estimated that about 20 percent of the congregation is doing much of this work. Additionally, Pastor Mike is filling many roles outside of his normal duties. There is a concern that many volunteers are facing burnout, while others expressed concern about Pastor Mike possibly taking on too much.

More than one person expressed not knowing what is needed or how they could help to volunteer. Some are being asked into specific jobs. Otherwise, volunteers are recruited by walking by the sign-up board on Sunday morning, or reading the email newsletter and responding on their own.

Opportunities for Teenage Students

Teenagers (9th through 12th graders) are in a group named “The God Squad.” This group met weekly, before the pandemic, for youth programming. The curriculum is based around group designated discussion points. The God Squad did not meet consistently during the pandemic, but the group kept in contact, according to one of their faithful volunteers. Historically, this group has participated in the ELCA Youth Gathering every three years. However, the church has not hosted other larger youth events in quite some time, which include summer mission trips or camps.

Some members expressed sadness that many youth who are on the church roster often don’t attend church because they are busy with sports and other activities. One member said, “It’s hard to have a youth program without many youth.”

The God Squad has a dedicated leader, as well as support from Pastor Mike and the Christian Education Committee. With good communication and intentionality, this group of teenagers may reengage, although it may take some time to rebuild this ministry.

Faith Formation (Christian Education) Committee

The church has several committees, ranging from Finance, to Personnel, to the Christian Education Committee. Each of these committees has a representative that regularly communicates updates to the

Church Council. In general, most participants in the listening sessions indicated satisfaction with how the church is structured. Specifically, most participants indicated that the Christian Education Committee is the most fragile planning group within the church.

One member said, “We’ve relied on the same core group of people in these committees, and the [Christian Education] leaders have had such a tough time over the last two years. They’ve done great work, but they need some help.”

Another said, “I haven’t been paying attention because there have been so many distractions. I think there are people who would help, but adding one more thing is tough right now.”

A regular attendee said, “Pastor Mike and our key leaders have handled so much for us. I wonder if we could have helped more if we had known how much they were doing.”

Presently, the Christian Education Committee seems to be operating as an ad hoc consultation group. This is an acceptable model, provided each member or participant has a dedicated task or job. However, there is no formal membership, other than the chairperson and the Church Council Liaison, so scheduled meetings usually include just a few participants.

Additionally, the name of the committee is confusing. The website and other publications refer to Christian Education programming as “Faith Formation.” This consultation project, in partnership with MLI, is to engage in a conversation about “Faith Formation.” Yet, the committee is called the “Christian Education Committee.”

Working Hard and the Risk of Burnout

The consultants from MLI engaged in conversation with several other pastors, children’s ministers, youth ministers, and volunteers to gather peer data for this report. MLI found one particular anecdote that is worth lifting up both as a strength, and as a challenge.

Most other churches cancelled all faith formation events during the first six months of the pandemic, and instead focused exclusively on providing a quality and meaningful online worship event. Some churches distributed activities to families at home. Other church leaders planned outdoor worship events in creative ways to keep their congregations safe.

Hosanna! Lutheran Church paused most of its faith formation programs during the early days of the pandemic. However, the church did not slow down. Several members reflected positively about the outdoor worship events at the nearby school, commenting that “Pastor Mike would stand in the back of a truck and share a message with us, and it was great to be in the same space.”

Additionally, Pastor Mike and the Christian Education Committee distributed Bless Boxes to families with children, so they would have faith formation lessons and activities to practice at home.

Some participants in the listening sessions expressed concern that Pastor Mike, the leaders in the Christian Education Committee, and the Church Council might be experiencing burnout. When directly asked about this possibility, most of these leaders said something similar to, “Not yet, but we’re working harder than we probably should be.”

Nearly everybody at the church, from Pastor Mike, to key volunteers, to worship attendees, are working hard to keep the congregation vibrant.

Finding Other Community Resources

Hosanna! Lutheran Church works tirelessly to nurture its people. It does so, somewhat, on its own. On a few occasions, it has partnered with other churches in the area.

In every listening session, members of the church said that the faith formation program is fragile, but not broken. Most members believe there is something really dynamic already at work at this church, but they are worried about having enough people and energy to sustain it. Folks are drawn into something really special at Hosanna! Lutheran Church and love being part of this congregation. Finding like-minded congregations or resources from the Synod may be helpful in the future.

Two Primary Interpretations from the Study

Adaptable Work is Required

Ministry Leadership Initiative recognizes how challenges can be categorized in two ways:

- Technical challenges “live in people’s heads and logic. They are susceptible to facts and expertise.”⁴
 - An example of a technical challenge is a leaky roof. We respond quickly to this challenge, because it is an emergent threat to property.
 - Another example of a technical challenge is a project list. We check things off the list as they are completed.
 - Technical challenges don’t usually require emotion to solve. We change the spare tire, pay the bills, fix the leak, return the phone call, turn off the lights after worship, etc.
- Adaptive challenges “exist in our hearts and guts. Adaptive challenges linger. Solutions are elusive. Progress on adaptive challenges requires people to change.”⁵
 - Adaptive challenges require a change in thinking, and often a change in culture. The pandemic has presented numerous adaptive challenges to our culture, from a shortage of supplies to a shift to working at home instead of commuting to an office.
 - The examination of the faith formation ministry at Hosanna! Lutheran Church is an adaptive challenge. MLI consultants are asking, “Why do you do ____?” and “How long has ____ been occurring?” and “What would happen if your church did ____?”

Retooling the faith formation ministry at Hosanna! Lutheran Church will require more than punching through a checklist. It has required examination, reflection, and research. It will now require critical thinking, adaptive responses, and a commitment from the entire congregation.

This work cannot be undertaken by Ministry Leadership Initiative, because the MLI consultants are not part of the community of faith at Hosanna! Lutheran Church. Instead, this report outlines a series of strategic recommendations that should allow the faith formation ministry at the church to experience revitalization and added participation.

The process will take time. It will require additional interpretations and decisions. Members of the church leadership teams will need to experiment beyond their comfort zones to try new things toward a collective purpose.

⁴ O’Malley, Ed and Cebula, Amanda (2015). *Your Leadership Edge: Lead Anytime, Anywhere*. Wichita, KS: KLC Press, pg. 14.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 10.

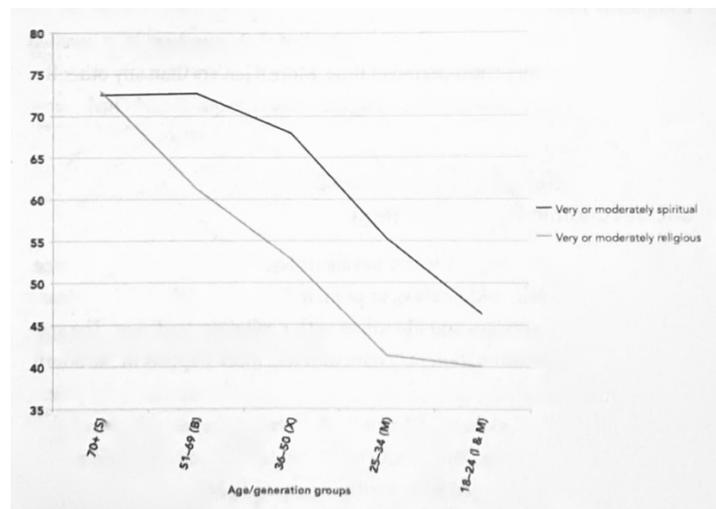
Fortunately, the purpose is clear. Every participant in the consulting process wants to improve the faith formation ministry. This was expressed by survey respondents, those who gathered for in-person meetings, and those who shared conversations on Zoom and by phone.

As one member said, “One of our greatest gifts is our ability to engage children. Let’s do that better.”

The Faith Formation Model may be Outdated

Participants in the MLI study indicated that experiences for young people are quite good. However, the church has seen less engagement from young people over the last several years. Hosanna! Lutheran Church is not alone in this phenomenon, which can partially be attributed to a generational change in ministry with young people over the last decade.

Specifically, research is showing that “a full third of young adults do not affiliate with any organized religion.”⁶ Young people in grade school through high school are known as Gen/Z (the youngest Millennials are now 27 and older⁷), and are largely raised by parents who comprise Generation X. Indeed, 31 percent of Gen/Z young people “did not affiliate with a religion,” according to a 2016 study.⁸ Those with a faith background increasingly identify themselves as ‘spiritual’ more than ‘religious.’ The following table, taken from the *iGen* text, shows how different generations identify themselves in this manner:⁹



The table tends to match the decreasing engagement from different generations in local churches, and the trends for this younger, Gen/Z generation, follows this decline. In this way, the reduced engagement and attendance of young people at Hosanna! Lutheran Church is typical among churches today.

Hosanna! Lutheran Church is utilizing newly-published curriculum, in part to address the generational changes identified in this study. The church uses a curriculum published by Sparkhouse, a publishing ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Sparkhouse is renowned for developing innovative, creative, and relevant curriculum for young people, and the curriculum is actually recommended by MLI to churches in other denominations.

Some teachers indicated that additional resources are often used to complement the published curriculum, and MLI encourages the church to continue this practice. Other churches, for example, often use videos

⁶ Twenge, Jean M. (2017). *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. New York, NY: Atria Books, pg. 121.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 122.

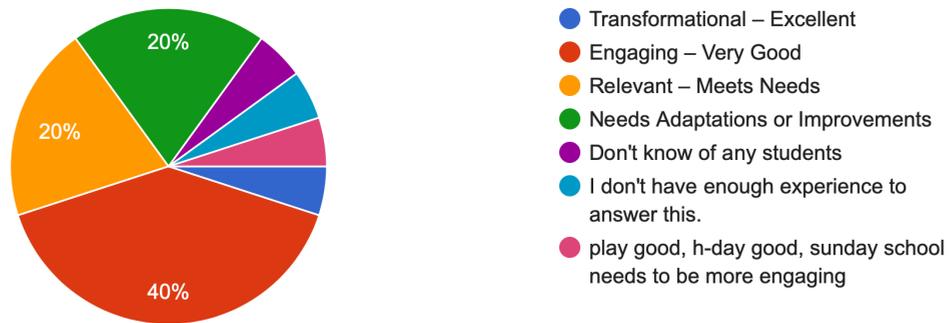
⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 131.

published by The Bible Project (bibleproject.com) to easily convey different Scripture messages. This can be a helpful resource to use both in the classroom and when encouraging families to learn and discuss Scripture at home.

Specifically, survey respondents indicated that 65 percent said the ministry for young people was either transformational, engaging, or relevant. Only 25 percent indicated that the ministry for young people needed adaptations or improvements, while 10 percent of respondents either didn't have enough information or answered with other comments.

How would you describe the experience for students involved in the ministry for young people?
(Please leave blank if answer is unknown.)

20 responses



Therefore, the MLI consultants choose not to make any specific recommended changes to the classrooms, curriculum, or the Sunday morning time frame of faith formation programming (none of the respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the schedule or meeting times). Some improvements and modifications will need to be considered, but there is a good level of satisfaction in these facets of the ministry.

Instead, most participants in this process indicated concerns about volunteers, numbers of participants, and the widening gap between preparation and engagement. There are many factors that contribute to these concerns, but one aspect may be contributing more stress to the system.

MLI is interpreting that Hosanna! Lutheran Church is utilizing a faith formation model that was designed for twice the number of participating children. For example, there were 10 or 11 teachers recruited for Sunday morning classes in 2016 and 2017. Classes were divided into six classes (Pre-K, 1st and 2nd grade, 3rd and 4th grade, 5th and 6th grade, middle school, and high school).

Today, Hosanna! Lutheran Church does not have the critical mass of young people to divide classes in the same manner. Teachers reported that some Sundays there are just a handful of kids, and it's hard to recruit and train teachers for all the different classes.

Strategic Recommendations from MLI

Divide Classes into Sustainable Sizes

Consider two of the case studies outlined near the end of this report. Spirit of Hope Lutheran Church (the Lincoln church) and First United Methodist Church (the Belleville church) both divide their faith formation classes into two groups: Pre-K through 5th grade and 6th through 12th grade.

MLI recommends that Hosanna! Lutheran Church reconsider the teaching groups for children. This would better maintain a “critical mass” of young people in each age group.

Consider combining children into different age groups. Two possibilities exist:

- Pre-K through 3rd grade, 4th grade through 6th grade, and 7th grade through 12th grade.
- Pre-K through 6th grade and 7th grade through 12th grade (this model could be used interchangeably with the first model when attendance is lower and the classes are combined).

This proposed change will require a change in preparation and teaching. MLI also recommends communicating these changes in a positive manner. One of the best strengths of Hosanna! Lutheran Church is its ability to see joy in all things, and in all people. This is an adaptable change that will require some changes in teacher recruitment and teaching styles, but there are many positive outcomes that the church should work toward, including how children of different ages working together might be a benefit as the older kids mentor the younger kids.

MLI screened several churches during the research phase of this report, and the consultants wrote three case studies that might exemplify how Hosanna! Lutheran Church might adapt its faith formation model toward better sustainability and success. Two of the case studies, of churches in Lincoln and Belleville, specifically examine how to combine class sizes. These two churches are slightly larger and slightly smaller than Hosanna! Lutheran Church.

The Lincoln and Belleville churches combine Pre-K through 5th graders in one classroom (6th graders are considered middle school in these two communities). Both Pastor Lance (from the Lincoln church) and Virginia (from the Belleville church) indicated that they adapted their teaching style to involve the older students in the room as mentors to the younger students.

Specifically, Virginia, who has a background in early childhood education, said “We teach to the oldest child in the room, and the younger children will take what they need.” She said, “We did this originally because we didn’t have enough volunteers, but it kept us vibrant during the pandemic because we have enough children to fill our program.”

Pastor Lance responded similarly, saying, “We try to have the older kids teach the younger kids. Those younger ones are happy to be there most of the time, and the older ones like having some leadership.”

The key to this model is to “Keep those kids moving,” according to Virginia. Pastor Lance said the kids in his classrooms sometimes don’t finish activities because they move things along swiftly to keep all the children engaged. He said they use an introduction, go into the “nuts and bolts of the lesson,” and move into several activities.

Consider a Once-A-Month Intergenerational Class

Hosanna! Lutheran Church excels at intergenerational ministry. The MLI consultants observed a dozen children picking grapes on Harvest Sunday. Nearly every participant in the listening sessions mentioned an event or worship example that included both children and adults.

Clearly, this is one of the core values of the congregation.

Therefore, MLI recommends that Hosanna! Lutheran Church consider offering a once-a-month intergenerational faith formation class.

This intergenerational class could be offered on the first or second Sunday of each month.

Consider the case study of First Presbyterian Church (the Lexington church). Emily Powers, the Christian Educator, noted how important it was to bring families and older members together in their educational hour. She said the once-a-month class “feels like a big family reunion.”

Classes at the Lexington church are co-taught by a pastor and the Christian Educator. All participants meet together in Fellowship Hall, and they often move people around so that tables include participants of varying ages. Like the churches in Lincoln and Belleville, the Lexington church “keeps things moving” so that there’s always an activity.

The Lexington church offers an in-person intergenerational class, which is followed by a Zoom and at-home lesson in following weeks. Here is a graphic from the Lexington church last month:



Emily Powers, the Christian Educator, indicated that a terrific benefit of the intergenerational class is that it engages members of the church that otherwise don’t participate in Christian Education. Additionally, many members of her congregation don’t otherwise interact with the young people.

At Hosanna! Lutheran Church, Pastor Mike and one of the other key teachers would offer a lesson. Additional teachers and volunteers could each lead activities and conversations at different tables.

This model offers additional flexibility, as each table could host a different “floating” activity during some class sessions, with participants moving between tables. Some adult shepherds (volunteer assistants) may need to accompany children between tables and activities.

Utilize the Art of Testimony

Amanda Hontz Drury, a professor and researcher, wrote, “Christians are called to testify.”¹⁰ People who share their testimony of faith are more impacted by the process, and those who listen are compelled to follow. She continues by writing, “But the act of testifying does something more... The self-giving nature of God is such that even in our gratitude we are blessed.”¹¹

There are many ways that testimony can both engage unusual voices and inspire a collective purpose. For example, one of the MLI consultants, Matt, has two teenagers who have been musicians in the high school marching band for six years. Each year the band has a back-to-school meeting. Matt shared this case study about how his school band shifted its volunteer strategy from an obligation to something more personal:

¹⁰ Drury, Amanda Hontz (2015). *Saying is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, pg. 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 107.

“Every August we return to the high school auditorium to learn about the marching band uniforms, bus rides, football games, fundraisers, and activities. At the end of this meeting, there’s always a parent, representing the Band Boosters, that asks us to volunteer for at least two responsibilities during the course of the year. I attended this meeting again in Fall 2021.

“We’re usually directed to a sign-up form or a white board, where we can list our name and contact information. Inevitably, the easy tasks are always filled first, such as buying water bottles for the marching band at an early September football game, or sitting at the fundraising table during the annual sale.

“This year, the Band Boosters tricked me! This wasn’t a bad thing, but I was surprised. This year, a mom stood up at the end of the meeting and she told a story about her daughter.

“The mom said, ‘My daughter was really depressed during the at-home school days. She had hardly any interaction with others outside our family for weeks at a time. But there was always a bright spot in her day. She loved seeing her clarinet section on Zoom. This was her safe place.’

“I would ask her about the best part of her day, and she always said it was playing along with the other clarinets, or chatting with them in the sidebar. They encouraged each other. They helped each other cope. They made each other happy.’

“And when they were able to be together again, there was sheer joy. My daughter’s happiness is why I volunteer with this band. I know my work behind the scenes makes her day better. I know my time is valued, and that these kids need this band community.’

“Then, sure enough, we were once again invited to volunteer. This time, some of the harder tasks filled up first. We agreed to help the band because it became more personal, instead of just another obligation. We agreed to volunteer with the band because it meant something to our kids, which means we were making a difference. That feels good.”

MLI encourages Hosanna! Lutheran Church to consider including a time for testimony (or witness, or affirmation) in several, consecutive worship services. Invite several invested volunteers to share their story. They could talk about a child or a group of young people. They could talk from their hearts. They could share a narrative about the results of their work, provided the stories they share are personal.

Revise the Faith Formation Committee

MLI recommends that the church refer to its educational ministry as “Faith Formation” and change the name and purpose of the Christian Education Committee. Additionally, the committee should take on a jobs-based approach.

The faith formation committee could continue to meet on an ad hoc basis, as this model is quite adaptable. However, members of the committee should each take on assigned roles. For example, one participant could lead the Hosanna! Day activities, and attend the faith formation committee meetings immediately before and after the event. Another participant could be a teaching facilitator for one semester, and attend meetings for just part of the year.

Some suggested roles could be:

- Teaching facilitator, semester by semester commitment. This person would communicate regularly with the weekly classroom teachers by providing curriculum, supplies, and helping to coordinate substitutes.

- Intergenerational facilitator, one year commitment. This person would coordinate the monthly intergenerational classes for a year, so the commitment would be monthly and spread out over a longer period of time.
- Event coordinators, varying commitments. These volunteers would each take on a special event on the calendar (a partial list is shown in the strengths section of this document).
- Church Council representative. This person would communicate with the Church Council.
- Volunteer coordinator. This responsibility should be shouldered by each person in the committee (and among all parents), but the church could ask for one person to lead this initiative.

Efficiently Train and Utilize Volunteers to Serve

There are many ways to recruit, support, and sustain volunteers. Hosanna! Lutheran Church has done a good job with its limited resources throughout the years to staff its events and Sunday morning activities. **MLI recommends that the church revisit its volunteer practices which might prove beneficial to reenergizing volunteers.**

Here are some recommended strategies:

1. **Create a team** of people willing to give a concentrated amount of time over a weekend or two. Alternatively, this team could meet on a Sunday after worship. This team should be made up of current and past volunteers of faith formation, both for weekly and annual events.
2. **Ask this team to create:**
 - A list of volunteer needs in faith formation—be sure this list has a variety of jobs on it. Some short, one-off jobs, jobs that are hands-on, some that are behind the scenes, etc. One great position to have is a person who recruits for volunteers on an on-going basis.
 - Job descriptions for EACH volunteer position INCLUDING time expectation and volunteer position duration.
 - A list of people to recruit to each specific job.
 - A list of who will be contacting the specific identified people and asking them to fill the positions.
3. **Recruiting volunteers specifically** for a job they are equipped to do will help them to feel successful in their position, as well as inspire them to respond to the call that God has specifically for them. “Having a sense of calling can affect not only what you do but where you do it.”¹²
4. **Creating a job description** for each volunteer position can take some time. However, once that task is completed, it is extremely helpful for training and recruiting new volunteers. When volunteers have a clear understanding of their expectations, they are more likely to say yes, stay in their positions longer, and are more confident fulfilling their positions. Building in volunteer positions that are short-lived, easy, in-the-background, and singular, can help new volunteers “catch the vision” and get inspired to do more later.
5. **“Ask with your face.”** When a volunteer is asked specifically in person (on the phone, zoom, or in person) by another person, especially if they know and like that person, they are far more likely to say yes.
6. **Use Signup Genius** because it is helpful for organizing volunteers by keeping track of what volunteers are still needed for events and weekly programming, and provides emailed reminders for volunteers before events. The service is free, and a copy of the signup could also be occasionally printed and posted in Fellowship Hall, as that is already practiced at the church.
7. **Encourage parents to become involved.** The National Study of Youth and Religion found that the most influential people in young peoples’ faith development were neither pastors nor faith formation

¹² Weir, Kirsten (December 2013). *More than Job Satisfaction*: Psychologists are discovering what makes work meaningful—and how to create value in any job. Published by the American Psychological Association. Retrieved October 14, 2021 from: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/12/job-satisfaction>

teachers.¹³ Instead, parents have the greatest influence. The MLI consultants received some questions from parents about teaching in the same spaces as their children, and the data show that this can indeed be a positive and healthy practice for families.

Retire Some Programs to Strengthen Others

Because of the pandemic many of the “usual” events and programming have been put on hold. This is a great and natural time to see if there are events that aren’t “missed” that much. If so, this might be a great time to stop doing some of these events to make way for people to put effort into the things that are really working well for Hosanna! Lutheran Church.

This doesn’t mean the church couldn’t try new things. Instead, it may be wise to add events that have initiative and let go of some events that may not be as effective. This would help preserve and nurture the volunteer base of the church. **MLI recommends that leaders have an evaluative listening session after each event to ask, “Did this meet our desired outcome?” and “Does this help us with our mission and purpose?” and “Should we do this again in the future?”**

Additionally, it is important to communicate when events will only occur once. For example, during the pandemic, the church communicated that outdoor worship at the school would occur during the at-home era of the pandemic. In this way, there was an expectation that the service would be discontinued in the future, but it could always return if the church desired.

Experiment, Evaluate, Embrace Failures, and Learn

MLI is supported by a grant from the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC). KLC provides extraordinary training and leadership development resources to MLI faculty.

One of the strongest leadership aspects taught by KLC is the willingness to experiment and evaluate. KLC facilitators often quote from a known KLC textbook by saying, “If you want to make progress on your challenge, you’ll need to say yes to a little discomfort.”¹⁴

The text continues by saying, “Expand your comfort zone through low-risk experiments. When we experiment, we learn.”¹⁵ However, in our surrounding culture we are taught that failure is not an option. MLI pushes back on this assumption and encourages Hosanna! Lutheran Church to embrace experimentation, just as the church embraces joy, children, and celebrating together.

MLI encourages the Church Council and the Faith Formation Committee to engage in evaluative practices after each semester and after major events. Ask, “What did we learn?” This question can be a provocative way to engage in a lively and engaging discussion.

Continue to Adaptively Respond to the Pandemic

The church has returned to offering outdoor worship every few weeks, which was celebrated by many people. Some participants in this study expressed concern that the church wasn’t as safe as it could be, as masks are not required indoors. This concern will continue, especially as the weather cools.

¹³ Dean, Kenda Creasy (2010). *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Chapter six in the text, “Parents Matter Most” examines how influential parents are in the faith development of American adolescents; pgs. 109–130.

¹⁴ O’Malley and Cebula, pg. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 87.

Notably, one of the MLI facilitators is a primary caregiver of a family member who has cancer. This facilitator is not fearful about contracting COVID, but is aware that bringing the disease home could be devastating. Certainly, there are other visitors who have similar health concerns. How will the church provide a welcoming and safe environment to all its members and guests when it is too cold to offer outdoor activities?

MLI recommends that the Church Council continue to evaluate the church's mask, sanitation, and socially-distanced policies, especially if the Delta COVID variant continues with new infections.

Suggested Timeline and Conclusion

Strategic Programming Recommendations

MLI recommends, as a summary of the previous section, the following strategic programming recommendations. This is listed in a general order of logic, but not priority:

- Divide Classes into Sustainable Sizes
- Consider a Once-a-Month Intergenerational Class
- Utilize the Art of Testimony
- Revise the Faith Formation Committee
- Efficiently Train and Utilize Volunteers to Serve
- Retire Some Programs to Strengthen Others
- Experiment, Embrace Failures, and Learn
- Continue to Adaptively Respond to the Pandemic

Timeline

Hosanna! Lutheran Church could consider a nine-month timeline to introduce these programming changes. MLI recommends that the church consider three phases of changes.

Phase One: Introducing the Report

- The MLI faculty would lead an in-person review of the report, share the strengths and challenges, and read through the strategic programming recommendations.
- The Church Council could recommend changing the name of the Christian Education Committee to the Faith Formation Committee in the constitution at the next annual meeting. The Church Council should also continue to evaluate the church's health precautions on a regular basis, especially as the season changes.
- A revised Faith Formation Committee could begin to take shape immediately following the adoption of the recommendations in this report.
- A volunteer recruitment plan would be initiated by the Faith Formation Committee, Pastor Mike and the Church Council.

Phase Two: Building the Team

- An "art of testimony" portion of the worship service would be planned so that it is not in conflict with Stewardship, Advent or other important season on the church calendar.
- Invite several invested and respected members to share their faith stories and how being a servant leader and volunteer has shaped their involvement in the church ministry.

- The Faith Formation Committee and the Church Council will initiate a volunteer screening and training process. This does not need to be complicated, provided it is intentional.
- Additionally, the Faith Formation Committee may wish to evaluate the calendar and prune some events that may be taxing to this revitalized volunteer group.

Phase Three: Experimentation and Evaluation

- The Faith Formation Committee would pick a date to retool the Sunday School hour by dividing classes into sustainable sizes (with teachers who are trained to lead children of a wider age range).
- This phase could kick off with the first monthly intergenerational faith formation hour on a Sunday morning.
- Embrace for an era of experimentation and evaluation, knowing that some aspects of this plan will work brilliantly while others may experience failure.
- Celebrate the end of the 2021-2022 school year with a volunteer appreciation Sunday!

Conclusion

Ministry Leadership Initiative advocates three strong characteristics of leadership: “authenticity, intentionality, and proficiency.” Those who participated in the listening sessions for this report underscored these values and shared their support for the church’s faith formation ministry. Participants shared their observations and beliefs and a willingness to try new things.

This report represents a snapshot in time. It did not include input from every member. Nor did it address all the needs in the church or the surrounding community. However, the report does reflect the reality that the faith formation ministry at Hosanna! Lutheran Church will benefit from a revitalization in volunteer recruitment and support. This will help sustain the wonderful base of families, and leave room for growth. It will be important to recruit and train new volunteers in new ways to avoid burnout.

Children and youth add sparkle to the life of the church. It is so apparent when experiencing worship at Hosanna! Lutheran Church that children are integral in helping the Holy Spirit move through the congregation. Continuing to pour into the faith formation of the children and young people will only benefit this congregation in the next year and beyond.

Therefore, this report is a starting place. It represents a culmination of thoughts from people who care deeply about their church and have great hopes about where God is leading them. In this way, the authors encompass the membership of Hosanna! Lutheran Church and those in the ministry that participated in the process. The writers are consultants from Ministry Leadership Initiative.

From the writers – it was a pleasure to be with you on this journey. MLI will continue to be available to your pastor, Council, and volunteers to help enact these recommendations, and we will be in prayer for your congregation.

Matt Vaughan and Emily Nelson Dixon, October 2021

Faith Formation Case Studies from Other Congregations

Background

The MLI consultants researched several other congregations in the Midwest to learn how others are approaching some of the same challenges identified in the congregational study at Hosanna! Lutheran

Church. Three congregations were identified as utilizing adaptable and innovative Christian Education models. Aspects of each of these models may be compatible and even utilized in a retooled faith formation program at Hosanna! Lutheran Church.

Spirit of Hope Lutheran Church – Lincoln, Nebraska

Spirit of Hope Lutheran Church is a mid-sized congregation. The church, located in Northwest Lincoln, is a multi-staff congregation. The church has a full-time pastor, Pastor Lance Ferguson, and an administrative assistant, worship leader, and accompanist. The church's website is:

<https://www.spiritofhopelincn.org>

The staff leadership is comparable to Hosanna! Lutheran Church, with similar attendance statistics. Spirit of Hope Lutheran Church saw around 128 people in weekly worship in 2019. In-person attendance figures are lower in 2019, although many members are worshipping online.

Spirit of Hope has a faith formation program that emphasizes in-person faith formation classes on Sunday mornings, a three-year confirmation program, and several intergenerational annual events.

The church has an “ad hoc” faith formation committee. Instead of meeting regularly, the group has several parents that each take on specific tasks, or purposes, to support the faith formation ministry. The church is considering ways to retool the faith formation model. Pastor Lance said, “Variety is useful,” so the curriculum or meeting routines may be adapted, especially since the pandemic continues to be a disruption.

The Sunday morning faith formation program at Spirit of Hope is presented in the following ways:

1. Faith formation classes are offered for four age groups:
 - a. Pre-K through 5th grade students meet together.
 - i. Teachers prepare lessons that meet the needs of older students.
 - ii. Younger students are typically happy to be there, learning alongside older peers.
 - iii. Some older students assist the young students in reading, crafts, and other activities.
 - iv. There is usually an introduction, then a “nuts and bolts” discussion, followed by activities in each weekly lesson.
 - v. The curriculum follows the lectionary, so children ideally hear the Scripture in worship, during children’s time, and in the faith formation class.
 - vi. Around 10 to 15 kids typically participate in this age group, although numbers have been lower and less consistent during the pandemic.
 - b. 6th grade through 12th grade students meet together.
 - i. Teachers prepare lessons that better meet the needs of older adolescents, although the lesson plans can be more flexible for this age bracket.
 - ii. Older students are more engaged than in previous years, due to a change in how the Confirmation class is taught (see point “c” below).
 - iii. Attendance for this age group is not as consistent as younger students.
 - iv. The church has experimented with having older kids teach the younger kids, with mixed results.
 - c. Confirmation is a three-year timeframe, and it includes a parent commitment.
 - i. Every youth participant is expected to have a parent also attend every Confirmation class.
 - ii. Parents are active participants in the discussions and ask questions.
 - iii. Part of the mindset in this model is that kids know their parents’ journey better than the pastor and other class facilitators.
 - iv. It took around two to three years for the parents to “come around” and fully embrace the model. The results have been very good, as older youth tend to stay more engaged

- rather than seeing Confirmation as a “graduation” from the faith formation ministry of the church.
- v. Traditionally, parents teach the stories of faith, and this model reinforces this model at home.
 - vi. There are currently 10 kids involved in Confirmation, although this group spans three class years.
 - vii. Confirmation topics are topical and relevant, and each year are tied to the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Catechisms.
- d. Parents are asked, and encouraged, to be involved in a faith formation class with their children, although many parents gather for fellowship or other topical classes.
- i. Parents who had previously been involved in the Confirmation class tend to stay more involved in faith formation.
 - ii. Some older members choose not to participate in faith formation experiences because “they’ve already done their time.” The faith formation model has changed, so the pastor keeps trying to engage this segment of the congregation.

First Presbyterian Church – Lexington, Kentucky

First Presbyterian Church (FPC) of Lexington, Kentucky, is a large congregation. The church, located in downtown Lexington, is a multi-staff congregation with a dedicated Director of Children’s and Youth Ministries. The church’s website is:

<https://www.fpclex.org/staff>

This church budget and staff leadership at FPC is larger than Hosanna! Lutheran Church, but the in-person attendance at each congregation is similar (the reasons for these demographic differences are not germane to this study, although it should be noted that the membership of FPC is generationally older than Hosanna! Lutheran Church, and FPC is a downtown church, while Hosanna! Lutheran Church could be viewed more as a neighborhood-oriented congregation).

FPC has a relevant Christian Education program that includes in-person, intergenerational, and at-home learning options. MLI interviewed Emily Powers, the Director of Children’s and Youth Ministries, to learn how the church adapted its Christian Education (Faith Formation) programming for children, youth, and their parents. Emily Powers indicated that in-person attendance in the adapted model actually increased recently, with numbers equal or higher than they were before the pandemic emerged in early 2020. FPC offers different educational options each week in the following manner:

1. The first Sunday of each month features an all-church intergenerational Sunday School hour. Additional Sunday School teachers are specifically recruited and trained to lead classes of children, other young people, and adults.
 - a. The Sunday School hour begins with all participants joining together, in one room.
 - b. Siblings and parents are often separated into different areas of the room.
 - c. Facilitators begin with simple get-to-know-you activities, with some questions geared toward kids.
 - d. Most first-Sunday sessions include a short song time and devotion.
 - e. The devotion, or lesson theme, often includes a Scripture taught in an interactive, storytelling format.
 - f. Lessons and activities are then divided into smaller, age-defined groups.
 - g. Groups for younger children include a “shepherd” who helps manage children who need additional assistance or have difficulty reading or participating in the activity.
2. The second and fourth Sunday of each month features an at-home lesson.
 - a. This lesson is adapted from the denominational curriculum, in a fashion similar to how Salem Lutheran Church in Fremont, Nebraska, publishes its at-home curriculum.

- b. Visit the Salem Lutheran Church website for more information about how a Lutheran curriculum is adapted to at-home learning:
https://saalemfremont.org/sunday_intergenerational_class
3. The third Sunday of each month features an online lesson, taught on Zoom, with an at-home lesson that is published on the church website.
 - a. The third Sunday provides the church an opportunity to engage members online so that a full month doesn't pass without these interactive conversations.

First United Methodist Church – Belleville, Kansas

First United Methodist Church (First UMC) of Belleville, Kansas, is a smaller congregation. The church, located in North-Central Kansas, has a staff that includes a full-time pastor, a part-time Christian Educator, and a part-time musician. The church's website is:

<https://www.bellevillefumc.com>

The church leadership and worship attendance is slightly smaller than Hosanna! Lutheran Church. The Belleville parish is located in a rural area of Central Kansas. Around 75 people attended worship each week prior to the pandemic, and in-person worship attendance is now around 50 to 60 people.

MLI interviewed Virginia Anderson, the Christian Educator at the church, to learn how the congregation adapted Christian Education (Faith Formation) offerings. The church has several classrooms available, so classes are taught in a loose rotation format. Virginia indicated that in-person involvement dropped during the pandemic, but the church tried to safely continue as many in-person activities as possible over the last year. Virginia adapts a published curriculum to teach a lesson two weeks in a row in order to reinforce a Scripture message in two different rotations.

The roster for Pre-K through 5th grade children includes 20 children, although not all attend Christian Education (Faith Formation) classes each week. The Sunday School class is presented in the following format:

1. The Sunday morning class is offered for Pre-K through 5th grade students, and around five or six children usually attend.
 2. The class is kept together, in one group, unless attendance is higher. Occasionally, up to 12 children may attend, at which time the class can be split into smaller groups.
 3. The older children help teach the younger children. This church has a strong class of 5th grade girls, which are motivated to include the younger children in discussions and activities.
 4. The church uses a "STEAM" rotation format. Each room has a theme, which is based on science, technology, engineering, art, and meals (food preparation). There are not enough children to use a traditional rotation format, with multiple classrooms at once, so the entire group rotates at the same time.
 5. The kitchen is often utilized in a food rotation, and older members are encouraged to lead these sessions.
 6. Virginia plans lessons that move, move, move! She plans short activities to keep the children engaged, from an introduction, to games, to a learning activity.
 7. The church has struggled with recruiting and keeping volunteers, so the rotation model has given Virginia an opportunity to ask members to guest-teach on specific themes. They have used food/kitchen, woodworking, crafts, music, and other themes led by guest teachers.
 8. The youth group meets on a different day, which is due to a long-time tradition of having separate programming for youth.
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MLI Resources and Contact Information

About Ministry Leadership Initiative

Ministry Leadership Initiative Inc. is a non-profit organization founded in 2013. MLI is dedicated to teaching, training, coaching, and consulting. The organization's mission is to develop authentic, intentional, and highly proficient leadership, sharing the love and grace of Jesus Christ with young people.

MLI specializes in youth and children's ministry training, adaptive leadership coaching, and church consulting. MLI is an expert resource in youth and children's ministry by offering theological education with practical ministry training in an instructional cohort and coaching model.

Over 100 congregations have contracted with MLI to receive support in a variety of ways. Some churches seek consulting expertise from MLI because they are "stuck" in some way. Other congregations ask MLI to coach their clergy or staff, often because a series of adaptive challenges have made ministry difficult. MLI partners with churches in mainline congregations, including Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and churches of other denominations.

MLI is honored to partner with Hosanna! Lutheran Church in this evaluative and interpretive process.

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