

In late 2021 a small team of experts in the area of children's ministry were recruited by project coordinator Lee-Ann Matthews to address the urgent need to provide quality ministry to children as we are nearing a post pandemic future.

The response was impressive and the conversations the planning team had prior to the event were deeply meaningful. It was promising to receive approximately 60 people on a Saturday morning in mid October for a three hour webinar.

There were 13 speakers, each given 9 minutes or less to share their best and most helpful ideas to inspire leaders of children, youth and family ministry in a post pandemic world.

Here is an outline with a few points from each speaker. The full webinar is available to view on our youtube channel and / or the Diocesan website

<https://www.montreal.anglican.ca/youth>

## **Part 1 Creativity / Community & Connection**

### **Sheilagh McGlyn: *A View from the National Church***

Sheilagh reminded us that things are hard and there is a level of anxiety in the world right now that everyone is feeling. "If you are experiencing frustration and challenges in ministry - you are not alone." She encouraged us to lean on others and get support if you feel like you can't do it anymore. "We are all struggling," she said. Sheilagh emphasized how those who work with young people are often the most creative and the vision & creativity of these leaders are desperately needed by the Church right now. She stressed the need to offer programming that puts connection before content and to be strong in our faith to be present, grounded and nurturing.

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### **The Rev Grace Burson: *Telling the Story***

Grace opened her talk with the words "*Let me tell you a story ...*"

She delivered an entire biblical narrative with all of its twists, turns, triumphs, losses and recoveries across time and space with felt board images in less than 9 beautiful, awe inspiring minutes.

To summarize, Grace delivered an account that included the following: From Abraham and Moses, with tablets & covenants, she told of rejoicing, offerings and blessings, struggles and defeat. There were burnt temples and there was exile.

We encountered the Waters of Babylon, the Arc of the Law, the Prophets and themes of hope & listening. There were promises made, and families being formed. There was a baby named Jesus and Baptism with stories of healing, welcome and miracles too. There was good news, death, and new life with Rivers of life and fountains of living water that flowed.

Grace explained that the bible is one story - an overall arc that makes sense and is the most fundamental element of what we do in Christian community. Stories such as these allow faith to grow with children and images & stories help imagination and creativity to flourish.

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### **Valerie Taylor: *Come Together*, A New Resource**

Valerie described a new resource she is producing called ***Come Together***, that focuses on the feasts and festivals of the church year with an emphasis on all age gatherings for the whole community throughout the whole year. She explained that gatherings, in particular worship outside the box, cannot be implemented by one person but instead require a strong team (musical, technical, planning etc.).

The beautiful cover of the manual, featuring Valerie's original watercolour painting, depicts the Liturgical Calendar and allows participants the option to make their own version as an activity. This she says helps children to recognize and learn the liturgical seasons.

Valerie challenges us to set aside old models of Sunday school and to remember that prior to the industrial revolution worship took place all together. Being grounded in the liturgical seasons while exploring new models is important. She emphasized that Jesus taught outdoors and in homes as well. She encouraged us to know that all of the gatherings outlined in the manual have been tested and can be adapted to differences in liturgy / tradition.

There are games, quizzes, art projects, recipes, adapted to online or hybrid ministry.

She suggests that these gatherings occur once a month. Stay tuned, this new children's ministry resource will be launching soon!

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### **Dr. Jonathan White: Music Ministry for Children**

Jonathan concluded the session on Creativity, Community and Connection with his talk about his experiences offering a traditional music program in Oxford, UK and shared some details about the Royal School of Church music as a case study.

He explained how children in choirs are shaped emotionally and spiritually and he emphasized the healing benefits of church music and how it can deepen their spirituality.

Children learn quickly and can respond well to evensong for example. Being in a choir can offer a snapshot of the church. He noted that children have been singing in churches since the middle ages, teaching them about history, culture and deepening their understanding of liturgy. When involved in a music program, children have the advantage of being integrated into the entire service. He said "Many 12-13 year olds know more about liturgy than adults."

Jonathan emphasized the importance of this ministry taking place inside Inspiring buildings such as cathedrals, allowing children to embrace the awe and wonder of the Anglican tradition.

He acknowledged that initiating a music ministry program is not a straightforward task and we must think outside of the box, this includes being flexible about Sunday morning scheduling.

It is important for clergy to be involved saying that without their support there could be no program. He concluded with a reminder on how we must provide a positive experience for children as this will often “make” or “break” their future involvement in the Church.

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## **Part 2 Social Justice**

### **Caitlin Reilley Beck: *LGBTQ + Inclusion***

Caitlin opened the Social Justice session and was explicit that each of us is a full human person even before we can speak or communicate.”Children are not empty vessels. Revelation happens with, through and for them.” When debating the need to include a ministry curriculum that addresses LGBTQ+ issues she often hears the following objections:

1. They (children) are too young, they won't understand
2. It's just a small ministry we can't do everything
3. We don't know how to do it well and are afraid of making mistakes

Caitlin asserts that gender and sexuality are about understanding ourselves, our bodies, and our relationships which are all central to kids' lives. She reminds us that children are sorting these things out as of age two. They learn what is “OK” from stories: bible, liturgy, sermons, art, what is deemed funny, what clothes are being worn, what is being whispered. She emphasized that LGBTQ+ curriculum isn't just “extra” it is in fact central.

“We have inherited a tradition that has hidden, erased, slandered & denied queer and trans people, missing parts of our stories and communities.”

Caitlin also stressed the importance of all ages ministry saying that we need people at different ages and stages of life because we can help care for each other. In fact, she said that one of the main gifts of the church of God is being in relationship with people of all ages.

We share ourselves with children so that they can follow in the pattern of God by putting those in the margins at the centre of a caring community.

She closed with the following thoughts. “Don't worry, we definitely are going to make mistakes. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We must listen to kids , queer and trans people We were all kids once and in doing so we are revealing a part of who God is and who you are.”

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### **Edward Yankie: *How do we teach kids about Christianity and where does Social Justice fit in?***

Edward declared that there is no dichotomy between spirituality and social justice. The worst conversation you can have about race with kids is no conversation at all. He said that it is crucial to start talking about race early, often and honestly in children's ministry.

There is in fact only one race, the human race.”But it still plays a huge role in all our lives.”He explained that according to the WHO (World Health Organization) the very concept of race is fictitious. Edward emphasized that we need a generation that is going to turn things around.

Being “colour blind” is not desirable, in fact, diversity is important. He explained that kids are brave and leaders have to be brave to have these conversations.

There are resources on the *Anti Racism web page* on Diocesan website

<https://www.montreal.anglican.ca/antiracism-task-force> to support ministry to young people. “We know that Children understand concepts of justice and kindness. We need to be transformed to build a world with less bullying where people can reach their full potential.”

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### **ArchBishop Mark MacDonald: *An Indigenous Perspective***

Bishop Mark stated that the most stern & challenging statements and promises that Jesus made were about children . This is among the most urgent & pressing issues confronting the Church today.

He went on to say that If we need a reminder about the urgency of this matter, we should look at the missing children and the residential schools. Mark cautions that children are aware of what is going on and when they encounter images of little shoes on doorsteps or thresholds, they will see this with fear. “Our children are being faced with shock, fear and disintegration and we are trying to grasp wholeness”. Mark stated that the acceptance of land acknowledgement across the Church is a reflection that there is an attempt to repair the damage of the racist narrative. The task now is to find a new narrative, one that is inclusive and offers a just way of looking at our hope. It must begin with a land acknowledgement and explanation but there is more to be done. “There has been a radical breach of trust and repair has to be a part of this narrative.” “To become a tribe together is better than being separate. This Narrative was the foundation of the treaties. It was not a ceding of land but of making family and relatives. It was one of welcoming, making of relatives is in fact, the the foundation of our story”

We must teach children that they have agency and can be a part of the re-weaving of who we are. We know that 50-70% of indigenous people are under the age of 20 so our task is urgent and it is critical to link this story of who we are with the Christian narrative. It is not just a civil narrative.

1. Creating a new narrative in the face of fear and disintegration
2. Children have agency in reweaving this narrative
3. Children are a part of the Christian narrative

Mark informed us that when indigenous people heard the story of Jesus, they responded very positively. The story offers hope for all. This narrative has captured the mind of those who are fighting for hope. “We live in that hope.”

“The Ghost dancers who danced across turtle island believe that Jesus will come back and will make something new. We must weave this together. “

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### **Part 3. Children's Spirituality**

**Canon Dr. Neil Mancor : *Messy Church***

Neil opened the Children's Spirituality session with a reflection question: Are children empty vessels that need to be filled? Or are they innately spiritual and able to explore life, faith and prayer? He explained that this question can in fact, be applied to those of all ages.

Messy Church is "church" for everyone. It offers creativity, hospitality for all ages together, It provides an opportunity for open ended, meaning-making, process oriented ministry that creates intentional space to explore and experiment. Neil asserted that "The Spirit works through creativity." As such, children are considered active agents in shaping their spirituality through a combination of Prayer, craft and celebration that nourishes. Dinner is a very important aspect of Messy Church and it is a gift of love for the community. The table is the place where family happens. "All of us together, at the table, sharing the meal and children are full members, worthy of being included."

Neil claimed that if there is glitter on the floor of your hall or church it is a good sign. Just see children running, playing, exploring for themselves and taking ownership in church buildings. He wonders, if we realize that all of this is just as important for us as adults too?

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### **The Rev Amy Crawford: Godly Play**

Amy stated that children come to us as spiritual beings and already have an understanding of the Holy. Godly Play themes explore the capacity for us being with God and God being with us. Godly Play founder Dr. Jerome Berryman referred to the research of Dr. Rebecca Nye and grounded the approach to emphasize the following spiritual needs of children:

1. Children must be **listened to** (important topics such as death, freedom, sacredness, aloneness, meaning ) to use story, time and silence to wonder and wrestle with big questions. Emphasis of the language of the biblical story and Christian practice.
2. **Children must be Respected** - be aware of what kind of presence we are and whose presence we are in. Check our own needs. Are we controlling, demanding? We must signal mutuality, take questions and responses seriously. Also while recognizing the importance of playfulness. Matthew 18 - respect children
3. We need to Provide Good quality space: physical, visual, emotional and auditory space. GP ensures that space is the best it can be, avoiding being chaotic or overcrowded. We are encouraged to offer a variety of response materials without a particular outcome, expectation or product. It is important to provide silence in order to assist in meeting the spiritual needs of the child.

The main elements of a Godly Play curriculum are:

Greeting: intentional crossing of threshold

Gathering: with a centering song or prayer

Story

Wondering

Responding: art / play

Feast

Dismissal

Learn more about Godly Play <https://godlyplay.ca/>

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### **Archdeacon Linda Borden Taylor : *Spiritual Direction for Children***

Linda highlighted the importance of play in childhood but alongside this, stillness and wonder. She described moments in time where a child is pulled through an invisible barrier into what is seemingly another realm, oftentimes when in the natural world.

She encourages us to observe a child in their stillness. Children are in fact, naturals at contemplation, meditation and storytelling.

We must listen deeply with our whole being. We are not there to teach, they will teach us. Linda suggests that if we give children space and time they will share their wonder, beauty, goodness, sorrow and loss. We must simply ask, *Will you tell me*

Linda provided some helpful resources and creative tools for Spiritual Direction with children and reminded us that children love to play and our job is to take on the role of the Holy listening friend. She left us with an invitation to ask the following question to a child in our lives: "Will you tell me and to "listen deeply from your heart ."

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### **The Rev Jean Daniel ODonnacada: *On Hard Topics in Children's Ministry***

Jean Daniel stated that children are already spiritually mature and adults are not necessarily more mature than them. He challenged our understanding of spiritual maturity and reminded us that we are called to be like children asking why repeatedly. "We need to be childish in order to understand."

He explained that maturity is seeing things clearly and confronting reality. These are things that kids are already capable of. They know how the world works even if they don't have the vocabulary to say it. He emphasized that "A lack of vocabulary is not a lack of wisdom or experience"

We must honor the agency of children and be a safe person for them. He offered the following advice:

1. Listen to them
2. Be precise
3. Keep your discomfort to yourself
4. Answer what they asked

Jean Daniel concluded with clear instructions to talk about and address all of the hard topics in church ... because the children are ready. The question is, *are we?*

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### **The Rev Judy Steers: *Children's Ministry in a Pluralistic Society***

Judy's ministry context is within a K-12 day school which has Anglican roots but now has a highly multicultural and interfaith student body. She addressed children's ministry from the perspective that children are growing up in a diverse milieu with many influences including technology, science, pluralism, multiculturalism. We live in a time where our worldview is deeply influenced by the concept that "the knowable is provable". We are also in a milieu where there is not one dominant narrative - Christian faith exists alongside and in dialogue with other faiths or humanist worldviews.

She emphasized the importance of "meaning-making" through story, mythic narrative and community based rituals. There must be a sense of freedom and mutual accountability in the process of faith formation. Judy also cautioned us about the univocal perspective and asked us to consider who is not in the room? Who are we excluding? She emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for multi faith learning and appreciation.

In conclusion Judy asserted that we must learn to embrace diversity and work for a common inclusive vision where we learn from one another and see faith as a tapestry in which we are threads.

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### **Bonus Speaker: *Tanya Moxley: Let Kids Play***

Tanya provided a definition of play as any activity that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and self directed. If we are made in the image of God then surely God must want us to play! She explained that play is how we effectively work through pain, suffering and trauma. It can be deep and scary. It is not all light hearted. In fact, play therapy helps those who are processing trauma, it is not all tag and pictionary.

Tanya suggested that when implementing a play based ministry we start with asking why? We know that people learn through play 10-20 times faster and she suggests that this is because the activity is freely chosen. Tanya reminds us that children are intelligent, empathetic, curious and built to learn. She invited us as leaders of children's ministry to say yes to play!

