

“Let Your Light Shine”: Children, Youth, and Family Ministries at St. John’s

by Dawn Molloy, Director Of Children, Youth and Family Ministries



I am writing these words from home. I literally cannot get to my desk at St. John’s because my office is packed with gifts you’ve provided for children in economic need this Christmas. What a joy to serve in a community marked by generosity!

I am grateful that our Vestry chose Jesus’ words, “Let your light shine,” for their visioning and budgeting process this season. As the days literally grow shorter in our trek through Advent, I am happy to shine a light on the work we do together, as a community, engaging children, youth, and families in each of St. John’s “Core Four” priorities: Worship, Grow, Build Community, and Make a Difference.

In “Worship,” we are committed to building a multigenerational “beloved community.” You may have noticed that we are creating intentional roles for children, youth, and families in worship services (e.g., Welcome Team, Tech Team, Lectors, etc.). We’ve tapped service interests in our church school registration, and connected children, youth, and families with our ministry leaders. We offer worship resources like “Kids’ Kits” and “Sunday Papers” each week, and continually explore new ways, such as our “Worship Bingo” this fall, to help children engage in worship. Finally, we offer nursery care during our main Sunday morning service for children 5 and under, and invite all ages to join in the communion feast.

“Grow” is likely what comes to mind when you think of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries. We offer a comprehensive faith formation program for children and youth from three years through twelfth grade. Additionally, adults who serve in our programs consistently remark that their service facilitates their growth, too. Children in early and middle childhood, from three years through fifth grade, engage in “Godly Play,” a Montessori-style program that introduces children to sacred stories, liturgical actions, and language that provides a foundation for life-long wonder. Our Parent Cooperative not only provides support to our class, but also recognizes parents’ roles as primary faith teachers at home. “Parent Pages,” shared weekly, introduce parents to the week’s sacred story or lesson, and provide wondering questions to promote at-home faith conversations. Our youth, from sixth through twelfth grade, embark on a “Journey to Adulthood,” exploring self, society, and spirituality through three distinct and successive phases: Rite 13, J2A, and 4Ward. In the second phase, J2A, youth work intensively toward a life-changing pilgrimage that encapsulates our “Core Four,” and are invited to consider confirmation at the National Cathedral. With St. John’s continuing to adjust to post-pandemic schedules, we continually monitor and evaluate our schedules via attendance records for education and worship, as well as conversations with youth and

parents. We have over 100 children and youth engaged in our church school and worship community this year.

“Community” is a hallmark of life for all ages at St. John’s, and is a critical focus as we emerge from the pandemic. This year’s new Sunday morning schedule was designed to increase opportunities for fellowship before and after worship. To that end, our younger members have access to blacktop balls and playground equipment between church school and worship. Communication systems like our weekly CYF Newsletter emails and newly developed Family Resource Hub, are ever evolving with the goal of connecting people through promotion of play dates for little ones, our J2A-led Advent Wreath Workshop, Third Sunday Suppers, and other Parish Life events that have been dormant since March 2020.

Finally, mirroring and connecting with the larger St. John’s community, our children, youth, and families “Make a Difference,” both locally and globally. Recent church school “Sundays of Service” have included projects benefiting St. John’s Serving Seniors, Nourishing Bethesda, Samaritan Ministry, and families in Ukraine. In line with St. John’s commitment to fighting systems of racism, our Godly Play children have engaged in “Tell Me the Truth About Racism” lessons, and our youth attended the Imagination Stage production and panel discussion of “Ten Seconds,” held at St. John’s. Finally, our youth have demonstrated leadership in a variety of initiatives outside our walls, including the DC Pride Parade, Silver Spring Pride in the Plaza, and Youth Creating Change/Communities United Against Hate.

Your support of the St. John’s Children, Youth, and Family Ministries is vital in maintaining and growing our programs serving the next generation. You’ve probably heard the dismal statistics. Church attendance is declining, with Mainline Protestantism (including the Episcopal Church) seeing the biggest drops. Congregations are aging, with young adults (18-29 years) making up a smaller percentage of church populations. According to Gallup, 31% of Millennials and 33 % of Gen Zers who have reached adulthood express no religious affiliation, compared to 20% of Gen Xers, 13% of Baby Boomers, and 7% of Traditionalists (born before 1946). Despite the dark numbers, we have a vital and thriving multigenerational community, and I am thankful for the opportunity to shine a light on so much good. I hope you will support St. John’s in time, treasure, talent, and prayer, as we collectively seek to live as “children of light” (1. Thessalonians 5:5).