St. Mark's Youth and Family Ministries Report 2021

St. Mark's Youth and Family Ministry has had an eventful year. During the pandemic lockdown YFM took on two major tasks. The first was to shift away from our previous method of programming to meet the needs of at home families. The second was to continue a review of our program with the help of Ministry Architects, work that began in January of 2020.

In February of 2020, after instruction, six middle and high school students were confirmed at St. Mark's. In March, when lockdown began and church programs were cancelled, our weekly newsletter became the venue to keep families engaged and connect them with needed resources. We also created, sought out and curated a weekly list of Covid-19 safe activities for families to do at home. We included coloring pages that match the Sunday lectionary, and a script to do Children's Chapel at Home. Following the death of George Floyd, we sent suggested books and conversation guides to help families discuss the protests and the history of racism in America. After the attack on the Capitol building we sent slides, lesson plans and conversation guides gathered by area schools to our Christian Education leaders, teachers and St. Mark's parents and families.

In addition to connecting families with existing resources, we also began to create our own content. Beginning on April 1, 2020 we began a short-story-based podcast to send to families for a bedtime routine. We contacted the publisher and distributor of our most used story bible in order to receive permissions to record its content, and began to email out episodes (one of their stipulations being that we keep distribution local). Episodes averaging just over five minutes were sent out Monday through Saturday. Caleb crafted each episode to include a story, some discussion questions and a prayer. He recorded a majority of the episodes, with assistance from several community members and students. As of February 2021, 134 episodes have been produced.

In May of 2020 we began a weekly video series titled "Growing with God." In this series, Caleb and Michele lead a conversation about a bible story for younger viewers. In each episode we read the story, define key vocabulary and concepts and respond to discussion questions. Our first episode was posted to Facebook on May 22, 2020 and as of February 28,2021 we have produced 39 episodes.

For Advent and Christmas we adjusted existing programs for use at home. Under the guidance of Doris Burton, we purchased Advent wreath supplies and assembled over 50 Advent kits to be given out. They included wreaths, candles, lyrics for Christmas hymns and a family friendly devotional. Kits were distributed from St. Mark's on November 21, 2021 and November 28, 2021. In September of 2020, Michele, Caleb, Tracy Councill and Jeff Kempskie began meeting to create a plan for the Christmas pageant. Our goal was to have a pageant that would be meaningful to the congregation but would also allow students to participate from home. Our script was adapted from one written by All Saints' Episcopal Church, Chicago, and we added directions for at home sections. The pageant included 40 participants who recorded themselves from their homes, and was edited by Eliza Wapner.

We opted against doing a virtual version of Children's Chapel, or other virtual versions of our programs for 6 year-olds and younger. The feedback we received from parents was that their kids had more than enough screen time.

In addition to seeking to meet addressing lockdown needs, this year also saw the continuation of our five-year program review, in accordance with the 2014 ministry report. Prior to 2020, the Vestry approved a contract with Ministry Architects as consultants for the restructure of Youth and Family ministry. In May 2020 we surveyed members of the congregation to learn of their experience with YFM. In August we discussed the many assets of our program and outlined some goals for the future. These goals include reimagined middle and high school programming, a process to keep in touch with more families, and continuing to find ways for our children and youth to be involved in the greater St. Mark's community.

We established a team of St. Mark's members to do the work of renovating our program and related systems. The team consists of Paul Albergo, Kris Humphrey, Mary Thuell and Shay Waye. Together we planned and scheduled non-Sunday morning youth events incorporating different meeting locations, formats, and days/times. We held a pumpkin painting session in St. Mark's courtyard in October, led a virtual game show challenge and a new event called Culture Club wherein students share pictures, videos and songs from pop culture and establish connections with theological themes. These events were evaluated, and Culture Club and Art in the Garden were chosen to be recur monthly.

In addition, the renovation team devised a new communication plan for families and students, including personalized birthday and Christmas cards. We wrote job descriptions for volunteer positions. We devised a review process for current programs and new ideas. We began work on a revised mission statement, and began drafting three year goals for our program. We also brainstormed and selected concrete ways for children and youth to be more active and visible in the larger church, through worship services and intergenerational gatherings. Planning for these engagements has begun and will continue in 2020.

One of the main difficulties faced by children's and youth ministries was adjusting to the changing ways that people communicated during lockdown. When Youth and Family Ministries has in person events there is immediate feedback—youth and children are vocal about their experiences and parents share the lasting impressions that go home with them. Many of our families, particularly those with small children, were in a position where all of their focus and energy went to reestablishing their household norms and routines. This meant that our regular stream of feedback became more concentrated and isolated. We also found it more difficult to get word of our events and progress. In the first 6 months of lockdown, our newsletter went from approximately 35% engagement to 45% engagement. However things like event registrations or our survey required more email communication before receiving response. Similarly we found most people to be a bit slower in responding to emails than before lockdown.

We also had some difficulty in learning how to best engage with different age groups. We heard with some consistency from parents that preschool and elementary students were not

particularly interested in virtual activities. In October we planned a virtual Halloween party, and although we received several emails thanking us for our efforts, most parents let us know that it was not something the smaller children were interested in. For Advent and Christmas we sought to make sure that our activities could be done independently and would be a big return on a low time investment.

As Director of Youth and Family Ministries, Caleb Nelson Amaker lead in each decision making process. Our Christmas pageant was written by Caleb, Rev. Michele Morgan and Tracy Councill with music and lyric videos recorded by Jeff Kempskie and video edited by Eliza Wapner. Many of the programs and rebuilding of protocols and program infrastructure included the Youth and Family Ministries Renovation Team: Paul Albergo, Kris Humphrey, Mary Thuell and Shay Waye. We were assisted by our Ministry Architects consultant, Sean Williams.