Looking for the “best” curriculum for your children’s ministry? There are many options from a variety of publishers and denominations. The right choice depends entirely on your context and goals.

Below you’ll find a list of Building Faith’s favorite curriculum options based on theology, availability, and pedagogy. The articles in our Curriculum Center can help you identify your needs, capabilities, and hopes. Looking for more support? Get in touch with us by email.

How To Use This List

For each curriculum “top pick,” we list the name, publisher, publication date, age group, curriculum contents, and a brief summary. We have done our best to include helpful information such as:

how the curriculum works
number of lessons included
digital media options
materials available in Spanish
additional accompanying resources
availability of corresponding curricula for other age groups (youth, adults, intergenerational)
We have organized the options alphabetically by name under five types of curriculum (which you can learn more about in “5 Types of Sunday School Curriculum“), noting where some curricula fit more than one type:

lectionary-based
Montessori-based

rotation model

story-based

thematic

Additionally, we have limited this list to Christian formation curriculum for churches to use with children throughout the year. While some of the options below may work well in various settings and with various age groups, the list does not feature seasonally specific curriculum or resources designed specifically for families, at-home settings, or intergenerational formation. For intergenerational program resources, you may want to check out our Top Picks for Intergenerational Curriculum. For seasonal resources, a good place to start is our Articles by Topic page.

The name of the curriculum provides a link to the curriculum's website. The name of the publisher links to their "About" page where you can learn more about their theological approach. If you follow the link for each church denomination, you can review their statement of belief.

As always, when choosing a curriculum for your setting, take into account the theology, biblical interpretation, context, materials, and representation of human identities and experiences as you discern which curriculum might be the best fit for your context.

Lectionary-based Top Picks (Updated 2025)

1. Feasting on the Word

This curriculum revolves around exploring Bible stories through the lectionary cycle. The

children's curriculum is part of a collection of formation curriculum for the whole church so that children, youth, and adults can engage the same lectionary scriptures in age-appropriate ways. In 2024, the curriculum began transitioning to an undated format, which means that the lessons for each lectionary year can be reused every three years. The full scope and sequence features 52 lessons for each year (linked here for Year B/C, Year C/A, and Year A/B), and the majority of sessions focus on the gospel readings with select Old Testament, New Testament, and Psalms readings interspersed. Lessons include conversation about the liturgical year, Bible storytelling, singing, activities and games, and various forms of prayer. You can check out sample lessons on the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Westminster John Knox, 2024 – present and forthcoming (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.))
Age group(s): elementary, organized by grade groups (K – 2, 3 – 4, 5 – 6) as well as a multi-age option for grades K – 6
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by age group for each season (fall, winter, spring, summer) or the whole year in printed or digital formats; it involves a leader guide with resource sheets and accompanying color packs; music resources are also available to use with the lessons

2. Mini Revolutions

This curriculum encourages holistic exploration of lectionary scriptures, immersion in the rhythms of the liturgical year, and "micropractices" to transform people's lives of faith week by week. It is designed to be flexible enough for intergenerational groups, children's formation, or family devotions at home. We have included it on this children's curriculum list because its content may be particularly useful for year-long children's formation in some

church contexts. Weekly lessons include a scripture story, questions for "wondering," a related topic or event for further investigation, activity options, coloring pages, a micropractice, and prayer. Those who subscribe monthly for the curriculum receive access to additional resources like storytelling videos, guided activities, ideas and conversation guides for using the curriculum with youth, picture book suggestions, and online community support. You can request sample lessons on the publisher's website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Illustrated Ministry, 2021 – present (not affiliated with a specific church denomination)
Age group(s): elementary (grades K – 5) as well as intergenerational groups
Contents: The curriculum is available in digital format through a monthly paid subscription or single-month purchase; it involves a leader guide with graphics, coloring pages, Bible story booklets, and a media kit

3. Spark: Activate Faith Lectionary (Spark Lectionary)

This curriculum enables children to learn about the liturgical year and select Bible stories featured in the Revised Common Lectionary. Its lessons include opening activities and conversation, Bible storytelling, additional games and creative activities that relate to the story, and prayer. The curriculum uses student leaflets to help facilitate learning. The full scope and sequence covers all three lectionary years with roughly 37–38 total lessons for fall, winter, and spring. Sample lessons are provided on the publisher's website. (Note: Story-based and rotation model versions of "Spark: Activate Faith" are also available and discussed below.)

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Sparkhouse, 2011 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Age group(s): preschool (starting at age 2) and elementary up to grade 6, organized by grade pairs (pre-K & K, 1st & 2nd, 3rd & 4th, 5th & 6th)
Contents: This curriculum is available for purchase by season (fall, winter, spring) and grade pair level; it involves a leader guide and learner leaflet pack for each season and grade pair level; accompanying Story or Spark NRSV Bibles are also available (digital curriculum resources are available with an annual subscription)

Montessori-based Top Picks (Updated 2025)

1. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd / La Catequesis del Buen Pastor

This curriculum aims to cultivate children's lives of faith with joy at the center by creating a space of prayer where children can encounter God. Adult leaders, or catechists, take a supportive and "co-listener" stance in the curriculum's formation approach so that God in Christ may be the primary teacher for children. The curriculum involves presentations on scripture and liturgy as well as simple tactile materials. Instead of distribution through a publisher, this formation program trains teachers in the curriculum through courses, which you can learn more about on the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: THE CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD®, 1954 (Roman Catholic

Church)
Age group(s): birth to age 12 (grade 6), organized into age group levels (infants to age 2, ages 3 – 6, ages 6 – 9, ages 9 – 12)
Contents: The curriculum training is available in courses for each age group, or "atrium," level; it involves 90 hours for the first level and additional time for subsequent levels; training and curriculum are available in English and in Spanish

2. Godly Play / Jugar Junto a Dios

"Godly Play" invites children to connect with God by encountering stories, wondering, and responding through process-oriented art. It centers children's spirituality and agency in its approach to faith formation, and it uses simple tactile materials to foster sacred space and imaginative engagement with scripture, liturgical seasons, and the lives of saints. The curriculum scope and sequence involves 54 core presentations that focus on scripture and liturgy plus additional lessons for extension stories on scripture, liturgy, and the communion of saints. The Godly Play Foundation is also developing Equity Audit Toolkits that provide more inclusive and socially just language and teaching ideas to incorporate into the lessons (check out Ebony Grisom's article "Drawing the Circle Wide: The Antiracist Work of Godly Play's Equity Audit" for more info). You can learn more and view sample story videos at the Godly Play Foundation website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Church Publishing and Godly Play Foundation, 2017 – present (The Episcopal Church)
Age group(s): preschool (starting at age 3) and elementary (up to grade 5); includes option for middle school ages
Contents: The written portion of the curriculum is available for purchase as a series of books

with each volume containing a leader guide for 13 – 20 lessons; additional volumes provide guidance on teaching; accompanying story materials are also available at the Godly Play Foundation website; first three volumes are available in English and in Spanish (the publisher also offers a separate book called “Godly Play in Middle and Late Childhood” for using the curriculum with older children)

Rotation Model Top Pick (Updated 2025)

Spark: Activate Faith Rotation (Spark Rotation)

This curriculum is designed to enable children to engage Bible stories and liturgical seasons by rotating through multiple activities, or “workshops,” at different stations that all revolve around the same Bible story or season. The eight station options include: art, Bible skills and games, cooking, digital media and technology, creative drama, music, science, and video. The full scope and sequence contains 48 lessons; however, the director’s guide offers suggestions for devoting between four and six weeks to each lesson to facilitate full rotations in weekly children’s formation programs. You can review a sample lesson on the curriculum website. (Note: Lectionary-based and story-based versions of “Spark: Activate Faith” are also available; see above and below.)

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Sparkhouse, 2009 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Age group(s): preschool (starting at age 2) and elementary up to grade 6, organized by lower & upper elementary or multi-age groups
Contents: This curriculum is available for purchase individually by lesson; each lesson

consists of a leader guide that includes a director guide, station leader guides for 8 activity stations, and shepherd guides for group leaders; accompanying Story or Spark NRSV Bibles are also available (digital curriculum resources are available with an annual subscription)

Story-based Top Picks (Updated 2025)

1. Celebrate Wonder

This curriculum embraces wonder as both a value and a method for children's formation. It is designed to enable children to engage Bible stories in multiple ways. While its scope and sequence combines biblical narrative order, liturgical season, and theological theme in its organization and selection of stories, we placed the curriculum in the story-based list because its main focus is on Bible storytelling. Starting in 2024, the curriculum shifted to an undated format. It now provides three full years of weekly lessons, which include opening conversation, short videos with older children talking about the Bible story, reading and wondering about the story, multiple activity options, and a closing spiritual practice. You can access a sample lesson at the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Abingdon, 2019 – present and forthcoming (United Methodist Church)
Age group(s): preschool (starting at age 3) through older elementary (up to age 12) as an All Ages curriculum with age-specific and multi-age activity options
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by seasonal quarter (fall, winter, spring, summer) in printed or digital format; it involves a leader guide and additional supplementary materials that are packaged as a kit; accompanying story Bible and age-specific take-home

sheets are also available

2. Frolic

This is a curriculum for young children that brings together Bible storytelling, play and activity centers, music, and prayer. The two-year cycle of lessons highlights stories across the Old and New Testaments for approximately 40 weeks each year, and the remaining 12 weeks of lessons focus on story books about topics like emotions and relationships. The curriculum is available in three versions: Nursery, for children up to age 2; Preschool, for ages 3 – 5; and Family, for young children and their parents and caregivers. Sample lessons and materials can be accessed on the publisher's website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Sparkhouse, 2016 – 2018 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Age group(s): birth to preschool (up to age 5)
Contents: The materials for the Preschool curriculum include a leader guide and story sheet packs with stickers, organized into Old and New Testament, Year 1 and Year 2; the Nursery curriculum involves a coordinator guide; the Family curriculum consists of a leader guide, organized into Old and New Testament and by age group (birth – age 3 and ages 3 – 5); accompanying storytelling posters, story Bibles, story books, and other resources are also available (digital curriculum resources are available with an annual subscription)

3. Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible Curriculum

This curriculum is designed to accompany "Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible." It highlights stories across the Old and New Testaments and incorporates age-appropriate *Lectio Divina* style meditation and open-ended conversation on the scriptures. Lessons also feature activities, video links, and discussion questions to help children connect the stories

with their own lives and with contemporary issues. The full scope and sequence covers 148 stories organized into 35 units with 3 – 5 lessons per unit. You can review a sample lesson on the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Westminster John Knox, 2020 – 2024 (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.))
Age group(s): elementary (ages 5 – 10) in multi-age groups
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by unit in printed or digital formats; it involves a leader guide that includes handouts; accompanying story Bible is also available

4. Shine: Living in God's Light

This curriculum engages children in a three-year exploration of stories across the Old and New Testaments. It prioritizes commitments to love, justice, and peace in its theological approach to formation, and its lessons combine Bible storytelling, wondering, games and activities, singing, and prayer. The scope and sequence for one year consists of approximately 39 weekly lessons from September through May with separate curriculum options available for 13 summer sessions. You can check out sample lessons on the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: co-published by Brethren and MennoMedia, 2020 – 2023 (Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA, and Mennonite Church Canada)
Age group(s): preschool (pre-K – K) and elementary (grades 1 – 5), with younger (grades 1 – 2) and older (grades 3 – 5) elementary activity options in lessons; a junior youth (grades 6 –

8) version is also available for the fall, winter, and spring weekly curriculum, and youth, adult, and intergenerational versions are available for the summer curriculum series
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by age group and quarter (fall, winter, spring, summer) in printed or digital format; it involves a teacher guide and student booklet per child (with pre-K, younger elementary, and older elementary versions) that can be purchased individually or in a kit; accompanying story Bible ("The Peace Table: A Storybook Bible") and CD are also available

5. Spark: Activate Faith Classroom and All Kids

This curriculum is similar in design to Spark Lectionary (see above). The lessons in these versions, Spark Classroom and Spark All Kids, follow the biblical narrative over the course of two years. The Classroom scope and sequence includes 39 – 40 weekly lessons a year for children by grade pairs with a break for summer. The All Kids version includes 52 weekly lessons a year for multi-age groups. You can check out sample lessons on the publisher's website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Sparkhouse, 2009 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Age group(s): preschool (starting at age 2) and elementary up to grade 6 for Classroom; grades K – 5 for All Kids
Contents: This curriculum is available for purchase by season (fall, winter, spring) with differentiated grade pair levels for Classroom version and one set of materials for all ages in All Kids; it involves a leader guide and learner leaflet pack for each season and grade level; accompanying Story or Spark NRSV Bibles are also available (digital curriculum resources are available with an annual subscription)

6. StoryMakers NYC

This curriculum seeks to enable children to be not only recipients of Bible stories but active participants in the stories of scripture. It uses zines ("short for magazine," as the publisher's website says) with illustrations, information, and creative activities to guide group conversations and to make space for children to draw, write, and share their experiences. "Playbooks" with scripts for the Bible stories are also provided so that children can use drama or puppets to tell the stories. The curriculum is organized by story or seasonal "adventures" that contain 10 – 12 lessons each for 12 different Old Testament adventure series and 4 – 8 lessons each for 10 different seasonal series (Advent, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter) that focus on the New Testament. Three of the Old Testament zines are available in Spanish as well as in English: "la creación" / "Creation," "el diluvio" / "The Flood," and "el éxodo" / "The Exodus." You can request sample materials and view video tutorials on the publisher's website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: StoryMakers NYC, 2019 – present (not affiliated with a specific church denomination; read their belief statement here)
Age group(s): elementary (starting at age 5)
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by story or seasonal series as well as through subscription; it involves a zine per child and a leader guide, which can be purchased individually or in a starter kit; accompanying supplementary materials are also available

Thematic Top Picks (Updated

2025)

1. Diddy Disciples

This curriculum is designed to provide engaging and child-centered singing, Bible stories, activities, and prayers for young children from birth to early elementary. It implements pedagogical "principles" that include "movement" and "our [children's] voices" along with other dimensions of young children's experiences, development, and gifts. The full scope and sequence includes 57 lessons organized into thematic units that correlate with the liturgical seasons. You can check out sample lessons on the curriculum website and Gretchen Wolff Pritchard's review of the curriculum here.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2017 (Anglican tradition, The Episcopal Church)
Age group(s): birth to young elementary
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase as two book volumes, one with lessons for September to December and the other for January to August; the volumes offer a leader guide with scripts, song lyrics, and activities

2. Follow Me: Biblical Practices for Faithful Living

This curriculum is designed to help children learn about key Christian practices for a life of faith. The children's curriculum is part of a formation series for the whole church so that children, youth, and adults can all explore the same Christian practices concurrently in age-appropriate ways. The practices include "Welcome All," "Pray," "Do Justice," "Worship God,"

and many more. The full scope and sequence consists of 27 units that span three years, and each unit involves 4 – 6 lessons on a specific practice, resulting in around 38 lessons per year. Lessons include scriptures that illuminate the practices, multiple activity options and discussion questions about the practices, and prayer. You can download a sample lesson on the curriculum website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: Growing Faith Resources, 2020 – 2024, with more lessons forthcoming (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.))
Age group(s): preschool (ages 3 – 5) and elementary (multi-age group for ages 6 – 10)
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase by unit and age group in printed or digital format, and it consists of a leader guide; accompanying infographic posters are also available

3. Illustrated Curriculum Series

The evergreen curricula by Illustrated Ministry explore collections of Bible stories or a specific passage through a common theme with "open and inclusive language, diverse imagery, and progressive theology" (as they say on their About page). Curriculum options include: An Illustrated Earth: Celebrating God's Creation, An Illustrated Compassion: Learning to Love Like God, An Illustrated Invitation: Joining God at Work in the World, The Lord's Prayer: An Illustrated Curriculum, and The Beatitudes: An Illustrated Curriculum (which is designed for intergenerational rather than child-exclusive formation). Except for "The Lord's Prayer," which contains 6 lessons, each curriculum option consists of 12 lessons. The lessons provide a Bible story in age-appropriate language for children, questions for wondering and imaginative conversation, story cards and handouts to color, suggested activities, and a prayer. You can access sample lessons through the publisher's website.
Additional Information

Publisher and date: Illustrated Ministry, 2017 – 2020 (not affiliated with a specific church denomination)
Age group(s): pre-K and elementary (grades K – 5) for most curriculum series; intergenerational for “The Beatitudes”
Contents: The curricula are available for purchase by topic in digital format, and some can be purchased in 4-week modules or full 12-week bundles; each series involves a leader guide with printable handouts and coloring pages; additional resources (like coloring posters) and family versions for at-home use are also available

4. Path to Peace

This curriculum invites children to explore the meaning and practice of peacemaking in Christian faith. The curriculum is designed to be used with “The Peace Table: A Storybook Bible,” and it illuminates themes of peace, resisting violence, justice, inclusivity, and care for neighbors, enemies, and the rest of creation across the Old and New Testaments. The full scope and sequence features 4 units: “Peace with Creation,” “Peace with God,” “Peace Inside,” and “Peace with Others.” Each unit contains 3 modules with 5 lessons each, totalling 15 lessons per unit. As of this article’s 2025 update, the first two units are available, and the remaining two units will be released in 2026 and 2027. Lessons provide theological background for leaders, opening activities and conversation starters, Bible stories, wondering questions, multiple activity options for engaging the story and its themes, handouts, and prayer. The curriculum offers a pre-K edition for children ages 3–6 and an elementary age edition for children in grades 1–5. Sample materials can be accessed on the publisher’s website.

Additional Information

Publisher and date: co-published by Brethren and MennoMedia, 2024 – present, with two

more units forthcoming (Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA, and Mennonite Church Canada)
Age group(s): pre-K (ages 3 – 6) and elementary (grades 1 – 5)
Contents: The curriculum is available for purchase in printed and digital formats by age group and unit; it consists of a teacher's guide that contains lesson plans, student handouts, and access to music; accompanying storybook Bible is sold separately, and activity card decks designed for families are also available for purchase

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About the Author

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July is Disability Pride Month in the U.S. As Lizzie Cox explains in her article "Disability Pride and Advocating for Access," this month is a time to "celebrate the efforts of thousands who organized for decades to create the Americans with Disabilities Act," which became law on July 26, 1990. In "Disability Pride Month: Why Should Disability Pride Month Matter for the Church?" Leslie Ballew describes additional layers of meaning that Disability Pride carries in this way: "Disability Pride is challenging the way society understands and embraces

disabilities. It pushes us to accept and honor disabilities as a natural part of human diversity. Disability Pride works through centering the disability community by creating visibility, celebrating identity, and fighting against ableist biases."

To help Christian communities learn from and attend to the histories and experiences of disabled people and communities during this month and throughout the year, we at Building Faith have compiled a list of resources that center disabled people's agency, voices, and work. The list includes books, articles, podcasts, church accessibility audit tools, videos, and more. Most of the resources are by people who identify as disabled and have been published or released within the last four years. We hope that these resources aid your communities in seeking justice with disabled people in your contexts.

Books

Nonfiction Stories of Disabilities and Disability Studies in Social Contexts

"Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement" by Ashley Shew (W. W. Norton, 2023)
"The Anti-Ableist Manifesto: Smashing Stereotypes, Forging Change, and Building a Disability-Inclusive World" by Tiffany Yu (Hachette Go, 2024)
"Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid" by Shayda Kafai (Arsenal Pulp, 2021)
"Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally" by Emily Ladau (Ten Speed, 2021)
"Disability Pride: Dispatches from a Post-ADA World" by Ben Mattlin (Beacon, 2022)

"Disability Visibility (Adapted for Young Adults): 17 First-Person Stories for Today," edited by Alice Wong (Delacorte, 2021)

"The Future Is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs" by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Arsenal Pulp, 2022)

"White Supremacy Is All Around: Notes from a Black Disabled Woman in a White World" by Akilah Cadet (Balance, 2024)

Nonfiction Stories of Disabilities and Disability Studies in Religious Contexts

"At the Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches" by Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2022)

"Blessed Minds: Breaking the Silence about Neurodiversity" by Sarah Griffith Lund (Chalice, 2025)

"From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership" by Erin Raffety (Baylor University Press, 2022)

"Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole" by Julia Watts Belser (Beacon, 2023)

"My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church" by Amy Kenny (Brazos, 2022)

Articles

"Ableism Is Still a Core Part of Church Spaces. Here's How to Change It" by Amy Kenny, Sojourners (Jul. 14, 2022)

"Confronting Ableism on the Way to Justice" by Keith Jones, Learning for Justice Magazine, no. 3 (Fall 2022)

"Disability Pride and Advocating for Access" by Lizzie Cox, National Center for Civil and

Human Rights website

"Disability Pride Month: Why Should Disability Pride Month Matter for the Church?" by Leslie Ballew, Church & Society of the United Methodist Church (Jul. 27, 2021)

Podcasts

Access All: Disability News and Mental Health, hosted by Emma Tracey – A BBC podcast that engages news related to disabilities and mental health with guest interviews; new episodes released weekly, approximately 30–40 minutes long

The Accessible Stall, hosted by Kyle Khachadurian and Emily Ladau – A podcast that features conversations between the hosts about their experiences as disabled persons and critical reflections on current events and situations affecting disabled communities; new episodes released every 1–2 months, approximately 30–45 minutes long

Down to the Struts, hosted by Qudsiya Naqui – A podcast with guest interviews that brings intersectional approaches to address disabilities, accessible design, and social justice; new episodes are released every two weeks, roughly 20–30 minutes long

The Mad and Crip Theology Podcast, hosted by Amy Panton and Miriam Spies (also available in video format at the Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability YouTube channel) – A podcast that features interviews with theological scholars whose work engages disabilities and mental health; new episodes released monthly, approximately 40–60 minutes long

Church Disability Accessibility Audit Tools

"Annual Accessibility Audit for United Methodist Churches," Disability Ministries Committee of the United Methodist Church (Dec. 2024)

Church Accessibility Audit documents, "A2A Accessible to All," United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries website – Multiple versions of the audit documents are available at the link, including an online form as well as small and large print PDF and Word formats
"Church Accessibility Audit Form," ELCA Southeastern Synod website – Additional resources are available at the synod's "Disabilities Inclusion" page
"Handbook: Disability and Deaf Access for Churches and Institutions," The Episcopal Church in the Bay Area/Diocese of California website (working draft, Oct 2023)

Additional Resources

"The Art of Flourishing: Conversations on Disability," The Hastings Center for Bioethics website (2019–2022) – A collection of six videos featuring panel discussions among disabled scholars and creatives on the theme of flourishing; topics addressed include belonging, technology use, ableism, disability justice and activism, health care, creativity, and family and kinship
"Disability Pride Month and the Disability Rights Movement," PBS website (updated Jul. 24, 2024) – A collection of videos and documentaries that center experiences of disabled people as well as the Disability Rights Movement (please note that some videos are no longer available as of this article's publication date)
"Virtual Bookshelf: Disability Pride Month," National Endowment for the Humanities website (May 28, 2024) – A website that highlights research and creative projects that have received NEH funding and, as the site says, "expand disability access and research and support the teaching and preservation of disability history and experience"; the list includes books, documentaries, archives, and more

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Featured image of "Visually Safe Disability Pride Flag" is by Ann Magill on Wikimedia

About the Author

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Content warning: This article mentions sexual assault and racial violence.

In November of 2018, my colleagues and I in the Adolescent Girls Faith Formation Working Group of the Religious Education Association began talking about current events and how they affect the way we think about forming faith with young people, particularly adolescent girls. The United States Senate had just confirmed the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Like many in this country, we had watched the bravery of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, who came forward to testify to the Senate about her experience of sexual assault by the then nominee to the highest court in our country. We had heard her share her testimony, with no hope to gain anything for herself from publicly disclosing the truth.

As advocates of adolescent girls who wade in the waters of navigating situations similar to what Blasey Ford navigated, we were distressed to hear that what he did to her was not enough to disqualify him from this position in the justice system. It did not seem just at all. His behavior toward Blasey Ford was called a youthful mistake, and he was passed along in the confirmation hearings.

Who Is Allowed to Make Mistakes in Our Society?

Among our group of Christian education scholars, students, and practitioners, especially concerned with how we will educate and form adolescent girls, our conversation then evolved. Who else is allowed to make mistakes in our society? Certainly not Black teenagers. Black girls are overly sexualized and punished for their bodies. Unarmed Black boys lose their lives for their mistakes.

The name of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old who was shot and killed while he played with a fun toy outside a recreation center, came into our hearts and conversations. Why could Brett Kavanaugh make a "youthful mistake" and end up a Supreme Court justice, and Tamir Rice lose his young life because of a white police officer's "mistake"? Moreover, why were we talking about these as mistakes when our theological language offers us something much richer? It is a sin to assault another person. It is a sin to take the life of another.

This is when we knew that our questions were bigger than adolescent girls and ones we desperately wanted to explore. Our hope was that those who minister with youth and teach in Christian education could help our youth navigate all this in different ways.

Addressing Sin and Mistakes with Youth on the Margins

As we began our research, we realized that, in looking at the complex world of sin and mistakes in the experiences and Christian education of young people, the youth on the

margins commanded our attention. Our book developed in a sustained conversation with nine practitioners and scholars of Christian education with adolescents on the margins: those who are harmed by policies of exclusion around sexuality in their churches, those who see their very identity as a mistake that excludes them from connection with God and a faith community, those who are at the losing end of a capitalist system, and those who are held to an unfair and unattainable standard of perfection. These are the young people who need help discerning the difference between mistakes and sin and between personal sins and systemic issues that are like a force of the power of Sin moving in our society.

Now, as of the end of February 2025, six and half years after we began, "Nobody's Perfect: Redefining Sin and Mistakes in Christian Adolescent Education" is out in the world. Our contention in this book is that adolescents are good, embodying the image of God just like the rest of us. Our contention is that adolescents are supposed to make mistakes; they can learn and grow from them. Our contention is that they can find empowerment from calling out sin, especially systemic sin.

Outline of the Book

The book is divided into three sections:

1. Distinguishing Sin from Mistakes

This first section helps those who work with youth think about what mixed messages we might be sending. Is every mistake a sin? Can we learn from sin? Are we allowed to make mistakes?

2. Navigating Institutional Mistake-Making

The second section is really focused on churches and helping youth and those who work with youth to consider mistakes we may be making as congregations and denominations. In this section, youth workers, ministers, hospitality committees, and worship committees will all find resources to help think through what we, as the institutional church, might be teaching our youth (whether we are intending to or not).

3. Navigating Sin and Mistakes in Culture

This section looks more broadly at culture, specifically our culture of racism, sexism, and consumerism, and offers some ways to consider how we might educate youth in the church to speak back to, confront, and challenge the sins and mistakes our culture makes.

A Resource for Youth Ministers

As youth ministries look for ways to form youth to develop a theological lens for their lives, we hope this book helps. We see this book as accessible for youth workers as well as for scholars of youth ministry. It is particularly useful for congregations who are:

looking to help youth develop a theology of sin that also helps youth realize that every mistake they will make (and there will be many!) is not a sin against the God who loves them
seeking to make their worship space and church building more welcoming to youth on the margins
wanting to empower their youth to help them live out their faith in new ways and to be responsive to what youth can see and adults may miss

As youth ministries try to connect authentically with young people who are girls, LGBTQIA+, Black and Brown, and who are trying to exist in a consumer culture while teaching about how our worth does not lie in what we buy, we hope this will be a resource to consider deeply and thoughtfully what it's like to find a way through all these waters and grow in faith while doing so.

Featured image is by Swapnll Dwivedi on Unsplash

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This article is part of a series on Intergenerational Formation Insights written after a literature

review by the Roots & Wings: Intergenerational Formation Collective grant team in the spring of 2025.

Intergenerational Ministry: A Definition

Intergenerational ministry intentionally brings two or more generations together in worship, service, learning, or sharing “in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community” (“All Ages Becoming: Intergenerational Practice and the Formation of God’s People,” p. 58). To be truly intergenerational, the ministry must be characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, and the empowerment of all participants.

It’s important to note in this definition that the presence of a particular age group is not essential, nor is a particular mode of being together. Practitioners and experts across the field of faith formation use slightly different wording to define intergenerational ministry, but the common, indispensable hallmarks are intentionality, positive cross-generational interactions, and mutuality.

A Resource to Share

This four-minute video provides a summary of the concept of intergenerational ministry and what characterizes a healthy intergenerational church culture. It could be used to broaden your own thinking about intergenerationality, shared with others, or used in a group setting to spark conversation.

Here are a few discussion questions to spark meaningful conversation for a vestry, committee, or group of volunteers:

What ministry silos exist in your church context?
What aspects of church life in your context are multigenerational? Crossgenerational? Intergenerational?
In what ways might intergenerational ministry be more chaotic? What value could there be in that chaos?
Which characteristics of intergenerational culture are already present in your context (positive interactions, connectedness, interdependence, empowerment, accommodation)? Which are or might be most challenging?
Wendy states, "Accommodation always requires empathy. And it often asks us to sacrifice or surrender. Which is, in fact, the way of Jesus." In an individualistic and consumerist culture, how might we encourage accommodation within our contexts?

Additional Resources

Below you will find additional resources for exploring the concept of intergenerational church culture, ministry, formation, and worship. These might be used for your own learning or be helpful resources to share with congregational leaders.

"All Ages Worship: Shifting Language & Why it Matters" by Miranda Hassett

Publisher/Source: Building Faith
Description: The article discusses the idea of shifting from "family services" to "all ages worship" to create a more inclusive and engaging worship experience for people of all ages.
"Beginners Guide to Intergenerational Ministry"

Publisher/Source: The Effective Ministry Podcast
Description: In this first podcast episode of a mini-series, Al James and Tim Beilharz discuss the concept, importance, and implementation of intergenerational ministry, emphasizing its role beyond youth and children's ministry to foster a church community where all ages are actively engaged together.
"Being An Intergenerational Church Resource Paper #1: Toward a Common Understanding"

Publisher/Source: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly
Description: This PDF provides a framework for fostering intergenerational relationships marked by mutuality, equality, and reciprocity, aiming to sustain lifelong discipleship for all ages.
"Being An Intergenerational Church Resource Paper #2: Distinguishing Between Multi-, Cross-, and Inter-generational"

Publisher/Source: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly
Description: This PDF discusses the differences between being multi-, cross- and inter-generational and the implications of these definitions for intergenerational ministry.
"Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship" by Holly Catterton Allen, Christine Lawton, and Cory L. Seibel (second edition)

Publisher/Source: InterVarsity Press, 2023
Description: This book is the primary text for anyone studying intergenerational ministry and formation, providing a theoretical framework and practical guidance based on research and case studies from across the U.S. and around the world.

Featured image is by Sung Jin Cho on Unsplash

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Wendy Claire Barrie (she/her/hers)

Wendy Claire Barrie is the author of "Faith at Home: A Handbook for Cautiously Christian Parents" and is finishing up her second book, "The Church Post-Sunday School: How to Be Intergenerational and Why it Matters." A writer, editor, speaker, and Christian educator, Wendy has served eight Episcopal congregations on both coasts over the last 30-plus years, including All Saints Church in Pasadena, California and Trinity Church New York City. She has a son, Peter, and a husband, Phil, whom she and Peter met at St. Lydia's, a dinner church in Brooklyn, New York. A resident of Seattle, Washington, Wendy is Canon for Intergenerational Ministries at Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral.

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What Is the Age-and-Stage Ministry Model?

The age-and-stage model refers to a ministry that groups members of the church community into separate formation, worship, or fellowship experiences based on age and life stage. Examples of age-and-stage ministry include age-segregated Sunday school, youth pilgrimages, and preschool worship.

The age-and-stage model has its roots in the Sunday School movement, which began in the eighteenth century as an educational opportunity for working class children who were unable to attend weekday school. As access to public education expanded, Sunday School shifted its focus to religious education. At the turn of the twentieth century, public schools began to integrate learnings from developmental psychology, and religious educators took note. Churches began to teach children, youth, and adults "according to the methods of modern pedagogy," as John Westerhoff, III says in "Will Our Children Have Faith?" (3). Church members were grouped together by age or life stage similarity (preschoolers, retirees, etc.) and the teaching was tailored to meet the perceived needs of that specific group. [1]

What Are the Limits of the Age-and-Stage Model?

The age-and-stage model of ministry can be effective. Many of us have positive examples from our own lives and ministries, such as leading a small group for other youth during a diocesan event while in high school and serving as a Godly Play mentor while working as a children's minister. The gifts of this model include:

community building among peers
supporting meaning-making around specific topics such as parenting
accommodating developmentally appropriate modes of learning
lessening age-based power dynamics
However, research of the last several decades documents that the age-and-stage model of ministry is insufficient as a primary mode of faith formation. In "Intergenerational Ministry–A Forty-year Perspective: 1980–2020" Holly Catterton Allen and Jason Brian Santos explore the shift from the age-and-stage model toward intergenerational ministry from the 1960s through 2020. Drawing on books written by Christian formation experts, research from the National Study of Youth and Religion, the College Transition Project from Fuller Youth Institute, and a five-year study on the spiritual lives of 18–29-year-olds from the Barna Group, they conclude, "As the Millennial generation came of age, it became clear that age-segregated efforts had failed to pass on the faith in the way that had been expected" (515).

When the age-and-stage model of ministry is primary, people of all ages forego opportunities to:

form deep cross-generational relationships with a wide range of other Christians

experience polydirectional learning – learning across generations that is mutual and reciprocal
mentor others
build a sense of connection to the church community and the body of Christ beyond their small group

What Is the Alternative?

Incorporating robust opportunities for intergenerational ministry can offer an alternative to faith communities where most ministry is age segregated. Intergenerational ministry intentionally brings two or more generations together in worship, service, learning, or sharing "in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community" ("All Ages Becoming: Intergenerational Practice and the Formation of God's People," 58). To be truly intergenerational, the ministry must be characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, and the empowerment of all participants. Intergenerational ministry is less a new way of being church than it is an old way, perhaps the oldest way, modeled by the ancient Israelite people and the early Christians. It is not a program as much as it is a culture.

Additionally, multiple benefits to intergenerational ministry across age groups are enumerated by practitioners and in the current research. As chapters 3 and 9 in "Intergenerational Christian Formation" make clear, these benefits include:

cultivating a sense of belonging
navigating difficulty and loss
supporting transitions between life stages
providing unique opportunities for character growth
strengthening spiritual practices and connections

offering a better use of resources within the congregation

What Balance Should We Seek between Age-and-Stage Ministry and Intergenerational Ministry?

In their foundational book, “Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship,” Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross recommend that 50–80 percent of congregational activities be intentionally intergenerational (38). This leaves ample room for churches to continue to provide meaningful formation, fellowship, and worship experiences for specific age or affinity groups while finding new and creative opportunities for intergenerational ministry throughout the liturgical year and in a variety of contexts. After all, we learn to be disciples not from a book or a program, but in community, in relationship, by following Jesus, all ages together.

Note

1. A critique of the schooling-instructional paradigm used in churches is warranted. For example, an educational model of ministry may effectively teach about God, but does it help us know God or live more fully into who God created us to be? This critique, however, is beyond the scope of this article. For exploring this question further, we highly recommend “Will Our Children Have Faith?” by Westerhoff.

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The Power of a Good Story

Luke 24:13–35 is one of my favorite biblical narratives about the aftermath of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Two followers of Jesus encounter the risen Savior in the form of a stranger who accompanies them on their journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. When the stranger asks the two downcast travelers about their conversation, one of them, whose name was Cleopas, initially responds with incredulous annoyance because he is surprised at the stranger's oblivious ignorance.

I relate this moment to my experience as a parent of two teenagers when I ask them about teenage happenings, idioms, and interests. A year or so ago, I asked them why so many young people enjoyed viewing Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos. More

recently I asked them about the chicken jockey meme from “A Minecraft Movie.” Like my patient children, Cleopas and his companion proceed to answer the stranger’s question with a recounting of their trauma due to the crucifixion of Jesus and ongoing confusion with rumors of their fallen leader’s empty tomb.

New Testament scholar Raj Nadella finds that the narrative power of the gospel of Luke lies in its full (versus flat) presentations of complex characters and features such as dramatic reversals, a range of emotions, and open-ended stories. In Luke 24, the concept of “theoxenia” (divine beings appearing on earth in the form of a stranger) would have been familiar to Greco-Roman readers, but Nadella observes that the story contains a striking reversal because the resurrected Christ is a divine being who desires to serve humans, rather than being served by them, in table fellowship. After Jesus incognito talks with the two travelers, he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and serves it to them. The two followers then realize the identity of the stranger and exclaim to one another in Luke 24:32, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

The Power of History

As an historian of Christianity in the United States, I find the Emmaus narrative also provides meaningful and applicable lessons for teaching church history. In 1997, Joyce Appleby stated the following about the power of history in her presidential address to the American Historical Association: “History is powerful because we live with its residues, its remnants, its remainders and reminders. Moreover, by studying societies unlike our own, we counteract the chronocentrism that blinkers contemporary vision. That’s why we cannot abandon intellectual rigor or devalue accuracy.” Appleby compares historians to cultural translators.

Historians immerse themselves in the past, just as cultural translators study the customs of a foreign country, and historians help their contemporaries comprehend how past developments have shaped the present contexts they inhabit.

I therefore believe we should teach church history with honesty and fullness. Just as the Emmaus narrative provides readers with a story that engages a range of emotions, such as anger, despair, and perplexity alongside awe, joy, and hope, so too should the teaching of church history.

One obstacle to full presentations of church history is the highlight reel trap. In Sunday school and seminary classrooms, church history is taught for the primary purpose of imitable inspiration. Courageous and righteous Christians, such as abolitionists working to end transatlantic slavery in the nineteenth century, are emphasized because their actions and convictions are worthy of our reflection. But this pedagogical approach leaves little room for depth and nuance, and the educational experience is akin to watching a highlight reel of isolated Christian moments devoid of context and light on content.

Teaching the Histories of Abolitionism and Proslavery Christianity

The histories of abolitionism and proslavery Christianity in the United States are vital to our practices of faith, witness, and worship today. In the same way one cannot understand the making of American democracy without beholding its advances, ideals, compromises, and contradictions, we need a fuller understanding of Christian history in this country. The best

and worst of American Christianity manifested in the efforts to end slavery and the terrible yet real Christian defenses of this grave injustice. Here are three examples that provide further context and illustrate how we can more deeply comprehend the story of American Christianity.

William Lloyd Garrison and His White Christian Critics

In 1860, William Lloyd Garrison responded to the longstanding accusation that the abolitionist movement was atheistic and anti-Christian. Garrison's activism began when he delivered antislavery speeches in the late 1820s and more formally when he launched what become the most well-known abolitionist newspaper, "The Liberator," in 1831, and white Christians were consistently among Garrison's fiercest critics. Garrison explained that he was not surprised that his most ardent detractors were white Christians. Every nation had distinct social injustices that were difficult to reform, precisely because they had grown so large as to become engrafted to its foundations. Garrison noted that proslavery Christianity spawned an ecumenical movement that brought together people of faith from a wide array of denominations and traditions like no other issue. These Christians argued over innumerable doctrines, such as predestination, free will, and whether infants should be baptized, but they agreed that American slavery was divinely ordained and assailed abolitionism as blasphemous and unbiblical.

White Clergy's Arguments for and against Abolition

In 1792, the white Presbyterian pastor David Rice delivered a speech before the Kentucky state legislature denouncing slavery on the grounds that it was "inconsistent with justice and good policy." Rice laid out the simple argument that his state should abolish slavery because it was morally wrong.

Yet in the following years and decades, it became harder, not easier, for many white American Christians to profess this fundamental truth. The white Presbyterian pastor Frederick A. Ross accused the abolitionists in 1857 of what he regarded as a severe crime: They were twisting the Bible into “an abolition Bible,” and remaking the Christian God into “an abolition God.” The white Episcopal bishop Stephen Elliott similarly charged four years later that Christian abolitionists were in fact “infidels—men who are clamoring for a new God, and a new Christ, and a new Bible.” The sad and perverse irony is that proslavery Christians were the ones who had manipulated Christianity to uphold their unjust system.

Black Christian Abolitionists’ Denunciations of Proslavery Christianity

In 1845, the formerly enslaved Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass elucidated his righteous anger at the failures of white American Christianity in his autobiography. Douglass differentiated between “Christianity proper” and American Christianity. He hated how Christian enslavers and supporters of slavery wielded their biblical interpretations as weapons to combat abolitionism. Douglass asserted: “I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”

Maria W. Stewart, one of the first African American woman activists, also weighed the liberative principles of Christianity alongside the racial oppression in the United States. In her lecture delivered at Boston’s Franklin Hall in 1832, Stewart called out the sinful hypocrisies of slavery and racism and encouraged her Black and white listeners to enact the gospel message by dismantling slavery in the southern states and racial discrimination across the United States. Garrison supported Douglass, Stewart, and other Black abolitionists by publishing their writings, arranging speaking opportunities for them, and amplifying their

insights, with proper attributions, in his own works.

The Fullness of Church History

My brief survey of abolitionism and proslavery Christianity is an illustration of how fuller presentations of church history can help Christians better understand the past and the present contexts they inhabit. A flat presentation of Christian abolitionists such as Douglass, Garrison, and Stewart would isolate their faithful witness and ignore their ferocious criticisms of the Christianity that enslavers and supports of slavery practiced. Such a presentation of selective highlights would likely be inspiring for learners, but it would also be misleading and potentially inaccurate if the only Christians mentioned were those opposing slavery.

The purpose of church history is to take Christians on a journey akin to what readers of the Emmaus narrative experience. The fullness of church history engages a range of emotions and aims to inform, inspire, infuriate, and illumine. Our teaching informs people of faith when it is intellectually rigorous and provides accurate information about the past. Our teaching inspires people of faith when it features thorough portrayals of Christian history that include stories of courage and moral clarity alongside narratives of compromise and failure.

To behold the historical realities of compromise and failure is infuriating, and it should infuriate people of faith. The notion of proslavery Christianity is simultaneously an oxymoron—because the two words stand in contradiction to one another—and a historical fact—as many white Christian individuals, churches, and denominations defended slavery with scriptural appeals and theological arguments.

But the pursuit of a more complete history need not be a fatalistic task that results in

hopelessness and despair. Rather, teaching the fullness of church history illumines fresh understandings and new pathways to enact the love and justice of God in our faith, witness, and worship today. We learn from the past when we reject false doctrines, comprehend how those doctrines came to be, and discern how we participate in ministries that continue the work of the Christian ancestors we admire. The best way to honor their legacy is to practice what they preached in our lives.

Additional educational resources based on William Yoo's book, "Reckoning with History: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity," are available at https://www.wjkbooks.com/reckoning-with-history-study-reflection-resources/.

Featured image of "Masthead of 'The Liberator,' January 11, 1861" is by Hammatt Billings and engraved by Alonzo Hartwell and available as public domain at Wikimedia Commons

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William Yoo is Associate Professor of American Religious and Cultural History at Columbia Theological Seminary. He has published books on African American Christianity, Asian American Christianity, Presbyterian history, and the histories of Indigenous rights activism and abolitionism in the United States. His most recent book is "Reckoning with History: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity" (Westminster John Knox Press, 2025).

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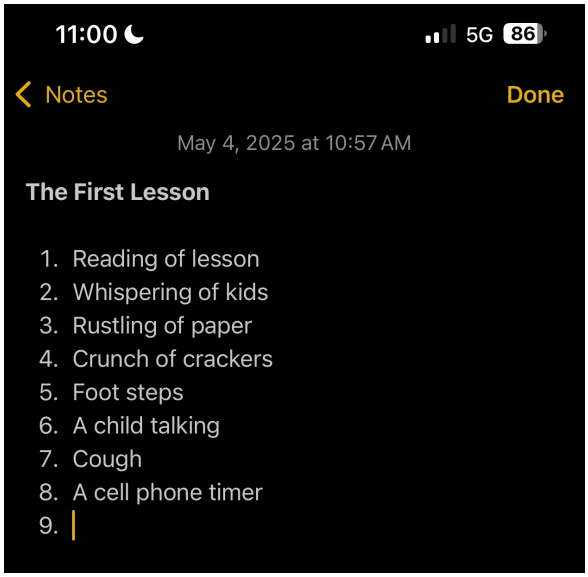
If you have been part of a congregation where children are present during worship, you have probably heard someone comment about the “noise” of children. The truth is that children make sounds, and their capacity for quiet voices and movement is often lower than the capacity of most adults. However, no gathered body of people is truly silent.

A Small Experiment



The next time you are listening to a lesson or sermon at church, tune in to the full soundscape of your worshipping community. Grab a pencil or the notes app on your phone and jot down what you hear. Does the air conditioning or heat in the church turn on suddenly? Is anyone coughing? Can you hear anything from outside the building?

Reflect

As I have tuned in to the sounds of the gathered faithful during worship, I've begun to notice lots of potentially distracting sounds—from the oxygen tank of an elderly parishioner to cell phone ring tones and a preacher's microphone cutting in and out. You can see my own list of sounds heard during the reading of the first lesson on May 4, 2025 in the picture attached to this article. And yet adults seem to respond to these auditory distractions differently. While I have heard people comment on "how distracting" it is when someone's cell phone goes off in church, people seem to have a much more sustained and emotional response to the sounds children make during worship. I wonder why. I also wonder how leaders can gracefully walk the line that validates the real frustration of those who want to hear the content of worship while promoting the gift of being together as the body of Christ, a reality that involves the sounds of a gathered group.

Stories from the Roots & Wings Community

The above reflection on "The Sound Factor" of intergenerational worship first appeared in the May 2025 monthly newsletter for Roots & Wings: Intergenerational Formation Collaborative. Below are a few of the stories I received by email in response to that newsletter.

Even Some Adults Need to Move and Make Sound in Worship

"At one congregation where I was serving as the director of children and family ministries one Sunday, I was attending the more formal morning service where sometimes, but not always, children were taken out to a chapel service for part of the service. I did not have kids

at the time, but I was sitting with a family with kids who were moving around a bit and making kid sounds. I can't remember exactly at what point but probably during the readings, an older adult wandered into the church service, and we made room for this person in our pew. The person brought one of the church newsletters in with him and during the sermon was loudly turning pages and looking through the newsletter while often clearing their throat or coughing. I realized I was very distracted by this behavior and frustrated at the person's lack of social awareness and the loud noises they were making while I was trying to pay attention to the sermon.

"I have since reflected on this often as this person's behavior was much more distracting to me than any child noises I've heard in worship. I'm guessing the reason for that is that I recognize that children are going to move around and make noise and have less capacity than most adults to keep their voices lower or sit still during worship. But when it is an adult moving around a bunch and making noise, I feel they should know better. Now looking back, I wonder if there was something going on with that particular person that I didn't know about, maybe, maybe not. Either way, I recognized the need in myself to be more understanding that even some adults need to move around and make noise during worship."
By Suzanna Green

Tears of a Child Bring Us to a Fuller Embrace of Our Own Humanity
"Good Friday 2024, at Saint John's Cathedral in Denver. The exceptional choir at the cathedral, made up of both paid professional and amateur parishioner singers, sang the most beautiful Good Friday mass I've ever heard. It brought worshipers directly into the story of Jesus's passion as if we were walking alongside our Lord from supper to the garden to Caiphus to Pilate. We felt the lashes of the whip, the pierce of the crown of thorns, and we felt the devastation of witnessing the degradation and pain of our remarkable and beloved friend. And just as we stood at the very foot of the cross and heard him utter "It is finished,"

a small child, well-known and beloved by this congregation, began to cry. And my first thought was, yes, dear one, it is time for tears and lament.

“After the service, I went to the mother to assure her that her sweet little one’s tears had in no way distracted or interfered with our worship, but had lifted it, connecting us with our own tears and lament, our own grief. We must walk the way of the cross before we can truly grasp the joy of resurrection; sometimes, the tears of a child bring us to a fuller embrace of our own humanity in all of its flawed beauty.”
By Christina (Tina) Clark

Featured image is by PublicDomainPictures from Pixabay

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As the morning sun crested the Seven Sisters east of Asheville, North Carolina, I stood in its pale light near a sparsely decorated flower cross. Easter was early in 2024. I had asked those attending the sunrise service to bring clippings from their gardens for our cross adornment. There were some early dogwood flowers, a few wilted daffodils, store-bought filler shirking the rules, and a few clusters of delicate white flowers that looked like small bursts of firecrackers.

After the benediction, I stood surveying these wondrous flowers on the cross. My friend Steve stood next to me and said, “Those are sarvis-berries or, as more civilized folks call them, serviceberries.” Steve is a retired U.S. Forest Service Biologist and Researcher. Steve explained that these flowers were from the serviceberry tree, a tree that produces its buds very early. Its name comes from the fact that often these were the only flowers to adorn the altars of church services, weddings, and funerals in the early spring season. They also signaled to early circuit riding Methodist preachers that the ground was thawing and it was time to get back on their horses.

Selecting “The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World”

The months crept by after this conversation, and those small white flowers faded from my memory. I sat with a trusted mentor, picking his brain about my fledgling book study and what book we should do next. He asked if I had heard about Robin Wall Kimmerer’s new

book. It was short, poignant, accessible, and named after a tree he could not remember the name of! A quick Google search for the book title revealed that elusive plant again: "The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World."

I talked to my leadership team, and we decided this book arrived at the right time. Just before the white flowers would begin blooming on the trees around our old church cemetery. Right on time for our hearts to be stretched and shaped by the wisdom of the more-than-human creation.

Our Book Study Structure

Our typical Sunday afternoon book study follows the same pattern. My group firmly believes that liturgy is the work of the people and that all moments when folks gather together are, and should be seen as, a holy fellowship. Every time my small church plant gathers, we pray the same opening and closing prayer and check in on one another's faith journey by asking three questions:

In what ways did you experience or observe God's presence over the last week?
In what ways did you feel distant from God this past week?
How would you like to grow in your relationship with God this next week?
The shared prayers help dislocate the central voice from the credentialed pastor in the room (me) and place it on all of us (the priesthood of all believers). The three questions help keep us honest with one another while also deeply rooting our community in our own faith journeys.

We had studied two books before embarking on "The Serviceberry." One book was deemed

too secular, and the one that followed was deemed too heady and exegetical for seekers and committed church members alike. In an effort to split the difference, I set about pairing the seven chapters of “The Serviceberry” to biblical texts, supplemental readings from theologians and agrarian writers, and guiding questions across four weeks plus an introduction week to invite members into the series. This study and the overarching structure can be found in this PDF: Central Haw Creek “The Serviceberry” Study.

Each Sunday over five weeks preceding Lent, a group of 8–12 got together. We ranged in age from 21 months (my son Silas) to the late 70s and everything in between. We had folks who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, people who had not darkened a church door in 15 years, and folks who have been faithful church people longer than I’ve been alive. Our conversations were lively, respectful, and a salve to my sometimes cynical soul.

The Response

I had many folks say that they loved this book and our study of it. Many folks in the class bought copies for family and friends to encourage them to read it. As people who had all just experienced the destruction of our realities by Hurricane Helene, we deeply resonated with Kimmerer’s discussion of service economies that pop up out of nowhere like ephemeral flowers or berries and nourish communities in deep and rich ways. I also observed intergenerational friendships forming. People who would never speak to one another normally stayed after study to chat—so long sometimes that I would have to shoo them out into the evening! The most overwhelming response was a deeper appreciation for God’s created world and all the beauty and gospel truths that can be found in the branches of a tree that nourishes birds, bees, and bodies all the same.

Featured image is by Anya Chernik on Unsplash

About the Author

Patrick Neitzey (he/him/his)

Patrick was born and raised in Texas and spent his childhood and college years there. Perceiving a call to ministry in the Methodist church at a young age, Patrick was involved in church in any way he could be at an appropriately named John Wesley United Methodist Church. He was a Methodist missionary in a Baptist land when he attended Baylor University, studying world religions and English. He was also on the team that cared for the two North American black bear mascots, Lady and Joy. Patrick loves being outside hiking, biking, fly fishing, and camping, usually with his wife, Hannah, a social worker at Charles George VA in Asheville, their son, Silas, and their dog, June Bug. Patrick has served on staff at Central UMC in Asheville since 2018 as Pastor of Connection and Discipleship and worked in extension ministry from 2018–2020 with the Missional Wisdom Foundation. As of February 2024, Patrick has been following a call from the Spirit to plant and nurture a church at the Haw Creek Commons, an adaptive reuse space in the Haw Creek neighborhood of Asheville.

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Welcoming and affirming those who identify as LGBTQIA+ in Christian communities involve recognizing all sexes, genders, and sexual orientations as good and sacred reflections of the divine. One thing that can go a long way toward putting this theological conviction into practice is understanding the terms that queer people use to describe their identities.

Ways of thinking and talking about sex, gender, and sexuality have evolved and are continuing to evolve. New terms and labels are emerging to name people's experiences. Some definitions have shifted, broadened, narrowed, or multiplied. The growing abundance of meaningful words enables more people to describe themselves and feel less invisible. At the same time, becoming familiar and conversant with the wide array of terms for LGBTQIA+ identities can be a challenging and confusing process in this rapidly evolving context.

This article aims to provide a brief guide for navigating common key terms and ideas for LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences. It is intended as an introductory glossary rather than a definitive lexicon or encyclopedia; if you want to dive deeper into any of these terms, we recommend exploring additional sources, including those offered below. It is by no means representative of how all LGBTQIA+ people think and talk about these terms. It is also designed to be updated, corrected, and improved as needed.

Things to Bear in Mind

This guide is not exhaustive
People may use terms, labels, or definitions to describe their experiences that aren't listed here.

These terms can mean different things to different people
People who identify with these terms may define and understand them in differing ways, and what the term means to each person will vary from person to person.

People's relationships to these terms can change
People may change the terms or labels they use as they grow in self-understanding and as

language and meanings change. Sometimes social and cultural norms can hinder a person's discernment about their gender identity or sexual orientation, and they may realize that a different term than one they had previously used better reflects their experience.

These terms point to personal, and sometimes intimate, human experiences
Sex, gender, and sexuality can be highly personal and sensitive matters for people. Thus these terms and labels deserve to be treated with sensitivity and care.

1. Sex Identity Terms

Sex in the context of human identities generally points to characterizations of human bodies based on reproductive body parts. Sex is often presented as two possibilities: male and female. However, sex is more diverse than this either/or indicates.

intersex

Intersex is a term that encompasses sex identities that the binary of male/female does not adequately reflect. As InterACT's article "What Is Intersex?" indicates, people who identify as intersex can have a range of variations in sex characteristics through "genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes" (Jan. 26, 2021). For more information on intersex identities, check out InterACT's "Intersex Variations Glossary." [1]

2. Gender Identity Terms

Gender generally points to how human beings experience themselves. Gender is not as

simple as checking “woman” or “man” boxes based on reproductive body parts. As Gender Spectrum’s “Dimensions of Gender” resource says, “a person’s gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions: body, identity, and social gender.” In other words, as this article explains at greater length, a person’s relationship with their own body and its sexual development, their sense of who they are and how they think and feel about themselves, and their negotiation of the socially constructed ideas and norms for gender roles and behavior in their context all play a part in shaping their gender.

Here are some common terms used to describe particular gender identities:

cisgender, cis

Cisgender, or cis for short, refers to gender identities that correlate with the sex assigned at birth. [2]

Cisgender girls or women are people who are assigned the sex female at birth and identify as girls or women
Cisgender boys or men are people who are assigned male at birth and identify as boys or men

transgender, trans

Transgender, or trans for short, is commonly used to refer to gender identities that do not correlate with the sex assigned at birth. [3]

Transgender often refers to people who are assigned male at birth and identify as girls or women (transgender girls or women) as well as people who are assigned female at birth and

identify as boys or men (transgender boys or men)
This term can also overlap with nonbinary as an umbrella term for a wide array of gender identities beyond cisgender identities, depending on context and how a person chooses to identify themselves

nonbinary

Nonbinary is commonly used to refer to gender identities that the gender binary of girl/boy or woman/man does not adequately reflect. This includes people who experience their gender as fluctuating, as being both girl/woman and boy/man, as being neither girl/woman nor boy/man, as having no gender, and more. [4]

agender

Agender refers to people who understand themselves to have no gender. Their experience may involve not identifying with either girl/woman or boy/man or a neutral gender that is neither girl/woman or boy/man. Agender is often included among the various ways of identifying as nonbinary. [5]

bigender

Bigender refers to people who have two or more genders. It is often included among the various ways of identifying as nonbinary. People who identify as bigender may experience two or more genders simultaneously or over time. [6]

genderfluid

Genderfluid refers to people who experience their gender as fluctuating and changing over

time. It is often included among the various ways of identifying as nonbinary. [7]

genderqueer

Genderqueer is commonly used to refer to people who identify beyond or between the gender binary of girl/woman and boy/man. It can refer to people whose gender experience does not completely align with girl/woman or boy/man and instead involves aspects of each. It can also refer to people who experience a neutral gender or gender that is completely different than either girl/woman or boy/man. It may also be used interchangeably with nonbinary to encompass various gender experiences that do not reflect the gender binary. [8]

Two-Spirit

Two-Spirit is a term developed by Elder Myra Laramee, as Isabella Thurston explains in "The History of Two-Spirit Folks," and used among Indigenous peoples to refer to members of their communities whose genders encompass both girl/woman and boy/man identities. It points to identities that have distinctive cultural significance for certain Indigenous communities and is a term that belongs to these communities. [9]

3. Sexual Orientation Terms

Sexual orientation, or sexuality, generally points to if and how human beings experience attraction to other people. Attraction can be physical, sexual, or romantic as well as any combination of these, and it can be tied to or unrelated to gender. Additionally, attraction to a particular gender (or to no particular gender) does not mean attraction to everyone who

identifies with that gender.

A person's sexual orientation is a part of their identity. It is not the same as sexual or romantic activity, and it does not depend upon being romantically or sexually involved with another person. It is also not identical to or determined by gender; in other words, you can't know a person's sexual orientation simply by knowing their gender identity.

Some common terms used to describe particular sexual orientations are:

asexual, ace

Asexual, or ace for short, refers to people who experience no sexual attraction to other people or for whom sexual attraction or interest is low or neutral. It may include people who experience no, low, or neutral romantic attraction as well. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as asexual. It is also used as an umbrella term to encompass a spectrum of experiences. Some asexual people also identify with sexual orientations like gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual, and asexual people may also use common terms for types of romantic attraction to identify their experiences, like aromantic, biromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, or panromantic. [10]

aromantic, aro

Aromantic, or aro for short, refers to people who experience no romantic attraction to other people or for whom romantic attraction or interest is low or neutral. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as aromantic. Like asexual, it encompasses a range of experiences. [11]

demisexual

Demisexual refers to people who do not experience sexual attraction to other people until they develop an emotional connection with them. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as demisexual. It is an identity often included within the asexual spectrum. Demisexual people can also identify as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, omnisexual, pansexual, and more. [12]

graysexual, gray-asexual, gray-a, gray ace, gray

Graysexual, also called gray-asexual as well as gray-a or gray ace for short, refers to people who experience low or neutral sexual attraction or interest. It is an identity often included within the asexual spectrum. The level or degree of sexual attraction or interest can vary among graysexual people. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as graysexual, and graysexual people can also identify with other sexual orientations, including gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, omnisexual, pansexual, and more. [13]

gay

Gay refers to people who identify as men who are attracted to men (or boys who are attracted to boys). It tends to mean attraction solely to men (or boys). Both cisgender and transgender people can identify as gay, and some nonbinary people who are attracted to men also identify as gay. “Gay” is also frequently used as an umbrella term to encompass all who identify as gay and lesbian and even more broadly as a term for all LGBTQIA+ people. Because the term has layers of meaning that point to specific identities within the LGBTQIA+ community, however, not all members of the LGBTQIA+ community use this term to describe themselves. [14]

lesbian

Lesbian refers to people who identify as women who are attracted to women (or girls who are attracted to girls). It tends to mean attraction solely to women (or girls). Both cisgender and transgender people can identify as lesbian, and some nonbinary people who are attracted to women also identify as lesbian. [15]

heterosexual, straight

Heterosexual or straight generally refers to people who identify as women who are attracted to men (or girls who are attracted to boys) as well as to people who identify as men who are attracted to women (or boys who are attracted to girls). It tends to mean attraction that is exclusively women to men and men to women (or girls to boys and boys to girls). Both cisgender and transgender people can identify as straight. [16]

bisexual, bi, bi+

Bisexual, or bi for short, refers to people who are attracted to more than one gender. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as bisexual. Although the prefix "bi" means two, people who identify as bisexual may be attracted to more than two genders. They may also have a stronger attraction to people of one gender more than another, and attraction to various genders can fluctuate. "Bi+" is often used to encompass all people who experience attraction to more than one gender, including bisexual, omnisexual, and pansexual identities. [17]

omnisexual

Omnisexual refers to people who are attracted to people of all genders. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as omnisexual. The term often indicates that gender plays a role in their experience of attraction, in contrast to pansexuality (see below). Like bisexual people, those who identify as omnisexual may have a stronger attraction to people of particular genders more than others, and attraction to various genders can fluctuate. [18]

pansexual, pan

Pansexual, or pan for short, often refers to people who are attracted to people of any gender. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people can identify as pansexual. For some, this term also indicates that gender does not play a role in their attraction to other people. Additionally, some who identify as pansexual also use the term “bisexual” to describe themselves. [19]

queer

Queer is a term that was used historically as an insult for LGBTQIA+ people but has been reclaimed by many members of the LGBTQIA+ community and given positive, affirming meaning. It is commonly used as an umbrella term for all who identify as LGBTQIA+. As a reclaimed term, it can also be used to challenge gender- and sexuality-based oppression. Because of the term’s history, however, not all members of the LGBTQIA+ community identify with it. [20]

questioning

Questioning refers to people who are still discerning their gender or sexual orientation. Some people who are grappling with their gender or sexuality may choose to describe themselves as questioning, and some may not. [21]

A Word about "Homosexual"

"Homosexual" is a term that has come to be regarded as "offensive" in some contexts, to quote the "PFLAG National Glossary" and We Are Family's "LGBTQI+ Glossary of Terms." GLAAD lists the word in its "terms to avoid" and provides this clarification:

"Because of the clinical history of the word 'homosexual,' it is aggressively used by anti-LGBTQ activists to suggest that people attracted to the same sex are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered—notions discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s" (see "Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ").

Additional Resources

"Resource Center," The Trevor Project

"Understanding Gender," Gender Spectrum

Notes and References

1. See "What Is Intersex?," InterACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth (Jan. 26, 2021).

2. See "The Language of Gender," Gender Spectrum.

3. See "The Language of Gender."

4. See "Glossary of Terms," Human Rights Campaign; "Understanding Nonbinary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive," Advocates for Trans Equality.

5. See "What's it like to not have a gender?" in "The GENDER Book."

6. See "What Is Bigender Identity?" by Leah Campano, "Seventeen" magazine (May 17, 2022).

7. See "The Language of Gender."

8. See "The Language of Gender"; "Glossary of Terms," Human Rights Campaign.

9. See "The History of Two-Spirit Folks" by Isabella Thurston, The Indigenous Foundation.

10. See "About Asexuality," The Asexual Visibility & Education Network.

11. See "Romantic Orientations," The Asexual Visibility & Education Network.

12. See "General FAQ: Definitions," The Asexual Visibility & Education Network; "Am I Demisexual?" by Alison Caporimo and Leah Campano, "Seventeen" magazine (Sept. 30, 2022).

13. See "The Gray Area," The Asexual Visibility & Education Network.

14. See "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," Stonewall.

15. See "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," Stonewall.

16. See "List of LGBTQ+ Terms," Stonewall.

17. See "What Is Bisexuality?," Bisexual Resource Center.

18. See Lindsay Curtis, "Omnisexual: Meaning, Attractions, Relationships, and Health," Verywell Health (Feb. 13, 2025).

19. See Sue Cardenas-Soto, "Pansexuality: What It Is, What It Isn't," The Trevor Project (May 23, 2023); "What Is Bisexuality?," Bisexual Resource Center.

20. See "What Does the Term 'Queer' Mean? Why Are Younger Generations Reclaiming the Word Queer?," The LGBTQ Community Center of the Desert (Dec. 12, 2022).

21. See "About the Q" and "PFLAG National Glossary," PFLAG.

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Ordinary Time is expansive. This year it lasts from June 8 to November 30. This makes Ordinary Time a perfect season to dig out a journal bought for a New Year's resolution, open a journaling app that a friend recommended, and try journaling.

Why and How I Journal

I've been journaling at least once a week for many years. While my journaling takes many forms, my journal entries are generally observations with thoughts and comments about what I'm seeing.

When I was younger, I chronicled what was happening or had happened on a day or during a span of several days. I basically recorded the actions, trials, and successes of my young life.

As I matured and moved from being the center of the universe to merely one of the spatial bodies, my journaling changed and became much less about me and more about that expanding universe I was part of. As such, I could look at events, hear conversations, and feel impulses from around me, and I began to write about them, insert myself into places where I was not actually present, or even alter those scenarios to create new realities and possibilities. In time, I began, at a very simple level, to consider what being a person of faith meant in those many real and altered realities.

Journaling has provided breadth and depth to two spiritual practices of mine. My day usually begins with the Daily Office in “The Book of Common Prayer” or a combination of daily readings and devotions. I use my journal to explore questions I have about words, their meanings, or the scriptures themselves. I may write directly about what I’ve read or use the readings to consider the passage’s relevance for today or other points in history. Sometimes I’ll look up a definition and then spend some time pondering how ancient words have evolved as time has passed and cultures have changed. Journaling during this time also leads to sharing my thoughts on the readings with family and close friends.

Another one of my spiritual practices is taking notes during sermons. Phrases, analogies, names I’m not familiar with, and books or music mentioned provide journaling prompts on a weekly basis. On Palm Sunday, for example, our associate rector’s sermon included the phrase “The Passion is not a performance, it’s a mirror.” This dramatic summation of his points about where we stood historically and presently during Holy Week was an excellent lead-in for my journaling about Jesus’s journey that week.

Tips for Journaling as a Spiritual Practice

I have led workshops on journaling for adults as well as youth. Here are some ideas and suggestions that I have shared with these groups for getting started with a journaling spiritual practice.

1. Journaling Can Take Many Different Forms

At a workshop I led for the men of a previous parish, I asked if anyone kept a journal. Well, no

one admitted it. When I explored why that might be, many expressed that they had once been made to do journaling that was limited to retelling what they had done that month or season.

As I distributed a mix of formal journals and everyday school notebooks, I offered several different prompts they could use for journaling. Here are a few to consider:

Write about an experience in the church
Jot down notes about an activity or a friend
Write a prayer
Draw
Use multiple colors
Add stickers
Use it to keep mementos like church bulletins, flowers, or restaurant menus from places you visit

2. Make It Your Own

In my workshops, I remind people that the journal and its content belong to them. Journaling is not a homework assignment or for anyone else.

3. Explore Faith in Both Everyday and Memorable Moments

My daughter-in-law asked me to discuss journaling with her youth group as they prepared for a pilgrimage to Scotland. I encouraged them to start using the journals before their trip, to carry them around as they saw fit while on pilgrimage, and then visit them often when they returned. My message was to use the journals to enliven their faith through their everyday encounters. By journaling, they could also document memories about their pilgrimage and

faith formation.

4. Journaling Can Be a Mode of Prayer

Two years ago, while I was in docent training, my seatmate shared a picture of a page from her journal celebrating something. The page was alive with sketches, words, exclamation marks. She shared that she journals most days and always starts with a note to her late mother and to God. For her, faith is real, and this spiritual practice of hers celebrates and reinforces that faith.

5. Incorporate Journaling into a Formation Program or Small Group

Journaling provides a way of recording growth and development in faith formation. It is a flexible practice that can be incorporated into a formation lesson or small group. Formation leaders can allow time during gatherings or between sessions for journaling, either prompted or unscripted.

Conclusion

Ordinary Time is perfect for engaging faith on your own schedule and in your own way, and journaling can help you be intentional and find new ways to explore your faith in this long church season. Whether you fill your journal with the mysteries of Christ's resurrection as often as each day's sunrise, an occasional act of kindness, a relative's birthday, books read, conversations shared, challenges encountered, fellow travelers met on your formation journey, or prayers, I hope journaling may enrich your spiritual life as much as it has mine.

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