Can a Congregation Imagine ‘Something New’?
Karen Gieseke

The church council annual retreat agenda and conversation included the expected business items: calendar planning, stewardship drive, building maintenance, and budget issues. But an unplanned and unexpected conversation began. The dialogue turned to Sunday School and included the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers, the children’s unpredictable attendance, the weariness of those attempting to lead the program, and the honest but unspoken question of “Is it worth it?”

This conversation is occurring in church settings across the country. Whether at a council retreat, a committee planning meeting, a weekly staff conversation, or among the volunteers committed to nurturing the faith of children at the expense of nurturing their own faith, the same questions continue to surface. Where are the families? Will the children’s attendance last after Christmas? How can we recruit energized teachers committed to a schedule? And most importantly, is God’s story being heard and experienced in a way that fosters a growing and rooted faith, and an identity as a child of God that is known and lived?

*The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* names the faith of the whole congregation as one of four elements in exemplary youth ministry, asserting “. . . it is the culture of the whole church that is most influential in nurturing youth of vital Christian faith” (Martinson et al., 14). It is the attitudes, behaviors, and customs of the whole Body of Christ, all people of all ages, that is needed in planting, growing, and nurturing Christian faith. The stories of all validate both purpose and identity within God’s family, whether young or old. “. . . care of children as practice of faith transforms us adults by summoning us to be committed to the well-being of children—not just our own but all children—as an essential dimension of the common good of the human family” (Miller-McLemore, xv). Our faith gives witness to God’s story throughout life’s journey, and doesn’t begin and end with specific benchmarks—or age delineations—on life’s timeline. But many ministry programs draw lines between age groups, imitating North

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American culture which employs age to guide whether one is “in or out,” including movie ratings, restaurant menus, and purchasing discounts. This same attitude, behavior, and custom in congregations reflects current culture and “causes those in our churches not to want to be with other generations because they have been told they don’t need to be” (Beckwith, 132). But the model and practice of separating from each other and each other’s stories has led to a place where Christian identity and a maturing Christian faith are on shaky ground.

So can we imagine “something else” other than what our current culture offers our families and congregations? “What if we began to live as people who believe what we preach—that Jesus is Lord, that his life, death and resurrection binds our futures with his, and that the kingdom of God is at hand. . . a community that embodies the world as God intends it to be?” (Root, 212). Some congregations are doing just that, bringing together the cloud of witnesses of all ages. The above-mentioned council retreat resulted in a brave and bold decision. The council leadership decided to “cancel” the current Sunday School model for a year and try “Something Else”. They believed in the gift of community and the richness in telling and sharing stories, and understood the current program struggled with both sustainability and rooted faith formation. So they began a journey together, and invited the congregation along to try “Something Else.” Grace Lutheran Church in Waseca, MN experienced a year of risk, reward, opportunity, and promise (www.wasecagrace lutheran.com).

An organic team of leaders, most in their 30s and 40s, created weekly intergenerational experiences paired with the narrative lectionary stories from the worship texts, tying together conversations and experiences each week, and named these opportunities Something Else. An example of this pairing developed within the Passover story, as brainstorming conversations explored the Passover text related to the Gospel story of Jesus’ dialogue with the disciples “that from now on his blood would be enough.” The life-giving words and example through God’s story evolved into the opportunity to hold a community blood drive, something the church had never done.

Through collaboration with the Red Cross, a community wide life-giving experience unfolded. Children and adults worked side-by-side, as city residents who were not church members, gave generously of the gift of life. The men’s Bible study and the women’s group came alongside the younger families from Grace Lutheran and all joined together with the Something Else Team in the planning and oversight of the blood drive. Volunteers from multiple ages joined hands at complementary activity stations which focused on assembling personal health care, baby care, and school supply kits.

Coincidentally, the same day as the event was New Member Day at Grace Lutheran. So rather than the usual “brunch” experience, the new members joined in, shoulder to shoulder, with all ages in this life-giving opportunity, which originated in God’s story in Egypt, continued through the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, and now offered life to people today.

How did doing Something Else affect the congregation? After the blood drive experience, one young boy from Grace Lutheran was heard asking “When are we were going to do something like that again?” An older woman from the women’s group shared in an email, “Thanks for letting me be a part of the team,” and a church council member, reflecting back on this year of doing Something Else, said his favorite experience was the blood drive ministry.

**Could ‘Something Else’ be Imagined?**

Confirmation is celebrated within many Christian congregations and most frequently
designated for youth. The tradition of this ministry runs deep and is often a cornerstone, or benchmark, in faith. Unfortunately, current culture seems to hear the message of a “graduation” of sorts, away from the Christian community rather than an “entering into” the community. In response, variations in content delivery and activities have been added over the years to create meaningful opportunities seeking to “root” one’s faith, rather than complete it. But findings reported through studies suggest a frail faith foundation in our youth as “…adolescent religious and spiritual understanding and concern seem to be generally very weak. Most U.S. teens have a difficult to impossible time explaining what they believe, what it means, and what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives.” (Smith, 262).

At Peace Lutheran Church in Eyota, MN, “Livin’ the Faith” is offered as the something else for a traditional confirmation framework (www.peaceeyota.org). Peace Lutheran, a mission start church, had few if any congregational traditions or history. Many in the community had little or no expectation of how specific ministry programs should unfold. The initial attempt at a “traditional” confirmation model resulted in telling many of the participants they had “failed” to meet the requirements, a message in direct opposition to the message of grace which is foundational to Christian faith. The result was re-imagining something else for these steps and moments on the faith journey.

Peace Lutheran melded the current congregational culture with several foundational blocks from another church’s confirmation experience, and launched “Livin’ the Faith.” This opportunity, open to all from 9th grade through adults of any age, offers a nine-week journey rooted in reflecting on faith with the outcome focused on the ability to state “what I believe.” Additionally, for anyone less than eighteen years of age, a parent or mentor is a partner in the weekly 90-minute conversation which focuses on a theme and invites a weekly writing reflection that asks, “Why does this matter to me?”

As Livin’ the Faith evolved, adaptations resulted including deeper Biblical exploration through the reading of both Genesis and Luke, and the creation of more space for intentional and personal conversation as the group size grew. Large group reflective conversation each week became increasingly challenging as more people joined together. To adapt and listen more intently, the pastor now invites the participants to text him their questions as they dialogue with their parent/mentor, providing space for more voices to be heard and engaged with during the conversation. The adaptive innovation resulted in an unprecedented willingness for transparency about one’s faith and the questions arising. The nine-week experience culminates in an optional Commitment Sunday celebration. Peace Lutheran’s pastor candidly admits he’s not sure of the long term outcomes, but is confident the experience invites a variety of narratives to journey together and calls the individuals to respond with what they believe about their own personal, Christian faith and relationship with God.

The freedom to imagine something else resonates throughout God’s story, beginning with Creation and moving God’s people into the innovations of the 21st century. The willingness to imagine something else in the here and now “…allows us to wait with confidence, to name our anxieties without fear, and to make room for new life and possibilities as Christ works, unseen, to usher us into an unknown future… and the future belongs to Christ. Fear not.” (Root, 217)

Into what future something else might God be inviting the faith of your whole congregation?
Works Cited


