Introduction & Outcomes from the Age to Age Grant

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with updates from May 2026

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What is the Age to Age Initiative?
The Age to Age Initiative is a Lilly Endowment funded grant given to Capital University for the purpose of equipping faith communities with accessible, culturally competent resources that strengthen children's faith and those that care for them. Resources are developed through annual congregational cohorts and distributed both in person and digitally

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What is an Age to Age Congregational Cohort?
Congregations selected through the application process will engage in a year-long learning journey, partnering with an Age to Age Specialist or Coach* and the partnership of the other congregation. These specialists and coaches are attentive to the ministries and intentions you have identified within the application process and in conversation with the director. This year, there will be eight congregations chosen for this cohort. Our church specific cohort included *Emily Topinka, Julie Phillips, Kristen Cambell, Todd Reemtsma, Rev. Gretchen Roeck, and Rev. Lindsey* in a consulting role.

The goals that were established by the Saint Mary's Episcopal Church team in our early meetings were:

- Create a sustainable children and youth ministry that is not staff dependent.
- Encourage families to stay in the program from level to level.
- Help kids feel comfortable at church and find a church community even after they are adults.
- Do something to help in our current time.

The Saint Mary's Children and Youth Community - Who are we?
In Spring of 2025, the Saint Mary's Age to Age Team created and sent out a survey to families who participate in Saint Mary's Children/Youth/Family activities. When asked why they prioritized at Saint Mary's over other youth/family activities as well as what they find at St. Mary's that they don't find anywhere else, respondents repeatedly cited:

> *A welcoming, safe, inclusive community who loves children and youth for who they are.*
>
> *A multi-generational place where children can be seen and heard.*
>
> *A place in which people can slow down, ponder mysteries, reflect and think critically about their lives.*

While some wrote of the welcome they received at St. Mary's (perhaps in recent years), others cite it as a place that's known their children since they were babies.

Respondents value

- The inclusive practice and understanding of Christianity
- The radically welcoming and kind faith community
- The congregation's support of and care for marginalized communities
- Opportunities to then engage in efforts to do good in the world
- A place to talk about God, faith and the Bible
- A place to support children in developing a worldview grounded in love, inclusivity, justice and peace – one that's grounded in Christian tradition and history.
- A free family activity that isn't school- or sports-related

According to the list of Saint Mary's children and youth, as of the March 2025 survey, we have 10 children eligible for nursery, 8 for Kids' Group, 6 for Tweeners and 20 for Youth Group. We have 14 who could participate in Sunday School.

Of the surveyed 12 noted who could participate in Sunday School, seven do/have. There are 15 who are either too old or too young.

Regarding participation in youth groups, seven of 12 from the age 5-12 cohort do so; ten could potentially participate in Tweeners and Youth Group and six do so.

What does the St. Mary's Children and Youth Community Want?
Our community is craving connection.

Many feel isolated. The desire for community, along with spiritual growth and formation, brings families to St. Mary's Episcopal Church.

Families shared that they want a community where children learn to care for others outside of their social spheres, and can develop intergenerational relationships. Having a safe and warm community is of utmost importance to many families.

Families shared that Saint Mary's Episcopal Church provides a place where you are beloved just for showing up - no special talents or skills required! The Saint Mary's community celebrates everyone's individual gifts and uniqueness, something that can be hard to find in other spaces.

The top priorities of Saint Mary's Episcopal Church families are:

- building Beloved Community
- learning about faith and developing a relationship with God
- participating in justice work

Participating in worship services is the primary way people engage at Saint Mary's Episcopal Church. Participating in worship, often called Common Prayer, helps establish a sense of belonging and groundwork in the Episcopal tradition, something that is important to some families. Families hope to have their children participate in the service, as well as be supported by the various adults gathered there. Families appreciate that we have a non-linear curriculum and programming that fits with our irregular participation. Zoom has been a huge gift for developing community among the younger ages.

The following includes additional hopes, needs and wants of our community:

- Building beloved community … building relationship-skills
- Unity without conformity.
- Community that celebrates our individual gifts and uniqueness.
- Building intergenerational relationships
- Community Engagement: service projects, connection to our outside community Forcing time to slow down, think about mysteries, care for others, reflect
- Inclusive and engaging worship. "Calming for parent, supportive for child, family activity"
- Balm to talk about mercy, forgiveness, serving the outcast.
- Want children to have faith tradition/worldview grounded in love, inclusivity, justice and peace, one rooted in deep history and reckoning with longevity and immediacy of Christ's message
    - Children can be seen and heard
    - Link between family values and our place in the great chain of being. Family choices/traditions and how it's been done through Christianity
    - Learn about community
    - Inclusive view of Christianity with a God-focus
    - Desire for faith/giving to be part of DNA
    - Welcoming
    - Intentional space for children
    - Talk about God, faith, Bible
    - Asked to think critically about our own lives
    - Get youth more involved in every event

Guidelines/Recommendations for future programming

Future programming should…

- **Be centered on building Beloved Community across age groups.**
    - Adapt and maintain structures that make Saint Mary's Episcopal Church feel like a spiritual home that:
        - Provides safe space for children and youth to explore and grow their faith and identity.
        - Continue to develop a community of Safe Church trained adults
- **Have a clear formation arch for children and youth 0 to 18 years old that includes:**
    - Clear learning priorities and goals for each age group – refer to needs and current participation levels.
    - Offers reliable communal, formational, and spiritual structures and rhythms
        - Example: Gatherings/programs for each age group begin the same way with check in and prayer. Different age groups learn different age appropriate prayers. For example, the youngests learn the St. Mary's Prayer, elementary kids learn The Lord's Prayer.
    - Community rhythms and opportunities for children and youth to serve in worship and in the community.
    - Ways to do this: Kids Group children lead the Saint Mary's prayer (God Be in My Head….), Tweeners acolyte and work AV, Kids Group and Tweener families lead pancake supper, Youth Group leads Souper Bowl of Caring and Ash Wednesday. Tweeners and kids volunteer at First Nations Kitchen Prep Shifts alongside their parents and care givers, while Youth Grouper volunteer at both Prep and Give Away shifts.
- **Connect and refer back to Saint Mary's Children, Youth, and Family Ministry Mission Statement and Values**
    - Mission Statement: Saint Mary's Episcopal Church seeks to offer children and teens the spiritual, emotional, and religious resources of our tradition so they can weather life's storms. *CYF Committee and Rector to discuss this.*
    - Values: "These define the spirit of the ministry, which leads to and produces climate and culture" (*Sustainable Youth Ministry*). – *We have uncovered our community values in this work but we haven't clearly articulated them. These values should not only reflect who we are proud to be, but also who we strive to be in the future. Should be done in conversation with Rector and CYF Committee*.
- **Build a CYF Team** (see page 6 for defined roles)
    - Sustainable community-based ministry must be based on conversations between the Rector and the community.
    - This team should:
        - Develop a formation arc with Rector, ensuring Mission, Values, and community needs are being met.

        - Create Measurable 3 year goals including:
            - Establishing clear, measurable standards for evaluation (*Sustainable Youth Ministry,* 67).
            - Setting 3 year “stretch goals” and 1 year “attainable” benchmarks (68). *These are from the planning doc Lindsey and I put together for the vestry in December 2023 when we were establishing goals for the ministry.*
- **Follow an adaptable organizational document**
    - Defining each program's content, rhythm, schedule and volunteer roles and responsibilities.

What was implemented in the 2025-2026 program year?

1. Youth Group frequency reduced to 2xs a month with dinner.
2. Recruited Lay Youth Group Leaders (Jim DeLuca and Elyse McIntock)
3. Recruited a parent to organize youth group parents to bring dinner. (Lori Stone)
4. Recruited a minister of fun to plan and host Youth Group Fun. Murder Mystery Party & Bowling at Ranham (Anne Valaas-turner)
5. Recruited Lay Leaders for Kid’s Group Leaders (Michael Shewmaker and Lori Stone)
6. Recruited Lay Leaders for Tweener’s Group Leaders (Sue Kruger and Emily Topinka)
7. Reduced Kids and Tweeners Zoom Groups by 1 meeting monthly, thus having 2 zoom meetings and 1 in person meeting monthly.
8. Made three 4-week blocks of Sunday School and nursery: Pentecost/Fall, Advent/Pageant Practice, Lent.
9. Parents of Young Children have met with Rev. Lindsey on Zoom to define what our communal expectations for behavior at church are.
10. Continued to plan and host children and youth events with neighboring churches: MLK Day of Learning and Service, D&D, Summer Connect.
11. Hired Volunteer Coordinator

Next Steps for Summer 2026

- Complete Communal Behavioral Guidelines for children at church with Parent of Young Children
- Adapted the Soft Space for kids in the church to support kids and parents more, including experiments with the set up and a possible space for 5-9 year olds.
- Identify and recruit CYM Task Force. (see chart below for roles)
- Outline goals for our 2026-2027 program year.
- Hire new Volunteer Coordinator (Zoey found a position in her field)
- Exploring the possibility of joining that Gathered cohort – a Lily Grant through St. Clement’s that looks to improve how churches meet the needs of neurodivergent children.

Children & Youth Ministry Task Force Roles

Role	Purpose	Description
Vision Keeper	Ensure CYF Ministry aligns with Age to Age outcomes (community identity, prioroties, needs and mission)	Ensure the team follows the Preventative Mantainence Calendar and update calendar yearly. Ensure programming is aligned with Age to Age outcomes. Monthly check-ins with team members to maintain accountability, address challenges and prevent burnout.
Leader for Curriculum and Program Development		Work with Rector to: develop a program vision and arch for children and youth 0-18. Set learning goals for different age groups. Establish program and community rhythms, including learning opportunities and different ways to participate in and contribute to the life of the community in and outside of worship. Track and maintain program supplies. Order curriculum (work with church admin). Lead work with Rector and Leader of Volunteer Empowerment and Community Building to recruit program leads and vols for programs and events.
Leader for Systems and Organization	Maintain organizational systems to ensure volunteer and participant safety and success.	Train and equip vols for specific programs (work with Leader for Curriculum and Program Development). Ensure all vols have background checks and are Safe Church Trained (Work with church admin). Collect children and youth permission forms (Work with church admin to update family info in database). Create a Parent/Guardian and Emergency Contact List for all program leads to have in case of emergency. Communicate special needs and allergies to program leaders. Create attendance spreadsheet and ensure program leads and vols update it weekly -- this spreadsheet should also include children's name, age, pronouns, parent(s) and age appropriate programs.
Pastoral Care for Families	Care for and attend to the spiritual, emotional and concrete needs of children, youth and families (CYF) on an ongoing and emergency basis.	Maintain consistent communication with Leader of Volunteer Empowerment and Community Building, and with Family Community Builder to promptly address the spiritual, emotional and concrete needs of CYF.

Leader of Volunteer Empowerment and Community Building	Empower, support and build community with and between program leaders and vols.	Main programming contact. Check in quarterly with program leaders and vols and support where necessary. Lead 6 month reviews of programming with program leaders. Review vol. job descriptions and update (annually).Coordinate beginning of the year program leader/vol blessing. Coordinate end of the year program leader/vol appreciation. Notice and celebrate the gifts and talents each leader brings to their program. Work with Rector and Leader for Curriculum and Program Development to recruit program leads and vols.
Family Community Builder	Foster community between current families; welcome and build community with new families.	Review attendance spreadsheet (monthly) -- communicate findings to Rector for follow up and pastoral care. Ensure program leads to update their attendance weekly. Be on the look out for, welcome newcomers and introduce them to other families. Encourage newcomers to share their contact information (sign up sheet located outside sanctuary).
Communications	Share program information and opportunities	Communicate and promote upcoming events, programs and opportunities through the Weekly, website, email and text (work with Rector, church admin and Leader for Curriculum and Program Development). Make sure community "insiders" and "outsiders" can find information.