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Children & Youth Commission Report



2010-2011

SAINT ANDREW'S

Executive Summary

The Children and Youth Commission (CYC) convened for the first time in mid-October 2010 and met as a group seven more times over the course of the following seven months.

By May 2011, when we met for a final time to debrief after our parent discussion groups and teacher surveys, our numbers had dwindled, and the commission consisted of the following members:

Kathy Hickner	Lori McGarry
Alison Jaenicke	Meg Small
Liz Jenkins	Travis York
Julie Kwasnica	

It is this group that respectfully submits this recommendation report to Fr. Richard Wall, St. Andrew's Staff, and our Vestry.

One of the first tasks that the CYC tackled was writing a purpose statement for the group that would guide our work (see statement to the right).

We spent time discussing student and children's ministry readings shared by group members and the big-picture questions that emerged from the readings (such as "What is the philosophy behind our ministry with children? Do we want a formational program or a purpose-driven program or something else? If intergenerational interaction is critical to helping young people have faith, how do we offer such interaction in our church?").

Fairly quickly, we determined that one of our central tasks would be to collect data from parents and teachers regarding our programs' strengths and needs. Ultimately, we decided to hold four discussion sessions in May 2011, for preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school parents. We also sent out an email survey to current teachers in the church school and Journey to Adulthood programs, and spoke extensively with Robin Bagby, Meredith Kirby, and Kelly Paulsen. The key content and recommendations that emerged are summarized in the following sections of this report.

We also decided to try to gather information about children and youth programs from other denominations of churches in town and other Episcopal churches in the diocese. We developed a list of questions for these interviews; ultimately, we only contacted three churches, and these yielded helpful insights that guided some of our discussions and affect some of our recommendations. (Alison interviewed several staff members involved in youth ministry at State College Presbyterian Church, Lori interviewed the Christian Education Director at St. Paul's United Methodist Church (her mother, Donna Snyder), and Geoff Cozine conducted an email interview

Purpose Statement for the Children and Youth Commission at St. Andrew's

The purpose of the CYC is to establish a vision for youth development and youth programming at St. Andrew's.

The CYC will examine current program strengths and needs, and then develop a recommendation report about how to meet the following objectives:

1. Align the interests and needs of families, teachers, and the larger church community in planning and implementing youth programming at St. Andrew's.
2. Promote youth programming and youth participation opportunities within the St. Andrew's

“True community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations. Too often the church either lacks the third generation or sets the generations apart. Remember that the third generation is the generation of memory, and without its presence the other two generations are locked into the existential present. While the first generation is potentially the generation of vision, it is not possible to have visions without a memory, and memory is supplied by the third generation.”

--John Westerhoff
Will Our Children Have Faith?

with a youth coordinator he knows at a church in North Carolina. Write-ups of these interviews are available in the CYC records.)

We also decided that during the slow visioning, discussion, and data collection process we would start acting on one of the principals we all agreed was important—trying to strengthen our faith community through intergenerational events, something CYC members view as an untapped opportunity in our church. Coordinated by Julie Kwasnica and Kathy Hickner, the successful Valentine’s Day Square Dance (which J2A students helped plan and run) was the CYC’s way of experimenting with intergenerational community building. Several parishioners commented on this event in our discussion groups, noting that it was both successful and strongly desired.

The next section of this report includes a list of 15 recommendations that the commission has developed after long hours of prayerful discussion, considering not only our own observations, but also multiple forms of input from the parish, and the insights gained from other church professionals encountered through interviews and research. The sections that follow offer summaries of the parent discussion groups, as well as the teacher email surveys. Recommendations for improvement can also be gleaned from these summaries. We encourage church staff to consider them seriously for the improvement and growth of our congregation; however, they should also be viewed within the most prevalent theme discovered in this process: Our children and youth ministries here at St. Andrews are alive and thriving; our programs are strong, and the staff, teachers, volunteers, and families involved are primary reason for this truly remarkable venture.

CYC Recommendations

1. Continue to seek ways to offer intergenerational activities and events.
2. Develop a mission statement for our Children and Youth Ministry.
3. Look for additional ways to mark milestones or Rites of Passage in children’s lives (including, for instance, high school graduation).
4. Explore meaningful work, programs, and ways to provide continued integrated discipleship for “leftover YACs” (those high school seniors who have completed two years of YAC).
5. Examine teacher training, recruitment and retention.
6. Consider bringing in outside programming to help educate teachers and/or parents.
7. Explore the possibility of a mentor program for YAC and/or confirmation.
8. Consider offering some teen activities where students are separated by gender (perhaps retreats).

9. Look for ways to bring music into children and youth programs more regularly and to tap into the skills and interests of our student musicians.
10. Continue to explore a fuller relationship with our neighbor, State College Presbyterian Church, and consider coordinating with them on some efforts (such as their significant mission work for teens or Senior Passage program for high school seniors).
11. Increase opportunities for mission work at the YAC level.
12. Consider ways to improve the families' and the congregation's financial commitment to the Journey to Adulthood program, to solidify dedication and ensure the financial stability of the program.
13. Develop informative and attractive promotional materials for Journey to Adulthood program that are readily available in church building (akin to the Presbyterian FISH and Chrysalis materials).
14. Offer a "Time and Talent Survey" to kids, as we do with adults, to help them understand that they are an important part of the church and to make the process of selecting children for activities more egalitarian.
15. Over the past nine years, youth programming has successfully engaged secondary school students and their families. As a result of this increased participation and commitment, opportunities to restructure confirmation and integrate it more fully into youth programs now exist. Therefore, we recommend that the church leaders reexamine the preparation for and timing of confirmation, considering the following sorts of questions in planning a new approach:
 - a) What is the philosophy behind confirmation in the Episcopal Church and at St. Andrew's?
 - b) Should confirmation be bound up with the YAC experience?
 - c) When should a young person be confirmed? Is there a minimum age?
 - d) What are the advantages and disadvantages of combining teenagers and older confirmands?
 - e) Can the confirmation class be used by participants as a journey of exploration where they can participate and then decide whether they would like to be confirmed?
 - f) Who should prepare the young people for confirmation?

"Loving & accepting the students where ever they are in their lives is an amazing way to be relevant. The various leaders could relate to the students in different ways: some through music, others art, others humor, or just by listening, or being a positive voice. It was great having so many diverse youth leaders to help make those crucial connections with the teens. Love is the best way to be relevant. And of course, to be yourself. My advice - don't try to fit in with the youth culture to be relevant. Just get to know your students and be genuinely interested in their lives & interests. **It's all about relationship.** Small group bible studies and one-on-one time is the best way to get to know what's really going on in student's lives and one of the best ways to teach the word. Discipleship groups are encouraged (split up by gender)."

--Don Gariepy, Youth Ministry Coordinator, Destiny City Church, Salisbury NC

Summary of Preschool/Elementary Discussion Groups

(9 Participants)

Our elementary and preschool discussion groups drew only female participants, with eight women attending the elementary group and two women attending the preschool group (one participant attended both sessions). Participants commented positively on the quality of teachers committed to children's programming, the team teaching approach, and the availability of classes for all age groups. Participants also noted that classes from T3 through Grade 3 seem to engage children well with songs, stories, and other age-appropriate activities.

Several participants at the elementary session recommended that the Grade 4/5 class provide more opportunities for social interaction and friendship building to help children form an age-level community and motivate them to attend on a weekly basis. It was also suggested that more ministry activities within the church, such as assisting with younger classes or taking on roles in worship, might help engage children in Grades 4 and 5 more effectively. Participants in the preschool discussion group also suggested new opportunities for interaction among St. Andrew's parishioners. For example, these participants mentioned challenges in forming friendships as new parishioners and suggested that Baptism preparation (a time at which many families join or rejoin the church) be a time to connect new families with other parishioners, e.g., through a sponsorship program and/or social events. Participants also suggested hosting a "back-to-school" Sunday where, near the beginning of each year, parents could visit their children's church school classrooms, meet the teachers, learn about the curricula, and ask questions.

While there was general agreement on the above topics and ideas, some questions did yield diverse opinions. With regard to logistics, some participants stated their preference for a separate church school hour that would allow them to worship with their families, while others expressed approval for the current format that allows adults to worship quietly in church prior to the children's entrance* (especially for younger children). There were also differing opinions about the need for midweek worship and gathering opportunities. Some participants stated that they would attend a weekly event, while others stated that they would prefer less frequent events (e.g., monthly) or that they would not be able to attend midweek events. Finally, participants expressed differing opinions on the curricular needs of preschool and elementary children, discussing the appropriate balance among songs, stories, Biblical literacy, prayer, and spirituality at different ages.

**The preschool group suggested that T3 and Pre-K/K teachers walk the children to church like the elementary classes, so that parents can remain in church at Communion.*

Summary of Church School Teacher Responses

(7 Responses)

Robin Bagby's support was acknowledged as a strength of the program unanimously! Other strengths identified were: our welcome of children regardless of their attendance, and the teachers' enjoyment of the children. Lack of teacher consistency, as well as inconsistent attendance among children, were strong themes in discussion of our program's weaknesses. Several teachers suggested switching to a model where a small team of teachers worked on one area for a short time. A couple of teachers were looking for more training, or generally more connection between teachers. Many acknowledged that busyness and teachers' own family needs limit involvement. There was a range of satisfaction with curriculum. A number of teachers identified lack of a spirituality component (or something more experiential) as a weakness. Many people noted a problem with the curriculum for children in grades 4 and 5. A T3 teacher was frustrated by how much time was needed to adapt lessons, but was pleased with how the children responded to some of them. A Young Children and Worship teacher expressed satisfaction with the ease of teaching in her curriculum. No one called strongly for a change in timing.

Comments of interest from Church School Teacher Responses:

- “The program I teach in is extremely well organized. I feel supported every step of the way. I would need more training if I were to offer an experiential program.”
- “I don’t think the children are very engaged. I think we do a good job of delivering a standard curriculum, but we don’t offer a variety of ways for children to connect.”
- “I hope and pray they are learning about Christ in their lives.”
- “I’m not a teacher and not used to large groups of kids, so the dynamics and flow of the lessons were difficult.”
- “4th and 5th grade kids could prepare a skit or activity for the Primary kids. You really DO learn things when you have to teach them.”
- “More spirituality in the teaching. We rarely pray and talk about what Christianity means.”
- “Teaching happens rarely so it is not too much to ask [teachers] to be there early and prepared. The main reason I don’t want to teach anymore is my frustration with my fellow teachers [and their lack of preparation].”
- “Kids don’t get much education on the history of the church, the service, etc. They really have no idea what it means to be Episcopal versus other religions and why we do certain things. This creates a lack of respect for the important rituals of the church. Most of the kids have a hard time finding the various gospels in the Bible.”
- “It is also a weakness of our youth program that we depend so heavily on Robin [after identifying Robin as a strength]...Although Robin is capable and gracious, I think a different division of labor would be more fair and ultimately more effective.”
- “The curriculum...is dry, repetitive and not really geared toward the age groups to which it is assigned. It relies heavily on discussion and reading which, especially for the younger kids, is not very engaging. I would like to see more music in the program.”

Summary of Journey to Adulthood Discussion Groups

(6 Participants)

Two parents (both female) attended the discussion group intended for middle school parents (although these parents also had children in high school, and discussion tended to focus on older students in the Journey to Adulthood program). Four participants (one male and three female) attended the discussion group intended for high school parents.

All participants agreed strongly that the authentic relationship-building that occurs both between youth and between the youth and adult volunteers is the strongest part of the program. Participants seemed to agree that because of their children’s developmental stages and evolving independence, J2A and YAC’s curricular goals should continue to be based around learning how to authentically live out one’s faith in today’s world. This was further backed by suggestions for current topics discussions, service/mission oriented participation in the life of the church and community, and heavy emphasis on the social component (a part of the current program that participants noted as being their children’s highest priority). Being able to reconnect, even after prolonged periods of nonparticipation, is important. Off-property events like retreats are important and powerful. Participants also noted the convenience of the current format, but also said that as long as they had a clear schedule in advance, they would be open to other possibilities such as a weekday program (one suggestion was to target Thursday night’s Community Café).

Concerns about the program include the balance of responsibility between adult leaders, parents, and youth participants, as well as the current design of the confirmation program. Parents understand the time commitment of leaders and want to make sure these programs are sustainable. One parent noted that students should take more responsibility for evening dinners. (While parents understand the social aspect to Rite 13, all the effort spent “serving kids sends the wrong message and wears down the parents. What about having Rite

13 work one week and J2A do it the other (preparation and clean up)? This builds responsibility.”) YAC should take more responsibility for service activities and the program generally.

When asked about their own needs, participants echoed their strong appreciation for the few opportunities they had to grow in community with each other and asked for more opportunities to fellowship with one another. One participant also noted that they would enjoy the opportunity to serve and socialize with other parents as an “along-side” event with the youth, noting that this would be one way that parents could model service and church life without invading the youth’s own space. Similarly, when asked about interest for providing a parents’ series with information on relevant topical issues, participants responded with definite interest for a once-a-semester event (especially if it were structured to include space for parents to fellowship and share issues and advice with each other in a semi-structured manner).

Summary of Journey to Adulthood Teacher Responses

(3 Responses)

We received three responses to the informal email survey of Journey to Adulthood leaders (one Rite-13 leader, one J2A leader, and one former YAC leader). Leaders appreciate the structure of the Journey to Adulthood program, with a schedule mapped out in advance yet open to change as new opportunities arise (such as attending performances of students in the group, a practice that should be continued). One leader commended the intertwining of youth and adult programming so that students see mentors and pointed out that “it is a source of great strength to the youth (and comfort to parents) to have their spiritual counterparts there as they walk the halls [of our highly competitive high school]. That is the beauty of youth ministry.” One Rite-13 leader pointed out the advantages of working with five leaders: the group can play off the differing strengths of leaders, can reap the advantages of having several leaders in attendance each week, and can offer students variety through different mixes of teaching teams.

Several leaders noted that the Rite-13 curriculum is solid (although one questioned whether students learn much about the Bible); however, one noted that the J2A lessons do not work well and need reworking. Several leaders lamented the lack of regular student attendance, noting that this affects the quality of the experience for both students and teachers. As one leader noted, “I know there are parental and social factors involved, but it’s hard to plan if you don’t know the numbers coming that week.”

Other specific suggestions include:

- “More deliberate attempts [should be made] each semester to bring outlying youth into the programming. The youth groups can feel a little closed.”
- “The Sunday morning class time needs to be purely for exploring curriculum, whatever that curriculum may be” (not for working on such projects as bake sales; often not enough time to delve into discussion topics).
- “I would like to see a devoted unit to sexuality in particular gay issues. That is a particular strength of the Episcopal Church but I have not sensed any real education efforts for our youth and they should be encouraged and educated about being tolerant and welcoming to the 10 percent of our population who are oriented differently.”
- It would be nice to bond with fellow leaders before beginning the two-year process, through activities such as a half-day retreat.
- “More democratic efforts in scheduling, by making big scheduling decisions available initially through doodle polling to all eligible youth (and parents).”

Conclusion/Next Steps

While the CYC's work of gathering insights and envisioning changes for the children and youth programs at St. Andrew's has concluded for now, the full mission of aligning member interests, redesigning curriculum, supporting staff, and promoting programs still lies ahead. Perhaps the CYC will continue to exist in its current form; perhaps smaller committees are needed to take on the particular tasks required by St. Andrew's staff. We also would like to encourage fellow members of our congregation (both adults and youth) to share their time and talents in accomplishing the exciting tasks ahead. We await your guidance on how we may be of further service.

APPENDIX A
Parent Discussion Group Protocols

I. Strengths

Primary Question: What are the strongest aspects of St. Andrew's children's/youth ministry?

Follow Ups: What do you like about church school? What do your children like about church school?

II. Weaknesses

Primary Question: What areas would you like to see growth or change within our program?

Follow Ups: Unmet needs... Do you attend other churches or spiritual groups?

III. Curriculum

Primary Question: What do you want your children to learn in church school?

Follow Ups: Are there ways we can better recognize and use rights of passage for our families (confirmation, birth, baptism, sacraments)?

IV. Timing/Format

Primary Question: Do you like the current format and timing of our programs, for instance, children meeting during church service on Sunday morning?

Follow Ups: How interested are you in a mid-week program?

V. Parent's Needs

Primary Question: What do you most want for your own growth and development individually or as parents?

Follow Ups: What do families need to help raise their children spiritually? Parental support groups, or resources, activities like advent wreaths? Would you have time for a monthly parent's group?

APPENDIX B
Teacher E-Mail Questionnaire

Answer any or all the questions that you feel moved to respond to. Please answer freely—your responses will be processed by the commission and your name won't be associated with your responses.

I. Strengths: What are the strongest aspects of St. Andrew's children's/youth ministry?

II. Weaknesses: In what areas would you like to see growth or change within our program? Do you sense any unmet needs?

III. Curriculum and Children's Needs: What do you think the children are getting out of the program? Are there things the children are missing under the current program? Do you like the curriculum currently used? Can you envision a type of curriculum that you think would work better?

IV. Teacher Support and Needs: What are the greatest challenges of serving as a church school teacher at St. Andrew's? In what ways do you feel supported as church school teachers? What other types of support or resources would allow you to be a more effective church school teacher?

V. Timing/Format: Do you like the current format and timing of our programs? Do you like the current method of staffing and rotating teachers? Can you suggest any changes that would make the experience more fulfilling for teachers and students?