

Luke 18:15-17 NRSV

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he could touch them and bless them. These two verses that tell us a whole lot — they tell us that the word about Jesus had gotten out, and everyone wanted to see Jesus! I don't know why the mothers were bringing their children — whether they saw Jesus as good luck or wanted to bring them closer to God— but regardless, it meant that they trusted Jesus. That they saw in Jesus someone who was safe to hand a child to. You don't hand your baby to just anyone — (unless you are Beth at church... JK, if you've been tasked with running after Nate, you know you are a special person!).

It's not just people we entrust our children to, we entrust institutions. Daycares, schools, churches have long been places where children have been cared for. Sadly, tragically, sometimes that trust is broken. Today and tomorrow, we remember a broken trust. The National Day of Truth and Reconciliation reminds us of the dark and terrible past in this country. The government schemed that if they could just remove children from their Indian culture and families and languages and teach them in "proper" colonial English and French Christian ways, then the "Indian Problem" would be solved within a couple of generations, because there would be no more Indigenous people. Churches were the ones the government partnered with to do this work.

The first school opened in 1831 and the last one closed in 1996. The United Church of Canada was part of that partnership. The whole idea was horrible. But on top of that it was not well funded and there was corruption and blatant abuse. In many, if

not most cases, children were not fed well, and they were made to work instead of learn. Many were abused physically and sexually, with no repercussions. The children were not cared for, and many died while in the residential system. Those who survived emerged with a legacy of trauma. It was not just the children who suffered — whole Indigenous communities were left empty of school-age children. That separation and disconnection had a lasting negative effect on the children and the communities.

“Every Child Matters” has been the slogan for the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. It speaks to the fact that in Canada’s history this has not been the case. Some children mattered more than others. Some people mattered more than others. It also speaks to the call for making it different today — that more work is needed so that Indigenous children and youth receive the same supports that settler children and youth receive; and as much as possible that this support happen within communities and not at a distance or separated from culture and community.

I’ve been touching on our church’s *Fearlessly Forward* strategic plan this past month. There are 5 themes. We touched on Spiritual Vibrancy and then Community Outreach. Today I want to talk about Intergenerational Engagement. Our objective with this Intergenerational Engagement theme is to:

Foster cross-generational connections and increase opportunities for involvement of youth, families and seniors, both on Sundays and midweek.

This theme speaks first to making room in our church for families and children; second, it speaks to the gifts and the needs of seniors; and lastly, this section also talks about our digital ministry. Digital ministry has the potential to benefit youth and seniors almost more than other demographics. It benefits youth because they are immersed in a digital world, and we need our ministry to speak their language. Digital ministry benefits seniors because, as I have seen and been amazed, many seniors who have disabilities or struggle to attend church activities in person have been able to connect and feel connected as a result of things like Live streaming our worship or having Zoom prayer gatherings.

The message of God's love does not change, but *how we communicate that love must change*. It's a way of saying to youth and to seniors: we see you and you matter. You matter enough that we will change and make room for you.

This church has a history of making room for children. Part of the reason we added the big gymnasium and washrooms that included showers and a big room downstairs that was called "the Scout Room" back in the 1960's was because there were 800 children connected to this church at that time! I'm not sure if all 800 were coming to this campus. The church had a Mission or a Sunday School across from Cowan's Dairy where the Grace Community Church is now. Nevertheless, there were a lot of kids. The church invested heavily to accommodate those children along with the women —the UCW— who adopted the Living Room and upstairs kitchen for their work and meetings. There was an assumption that making room for all generations mattered.

We don't have 800 kids in the Sunday School anymore. We are doing well if we have 8 here on a Sunday morning. The decline reflects both a demographic decline — those children were the famous Baby Boom and there are not as many children in our community today— and it reflects a change in the centrality of Christian churches in community and society. Churches are no longer the centre for weekend and after-school programming for children.

There aren't as many kids in the community as there were in the 60's, but I'm always amazed at just how many children there are in the community — just go to any of the summer festivals like Fairies in the Park or the Santa Claus parade and you will see just how many children and young families there are in our community! It's not that these families don't need the church, because they do. Anxiety and mental health issues are on the increase for children and youth. Parents are struggling too.

My father, who was the minister here from 1988-2006, remembered the moment of clarity he had around making room for young people at church. He told a story in a sermon he preached at the closing service of the Bay of Quinte Conference meeting in 2018. He talked about a funeral he conducted for two Brockville teenagers who were killed while crossing the train tracks as they returned to

school at lunch in 1995. The funeral for one was held in the BCI high school auditorium, and my dad was told to choose the hymns. The first hymn was obvious— Amazing Grace—because everyone knew it. He had a harder time picking the second hymn, but thought “O God Our Help in Ages Past” would be well known from the annual Remembrance Day services. On the day of the funeral, as predicted, everyone sang “Amazing Grace”... but during the second hymn, he felt like he was singing a solo. He said: “Later, as I walked slowly back to my church, I remember thinking “If young people today don’t know — have never heard of — ‘O God Our Help in Ages Past,’ we are in big trouble! It was clear to me that our 200-year-old music was not speaking to modern young people in any way. It was a foreign language to them. So it was that slowly but surely, I started making changes at Wall Street United Church.”¹

Some of the changes included modernizing and bringing in a band and projection screens. Wall Street shifted from being a formal, traditional church to a casual, more contemporary and more missional church.

It’s interesting that my dad had that response. He could easily have been annoyed at “kids these days!”

The disciples were annoyed. It was not long before Jesus was heading to Jerusalem and to the cross. There was important work ahead. How could loud, rambunctious, snotty kids possibly advance the kingdom of God? They were a nuisance, and so they shooed them away.

In a moment of clarity after that tragic funeral, my father saw the youth. He recognized that the modern barriers to them coming nearer to Jesus were not people shooing them away, but a way of doing church that wasn’t going to reach them. In that moment he knew that these youth were 1) Important. They mattered. 2) They mattered enough for him and the church to make some changes. My dad preferred organ music but saw the kids and their needs trumped his needs even though they were not in the church.

We see today the product of these changes. Rev. Doug Warren who passed away

¹ [1]. Alan H. Bennett, "Goodbye Bay of Quinte" (Sermon, Bay of Quinte Conference, Peterborough, ON, October 20, 2018).

this past summer was the one who started a praise band. We see the legacy of these two ministers and so many other people, like Catherine who was the music director and open to change and continues in our ministry today.

Our music ministry is a shining example of what Intergenerational Engagement can look like. The reason we have any kids at all is because of the music program and the welcome they received. A shift in our music ministry started nearly 30 years ago and it has shifted again in recent years. Partly because of Covid and partly because of the desire to bring in a diversity of voices, things have changed.

The church is meant to be an intergenerational space. There are not many places in our communities that are truly intergenerational. Housing tends to be segregated: senior's housing. Activities are designed for kids or for seniors. Church is a place where all generations can meet — and that is a gift!

I wish for a world where every child truly matters. I wish for a world where every person regardless of race or gender or sexual orientation or ability or disability matters.

You matter. I want you to imagine a crowd gathered around Jesus, wanting to see him. Imagine disciples who stand at the edges deciding who gets through and who does not. Who are you in the scene? What would keep you from coming closer to Jesus? Where do you not feel like you matter enough and are worthy enough? Look around and see who else is not getting in to see Jesus—maybe it's a child, maybe it's a lonely senior or someone who is sure they wouldn't be welcome in the church. Go take them by the hand. Now I want you to imagine Jesus noticing you and the other person and calling out *"Let them come to me!"*

As the band sings Jesus Loves Me, I want you to hear it for you, and I want you to hear it as a prayer for someone else who needs to hear it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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