

Why do young people stay in church?

The Rev. Theresa McDonald-Lee, Regional Staff, Synod of Southwestern Ontario



Why do young people stay in church? That is the question that many people are asking. That was the question John Bowen was asking when he did the research for his book, *Growing Up Christian*. He interviewed hundreds of summer camp alumni, wondering what encouraged them to stay in church, what caused them to leave church, and what brought them back after a time away. Would the answer be great music in worship, an awesome summer camp experience, Christian friends or family devotions? The reason that 89% of the young people gave as to why they stayed in the church was none of the above. The response was both so simple and so obvious that it should not be a surprise. The young people stayed in church because they had a relationship with God.

More than programs or music or friends or mentors, a relationship with God was what drew

young people to church and into Christian community. Young people stay in church not due to family obligation, community expectation or societal pressure, but simply with a desire to affirm and deepen a relationship with God that has sustained the young person. This is good news for the church and the young people in our midst! This is something we can help nurture as camps and congregations together!

When congregations and camps work together, we are able to provide many opportunities for children and young adults to develop and grow their relationship with the Triune God. Studies in the PC(USA) have shown that camp is one of the most common and important places where young people have significant experiences of faith that shape their lives. We also know that a local community of Christians is necessary to sustain a



young person's faith. Neither camps nor congregations can do this work alone. Camps and congregations are not in competition with one another, but two pieces in a much larger picture. Everyone at camp and in congregations wants to fulfill the promises made at baptism to nurture faith until those young people take on the promises for themselves.

Summer camp is uniquely situated to offer programming and faith development and to provide experiences through which young people can think about their own relationship with God. Camp is dedicated to children's ministry, and everything is focused on helping children have fun and gain new experiences in a safe, Christian environment. With the concentration of time that children spend at camp, building relationships with cabin counsellors over two days is the same amount of time Sunday school teachers have over a whole year. Canadian Presbyterian camps are situated in idyllic locations and provide a real scope for the imagination and an opportunity to share God's glory in creation. Staff members love working with children and are excellent role models of faith. Christian community is created by living and playing together in a way that is possible in no other place in North American society. These are all attributes of summer camp that need to be celebrated. A week at camp often provides the sanctuary that is needed for children to begin a relationship with God.

Knowing the benefits of summer camp, congregations can help children get to camp. Congregations are encouraged to develop a campership or scholarship program to help children connected to the church get to camp. The gift of a congregation to provide camperships that are not based on need, but instead offered to every child in the church, exemplifies generosity and helps uphold those baptismal vows. Every family is supported in their decision to provide Christian education to their children in the summer. If there are no children in the congregation, consider offering a campership to a neighbourhood family, to the closest school, or to a family through the Children's Aid Society. By helping children get to camp, churches are staying connected to children through the summer and allowing the child another opportunity to connect with God and create a relationship with Christ.

When children return home, they are looking for places and people who affirm that new relationship and help it to grow. In the fall, consider hosting a camp reunion for all the campers to coincide with the start of church

school. Consider asking the children to speak at church or a WMS meeting or a men's breakfast about their experience at camp, specifically talking about what they have learned about God. Invite camp to come to your church to help lead worship, to share about what is happening at camp, or to lead a youth night. When this happens, children and young people are able to see that their experience of God is not limited to just camp or just church, but is supported and encouraged by both. This will validate their experience at camp and will not isolate it from the church or the rest of the year. They see that their church cares about their faith and wants them to continue to grow in relationship with God.

Another way for churches and camps to partner together to further nurture their children is for people from the church to get involved in camp. Children and young people have profound experiences at camp, and for them to see members of their church giving of their time and talent to camp helps the children to know that others care about their experience there. Put announcements from camp in the bulletin, attend work days, encourage your minister to be a chaplain for a week when children from your church are at camp, and take part in staff commissioning services. Bring a group of children or youth to an event and be a chaperone. Build congregational community with your young families at a camp retreat. Young people who are on staff notice when their Sunday school teachers, youth leaders and ministers come out to camp events. This helps to draw together two of the places where they live out their faith.

Above all, camps and congregations need to pray for one another. The ministry of one impacts the ministry of the other. We need to joyfully and regularly pray for the work and experiences that happen in the other. This needs to be done at prayer meetings, women's groups, Sunday worship services, camp services and staff meetings. We need to pray that through camp and congregational ministry, children and young people will begin or deepen a relationship with God, meet Jesus, and be inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is when this relationship blossoms that young people will come of their own accord to worship and continue to seek out Christian community.

Bowen, John. *Growing Up Christian: Why Young People Stay in Church, Leave Church, and (Sometimes) Come Back to Church*. Regent College Publishing, 2010.

¹¹<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/presbyterian-panel-survey-august-2002-summary/>

Children and Worship

Linda Shaw, Co-ordinator, Children and Worship



Congregations value children's ministries and always seek adults to lead them. Children and Worship is a program that provides the opportunity to build strong

relationships while offering children something wonderful.

Twenty-three years ago, I was invited to a workshop introducing a new children's program based on the work of Maria Montessori. The experience at that introductory workshop called me to make the program available to the children of the church, including my own three four-year-olds (yes, I have triplets!).

I did it with a whole lot of help; and I believe it is one of the best gifts those children and the leaders who joined the children's worship team at Westwood Church, Winnipeg, had.

What is Children and Worship?

- It is a unique and innovative way to worship with young children.
- It encourages the spiritual formation of children through "Godly Play."

- It involves children in a multi-sensory way so they can experience Bible stories and the wonder and mystery of God.
- In a Children and Worship Centre environment, there is a worship order for children, which combines structure and freedom to help children experience and develop a relationship with God.
- It is based on the philosophy of Maria Montessori and designed for use in all Christian churches.
- It was developed by Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman and is carefully outlined in their book *Young Children and Worship*, which is available through The Book Room.
- It is a program co-sponsored by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church.
- For over 20 years it has been a part of children's ministry across Canada.

I'm interested. How do I learn more?

- Borrow a copy of the DVD *Helping Children Experience God: An Introduction to the Children and Worship Program* through Canadian Ministries: canadianministries@presbyterian.ca.

- Visit www.presbyterian.ca/children-and-worship.
- Visit a church that already has a Children and Worship Centre.
- Buy or borrow a copy of the book *Young Children and Worship*.

What does it take to get started?

- Send a minimum of two adults for training (preferably four or more).
- Share the vision with your session and congregation.
- Recruit carpenters, seamstresses and crafty types to help assemble a beautiful centre.
- Train helpers to work alongside the leaders and the children (can be older youth).
- Commission people in the church to pray and keep praying.

The benefits

- Works well with two to 20 children. (If you grow to more than 20 children, you may need to make a second worship centre.)
- Works well with a wide age range. It was designed for three- to eight-year-olds, but it works well with children up to 12 years old.
- Trained leaders feel confident and proud of what they are doing; leadership often becomes a life calling.
- Leaders and helpers meet God in a way that is unique to worshipping with children.
- Congregations are fulfilling an important ministry - helping children to know God.
- Once the program is established, there is no more Sunday school curriculum to buy.
- Members of the congregation become advocates for children's ministry and start inviting children into their midst.
- The storytelling techniques are easily adapted for other settings: adults with a developmental disability, nursing home residents, the children's story in congregational worship, or adult Bible study.

It is wonderful, but it isn't everything

- Christian education and nurturing faith are primarily the work of the family. Even children who come to church every Sunday from September to June are only in the Children and Worship Centre for, at most, 35 hours a year.

- Children need to be a part of the wider congregational life. Spend some time in worship, attend pot-lucks and church picnics and bazaars, etc.
- Children need other programs to develop a lifelong love for the church: VBS, camp, mid-week programs, etc.
- Children need to make friends with older youth and adults in the congregation.
- Opportunities to serve others (e.g., visiting, mission projects) and caring for God's world are needed too.

Ministering by sharing God's stories with children through the Children and Worship program is both enriching and challenging. It is a program that has been used with adults living with developmental disabilities, in very small congregations in Guyana during Sunday worship, and in Canadian intergenerational worship. The work of the Holy Spirit - through leadership, little wooden figures and parable boxes - in touching the lives of others is overwhelming. Do not grow weary but be full of energy and hope, knowing that God is doing wonderful work in the lives of many through this unique program.

“Godly play matures us when we are young, and makes us young when we are old.”

Jerome Berryman

For more information, visit www.presbyterian.ca/children-and-worship/
To receive new resources or learn about enrichment opportunities, or for training workshops across Canada, contact Linda Shaw at 519-428-5396 or ianandlindashaw@gmail.com.

Linda Shaw has been a trainer of the Children and Worship program for 20 years and is thankful for opportunities to train leaders across Canada, in the United States and even in Romania. In November 2012, Linda travelled to Calgary to help a young woman who grew up in a Children and Worship congregation start a worship centre at Valleyview Church. That young woman's name is Kendra Shaw.