



First Congregational United Church of Christ  
4515 SW West Hills Road • Corvallis, Oregon 97333  
541-757-8122 • office@corvallisucc.org  
www.corvallisucc.org  
Reverend Jennifer L. Butler, Senior Minister



Friends,

Our current theology of Children's Religious Education at First Congo UCC has been growing, somewhat organically, over the last 5-ish years.

I've had the opportunity, over my 12 years in ministry here, to be involved in many different iterations of spiritual formation. And to hear stories about what it "used to be like."

What I've seen and heard and experienced tracks with what congregations around the country (of all denominations) report: whatever we've been doing with children and youth in most Christian congregations has not translated into a flourishing spiritual life or connection to a faith community.

Part of the reason the Christian project has failed our children in recent years involves the consumer mindset that arises from neoliberal values ... in other words, church has become a commodity to consume. Our children and youth programming has reflected those values, too: we try to entertain kids to keep them engaged, make church a social space they can have fun in, rely on volunteers to walk through milquetoast Sunday school curriculum, and cross our fingers that this will translate into some kind of spiritual life. And it doesn't work.

Even if we had the most exciting programming on the block, the most committed volunteers and the best donuts - we wouldn't get the results we hope for.

At First Congo, our aim is to create spaces of spiritual connection, to nurture spiritually engaged people who have the capacity and framework to explore the transcendent other and ask the important questions: *what does it mean to be human and how should we live?*

Can we get to these places through curriculum and youth groups and mission trips?  
Maybe.

But the evidence doesn't really bear that out - especially when such large numbers of young people exit the church in their early adulthood, reject religion entirely, or struggle with isolation, anxiety, loneliness and shame in percentages even greater than children who grew up without a religious context.

This is why we are not providing childcare or entertaining our kids with Sunday school during worship. This is why we keep families and community within proximity to each other in the sanctuary. We're starting at the beginning....

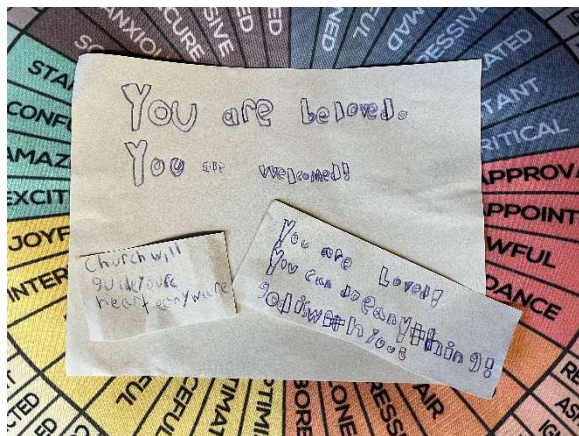
Our church is a place of extravagant welcome, where you are invited to show up as you are: crying baby, squirmy toddler, grumpy preteen, exhausted parent.

The most critical value we can cultivate together on Sunday morning is presence. You belong here. You are seen, blessed, and beloved.

And in this space, we develop common language and ritual together that can (must) be carried out of the sanctuary and woven through the tapestry of our ordinary lives. The church can be a container for gaining tools and language to explore the inner world, but home is the space of practice - parents and grandparents and chosen family members are the spiritual companions of our children's day-to-day lives.

As a pastor and a parent, here's what I believe is true: We can't outsource our children's spiritual lives to the church - and you don't have to be a spiritual expert to be spiritually engaged.

One Sunday morning, just a few weeks ago, a young congregant shared what she had been working on during worship:



There's no better proof than this for me...that the children are listening and absorbing exactly what we hope they will learn in this space. Can they recount the Creation story or recite the 23rd Psalm? Frankly, that's not important to me. If it is to you, I encourage you to create space at home to practice those spiritual disciplines.

What I care about is that our children experience this faith community as a place that reaffirms their identities, that practices love, that is part of their weekly rhythm, that creates space for their emerging, spiritual selves.

And, actually, that's what I hope for all of us.

Humans are hardwired for spiritual connection. But our culture doesn't do a good job of cultivating spaces or tools for experiencing growth in this area. Because of this lack of resourcing and support, most adults are underdeveloped in understanding our own capacity for spiritual life. Feeling inadequate as practitioners, we don't feel qualified to model spirituality for our children. We often assume that if our kids are interested in a life of faith, they will opt in on their own, when they're ready. But that is akin to letting our toddler decide if they are interested in napping on a particular day or choosing to exist on a steady diet of goldfish crackers and apple juice. We don't cross our fingers and *hope* our children will develop cognitive, physical, social and emotional capabilities - we support them in learning and growing. Sometimes, this looks like interactions with "professionals" (physicians, educators, clinicians, etc.), but mostly these capabilities are developed and shaped by the

primary community - parents, family, and peers. Spirituality is a capacity that develops (or erodes) alongside every other developmental process. Sometimes, support for learning to “know” spiritually will come from a religious professional. But mostly, it will be shaped by you - the interactions you have at home, the language you practice, the rituals you embrace.

In a world that increasingly prioritizes the individual over community, perpetuates “us” vs. “them” division, values humans for their ability to produce, and equates résumé with identity, developing an alternate way of “knowing” (or, in the language of spirituality - the inner life) is critical for survival of the soul. Without intentional nurture, this part of the self becomes lost in our narrow material culture.

Research scholar Dr. Lisa Miller writes, “a parent’s decision about how to approach their child’s spiritual life is a high stakes proposition with lifelong implications.”

Our job as ministers and companions in the spiritual journey is to resource you with the technologies to engage your inner world: companionship, stories, ritual, language, a space to practice within community, and modeling. But we cannot do the work of spiritual formation for you, or for your family.

We love having your family in our community. We know the work of raising minds and hearts is hard and relentless. We want to support you in this space while affirming your own *expert-ness*. You are your own expert - you can trust your inner teacher, AND the inner voice of your child.

On Sunday mornings, we invite you to think of our worship space as a ministry of presence. Our most important work is to be present - to one another, and to the Holy.

Here are some suggestions for how to engage worship on Sunday, how to create family culture around faith and spirituality, and a few reminders about resources within our community:

### ***Sunday Mornings:***

- Consider sitting in the sanctuary proper for the beginning of the service, through the first hymn. By doing this, kids will hear and participate in some of the oldest movements of the faith community: liturgy and song.
- Sit in a space with easy access to the Fireplace Room (FPR) and make sure your kids know how to get back to you if they are dividing time between the sanctuary and FPR.
- Establish a pattern of sitting together as a family during Prayers of the People. Write a prayer as a family and hear the community bear witness to YOUR desolation or consolation. Light a prayer candle together.
- Bring a sacred item from home to place on our community altar (near the prayer candles).
- Move to the space you need to be in - and remember, Jaqui and team are not childcare. They are a support system to create flexible, intergenerational worship space.
- Bring what you need with you. Does your kiddo need snacks? A water bottle? Their own coloring book? Fidgets? Maybe you need some of those things, too. Does your child need to run a lap or two in the gym before you head into worship? That’s available to you. Set your family up for success in the best way you know how. We’ll do the same.

***Here are suggestions for how to create a family culture of spirituality:***

- Pray before a meal together. Here's a suggestion for a table blessing you can memorize if that's your thing:

*For the dark earth that cradles the sea,  
For the rain that brings forth the green leaves,  
For the stars that give form to the flowers,  
For the warm sun that ripens the fruit,  
For all this goodness and beauty,  
O, heavenly Spirit, we thank you.  
Bon appétit! You may eat!*

- Create a ritual time for contemplative space. Adults call this the *Examen*: the spiritual practice of remembering the day: both desolations and consolations. In my house, we call this: Rose, Thistle, Bud. Every night, we each answer the questions: What was your rose today? What was thorny - or, the thistle? And, what are you looking forward to - what will blossom tomorrow?
- Create a prayer space or altar at home. Look for special things to gather in the space: a prayer candle, a religious icon, something beautiful that speaks to the first witness (nature - not the Bible).
- Read together at night - something that sparks the moral imagination or asks compelling questions, such as the Mindfulness prompt cards that were included in your child's Easter Box or Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.
- Volunteer somewhere together and talk about what it means to pray with our feet - *Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.* {Saint Teresa of Avila}

***Resources and Support from the First Congo Community:***

- Weekly lesson in the children's section of the This Week
- Archived videos on our YouTube channel
- Monthly snail-mailed newsletters
- Schedule a family meeting with Jaqui to connect in a smaller, relational space
- Pick up our resource offerings for the season, available at the church office - for parents and caregivers: *The Spiritual Child* by Lisa Miller and for kids (from the Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso): *I am God's Paintbrush*, *In God's Name* or *Who is My Neighbor?*
- Consider signing up for the UCC summer camp at Camp Adams in Molalla, Oregon. The UCC covers more than half of the camp fee.

And finally, here's our best advice. Take the opportunity to be your children's teacher as an invitation to your own spiritual formation. The best teachers are still learning.

In partnership and wonder,  
Pastor Jen