

Building Faith Brick by Brick

An Imaginative Way to Explore the Bible with Children

Emily Slichter Given



Morehouse Education Resources
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Emily captures the essence of the Christian story in the life of the Christian community. All of us, and children especially, are invited into an experiential, playful, and piece-by-piece exploration and building of the stories of faith. I highly recommend this book, its methods, and all the wonderful insights it brings. A must have, must use, must share book, and one that is guaranteed to bring meaning for years to come.

—**The Rev. Mark Francisco Bozzuti-Jones**

award winning author of *God Created* and *Jesus the Word*,
priest for pastoral care and community at Trinity Wall Street in New York City

Building Faith Brick by Brick is a fresh and practical approach to whole-community faith-formation glued together with a deep reverence for the power of stories retold and propped up with LEGO® bricks! Emily introduces us to pint-sized prophets and larger than life encounters with a wild Spirit. Her grasp of “boy faith” is brilliant—so needed right now in our churches. Warning: this guide will draw you in. You will not be the same after Emily Slichter Given is finished stirring your imagination!

—**The Rev. Thomas Brackett**

Missioner, New Church Starts & Missional Initiatives,
Episcopal Church Center, New York, NY

The great need in the church today is for resources, centered in Scripture, that deeply engage each child in their growing life in Christ. *Building Faith Brick by Brick* is an amazing response to the need and is so impressive because it uses a new language, a LEGO® language, for faith expression. Teachers can now teach children in Sunday school by binding religion and play by entering into a place of Joy and wonder doing theological reflection that builds upon questions of faith, brick by brick. Children can build on their own or in small groups. Everything is awesome because basic blueprints are included with a FAQ section that is absolutely so helpful to any parent or educator. This curriculum can serve as a powerful tool to aid congregations and Christian families as they pursue their goal to pass the faith to the next generation.

—**The Rev. Robyn Szoke-Coolidge**

Dean, Stevenson School for Ministry, Diocese of Central PA

Like some of the more interesting inventions that have shown up serendipitously or because of pressing necessity, *Brick by Brick* is a program that we’ve needed for a while and didn’t know we needed. The individual lessons are fun, full of good, tasty content and blooming like the yeast of Jesus’ parables with provocative “wondering” questions. I really appreciated, however, two things that we rarely see elsewhere: Emily’s research into what she calls “boy faith” and her advice on doing Bible with kiddos, both in the introductory section and well worth reading. *Building Faith Brick by Brick* belongs on the bookshelves of our congregations; more than that, it belongs in the hands and in the playbooks of everyone responsible for the Christian Formation of children.

—**Victoria L Garvey,**

Associate for Lifelong Christian Formation,
Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Building Faith Brick by Brick is a dynamic and palpable approach for children to encounter stories of faith in a rich new way. This acclaimed hands-on method of Christian Formation invites children's imaginations to take flight, and when this happens, the stories soon become real...block by block.

—**Roger Hutchison**

Canon for Children's Ministries at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia, SC
and author of *The Painting Table; A Journal of Loss and Joy*

In *Building Faith Brick by Brick*, Emily Given provides a creative, clear, and comprehensive resource for scripture studies with children and LEGO® bricks. Whether you find a place for these wonderfully fun and surprisingly deep activities in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Children's Chapel, in school or at home, this is a book that will fully engage both kids and the adults who teach them. It's also an invitation to explore the Bible unlike anything else on your bookshelf. You'll want this book, and chances are, you'll want lots of LEGO® bricks to go with it!

—**Wendy Claire Barrie**

Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries,
St. Bartholomew's Church, New York City

Building Faith Brick by Brick is a unique way of meeting children where they are and engaging them in God's story. Giving each child LEGO® bricks and a blank canvas, Emily's pedagogy links theology and practicality, encouraging children to wonder aloud about God in their midst. This guide helps both novice and veteran leaders facilitate a new way to imagine scripture and engage the energetic and creative children within and outside our parish walls. With a gentle spirit, Emily encourages and equips children and adults to see Scripture come alive and marvel at God's creation.

—**The Rev. Abigail W. Moon**

Associate Rector for Christian Education and Outreach,
St John's Episcopal Church, Tallahassee, FL

*For the people of Saint Michael and All Angels,
who have allowed me to love them
and share this walk of faith.*

*For Christina, Suzanne, Cathy, Ana, and Mama,
who have been a cheering squad and sacred circle.*

*...and for Aberlin and McKenzie,
who have shown me the face of God—more than once.*

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The Beginning

Most good ideas spring from a need—often an immediate need. *Building Faith Brick by Brick* (originally called *LEGO® My Bible...* but that led to copyright issues) grew out of an 11th-hour realization that there was a hole in the midweek family programming. Somehow I had overlooked first grade. It was an innocent mistake, since only two first-grade boys were coming on Wednesday evenings. They would be arriving in just a few short hours and I needed to be ready to welcome them.

What I knew (*deeply*) was that one of the boys would engage in nothing unless it was related to *Star Wars* or LEGO® bricks. The question then became, “How do I use this to my advantage?” Since I have two daughters, I know next to nothing about *Star Wars*, so in a pinch I turned to a possible LEGO® connection.

With just an hour to spare, I pooled the entire LEGO® collection from the nursery school, picked a story that seemed right (*Jacob wrestling with God*), and headed to the classroom to prepare the space. I remember praying over that room (small, without a lot of floor space) and the volunteer leader (surprisingly rigid). It was one of those “Oh God, here we go” type of prayers then I offered it up for God to do something—anything.

The boys were thrilled.

The volunteer felt like a champion.

I was saved.

God was glorified. (*Amen!*)

The combination of God’s grace and my creativity melded together into a new way of doing theological reflection. We were reaching into the stories of God while digging deep down into an enormous bin of LEGO® bricks.

A divine pairing indeed.

A Brick-by-Brick Story: Riley

There is always that story, that child, who shows us the face of God. For me that person is Riley (5 years). Riley struggled with creating anything related to the story and had a one-track mind that only wanted to pray for dead dinosaurs. After five weeks of disconnect, something remarkable happened. We gathered as a group for prayer, storytelling, and reflection on the building questions. We looked at suggested images—as we often did—but this time something was wholly and holy different. Riley worked and worked, digging deep into his bucket, clearly on a mission. When it came time to display and discuss his work with me, he proudly presented a tiny creation consisting of three LEGO® pieces. It looked like a tiny clam shell with a single LEGO® figure nestled inside. After five long weeks, Riley slowly spoke the wisdom of the ages, “It is Jonah. The fish wasn’t angry. The fish was a helper. This is Jonah and the whale. He was waiting. Waiting for God. Sometimes you need to wait for God, Ms. Emily.”

I was standing in the presence of a pint-sized prophet. The Word of God revealed itself in a few plastic pieces. It can happen anywhere if we are willing to show up, be present to our children, and wait for God.

Another Brick-by-Brick Story: Jack

We never know what will bind us together in this life. There are times and moments of connection that happen each day without us realizing their significance. That is, until difficult times come. One of the children from the church I serve walked into the hospital one day with what we thought was a terrible case of growing pains. It turned out that he was beginning a five-month journey through an aggressive and rare form of cancer.

On my way to the hospital, I gathered a healing balm of Pringles, Skittles, and a new set of LEGO® bricks, which, when put together, formed a prehistoric flying bug. I also brought the ridiculously long prayer shawl I had knitted more than six months earlier. I never knew for whom I was knitting until the call came from Jack's family. I suppose it had always been for him.

As I sat by the bedside, it was the language of LEGO® that created a moment of normalcy. Jack and I were talking about how to put the next piece into the prehistoric bug, but what we were really having was Communion. We celebrated a Eucharist of laughter and potato chips that made it clear: God's love is with us—in all times and all places.

A Case for Wondering

We have become a culture that expects prodigies in the halls of elementary schools and professional athletes on the playgrounds. Performance and achievement are in hyper-drive in the lives of many of our children. There isn't a lot of room for dabbling in a few different interests. An "A Team" expectation has taken the place of backyard fun and school-yard free play.

We can find a place to step back from those expectations—children and adults

alike. It is time to allow ourselves to enter into a place of wonder—a place of joyful unknowing. It may be scary at first, but that fear can break free into peaceful and fruitful exploration if we make room in our hearts, minds and schedules.

In Bible studies I often say, "I don't know how God really works. If we figured it out, that would make God too small." I truly believe that statement. We can grow in faith and love of God without figuring out the ins and outs of the gifts of grace and the miracle of living. We do not need to perfect life, we need to live it, show up, and enjoy.

How? Open our hands. Unclench our jaws. Step back from the intensity...and wonder. Just wonder. "I don't know" can be one of the most informative and freeing phrases we can utter in our life of faith. Let's help to nurture a generation of God's people who can simply be in the presence of God and wonder.

I have watched the most emotionally unavailable children open like flowers when they have been invited into the process of wondering. I have witnessed the most active children become deeply focused and connected by simply being invited to find their wondering places. There have been truly amazing self-discoveries and theological awakenings around the LEGO®-My-Bible circles. Some of my most treasured time has been being present for "God moments" with children who, in new and renewed ways, access the holy places of their lives. I have no doubt that God continues to show up in really big, important ways. This will happen for your group, too.

The *Building Questions* are the meat of this book. They are the series of wondering questions found in each lesson that are meant to draw us into the stories so we can

allow them to transform our lives and inform our living. I have sat at the feet of people like Jerome Berryman, Helen White, Robyn Szoke, David Canan, Jeff Ross, Paul Carling, and Vickie Garvey long enough to witness the power of wonder. I was blessed to be born into a family with Ginny and Charlie Slichter, people who allowed the world to be enormously large and lovingly small. What kind of place will you create so that those around you can flourish and explore?

Note: Several of the lessons repeat the same questions over and over. This is intentional. In each record of faith told in the Bible, we can't ask too many questions about why it matters and how we are a part of the story. Many themes are related, and therefore asking the questions over and over can create a natural connection and continuum for our faith stories. God speaks to us in an epic love story. These stories are for all people. I believe these questions can be pulled out and used in Biblical exploration by all ages—with or without the LEGO® bricks. They can help almost any group to break open Scripture together. Use the questions in this book with your vestry, women's groups, youth gatherings, worship services, sermon writing sessions, and more. We can all make a place in our lives for wonder as we allow the open space to come closer, to simply listen to ourselves and others. The *Building Questions* create a place of greater community and deeper level of trust. In the questions, we come to know one another and God more fully.

Wonder.

Just wonder.

A Few Words about Boy Faith

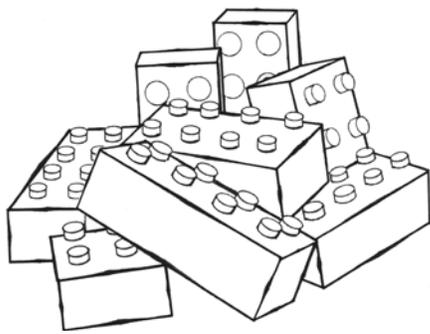
There is a rather vast, uncharted territory called “boy faith.” As faith formers, it is rare that we venture into the rough and ragged places where boys live, learn, and grow. What we know is that many places are not set up to meet the needs of the boy heart and mind. At the top of the list often fall school and church. Neither allows the wiggle room that many need to feel accepted and be encouraged to explore.

This isn't really a surprise, right? We all have boys in our lives who keep us active and bring us joy. Yet, if truth be told, they can also take a whole lot of energy from us too. Most of us have been in settings where we beg boys (fidgety and impulsive) to settle down and act like girls (focused and attentive). The true place of ministry is realizing that there is holiness in that impulsive and active nature if we will only take the time to understand.

I happen to have a heart for sharing faith and life stories with elementary school boys, so I needed to figure out a new language for faith expression. After engaging with boys in different settings, I realized that art response was not enough. Craft supplies and talking were not getting to that place of awakening that I knew lay waiting in the hearts of these boys.

You don't have to search very far before the trends in research clearly emerge. Everyone from the local Parent Teacher Association to the Harvard Medical School is talking about the educational and behavioral issues of boys. Not to be overly dramatic, but we have a crisis on our hands; the statistics are startling:

- 80% of discipline issues in schools are with boys.



The Six Days of Creation:

The First of Two Creation Stories

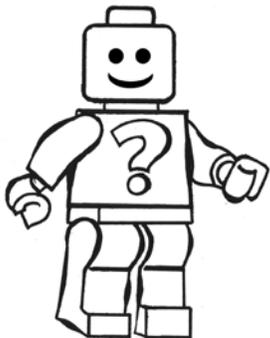
Genesis 1:1–2:4

Welcome the Group

Lay the Foundation

- *Where is this story found in the Bible?*
Old Testament
- *What is its place in the Bible story?*
first story of the Bible, before Cain and Abel
- *Who is the author?*
Moses and others (Some scholars believe three or more people helped to write the book we call Genesis.)
- *Who are the main characters?*
Adam, Eve, and God
- *Where in the biblical world did it happen?*
everywhere!
- *Where is this in today's world?*
everywhere!

Find the full description of *Lay the Foundation* on page 15.



Did You Know?

- ✓ The word *Genesis* comes from the Greek word for “beginning” or “to be born.”
- ✓ The word *Eden* comes from the Aramaic word for “fruitful” or “well watered.”
- ✓ There are two stories of creation in the Bible.

Pray

Dear God, you are the creator and lover of all things and all people. Thank you for the many creations you have made in this world and in our lives. We ask you to help us to use them in right ways and to your glory. Amen.

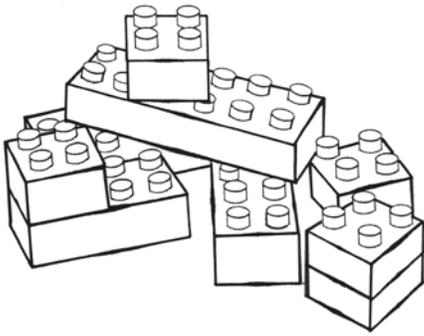
Suggested prayer methods are outlined on page 15.

Share the Story

Suggestions for storytelling are detailed on page 16.

Respond to the Story

Invite each member of the group to use bricks and figures to respond to the story. This can be done individually or in small groups. Suggestions for how to support this form of theological reflection can be found on page 16.



Ask Building Questions

- I wonder what it felt like in the darkness?
- I wonder why God didn't create the world all at one time?
- I wonder what it was like to see the first light?
- I wonder what the earth smelled like when it was new?
- I wonder if God ever made anything God thought wasn't good?
- I wonder if there is anything that God forgot to create?
- I wonder what part of creation was God's favorite?
- I wonder what part of creation is your favorite?
- I wonder if God is finished creating things?
- I wonder what things we can create with God's help?
- I wonder what God does to rest?
- I wonder what it means to be created in the image of God?
- I wonder how we are like God?

Suggest Blueprints *(if needed)*

- God
- darkness
- water

Continue the Story

One way to deepen the learning experience and create a link between group learning and faith formation in the home is to have builders show their creations to the adults who pick them up after class.

For additional study and conversation at home, consider different ways to share the Bible verses as well as some of the *Building Questions*. Possible methods of communication are texts, social media, e-blasts, website posts, and take-home sheets.

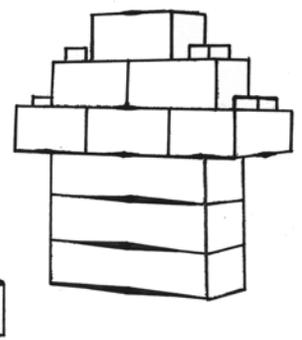
- land
- animals
- birds
- water creatures
- creepy crawlies
- day
- night
- stars
- heaven
- rest
- the first people

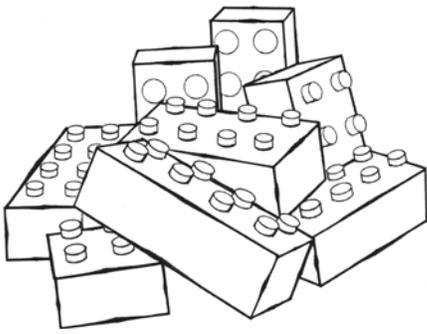
Share Responses

Encourage each group member to share the creations they have made in response to the story. More details about sharing can be found on page 17.

Share a Snack

- blue gelatin with candy fish
- graham cracker "dirt" crumbles with gummy worms
- animal crackers
- goldfish
- rice cereal treats or cookies in shape of stars, moon, animals, birds, or insects





Mary and Elizabeth

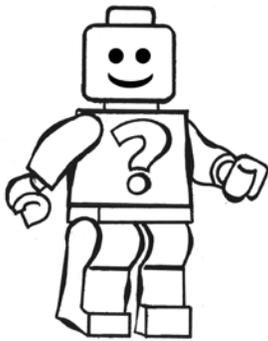
Luke 1:39-45

Welcome the Group

Lay the Foundation

- *Where is this story found in the Bible?*
New Testament
- *What is its place in the Bible story?*
after the births of John the Baptist and Jesus were foretold; before the birth of Jesus
- *Who is the author?*
Luke
- *Who are the main characters?*
Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, Jesus (still in Mary's womb) and John the Baptist (still in Elizabeth's womb)
- *Where in the biblical world did it happen?*
Hebron, hill country of Judea
- *Where is this in today's world?*
Hebron, West Bank

Find the full description of *Lay the Foundation* on page 15.



Did You Know?

- ✓ Luke was commonly known as a doctor who traveled with Paul on his missionary trips.
- ✓ Luke never met Jesus.
- ✓ Luke is also the author of The Book of Acts.
- ✓ The book of Luke is a gospel book. A gospel is a recording of Jesus' life. There are four gospels in our Bible (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).
- ✓ Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, which made Jesus and John the Baptist cousins, too.

Pray

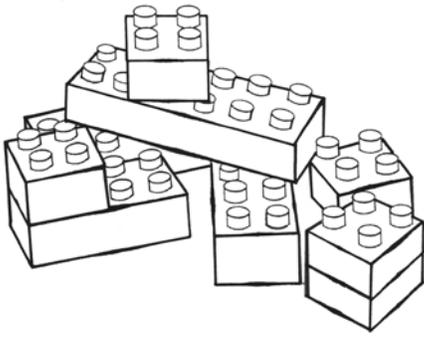
Dear God, create new places of joy and wonder in our lives. Help us to know the excitement of Jesus each day. Also, help us learn to wait for good things and trust in you. Amen.

Suggested prayer methods are outlined on page 15.

Share the Story

Suggestions for storytelling are detailed on page 16.

Note: If you are telling this story by heart, you may want to add details about the foretelling of the birth of John to Zechariah and the foretelling of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph. These stories are interconnected; it would be helpful to lay the groundwork together.



Respond to the Story

Invite each member of the group to use bricks and figures to respond to the story. This can be done individually or in small groups. Suggestions for how to support this form of theological reflection can be found on page 16.

Ask Building Questions

- I wonder if you have ever felt the belly of someone who is pregnant?
- I wonder if you have a cousin?
- I wonder what you do when you are excited?
- I wonder what song you would sing for God?
- I wonder if you have ever been asked to do something important for God?
- I wonder what you think “blessed” means?
- I wonder if you have ever felt blessed?

Continue the Story

One way to deepen the learning experience and create a link between group learning and faith formation in the home is to have builders show their creations to the adults who pick them up after class.

For additional study and conversation at home, consider different ways to share the Bible verses as well as some of the *Building Questions*. Possible methods of communication are texts, social media, e-blasts, website posts, or take-home sheets.

Suggest Blueprints *(if needed)*

- Mary
- Elizabeth
- hill country of Judea
- Elizabeth and Zechariah’s house
- God

Share Responses to the Story

Encourage each group member to share the creations they have made in response to the story. More details about sharing can be found on page 17.

Share a Snack

- cut vegetables or fruit
- grape juice
- pita bread

