
Love First

**A Children's Ministry
for the Whole Church**

COLETTE POTTS

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Introduction

Truth be told, when I was in my twenties, religion wasn't very appealing. I wasn't sure how my brand of church was any different from the others that seemed to have gone off the deep end. Organized religion—particularly Christianity—appeared to have morphed into something much different from what Jesus had envisioned. Church looked like it was about accumulating wealth, creating beautiful buildings, and excluding others—all things that Jesus openly condemned.

Even though—a couple decades later—it looks like some parts of Christianity are *still* a ways away from the core teachings of Jesus, I can say that after wading through some of the baggage the church brings, I've discovered some invaluable things that are almost impossible to find elsewhere. At its best, church is a unique setting that opens its doors to people of all ages, literally from birth to death. And it accepts these people in all forms, from the joyful to grieving, the lonely to the overwhelmed, the sick to well, the rich to poor, the entitled to the marginalized. You can be introverted or extroverted, hardworking or lazy, chatty or quiet. Any way you are or feel, church can be home to you.

Church became increasingly attractive after I had children. I worried a lot about how I was going to raise my children, what communities I wanted to surround us, and what my children would learn by the places we went, the things we did, and the people we called "friends." I spent many nights around the dinner table making a case to my

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children about why gratitude was important, only to realize that our conversations about gratitude really only happened in the first three minutes of dinner and almost always involved vegetables. I sensed this wasn't going well for us.

I had a hunch that if I didn't work hard to make our family's values clear, then I might be overrun by the things our culture values: competition, success, consumerism, and personal fulfillment. These are the values I feared would trickle into my children's hearts and brains, and weasel their way to the top of *their* list of priorities. If I wanted it any other way, it was becoming clear I'd have to work at it.

Before I became director of children's ministries at Saint Barnabas Memorial Church, I was a parent who spent Sunday mornings wondering what her children were doing in Sunday school and how it related to our everyday lives. The wife of a religion professor and one of the clerics at Saint Barnabas, I spent evenings asking clarifying and needling questions about the historical context of how we arrived at the religion and church that we see today. I asked Matt on a routine basis, "Is church *trying* to make religion irrelevant and confusing to children?"

All of these ponderings and conversations were aiming to uncover whether or not I could get what our family needed from church: something that increased the volume on love and kindness and drowned out the less desirable values of competition and consumerism that were seeping into our family's culture when I wasn't looking. The church should be the logical place for a family to find the support they need to raise caring, loving, and compassionate children. The church proclaims the teachings of a man who preached (a lot) about love and caring for the marginalized. If our family was coming to church on a routine basis and it was still unclear to my children what church was meant to be, then *our* church—at least—had some serious self-reflection to do.

The Self-Reflection

I'm a trained family therapist and was working as an in-home therapist when I decided to take the position at Saint Barnabas. I practiced several different models of family therapy, but my favorite was—and still is—the solution-focused model. It might sound redundant, since you'd

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assume all forms of therapy would be *focused* on a *solution*. But that's not necessarily the case. This one spends almost no time unearthing the root of the problem, and instead looks ahead toward solutions for arriving at a desired outcome. More importantly though, this model is built on the assumption that every person or family can generate solutions to their own problems; they might just need a little nudge.

That's how I've always felt about our church: *we have everything we need*. Too often churches are searching for the magic pill that's going to reinvigorate their children's program and bring back the families who've stopped coming. The remedy might be a curriculum, a climbing wall, or a bouncy house. If you buy it, they will come. Looking elsewhere for the quick fix can distract you from looking inward within your own congregation for your very own solutions to your very own problems, a solution that binds together the whole community.

Millie, my seven-year-old daughter, has a favorite, though clunky, saying that often rings in my ears, "Be yourself. Do not be your friend." It takes a few seconds to figure out what she means by this. "Be *yourself*. Do not be *your friend*." When Millie writes this on birthday cards, bookmarks, placemats, or the refrigerator, I'm not sure if she knows how desperately most of us need to be reminded of this. Millie's motto easily applies to all forms of envy, including the envy that some churches have for those congregations which appear to have it all. We're all guilty of peeking at what the neighbors have and feeling like we want that same thing, even if we never gave it much thought prior to fifteen seconds ago. Our church was guilty of that, and we briefly contemplated ill-fitting ideas, because duplicating someone else's program seemed a whole lot easier than the process of self-reflection and reinvention. We didn't want to hear that the best solution was not *their* solution, but *our* solution. That seemed like a lot of work and no one knew how to get there. To me, it felt like we didn't have much choice; enthusiasm for our children's ministry was quickly evaporating.

This is the story of our mid-size Episcopal church's struggle to reach today's young families. The process of self-reflection helped us locate the intersection of the needs of children, families, and the church. We took a risk to rethink (completely) how we teach children about God, religion, faith, and the church in a way that is meaningful to children, families, and our faith community today—and in the future. We erased

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our preconceived notions about what we thought we needed, we recycled the old curricula, emptied the rooms, and moved forward with one single commitment: make it all meaningful. What resulted was a program that the whole church was proud of, one that children and parents loved and teachers wanted to teach, and a new way of being that breathed life into our congregation. We finally had what we really needed. And we did it ourselves.

When word spread that our program was growing *and* that there was enthusiasm among children and parents—two highly coveted things in the world of children’s ministry—other churches started inquiring. It looked to some like we were sitting on the golden ticket and everyone wanted a copy of it; whatever lesson plans or resources I could hand over would be greatly appreciated. In my first conversation with Church Publishing, I told my (now) editor that I didn’t have anything, really, to offer these other churches; this was not something to be circulated in an e-mail. This was, instead, a new model of children’s ministry, one that would have to be nurtured and fostered by the whole church community. Churches would have to be *all in* if this were going to work.

This book is for churches who *want* to be all in because you know, too, that your congregation has the gifts it needs to reinvigorate the life of your children’s ministry and the life of your church. Or, as they say in the field of family therapy: you believe that your church can generate solutions to its own problems.

Our program assumes that children already experience holiness in their lives; likewise we assume the experience of God is authentic in our community and our families. God is already here. The love is already here. The solution to our problem is here, in our church and in our personal experiences, rather than in techniques that a prepackaged curriculum might deliver.

That might be bad news for someone in search of a quick fix.

The good news, though, is that your community is full of golden tickets, too. Without having been to your church, I know it is rich with wisdom and experience. It is full of people who don’t have answers but want to search, who are willing to admit mistakes, who have suffered loss, who love and are loved, and who are prepared to participate in a children’s program that promises to give back to the whole congregation.

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Our children's ministry is for the whole church, not only because the whole church benefits from a thriving children's program, but also because the whole church *is* the children's program. The people who will breathe life into your children's ministry are there, and perfectly situated to have a profound and positive impact on the children of your faith community. Whether unique or commonplace, the gifts of others can deepen relationships and connect the most unlikely people in the unlikeliest of ways; you need only nudge them into giving what they have to offer.

Your church is full of love waiting to be unearthed. Your job is to look for it in the unlikeliest of places, and give it a little nudge. Love first, and you'll find that others will too.