

Engaging Children in Matthew 25

How do we include children in the life of the church? After years of considering children's ministry, family ministry, multi-generational ministry, and inter-generational ministry... let's consider the desired outcome. What are we doing and why?

We are engaging God's people in God's work because we are stewards of God's creation. Folks are most productive, committed, and invested in serving for and alongside God's people and sharing of time that is meaningful and appropriate to their gifts or capabilities. So, for children, how do we give children a "child-sized bite" of the work of the church? How can children be intentionally included?

Identify the program, project, plan, or initiative

The [Matthew 25 Movement](#) of the PCUSA and Matthew 25 scripture are uniquely suited for children. The scripture speaks to concrete ways of addressing the needs of God's people, see verses 35 & 36 of the 25th Chapter of Matthew. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (NRSVUE)

Congregations who are participating in the Matthew 25 Movement are serving Jesus by contributing to the well-being of the most vulnerable in all societies in many ways through the named focus areas of Building Congregational Vitality, Dismantling Structural Racism, and Eradicating Systemic poverty. Children can participate in this service and work.

How do we help this happen? Identify "child-sized bites" of meaningful work (service opportunities) that suit their capabilities as well as opportunities for "child-sized bites" to learn about the underlying issues. Jesus is calling us to perform ordinary acts of compassion in daily life and the examples below are one way.

Recognize the resources and steps necessary

Help children match the programs of the church to the needs of the community. Consider what is concrete, foundational, and accessible without deep context requiring inference. Jesus gives concrete examples: I was naked and you clothed me. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. This makes the hospitality of Matthew 25 readily accessible for children.

For example,

- "I was hungry and you gave me food." I wonder how our church can help people who are hungry? The answer might be to collect food for the food pantry.
- "I was sick and you took care of me." I wonder how our church can help people who don't know where they will sleep tonight? The answer might be to help make shelters more welcoming with blankets, welcome cards, or a hygiene bag.

Examples

Here are four examples of how to engage children in applications of Matthew 25 practices.

Matthew 25 BINGO – Make a BINGO game and fill the squares with specific ways children can participate in the mission work of the congregation. Encourage the children to “X” the activity or take a picture of themselves doing the activity. (Perhaps put SERVE on the top instead of BINGO.)

Objective: Matthew 25 BINGO gives children and their parents specific ways to participate in the mission/outreach/service of the local congregation.

Who and What: Families will learn that there are, at least, 25 ways to participate in the Matthew 25 initiative. (25!) Children will celebrate their participation in the life of the church as they serve alongside other church members. Congregants will remember that they must have the faith of a child and delight in the ways that they can serve in Jesus’ name.

Instructions: Create a list of the outreach, ministry, or service opportunities at your church. Challenge the leadership to identify ways that children can lead or participate in a meaningful way.

Copy the template for Matthew 25 BINGO found [here](#) or find a free template online to fill in. Fill in your 25 opportunities. Create thematic columns if you wish, or put the 25 ways to participate on small stickers and allow the children to put the stickers on the squares in a random arrangement.

Challenge the children and the congregation to get 5 in a row, or to cover the board by doing all 25!

Go BIG: Have a HUGE version of the Matthew 25 Bingo at the church and cover the square with a picture when the service opportunity is completed.

UTTER NONSENSE: Sing to the tune of BINGO.

“There was a church that served the lord and Matthew 25 was its plan, oh
S-E-R-V-E. S-E-R-V-E. S-E-R-V-E, and Matthew 25 was its plan, oh!”

Matthew 25 Mission Mondays - a pop up style mission activity that happens every Monday (or the day of the week of your choice.) Adults, staff, children and youth gather at the church and have a short devotional on the task ahead. Link it to Matthew 25 by pointing out what folks in need will benefit from the activity.

Objective: Matthew 25 to Mission Mondays gives children and their parents specific ways to participate in the mission/outreach/service in the immediate area.

Who and What: Working with the Mission or Outreach committee, children and youth can learn about the opportunities to serve in the immediate area.

Organizing Instructions: Meet with your congregational nurture, outreach, mission, and/or service leadership.

Create a list of the outreach, ministry, or service opportunities in your area. Challenge the leadership to identify ways that children can lead or participate in a meaningful way.

Have a combination of children, youth and adults select the projects and list the tools/supplies needed. Decide if you are doing a sack lunch or providing lunch. Bring more water than you can ever need.

Recruit families, youth, older adults or others to arrive for a Mission Monday during the summer, a school break, or a holiday. Remember permission slips! If someone signs up to lead the devotion, they get to know the project 1 week early!

Arrange transportation, gather supplies, announce that this coming Monday is a MISSION MONDAY. Order matching T shirts!!

Event Outline: Gather at the church or other rally point. Start with a prayer and devotional. Announce the mission project. Ex: work at the food pantry, yard work for the elderly, clean the Ronald McDonald house, paint a home that provides shelter for families of prisoners who come to visit.

Have a great time serving together. End with a fun activity such as putt-putt golf, swimming in a pool, or ice cream cones. Debrief the experience. Pray for the work, the workers, and the world.

Utter Nonsense: Sing to the tune of (Just another manic Monday)
"Oh Yeah! It's another Mission Monday (oooh)
That's my fun day. It's the Gospel on the run day.
You know you wanna come day!
I'll see you at the next Mission Monday. "

Placemat Prayers - children provide prayers and sets a place for chosen activities of the church be that a senior adult gathering, Bible Study, all church fellowship, or meal for the homeless.

Objective: Hospitality is part of the message of Matthew 25. Placemat prayers remind program participants that there is an age-defying intention behind the work of the church. Adult meetings will be grounded in the prayers and presence of the children of the church.

Who and What: Children will learn that they can and do have an impact on the events of their church or the gathering at hand. Adults will celebrate the children's role as prayer support. Program attendees will remember that they must have the faith of a child and remember that all can serve in Jesus' name.

Instructions: Select an event or program that uses designated space for either a meal or gathering.

Invite a representative of the group to join the children and to explain what the meeting is about or why the church has this group.

Provide paper (11" X 17" paper works great) and art supplies.
Give the children time to decorate the placemats.

- If the placemats are for a meeting maybe, make a "my name is _____" spot.
- If the placemat is for a meal, the children may want to write their favorite meal blessing.
- If the placemat is for a Bible study, help children copy a Bible verse onto the placemat.

NOTE: encourage children to only include their first name and no other identifying information.

IF POSSIBLE, set out placemats in the room or on tables where they will be used. Let the children arrange them. Then, gather the children and help them to pray for the group that will use the placemats.

Utter Nonsense: Sing to the tune of London Bridge is Falling Down
"Set the table* with Jesus' love, Jesus' love, Jesus' love.
Set the table with Jesus' love, and welcome all of God's people. "
*Set this place

FIG (Families In the Garden) - is an idea that involves the whole congregation in feeding the hungry and caring for creation. Or call it Friends in the Garden, to be more inclusive of those whose children are parts of the village rather than their household.

He told them a story. "Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God's kingdom is about here. Don't brush this off: I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won't wear out." - Luke 21:29-30 (Message Bible)

Objective: FIG provides families, the congregation and neighbors with an outdoor opportunity to "dig" into the scriptural invective to feed the hungry.

Who: Families will learn side by side about how to care for the earth and to be careful. Volunteers will celebrate the multi-generational community by being present and supporting a mission of the church.

Children will remember that volunteering in service to feed others can be done with almost no money and makes a big difference. Can one pack of seeds feed 5,000 if you plant okra or eggplant?

How: *Meet with a community garden group.* Find out when they could most use volunteer help. Identify hours that are outside of school time when a volunteer can be available to help those who are new to gardening.

Plan devotions for the garden time. Psalms are one good choice. Present them so that they are accessible to "smalls, tall, and all." Include a scripture and reflection questions. "I wonder" is a good way of asking children to sit with an idea. Give the children an opportunity to interact with the story or to tell the story back to those they are with. Maybe you can put up a mailbox in the garden and put a laminated devotion in it.

Have a variety of options for volunteer work in the garden. Be creative in making a list and working with garden leaders. Children can clean the birdbath and refill it or refill a bird feeder. Picnic tables can be cleaned or repainted. Weeds can be pulled, veggies harvested, plants watered, mulch added. Maybe you can let folks sign a table when they come to help.

Experienced garden volunteers might have "office hours" when help is available to assist inexperienced folks with more involved tasks or teach about the plants. Weighing the produce and taking it to a food pantry helps children see the impact of the garden on the hungry.

Include a prayer or other way to center, celebrate, and to thank God for the garden, ourselves, and the whole earth.

For Sharing with Participants: Feed your soul while you help to feed others. Community gardens can be places of fellowship and service and fun. Celebrate Summer by helping to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for your food pantry or neighbors. Children and families will have a chance to D-I-G:

- D - Devotion time
- I - I Wonder Questions
- G - Good works



Have a rain plan. For example, restock shelves at a food pantry or make manna bags for the homeless.

Sample of DIG Devotion: [Here](#) is a link to a sample DIG devotion based on Psalm 46. These can be a handout in the mailbox in the garden and change from week to week. Or you could just have a few laminated and keep a separate list of suggested activities.

A Sample Publicity Outline:

MAY I help others? YES, you MAY! May 1st is the First FIG (Families In the Garden). These Wednesday nights in MAY, be a FIG and gather your Family In the Garden*. Volunteers will be available to help your family work together to provide fruits and vegetables for the Food Pantry. Gather...(in the Community Garden at_____ on Tuesday mornings or after work or school on Wednesdays, from 4:00 pm until dark. Rest in the comfortable seating and know that "you've got mail." The mailbox in the garden holds a scripture and family devotion. There is also a list of tasks for smalls to talls. Here's a fun fact: it is a wasp that makes the fig tree bear fruit; it is a teeny tiny wasp. For that reason, you KNOW everyone is welcome in the Garden!

Utter Nonsense: Find a way to include music in the garden. One suggestion is The Seed Song by Marie Malone arranged by Betty Pulkingham copyright 1977 Church of the Redeemer, Episcopal

One must water, one must weed, one must sow the precious seed. We'll all work in unity to tend the garden of love.

Writer: Kathryn "Kat" Green, Director of Children's Ministry, Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church, Severna Park MD.

Office of Christian Formation www.pcusa.org/formation

July 2023

