
Love First

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

COLETTE POTTS

 **CHURCH
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*For Millie, Sammy and Danny:
Three reasons I need
the world to be more loving*



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Foreword

“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 our pre-conceived 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.” (page xix)

When I was serving as the Missioner for Education, Formation, and Discipleship in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, I started to hear about a new program at a church on Cape Cod. At first it was the rector telling me that they were trying some exciting new things in the children’s program. Many months later the interim called me to let me know that there was something really different and energizing happening with their Sunday school. And now Colette Potts is sharing their story and strategy with the world.

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In the sea of religious formation books, this book stands out for me because it is a framework, not a curriculum. Colette calls it “an approach to living in community.” This is the story of St. Barnabas’s Episcopal Church changing how children are invited into the life of the community and centering on the value of loving God and loving neighbor. In one sense, it is so simple. But in another sense, this type of change requires listening to the needs and desires of busy families, being willing to clean everything out and start over, and simplifying and grounding the message of a church school program. Colette Potts is a family therapist and takes an authentically different approach to the issues that a lot of churches face: declining attendance, unengaged children, and parents who want help with parenting. She provides a way into the heart of the issue that I haven’t encountered before.

Her approach is deceptively simple—putting love first. But the practice is sometimes counter to our institutional trappings and tradition. The church spends a lot of time teaching *about* love, rather than having children and adults actually practice it together. This book calls for changing expectations about the goals of church programs and the values that underlie them in order to help children and adults love one another and the world. Colette takes the reader through her church’s process.

Colette started by asking the question “What can the church offer to families that they can’t get somewhere else?” Recent research shows that parents want their kids to be good, kind, loving people but are having a hard time teaching that in today’s culture. Church seems like a natural place for parents to get help for this. So how can the church help children be more loving, kind, and empathetic? Empathy alone is not the end of the message, but when the church teaches children empathy and how to love self and one’s neighbor, then religion is not just language disconnected from everyday life. One reason for folks’ leaving organized religion is that they feel the church is hypocritical. This approach helps the church do a better job of connecting talk of faith into action in the world in an authentic, community-centered way.

This book dives deep into the process of change, critically examining the space, the limits of time, the formation possibilities in liturgy, and the gifts embedded within the community itself. Colette describes the rhythm of their revamped Sunday morning program as well as the

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thought process behind each of their choices, not as a program to copy but as a guideline for understanding the essential elements to create a meaningful program in any context. It's not about all the activities—the activities are the outcome of thinking deeply and critically about all the aspects in church that connect formation to anyone entering the doors. There are lots of practical suggestions as well as different ways of looking at the things that churches always do. Rather than a “how-to,” though, this book encourages rethinking church in your own context.

What are the challenges for your congregation? Are you wondering why you don't have young families? Colette offers an approach to change—a realistic evaluation of your program and your congregation—rooted in the outlook, goals, and desires of the congregation. This is about church helping kids have a faith life that grows with them and helps them to apply faith to real world situations in a way that anticipates an adult faith in the church.

Are you having trouble getting teachers? There are wonderful insights and stories to help you rethink and reshape teacher recruitment. Colette shares the belief that it isn't about finding the perfect teacher, or the knowledgeable Bible scholar that will involve more adults in teaching. Her approach is connecting the gifts of the adults in the congregation with the children, which has led to multiplying the numbers of adults who teach, lead, mentor, and share with the children and youth of St. Barnabas.

Do your children's spaces need some TLC after years of neglect? Is your church welcoming to children and their parents? Looking realistically at church spaces is part of the process. Every church has both positives and negatives when it comes to space. This book lays out a framework for creating inviting, family-friendly space and considers it as much of the message as any words spoken. This process also suggests ways to create rooms that are set up for spiritual practices—teaching kids ways to think about God and their faith in a meaningful, ritualistic way. These are practices, or spiritual disciplines, that can stay with that child all their life.

This approach honors the fact that many parents were raised with no church, or perhaps bad church experiences. This approach seeks to meet adults where they are as parents in their desire to raise loving, empathetic children and to help them grow in a foundation of love of

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self, love of neighbor, and love of God. The testimonials from parents that are scattered throughout this book help to emphasize the healing nature of this framework. When too many adults in the church feel inadequate to teach because of their lack of knowledge, and adults outside the church have often been hurt by the church in their own childhood, it is noticeably different to find an approach that takes the Bible seriously as foundation but teaches an embodied, not intellectual, faith.

I commend this book to anyone who is in charge of a children's program at a church, for clergy looking to make meaningful changes in programs, and for parents who are wondering how churches can help in the process of raising loving children.

Amy Cook
Working Group Head for Faith Formation
Episcopal Diocese of California



Our Challenges

Many churches today are facing unique challenges compared to their counterparts a generation or two ago. While some have managed to tap into the energy of children and families, others haven't moved far beyond a time when church was the only option for Sunday morning gatherings, still using the same model yet wondering where all the young families have gone. For previous generations, church didn't have to try so hard; families had more free time and there was more social pressure for families to attend church. That social pressure extended to volunteering, too, with fathers running committees and mothers teaching Sunday school. As we all know, for churches today that's no longer the case. Instead, families—barely recognizable to older generations—have changed, and churches have entered the competition for getting onto the calendars of young families—and not always making the cut.

If you've ever gone to any child-friendly event, you'll notice immediately that it is full of energy and excitement. From school concerts to soccer games to baby lap programs, children bring with them a kind of liveliness that is difficult to replicate. And when you don't have it, you tend to notice. And when you feel like it should be there but *isn't*, it can feel like emptiness or loss. Many at Saint Barnabas were feeling like we had lost something by not having more children in the church, and the only thing that would fill that void would be children themselves.

The joyful noise of children is great, of course, but everyone knows you can find that at the nearest playground or by hosting a free kid-

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friendly event in one of your church spaces. I wanted that joyful noise to come from children who were connected to us in a meaningful way, those who felt at home in our church, and whose families felt supported by our community. I wanted to take that long view, the slow and steady approach to offering something that *really* resonates with children, their families, and our church.

I wasn't preoccupied with recruiting families or growing our program; that was never a primary goal of mine. Instead, I focused my efforts on integrating the children who were *already* part of the life of our congregation: those children I knew to be the kind, caring, and loving children that we wanted in our midst. If others were feeling like children were missing from our church, my first step would be to prove that the children we wanted were already here.

A New Brand of Busy

This is no easy task, even with the families already coming. Families are experiencing a new brand of busy that has profoundly changed the way they function and—for some—hugely impacts their relationship to the church. In addition, families are becoming increasingly complex configurations with single parents, blended families, and families being far-flung from extended relatives. Some churches are finding it impossible to answer the question they continue to ask themselves, “How do we reach young families?”

As a young—and busy—family ourselves (you know, the household with a four-week stack of unopened mail on the counter), I find it hard to believe the future of the church hinges on my ability to get dressed and to church on Sunday mornings. That's too much pressure, too much desperation, and evidence that the church doesn't get us. Instead, I want to focus on a solution. I want to talk more about what today's families need from the church, and how the church can start doing more of it.

Once upon a time, church was a lot of things to a family, a social hub being chief among them. Sunday school was a lively place for children to gather and parents weren't overly concerned with the content, just that their children were occupied while the adults attended church. Today, most families can fill their social calendar in many other ways, connecting through children's activities like hockey, Boy Scouts, or

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dance. They have located their own social center and often don't need a church to serve that purpose.

So what does or should church mean for these families?

If we think church is merely a social circle of sorts, then it might not be useful to most busy families today. If, however, we believe it offers much, much more—which I do—then it's not on such a perilous path as some think. Perhaps we just need to rethink what we do best, how it fits into today's busy world, and then do it really, really well.

Even with a steady decline in recent decades, some families are still here—week after week—expecting something from church. Several of our young families race down the hallway ten minutes *after* Sunday school starts, pulling on church clothes over running clothes, or brushing the dirt off their pants from an early-morning trip to the stables. Despite it (almost) always being easier to stay at home, on the bike path, or at the horse ranch, families still turn up.

Although the busyness of many families is mostly self-inflicted, it does serve a purpose that's not unrelated to the decline of church attendance. Families fill their days and weeks with things they need and want, things that give their children opportunities and experiences that shape them into the people we hope they'll become. For many, it can feel like a full-time job trying to develop children into well-rounded adults.

Weeks after I took this job, I decided to rethink children's ministry and what we were doing with children on Sunday mornings. Were we doing something that was worth a family's time and effort? Was the church offering its best self to children? I wasn't sure we were doing either of those things and feared we weren't even meeting the needs of the few families who kept coming, expecting something from us.

My first step was to challenge this notion that "The Busy Family" is the immovable object affecting the church. Perhaps churches no longer understand today's families. Or at least, maybe that has *something* to do with it. It got me thinking about the intersection of church and busy families and whether or not there *was* an intersection. I wondered if church had something more to offer these families on the go. Was there something here that needed tending by the church? I wondered if the church could offer something to families they *couldn't get* elsewhere, something they might consider adding to their hectic schedule, and maybe—I don't know—something they desperately *needed*.

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What if families came to church and found that it actually made raising good, kind children just a little bit easier, and then raced to add it to their schedules like a coveted, hard-to-get-into summer camp? What if they found it absolutely necessary—a must have—for parenting in this jam-packed world? What we know about busy families is that they're busy because they turn up when it's something they *really* need or want. They're there. In fact, they're *everywhere*, which is why they're so darn busy. So maybe the problem isn't, after all, that families are just too busy for church.

Maybe the problem is that *church isn't offering what they need or want*.

Challenges for Families

I started asking parents about the challenges they're facing when it comes to raising children. Was there something families don't get from drum lessons, swimming, art class, lacrosse, dance, basketball, hockey, or ballet? Working as an in-home family therapist, I had become accustomed to this idea that every family had a struggle of some sort—some mild, some catastrophic. So it was altogether natural when I asked parents how things were going in their family in a real, I-mean-it sort of way. How were their children coping in school? How does their family spend quality time together? How does their busyness enrich *and* detract from family life? It surprised me that most of these conversations ended in the same place: families are busy, like *super* busy, and despite the long list of enriching activities, parents were left wondering if they were raising the caring and generous children they had hoped.

One mother quietly and dishearteningly whispered as our six-year-olds played together, "I'm afraid I'm raising a spoiled brat." A surprising number of parents asked with a look of hope in their eyes, "Can you find a soup kitchen where we can volunteer? I think that would be good for my family."

I understand these families' predicament. We had gotten into an unpleasant routine ourselves, using the first three minutes of dinner to deliver lectures on gratitude after fielding complaints about what was being served. These rants were award winning and often included stories of our own childhoods ("in my day . . ."), famine in South Sudan, the war in Syria, and children living in poverty down the street. Our

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children—in turn—had gotten into a routine of their own: glazed stare, exaggerated sigh, and an eye roll to await the passing of the evening harangue. This exchange wasn't what eventually bothered me, though; I'm perfectly happy giving talking points to my children about things of importance (isn't that called *parenting*?). What bothered me, in the end, was that these were the *only* conversations we were having about gratitude. And I wasn't certain that these moments were going to turn my children into the kind, generous people I was hoping. And I don't think an afternoon in a soup kitchen will fix it.

I asked families why that quintessential soup kitchen experience was important to them, and parents told me that they wanted ways for the whole family to do service for others in need, to make it a bigger part of their family life. One mother told me she was tired of merely dropping her children off at activities and wanted more opportunities to *share* experiences as a family. Another parent confessed that the suffering of others goes unnoticed by his children, and this bothered him—a lot. And most of all, parents told me that they were trying to raise children who were good kids, who cared about others, who were generous and grateful, and who were appreciative of the blessings in their lives. It just wasn't happening despite the best intentions. And they needed help.

As it turns out, these parents' instincts are right: they *do* need help. Between the time of these playground conversations and the writing of this book, I stumbled upon a collection of data that painted a grim picture of the children we think we're raising. Harvard's Making Caring Common Project published a report, "The Children We Mean to Raise," which exposes a trend toward children's prioritizing values of achievement and success over values of caring and kindness; high achievement is their priority, and more than 80 percent think it's ours too. In a survey of ten thousand students, three to one agreed that parents would be more proud if they got good grades than if they cared for people in the community. Children and youth are choosing their own achievement over caring for others, and they think that's what we want for them, too. Despite *almost all* parents intending to prioritize caring and kindness, this is what our children are hearing.¹

1. "The Children We Mean to Raise," The Making Caring Common Project of Harvard Graduate School of Education, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/mcc-research-report.pdf> (accessed October 4, 2017).

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This is a problem. Not only does it mean that most children are being raised to think that their personal fulfillment and achievement trumps caring for others, it means that we—as parents—are partly to blame for our children’s missing the message that we *think* we’re sending. This failure to communicate doesn’t just mean we’re not as effective as we think we are; it actually puts our children at risk for many forms of harmful behavior, including being cruel, disrespectful, and dishonest.

The best intentions don’t always lead to the best outcome. As a family therapist, I find “communication problems” often top the list of concerns between parents and their children. Parents make assumptions that their intended messages are those that are delivered, unaware of the gross miscommunication that’s happening, or how to rectify it.

This failure to communicate about values is bad news for everyone, the church included. Children are at increased risk, parents are missing the mark, the church’s ability to offer moral development is seriously questionable, and our society at large is faced with children and youth who are not on track to becoming fair, just, and caring adults.

We shouldn’t be surprised. If we fill our children’s schedules with activities and classes aimed to make them happy and high achievers, then maybe they *are* actually getting the message we’re sending. And maybe the problem is that our hopes are unrealistic that our children would put a high value on something we don’t appear to value ourselves.

Challenges for Children’s Ministry

Maybe as a holdover from times past, our children’s program was still trying to *deliver* content to children. Our job was to keep children busy and entertained until they were old enough to go to church, or to stay home and watch themselves, and whatever curriculum we were using was not important or compelling to parents. The problem with this model is that we treat Sunday school like school, or merely a time for adults to teach children something they don’t know. This model might work educationally speaking, but not pastorally. Assuming that children come to receive information misses an opportunity to minister to them in a real way, and neglects to help them be the ministers that they are, with a real capacity to relieve suffering. Sunday school should not be *just* about learning, but about being disciples of Christ, to love

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and serve others. And we should empower and encourage children to do this work by first believing that they can.

Unfortunately, the challenges of creating a thriving children's ministry are multi-faceted. It's not simply a lack of enthusiasm and an absence of families. Even if the children are here, there are other obstacles to a successful children's ministry; finding volunteers can be a huge task. For some reason people *really* don't want to teach Sunday school. If coerced, some might help, but rarely does someone willingly and eagerly volunteer. Even our best teachers didn't answer the general call for volunteers—*they* had to be persuaded, too.

Based on conversations—with current teachers and those who elected to participate in other ways, there were reasons why no one wanted to teach Sunday school. At Saint Barnabas, our schedule of Sunday morning services can be a drawback to finding committed teachers. We have an eight o'clock service with no music that mostly serves people without children; it's a more traditional service, and at Saint Barnabas this is more appealing to an older crowd. Our ten o'clock service with music tends to attract families. Children are dropped off by an adult at 9:45 (usually their parents, but grandparents are becoming increasingly influential in their grandchildren's faith formation) and remain in the classrooms for the first half of the worship service, joining the adults at the Peace and announcements around 10:45 when the whole congregation participates in the Eucharist. Asking a congregant to volunteer in the classrooms necessarily means you are asking them not to go to a portion of their regular church ritual. This schedule makes the calculus to volunteer much different from volunteering for other ministries.

This regular commitment aside, most people think a Sunday school teacher should be a highly qualified, skilled education specialist and a biblical scholar of sorts. In our church hardly anyone fits that description, which might explain the lack of interest; who would volunteer for something they felt grossly unqualified for? It was a problem if the loving, kind, and generous people of our congregation felt like they weren't qualified to be Sunday school teachers.

I was hoping to find a children's curriculum that even the unlikeliest people might love to teach: one that fit our budget, appealed to children, *and* made it easier for parents to add to their busy schedules. The curriculum I imagined would look to young adulthood, anticipating

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what lies ahead for children as they grow, and it would help develop a solid foundation for when their belief in God gets more confusing, complicated, and challenging. Anyone who has passed through adolescence knows it can be rough at times; the more positive supports, the better. This practice of anticipating needs of children and families is crucial and something the church should be in the habit of doing. The church needs children, but we need them as young adults, too, not only as a safeguard against the church's decline, but because church is something for a lifetime: from baptism to burial. If we ignore anything in between, we're likely missing something.

Saint Barnabas needed to learn how to be *more church*, figuring out how to tend to the in-between: children, their families, and the challenges they face today and in the future. Figuring this out is worth it, because children offer an energy and enthusiasm to church that cannot be found in any other age group. If you want what children can bring, you actually need children.

I searched high and low for the place where the needs and gifts of children, families, and the church intersected. It seemed logical to find that *exact* space where everyone complemented the other, and then build a program to tend to it. This was not to save the church, or even parents. It was because children need something from us: to belong and be included, to be accepted and be loved. What the church should be offering children is exactly that: a safe place where they are loved, even if they don't always feel lovable; where they feel included, even if they're not sure why; where they belong, no matter what; and where they are given purpose and where their presence matters, even at a young age. All of this is necessary in a community that not only includes but *celebrates* every generation and stage of life. School and home are not always the haven that children desperately need. Church can—and should—be that place by tending to their struggles as children in authentic and loving ways through a commitment to one another in our faith community, to God, and to the greater community.