

The Revitalization of a Children's Ministry: A Collaborative Effort

By Jennifer Wagner

In April 2021, I was approached by the pastor at Harmony Christian Church about an opportunity to run their children's program while they continued the search for a permanent children's pastor. This is a position I have held at two previous churches, so I was familiar with the process and what was needed to complete the assignment. I also knew it was a big task to take on. After much prayer, I decided to accept the temporary position and began the steps to revitalize the program.

I believe it is necessary to assess a situation before jumping in and making changes. To do this, one needs to observe, take part in, and evaluate. This is the approach I took to beginning this job of making the necessary changes to the program in order to build a strong platform in which children will feel safe, have fun, and most of all, learn about the reason we attend church – to build a strong and healthy relationship with the One we serve, Jesus.

My first step as the new Children's Pastor was to meet with the former children's pastor. He had simply moved to a new role at the church, so I had the privilege of speaking with him to gauge the health of the program and get a schedule of how the program was currently ran. After meeting with him, I observed a Sunday. I attended Harmony Kids and saw how he ran the program on a typical Sunday morning. What I noticed was that he was an excellent teacher and that he did a fantastic job leading the lesson and teaching the kids. I also observed, however, that the other volunteer in the room did very little.

I believe a successful children's ministry is built on strong volunteers. Having volunteers simply be "warm bodies" in the room defeats the purpose of having a helper. This was something I hoped to change. I met with several key volunteers. I asked them questions about

how they participated in the lesson, what they did on a Sunday morning, as well as how they prepared for a lesson. I asked them what they would like to see change in the program, and what they thought was already great. I gained valuable information from these volunteers.

My next step was to determine how many more volunteers we needed to run the program. We had several classes: nursery, 2-3 years, pre-k to kindergarten, and elementary. Since safety is a priority for our church, I wanted at least two volunteers in each classroom at all times. We also needed several different teams of volunteers. Volunteers served on a two weeks on, two weeks off rotation. With two services, that made the number of volunteers needed very large.

I determined we needed 12 new volunteers to join the Harmony Kids team in order to create safety and accountability in the classrooms. I created a video for Sunday morning asking for volunteers and explaining why investing in the children of Harmony is so important. I challenged people to come speak with me if they were interested in joining our team. After church, I had set up a table in the lobby, made flyers for potential volunteers, and had a sign up sheet for those interested. I stood by the table after both services that day and recruited 10 people to join our team!

Investing in my volunteers is very important. I want my volunteers to feel valued, prepared, and excited to participate in the Harmony Kids ministry. I planned a training meeting for the volunteers. I invited all the volunteers to the meeting on a Sunday after church. The church provided lunch for them, and we spent an hour discussing the expectations of a volunteer and what they could expect from me, as the Interim Children's Pastor. We also talked about the vision of the Children's Ministry, and why it was important. They brainstormed ideas as to how it is more than simply "babysitting." I had written a volunteer handbook. We discussed the main points of this book, volunteers signed consent forms for background checks, and I

introduced them to the curriculum we would be using. The pastor and I had worked together to create online training modules for each of the classes. Each volunteer was sent home with a folder of handouts, as well as a QR code to scan to access the online training.

After our meeting, I went to work preparing for the launch of our new programs. I determined that rather than launching all the programs at once, we would begin with one level at a time. Leading the Sunday morning program was new to most of my volunteers, and I wanted them to feel comfortable in their new roles.

We began with the elementary classroom. Before launching, I ensured each team member had completed the online training. I then met with them each individually to ask if they had any questions or concerns about the program. I walked them through the classroom and showed them where to find their curriculum and supplies, how to run the computer and sound equipment, and where their groups would meet each week.

On the day of the launch, I was in the classroom the entire time. I led the large group so the volunteers could see how it was to be done. While the children were watching the videos, I quickly met with the volunteers to see if they had any questions. We continued this process throughout the morning. The volunteers each led a small group. I walked around to each group to ensure they had everything they needed and were completing the correct portion of the lesson. As the morning progressed, the volunteers all began to visibly relax. After the children were picked up by their parents, I had a short “stand up” meeting with the volunteers to see how they thought the morning went and if they had any questions, concerns, or suggestions.

The next week, I had a volunteer lead the large group session. I was available throughout the morning to answer questions and ensure things were running smoothly. The volunteers did great and were able to run the program with ease!

I continued this process with the next group of volunteers in the elementary classroom. After these volunteers were comfortable with running the program, I began the pre-k-kindergarten program. This program was a little more difficult to implement. We moved the classroom to a different hallway to make the children's classrooms be in a more central location for parents. We also implemented a brand new curriculum. The curriculum that the previous children's pastor had been using was geared toward this age group, but I did not feel it was age appropriate. Before changing the curriculum, however, I met with the previous children's pastor, as well as a few of the key volunteers in this class. They expressed their concerns to me about the content. These concerns lined up with my evaluation, so I decided it would be best to change the curriculum.

The curriculum we use now is called, "Bible Adventures." This program is so much fun for the kids! They sing, dance, have prop talks, learn simplified Bible memory verses, and learn a Bible story. There is a lot of repetition in this program, so by the end of the month, children have learned a new verse with actions and can tell you the Bible story. It is engaging and fun for the kids!

When implementing this new program, I did it much the same way as the elementary program. For some classes, I led when we started. Volunteers slowly took over more responsibility as they became more comfortable with the program. For some classes, however, the volunteers were so excited about the program they had studied it in depth and felt comfortable and confident enough to begin the program on their own. I gave them the freedom to lead, and they did a fantastic job!

Beginning the 2-3 year old and nursery curriculum took a little longer because we still needed more volunteers. Because we were short several volunteers, I decided to combine some

classes during the early service. These classes had fewer children, so putting them together did not hinder the program or the children's learning. It also allowed us to begin the program at the 11:00 service. Volunteers in this class began leading on the first Sunday with very little help from me. I checked in with each class often to ensure they were going well.

Running a children's program for a church with over 300 people was a big undertaking for me! My previous church had 125 people, so I had to re-evaluate my thinking and what was needed, what needed changed, and how to adapt the program to meet the needs of more children and more service times. Making the program volunteer-led allowed the new children's pastor to enter into a fluid, fully-staffed program. She was able to adjust to her new position, and focus on getting to know the volunteers, kids, and their families. I believe the program is a success not only because I invested in it, but because of the collaboration with the pastor and current volunteers. Working as a team allowed their voices to be heard, which gave them ownership of their classes. We have such a fantastic group of volunteers at Harmony, and it was an honor working with each of them!