



Let the Children Come

An Invitation to Imagine and Experiment with Intergenerational Worship & Prayer

A Request for Proposals: Part 1 (discernment) and Part 2 (grant)

OVERVIEW

What do you dream for the children in your congregation in their life with God?

How might you design worship and prayer practices to help them become the disciples you imagine?

The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina invites 24 congregations to participate in a discernment and grant process to imagine and experiment with intergenerational worship and prayer that honors the dignity of children; the ways children experience God; and the gifts children offer to the entire worshipping community.

A trained guide will work with each congregation, inviting a three-person team of leaders to explore their church's hopes, worship practices and goals for forming children as disciples. Your guide will then support the leadership team as they listen carefully to children and their caregivers and, in response, wonder about how worship and prayer might be more intentionally designed for all bodies to fully contribute. Each congregation will receive a total of 10 hours of guided support.

After beginning the guided discernment process, participating congregations will have access to grants of up to \$7,500 each to experiment with intergenerational worship practices that

help them meet their formational goals. The discernment process will conclude with supported reflection and imagining next steps.

This discernment and grant process is made possible by a \$1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

If this sparks your imagination, you are strongly encouraged to:

- **Read this document in its entirety.** We know it is long! But it provides an overview, details of the time commitment and resources for further learning.
- **Attend a Zoom orientation session** on Tuesday, February 17, 2026, at 10 a.m. (*please see the timeline on p. 5*). If that date has passed, please view the recording on the [Let the Children Come webpage](#).

PURPOSE

Each participating congregation will work with a trained guide to:

- Connect formation programs and worship in a holistic, disciple-making strategy;
- Develop practices for listening to children and their caregivers;
- Discern specific, measurable goals for children’s formation;
- Experiment with intergenerational worship design and practices; and
- Reflect on what they are learning and imagine future possibilities.

WHY

In the Gospel of Mark, disciples speak sternly to children (and their caregivers) who are trying to get close enough to Jesus that he might touch them. Jesus is *indignant*:

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs,” Jesus tells his disciples (Mark 10:14 NRSV).

- Children in our diocese receive clear messages when they come to worship, they told us in interviews: Sit still. Be quiet. Don’t be wild. Sit down. Be calm.

How might that stop children from coming to Jesus?

- Some children in our diocese do not worship regularly at all. Instead, they spend much of Sunday morning in age-specific classrooms.

How might that stop children from coming to Jesus?

You are invited to dream of a more integrated formation strategy, one that brings together worship that intentionally welcomes all bodies, as well as age-specific programs to help disciples know God and not only know *about* God.

Such a strategy will have clear goals, practices for listening to children and their families, connections between worship and programs, and experiments with intergenerational worship that encourage children not only to be present but participate as members of the Body of Christ today (not the church of the future).

This invitation is grounded in the belief that worship and its sacramental practices are central to our formation as disciples -- a full-bodied experience with sights, sounds, touches and movements that help us to intimately encounter Jesus and imagine God's kingdom.

Our Episcopal liturgy grafts us into God's sweeping story of liberation. We meet Jesus at the altar and God's beloveds in the pews, and pray and learn as part of a community that is sent together out into the world to spread love, justice and peace. In worship, we live as the new family we become in Baptism, in which we are all responsible for one another's life in Christ.

Intergenerational worship in particular gives us a glimpse of the world that God dreams for us, a world in which each of us is welcome as we are, participates fully, and contributes gifts for the good of the whole community.

Learning alongside peers is essential too. In classrooms, parish halls and living rooms, we have space to deepen relationships, ask questions, develop personal prayer, support one another's vocations, serve, and study Scripture and our faith's traditions.

Together, these experiences build a rich tapestry of relationships, practices and stories that prepare all ages to fulfill our baptismal vocations. The language and practices of our Episcopal liturgical traditions help us -- heart, body and soul -- to experience God in worship and in our daily lives.

As you imagine these new possibilities, the diocese will walk alongside as you use the fullness of your wisdom, gifts and traditions to help your congregation grow in discipleship -- knowing, loving and following Jesus with joy and working, in community and with God's help, to build the Kingdom of God.

A COMMUNITY OF CONGREGATIONS

"The diocese" is a community of more than 100 congregations and worshipping groups in central North Carolina; it isn't the bishops' office and staff or even the governing bodies. Our bishops and other leaders are determined to focus resources, including staffing, on the work of local congregations and on supporting "churches helping churches" in convocational and other partnerships.

Over the next four years, the Lilly Endowment project described in this Request for Proposals will help our diocese continue to reconceive the way it supports congregations around children's and congregational formation. Rather than primarily offering diocesan-wide programming, we will come alongside congregations to:

- Spark congregational imagination around intergenerational worship and its connection to holistic Christian formation;
- Help to forge and support connections among congregations; and
- Equip and empower congregational leaders -- clergy, staff, caregivers and children -- with skills to:
 - Help children and adults express their faith through worship and prayer
 - Design and lead inclusive and sensory-rich worship rooted in Episcopal liturgical sources and grounded in local practices and traditions.

In addition to the discernment and grant process described in this RFP, we will do this through webinars, regional gatherings of formation leaders, and an annual overnight retreat for formation leaders who serve young people and their families.

ELIGIBILITY

All churches within the Diocese of North Carolina are eligible to apply. The focus of the discernment and grant process will be on intergenerational worship and prayer and honoring the dignity, gifts and needs of children, ages 0-12.

In spring 2028, the diocese will invite an additional 27 churches to participate in this discernment and grant process.

EXPECTATIONS

During this process, your congregation will imagine and experiment with intergenerational worship. The diocese will provide participating congregations: 10 hours with a trained guide, a detailed discernment process, support from diocesan staff, and a grant of up to \$7,500. Congregations, in turn, agree to:

- Participate fully in the process from start to finish, which will take about 9 months. In the first two months, you will engage in a detailed discernment process and then apply for a grant to experiment in intergenerational worship. **Please note: The three-member leadership team will have about 20 hours of work, including meeting with their trained guide, during this initial two-month discernment period.** The remaining 7 months will be spent implementing, reflecting on and refining your project.
- Appoint a three-person project leadership team that will, at each congregation's discretion, provide updates to the vestry and rector. This three-person team is expected to attend discernment sessions and complete homework together.
- Send at least one person to the overnight children's, youth and family formation leader retreat October 2-3, 2026.
- Complete a final report by February 1, 2027. You will both share this report with your vestry and submit it to the diocese.

- Gather online with other participating churches in spring 2027 to celebrate, share and learn from one another.

TIMELINE

- Applications available: Monday, February 2, 2026
- Zoom Q&A session (**strongly encouraged**): Tuesday, February 17, 2026, at 10 a.m. (Join here: <https://tinyurl.com/3hy4k2x6>)
- Applications (part 1) due: Monday, April 20, 2026, at 5 p.m.
- Participating congregations selected: Friday, May 8, 2026
- Zoom orientation (at least one project leader from each congregation must attend): Friday, May 15, 2026, at 10 a.m.
- Discernment process begins: Friday, May 15, 2026
- Applications (part 2) due: Friday, July 17, 2026, at 5 p.m.
- Grant funding distributed: Friday, August 7, 2026
- Overnight retreat for children's, youth and family formation leaders: October 2-3, 2026
- Final reports due: Monday, February 1, 2027, at 5 p.m.
- Zoom celebration for participating churches: Tuesday, February 2, 2027, at 2 p.m.

RESOURCES

As you prayerfully consider whether your congregation is called to participate in this discernment process, you may find it helpful to learn more about intergenerational ministry and worship. The first four suggestions offer quick overviews; the final four suggestions will help you explore more deeply.

1. [What do we mean by intergenerational ministry?](#)
2. [Being an intergenerational church](#)
3. [What is intergenerational ministry?](#)
4. [What We've Learned About Worship with Kids](#)
5. [Building Faith's Intergenerational Worship & Ministry Resources](#)
6. *All Ages Becoming*, edited by Valerie M. Grissom
7. *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, by Holly Catterton Allen, Christine Lawton, and Cory L. Seibel
8. *A Gospel for All Ages*, by David M. Csinos

Part 1 application: Discernment process

OVERVIEW

[Please submit your Part 1 application online](#) by **Monday, April 20, 2026, at 5 p.m.** Only congregations that participate in the discernment process in Part 1 will have access to grant funding in Part 2.

Selection will be based on whether your congregation:

- Demonstrates a commitment to strengthening ministry with children, ages 0-12;
- Is open to experimenting with intergenerational worship and prayer in which all ages are not only present but participating co-creating;
- Shows curiosity about learning from children and their families, with questions you're pondering about how children grow closer to God and become disciples;
- Has a team of leaders available and prepared to engage in the intensive work of discerning God's call and imagining something new (**about 20 hours of work during Part 1**); and
- Has existing relationships with children and families, in your congregation or your community.

*Please note: **DO NOT begin work on Part 2 of the application at this time.** Right now, you are only applying to participate in a two-month discernment process, with a trained guide, about ministry with children and intergenerational worship. One fruit of that two-month process will be an idea for a grant project. At that point, you will apply for a Part 2 grant. For now, hold lightly any ideas you have for how to spend the grant money. Allow the Spirit to work and the discernment process to unfold.*

QUESTIONS

To prepare to fill out the online application, please review the following questions, gather needed information and develop answers to the open-ended prompts. When you're ready with all of the information (you will not be able to save an incomplete application and return to it later), you will insert all of your answers into the online form. You will also upload two letters of support: one from your vestry and one from your rector.

1. Name of church or mission
2. Applicant's name
3. Applicant's role at church or mission
4. Applicant's phone number
5. Applicant's email address
6. Applicant's age group (multiple choice by decade)
7. Each applicant is **required** to identify two additional people who will also serve on the project leadership team and **commit to attending all of the meetings**. We recommend that each of the three people offers a different perspective. Options might include a children's minister, a leader who makes liturgical decisions, a vestry member, a child, a youth or a caregiver of children. You will have an opportunity to

involve other leaders during the process (in interviews and consultations), but this three-person team will provide leadership during the initial discernment process. **You are strongly discouraged from building a team that only includes staff.**

- a. Team member 1's name
 - b. Team member 1's role at church or mission
 - c. Team member 1's phone number
 - d. Team member 1's email address
 - e. Team member 1's age group (multiple choice by decade)
 - f. Team member 2's name
 - g. Team member 2's role at church or mission
 - h. Team member 2's phone number
 - i. Team member 2's email address
 - j. Team member 2's age group (multiple choice by decade)
8. At least one team member must attend a Zoom orientation session on Friday, May 15, 2026, at 10 a.m. Can you please confirm at least one person is available?
 9. Describe your current ministry with children. Please include weekly and seasonal activities, how many children participate and whether children are mostly with their peers. What are the strengths of what you're doing? What do you hope to do in the future, and why? (250 words or less)
 10. Describe your current intergenerational ministry practices. What do you do to bring all generations together? What are the strengths of this approach? What do you hope to do in the future, and why? (250 words or less)
 11. How does worship help us become disciples? (150 words or less)
 12. What questions would you like to ask children in your congregation about their relationship with God? (a list of 3 to 5 questions, 150 words or less)
 13. Why are you applying to participate in this discernment and grant process? (250 words or less)
 14. Please upload a letter of support from your vestry.
 15. Please upload a letter of support from your rector.

Part 2 application: Grant

OVERVIEW

*Please note: **DO NOT** begin Part 2 of the application until after you have completed the first four sessions of the discernment process with your trained guide.*

The grant funding will enable your congregation to design new liturgical and prayer practices that center children and their particular experiences of God as well as form worshippers of all ages to understand the “whys” of our Episcopal liturgy.

Your trained guide will accompany you as you discern how God might be calling you to experiment with intentionally intergenerational corporate worship and prayer to include children as full participants in the body of Christ. You may apply for up to \$7,500 to support your experiment.

Eligible expenses might include:

- Developing curriculum and resources;
- Designing liturgies;
- Providing training for children, families and other leaders;
- Buying or making materials to help children and their families understand what is happening in worship;
- Enhancing liturgical arts (visual, musical, dance, drama) as a means for engaging all bodies;
- Making adjustments to your worship space to honor the ways children encounter God; and
- Hosting intentionally intergenerational worship or prayer activities (dinner church, prayer stations, retreats).

You may not spend grant money to fund what you are already doing. That includes current Sunday school programming and staff salaries.

Selection will be based on whether your congregation:

- Demonstrates support for the inclusion and spiritual growth of children in worship and prayer practices;
- Engaged in practices to learn from children during the Part 1 discernment process;
- Has an imagination to conduct an intergenerational experiment that is aligned with formation goals developed in Part 1;
- Demonstrates the capacity to implement the experiment;
- Develops a budget with expenses aligned with the purpose and spirit of the grant; and
- Has a willingness to share what you are learning and resources you have developed with other churches in the Diocese of North Carolina for our common good.

This portion of the application will be completed following Session 4 of the discernment process. Your trained guide will help you prepare for this step. [Please submit your Part 2 application online](#) by **Friday, July 17, 2026**.

As in Part 1, you will answer questions in an online form. Make sure you have everything you need before you begin the application. You will also upload a budget; a Diocese of North Carolina direct deposit form; and a letter of support from your vestry.

QUESTIONS

To prepare to fill out the application, please review the following questions, gather needed information and develop answers to the open-ended questions. When you're ready, you will insert all of your answers into the online application.

1. Name of church or mission
2. Please share key demographic data about your congregation, including average Sunday attendance, number of adult and youth communicants in good standing, approximate average age, and the percentage of your congregation that is white, Caucasian or of European descent.
3. Applicant's name
4. Applicant's role at church or mission
5. Applicant's phone number
6. Applicant's email address
7. Applicant's age group (multiple choice by decade)
8. Name of project
9. How much funding are you seeking?
10. What did you learn from listening to children and families in Part 1? Please provide details about how many people you learned from, their ages, the context for receiving feedback (a survey, interviews, etc.) and their key insights, including quotes. (250 words or less)
11. In 500 words or less, describe your project. Please include:
 - i. Goals
 - ii. Key activities
 - iii. Desired impact & connection to overall children's ministry goals
 - iv. Key leaders and their roles
 - v. Timeline
 - vi. Description of how each major expense supports the goal of this initiative to engage children as full participants in corporate worship and prayer
12. Please upload a budget. You may use this [template](#) or a format that aligns with your congregation's budgeting process.
13. Please upload a completed [direct deposit form](#).
14. Please upload a letter of support from your vestry.

Final report

OVERVIEW

All participating congregations will submit a final report six months following receipt of their grant. The purpose of this report will be to describe the congregation's learnings during the

discernment and experimentation process; provide stories and data that demonstrate the impact of the work; share how the grant was spent; and describe plans for future intergenerational worship and ministry.

Please note that you are also expected to share this final report with your vestry and rector.

All final reports are due online by **Monday, February 1, 2027, at 5 p.m.**

QUESTIONS

This list of questions will prepare you to fill out the online final report. Please prepare answers and assemble needed documents and photos before beginning the online form.

1. Name of church or mission
2. Name of leader submitting final report
3. What is your role at your church or mission?
4. What is your phone number?
5. What is your email address?
6. What is your age group? (multiple choice by decade)
7. Name of project
8. Describe the experience of implementing your project. What did you do? What did you learn? (200 words or less)
9. What impact did your project have on children, families and others in your context? Include a story that illustrates the impact. (200 words or less)
10. Reflecting on this process from the beginning, what have you learned about children? About God? About your congregation? (200 words or less)
11. What have you learned about intergenerational ministry? What have you learned about the relationship between worship and formation? (200 words or less)
12. What is God calling you to do next to support children as disciples who are full members of the body of Christ? (200 words or less)
13. Please upload the goals you developed for children's and family ministry.
14. Please upload your final budget, illustrating how you spent your grant.
15. Please upload any supporting materials. This could be photos from worship, resources you developed, etc. If you share photos, please note whether you have permission for the diocese to use them and share caption information.
16. Have you presented your final report to the vestry and rector? What did you learn in that process? (150 words or less)

Need assistance?

Please do not hesitate to reach out to The Rev. Kelly Ryan, missionary for discipleship, at kelly.ryan@episdionc.org if you would like support in your discernment or need clarification about this process.

This project is made possible by a \$1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. in the [Nurturing Children Through Worship and Prayer Initiative](#). Grantees in this initiative, including the Diocese of North Carolina, are supported by a team at Indiana Wesleyan University. To learn more about the initiative, including other grantees, please visit the [Strengthening Ministry With Children Coordination Program](#).