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From Busy Bags to Building Bridges: An Investigation in How the Intentional Engagement of Children in Worship Can Assist Cultural Inclusivity

Billie Jo Wicks

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FROM BUSY BAGS TO BUILDING BRIDGES:
AN INVESTIGATION IN HOW THE INTENTIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN IN
WORSHIP CAN ASSIST CULTURAL INCLUSIVITY

by

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AFC	Anyuak Faith Community
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
OSLC	Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Austin, Minnesota

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Introduction

“But why don’t we ever see them here?” “Why won’t they come to worship?” These are questions that I have heard asked time and time again at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Austin, Minnesota. The “them” in question are the brothers and sisters of OSLC’s sub-community, the Anyuak Faith Community, and the ones posing the questions are members of OSLC. They are referring to the lack of presence by the AFC members on Sunday mornings.

On any given Sunday afternoon I can walk through the Great Hall, a large gym-like, multi-purpose room, dodging basketballs and be greeted by “Hi, Billie Jo,” high-fives, hugs, and even one young man who takes my hand in his to give it a kiss as he bows his head. These are the children of the Anyuak Faith Community. They are passing time while their parents take part in a two or three-hour-long worship service. Every time I enter this space with these people, they all but roll out the red carpet for me and make me feel like a celebrity.

I know and love the people in each of these worshipping communities. I see the value they both have as parts of the larger Christian community. I imagine what each sub-community could offer the other if we could just find better ways to do life together. And then I wonder: Are there things that OSLC is doing that might serve as bridges to join these communities together?

Busy Bags as Bridges?

Like many congregations, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church has worked to create spaces and services that not only welcome, but also honor the personhood of our youngest worshipers so they can have meaningful, engaging worship experiences. This is often based on practices and principles of early childhood learning facilities which allow for active learning and participation, rather than passive observation. Developmentally appropriate busy bags and

worship tool kits have been created. A Playground area has been added to the sanctuary space. It features materials that are rotated out based on the liturgical season and sensory tables that give young worshipers opportunities to worship with their hands. Families can often be found serving together on ushering teams, reading liturgy, and more.

As mentioned previously, OSLC is a Christian community that includes a church within a church. In addition to the traditional, mostly Caucasian, English speaking congregation, OSLC is also host to an African immigrant, Anyuak-speaking Christian community. As OSLC strives to find ways in which the two bodies can become more unified, continuous evaluation is needed of what is being done well and what might be done differently in order to better do life and ministry together.

This leads me to my research question. In what ways might the child-engagement worship practices of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Austin, Minnesota serve as bridges to the African immigrant Anyuak Faith Community?

Descriptive-Empirical Task: What is Going on?

Austin: A Changing Community

To begin, a glance at the community of Austin and its demographical make-up is helpful. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Fact Finder website,¹ the population for the city of Austin at the time of the 2010 census was 24,718. The median age was 37, with 28% of the community being under the age of 20. Another 17.8% were 65 and older. Some 86.8% of the community was Caucasian, while 15.4% of the community was Hispanic and 3.7% were African American/Black. Nearly half of the households had children present (47.5%).

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. "Community Facts: Your Geography Selections," created October 05, 2010. <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed February 26, 2018).

The graph below shows the demographics of the students that make up the Austin Public Schools in comparison to the state.² The graphs shows that the schools in Austin are much more diverse than the state average. The percentage of white students is significantly less, while the numbers for Hispanic and black students are higher. While this level of diversity is common in more metropolitan areas, it is not the norm in more rural contexts like Austin.

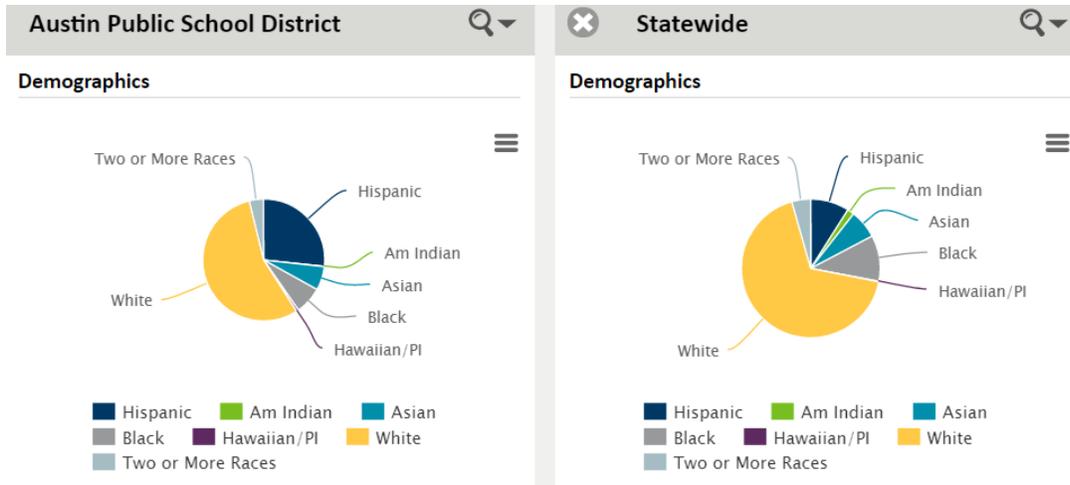


Figure 1

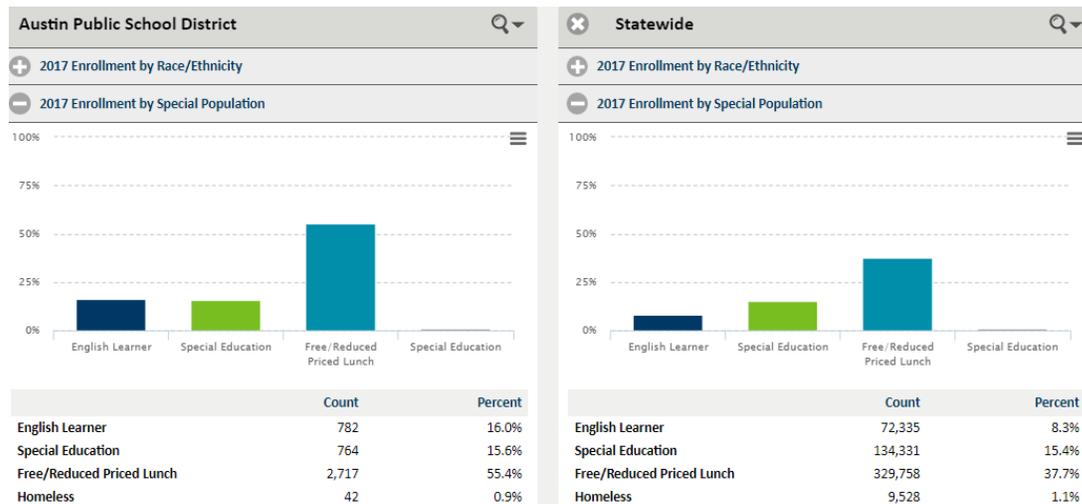


Figure 2

² MDE Data Center, "Minnesota Report Card," <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/index.html> (accessed February 26, 2018).

The second set of graphs is another comparison of the Austin Public Schools and the state of Minnesota.³ This one focuses on the special populations of the school systems, including English learners, special education, free/reduced lunch, and homelessness. While the special education population is comparable between the two, the number of English learners is nearly double and the free/reduced lunch population is 17.7% higher in Austin than the state norms.

What does this demographic information mean for the community of Austin, Minnesota? I think it is important to look at the community census information alongside of the public school enrollments to get a sense of how this community is in the process of changing and evolving. The comparison between the 2010 census numbers and the 2017 school enrollments help us see a shift taking place over those seven years, but there is also a discrepancy between generations living in the Austin community. In the census demographics, we see all generations contributing to the demographical statistics. I suspect that the overall diversity in numbers appears lower because the community's 36% of people who are age 50 and up are primarily white. As the 50 plus, mainly white community members age, the school demographical information shows us that the school-age population is becoming more and more diverse.

The Anyuak Faith Community and how it came to be

One of the growing diverse populations in Austin is a group of African immigrants from Sudan and Ethiopia. In response to this, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) reached out to Our Savior's between 2005-2006 and asked OSLC to serve as a host site for an Anyuak-speaking worshipping community with the hopes that the two separate communities would, in time, merge as one Christian community. The Anyuak Faith Community was established between 2006-2007 and began holding regular worship services at OSLC. The ELCA

³ Ibid.

and OSLC worked together to lead the community while also raising up leaders from within the AFC. In the last year, both the OSLC and AFC communities have been shocked with sudden and unexpected changes on two occasions. As OSLC and the AFC are at a leadership crossroads, leaders from both communities are looking for connecting points and bridges.

Wee Worshippers at OSLC

Entering into the worship space of OSLC, one can tell this is a place that has spent some time thinking about child-engagement in worship settings. Directly outside of the sanctuary, a cabinet full of age-appropriate materials are labeled by ages and ready for grab-and-go worship engagement. Near the baptismal font, a Playground space invites children to participate in worship in unique ways. Activity sheets, manipulatives, puzzles, children's Bibles, and even fidget spinners are readily available. Another child-friendly setting directly outside of the sanctuary provides families yet one-more option for a child-friendly worship opportunity and includes Bibles, blocks, activity sheets, and manipulatives based on the season. Sensory tables are available both in the Playground area and the space directly outside of the sanctuary. These sensory tables, and many other materials are swapped out regularly. Items are intentionally selected and often created to help make aspects of the liturgical season, Gospel reading, or worship theme available to children in concrete, hands-on ways.

One reason OSLC has allocated resources in this direction is because some OSLC leaders are aware of what Joyce Mercer writes about in her book, *Welcoming Children*, "Children can bring a sense of life and energy to congregations. That children contribute importantly to congregational vitality is not under dispute here. The issue is whether congregations are as concerned about caring for children and forming them in faith as they are about having

children's presence to enhance congregational vitality.”⁴ OSLC has a sense that having children present is not enough, but that as a congregation, OSLC must care for them and provide ways for them to have meaningful experiences. Mercer goes on to write that when this doesn't happen, we run the risk of worshipping the presence of children and possibly putting the needs and interests of adults ahead of the children; “children's exclusion from the liturgy reflects the adult argument that children's noise and restlessness impede adult abilities to hear and full participate in worship.”⁵ By moving beyond measures to pacify and hush children, OSLC is taking steps to be more inclusive of children and honor their personhood and ability to have meaningful worship experiences while striving to meet the needs of young worshipers. Mina Munns writes in her book *We All Share: Introducing Holy Communion to Under 5s through Play, Exploration and Creativity* that we should value children as much as adults because God does. “When Jesus rebuked the disciples . . . he was not joking. Jesus was making a point about the value of those we might sometimes see as lesser considerations: the poor, the weak, the children. Those who we, perhaps, overlook in our understanding of what is most important when we come to worship have as much value in the eyes of God as any adult worshipper.”⁶

Learning from Schools

Diversity is on the rise. However, not all aspects of the community are embracing it and churches in Austin tend to be very homogenous in their make-up. This led me to wonder, where is inclusivity and diversity happening at its best? In the city of Austin, the public schools are a

⁴ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 214.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶ Mina Munns, *We All Share: Introducing Holy Communion to under 5s through Play, Exploration and Creativity* (Great Britain: Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2018), 13.

clear front runner. Chair of the Austin Human Rights Commission Jason Baskin stated in an interview, “Schools are by far doing the best [at adapting to the changing demographics].”⁷

Austin Aspires Executive Director, Jennifer Lawhead, also spoke in regards to the schools’ success in this area and feels the youth are the ones leading the way at adapting to changing demographics, stating, “The youth in Austin love our diversity; they embrace it fully.”⁸

When asked what contributes to the success of the schools, both Baskin and Lawhead pointed to the success coach program. Baskin stated, “The success coaches help navigate things, facilitate communication, and are a relational connection.”⁹ Baskin and Lawhead both noted that the success is in part out of necessity. “Austin Public Schools have moved away from heroes and holidays to value all as people. . . . They have to, based on who is coming to our school. We need to build on the shared communal experiences” said Lawhead.¹⁰ District and National Distinguished Principal Jessica Cabeen, also gave credit to building relationships.¹¹

Churches are not doing as well at embracing diversity, though Lawhead notes many are taking small steps in the right direction. Cabeen said churches are starting to build bridges, and Baskin commented that there is potential there to be a powerful force. Finding ways to make personal impacts, build trust, create welcoming atmospheres, and building an “all in this together”¹² mentality were some of things mentioned that churches learn from schools and improve upon. Baskin mentioned that having others who speak their language and look like them

⁷ Jason Baskin, interview by Billie Jo Wicks, Chair of the Austin Humans Right Commission (April 10, 2018).

⁸ Jennifer Lawhead, interview by Billie Jo Wicks, Executive Director of Austin Aspires (April 13, 2018).

⁹ Baskin, interview.

¹⁰ Lawhead, interview.

¹¹ Jessica Cabeen, interview by Billie Jo Wicks, National Distinguished Principal and Woodson Kindergarten Principal (April 16, 2018).

¹² Lawhead, interview.

goes a long way in helping someone feel like an organization is inclusive.¹³ Cabeen said churches can benefit from listening more and learning people's stories.¹⁴

Interpretive Task: Why is this going on?

More Alike than Different

When asked what people might be surprised to learn they have in common with one another considering the diversity represented in Austin, Baskin, Cabeen, and Lawhead agree that love of children is a universal truth. Baskin says again and again it comes down to two common denominators, food and children, stating "Regardless of culture, everyone wants to create a better life for their children."¹⁵ Lawhead lists love for children, personal wholeness, and longing for connections as three things people have in common, but ranked children the highest, "We all love our babies and want to do our best raising them. We all want the best outcome for our children and have positive intent. We all want our babies to thrive."¹⁶ University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Director of Teacher Education, Dr. Kara Coffino agrees that children are a central value across cultures. "At the core we share the same hopes and dreams for our children regardless of race, class or ethnicity."¹⁷ Cabeen echoes the others saying, "everyone wants the best for their babies."¹⁸ It doesn't seem to matter what job someone has, what kind of home they live in, or what kind of parenting style they use, parents are doing the

¹³ Baskin, interview.

¹⁴ Cabeen, interview.

¹⁵ Baskin, interview.

¹⁶ Lawhead, interview.

¹⁷ Coffino, Dr. Kara, interview by Billie Jo Wicks. *University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Director of Teacher Education* (April 16, 2018).

¹⁸ Cabeen, interview.

best they can based on their experiences and knowledge to do what they know to be best for their children.

History of Childhood

Since children seem to be a universal truth and are valued across the cultures represented in the community of Austin, it seems worthwhile to look a little deeper into the history of how children came to be valued. The book, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* by O.M. Bakke, looks back into the ancient world and takes a deep look at when and how children first emerged as people. Baake studied how children were valued by society in the ancient world pre-Christianity as well as how those views and values shifted in light of Christianity. In this book, Bakke makes the claim that while some aspects of attitudes towards children were not that different in comparison to general Greco-Roman environment, there were big shifts in the value placed upon children's lives: "They were marginal actors in the life of Christian fellowship-just as in Greco-Roman society in general. Nevertheless, it seems that some differences did exist, with fundamental consequences for children's lives."¹⁹ Baake goes on to write about how children born in a Christian home had a greater chance of living and growing up than one in a pagan home. The number of children involved in sexual acts with men or who underwent what we would now call sexual abuse was also reduced in the wake of Christianity.

The book *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family and Community* has a chapter titled "Historical Roots of Ministry with Children" that supports this idea that Christianity was part of a shift in the view and value of children. In this overview of the

¹⁹ O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 284.

early church and the role children would have had in it, we read, “Christians had inherited from Judaism a positive attitude toward their children. Jesus’ interest in children and concern for them could never be totally overlooked by his followers.”²⁰ This reminds us that a positive shift in regards to children began with the example of Jesus and how he viewed, interacted with, and treated children.

In an article titled “Then and Now: Early Christianity’s Radical Reshaping of Childhood,” Jennifer Haddad Mosher summed it up nicely, writing, “what the early Christian community came to believe about childhood in the light of Christ’s life changed the world for children. In ancient pagan Roman society, before the introduction of Christianity, children were not considered to be people with the same worth as adults.”²¹ This reminds us that our current view and value of children has roots that can be traced back two thousand years to the birth of Christianity.

Moving from the Greco-Roman era into the Medieval Church and then Renaissance and Reformation, the view of the child continued shifting. A rise in literacy and invention of the printing press were radical for the direction of Christian education. While Martin Luther is well known for his ninety-five theses, we also know that the faith formation of people, including children, prompted his writings of the large and small catechisms. According to the book *Children Matter*, “His [Luther’s] *Introduction* and *Shorter Catechism*, known as the ‘Jewel of the Reformation,’ were written to provide Christian parents with guidelines and a basic curriculum for teaching their children in their home. Luther placed a high value on the continual

²⁰ May, et al., *Children Matter*, 291.

²¹ Jennifer Haddad Mosher, “Then and Now: Early Christianity’s Radical Reshaping of Childhood,” *Praxis: Sacred Childhood*, 16, no. 3 (Spring 2017).

study of and reflection of the catechism texts.”²² Martin Luther expanded upon his beliefs about the value of children when he said that the reason we exist is to care for children. Jane Strohl’s chapter on this theology of Martin Luther “The Child in Luther’s Theology: For What Purpose Do We Exist Other Than to Care for... the Young” states that, “Luther regarded the work of mother and fathers as a most holy calling and obligation. He also recognized what contemporary society struggles to internalize that it takes more than a family to raise a child. For Luther, the wider community and the civil authorities played critical roles in the vocation of parenting.”²³ OSLC, as a Lutheran congregation, is called even deeper into this value and care for children as a community because of the theology of Martin Luther. Strohl goes on to write, “For Luther, there is no neighbor closer than one’s own children, no claim upon society more pressing than that of the young. Whether or not they have biological children, all adults must exercise the vocation of parenting in one way or another... . When Luther urges his readers to consider the command of God enjoining parents to instruct their children, he is addressing ‘every citizen.’”²⁴

The Early Modern Period (1700-1900) saw a dramatic shift in perspective about educating children. Jean-Jacques Rousseau challenged the idea of children being born a blank-slate, as proposed by John Locke, or sinful, as proposed by others, and future writings and education experiments stemmed from this. The cultural shift of parents working away from home also created a shift in the needs of children. As a result, Sunday School was developed by Robert Raikes in 1780.²⁵

²² May, et al., *Children Matter*, 99.

²³ *Ibid*, 134.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 158-159.

²⁵ May, et al., *Children Matter*, 100-105.

The years 1900 to present, or the Modern Period, have been greatly impacted by the work of Maria Montessori. Montessori believed that children were born-learners and because of this she worked to

Create a learning environment where children could explore and learn under the guidance of teachers who would facilitate the child's self-discovery. The environment was to be carefully prepared with specially designed learning materials accessible to the children. Child-size furnishings and thoughtfully arranged learning centers would help children learn with a "climate of social interactions with others."²⁶

Many of the current practices in schools and also in churches like OSLC have been derived from the methods and practices of Montessori.

Recently, feminist theology has even further shaped Christian perspectives of children. In the book, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, Bonnie J. Miller McLemore writes about the impact that has been made in this area: "feminist theology upholds children as persons created in God's image and therefore deserving of basic human rights accorded all people of any age, color or creed. Second, it celebrates children as a source of spiritual insight."²⁷ Our evolving Christian perception of children now not only has us valuing children, but as mentioned earlier in the section titled "Wee Worshipers," viewing them as valuable in the spiritual formation of the whole church and vital to the health and well-being of the congregation.

It is clear that as a society, we value children. Parents want what is best for their children. When we look at the historical roots of our present-day shared value of children and see how

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood From a Christian Perspective* (San Fransico, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 138.

deeply intertwined with Christianity it is, it makes all the more sense that churches today may be able to find cultural bridges among children and our practices with them.

Normative Task: What Ought to be Going on?

Welcoming the Children

“Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’ And he laid his hands on them and went on his way” (Matthew 19: 13-15).²⁸ These verses remind us that we are called to include children in our ministry and Christian communities because Jesus, who was willing to have the children come to him and teach and reach people regardless of many societal barriers, gave us an example to live by.

The book *Children Matter* makes the case that there is a continued Biblical basis for us to include children, even a need for faith communities to survive:

Children are essential to the life of the church-yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Throughout Scripture we see again and again that the survival of the faith community is dependent on each new generation of children. And it becomes the responsibility of family and community to pass on to their children the story of God’s creating, redeeming, and sustaining grace and power. The mandate to make God known to our children extends to us today.²⁹

²⁸ Bible Gateway, Matthew 19:13-15 NRSV, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew 19:13-15&version=NRSV>.

²⁹ May, et al., *Children Matter*, 88.

Full inclusivity isn't just our duty; there are also rewards and benefits for the entire Christian community. Joyce Mercer writes in *Welcoming Children* that:

One of the most important gifts children bring to a congregation's worship life is the opportunity to act and look like the radically welcoming community of Jesus whether or not a profit can be made, whether or not there is any apparent benefit to the bottom line. A congregation seeking to welcome children (and in doing so, welcome Jesus and the One who sent him) may or may not increase its membership rolls or treasury, but it surely increases its faithfulness.³⁰

Mercer goes on to share more gifts that may be bestowed. Children's physicality can teach adults that worship is a full body experience. Additionally, the participation of children has "the power to evoke the religious affections and imaginations of their parents and other adults."³¹

In the process of welcoming children, we should keep in mind that faith does not mature the same way our physical bodies or even minds do. While digging into ministry relationships in *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Dean and Foster claim

Faith matures by expansion, not progression. Sometimes the older we get, the more likely we are to cloud faith with competence. Western society's definition of mature adulthood can work against mature faith...A little less passion here, a little more social conformity there, a little more listening to the boss, a little less listening to the heart: a formula for docile citizens and domesticated Christians.³²

Thinking of faith maturity in an expansion mindset challenges us to think uniquely and to respect children while revering them as they have faith capabilities that we may have lost. Through this,

³⁰ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 228.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

³² Ron Foster and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2005), 160.

some mature adults who have likely had the faith clouded by competence may have their hearts rekindled.

As a church, we need to honor the personhood of our children by finding ways to better include them in worship. Looking at proven early childhood techniques, we can create spaces, materials, and patterns that allow for children to have meaningful and positive worship experiences that allow them use of their senses and entire bodies.

Welcoming Diversity

In the example of prayer given to us by Jesus, he taught us, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.”³³ What might it mean for God’s kingdom to be done on earth? I can’t help but think one of the glimpses of God’s kingdom that God desires to see carried out on Earth is for us to live and operate as one kingdom. When we are able to worship as a unified body of Christ, not separated by barriers of this world, we are living more closely to God’s will, on earth, like it is in heaven. In the book *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile’s first chapter looks at the changing demographics in America and the implications for Christians communities. In short, when churches are able to embrace diversity, “the Spirit of God is bringing forth a vital and dynamic new moment in the world Christian movement.”³⁴ On the flip side, churches that are resistant and hang tightly to old ways of life and identity are at risk. Churches that are rooted in European Christianity find “their legacy structures and standardized procedures, largely rooted in Christendom, increasingly at odds with the changing and emerging

³³ Bible Gateway, Matthew 6:10 NRSV, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A10&version=NRSV>.

³⁴ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 35.

cultures now present.”³⁵ The challenge to rethink who the church is and what it means to be the church calls churches to reshape their sense of community. The African idea of *ubuntu* is something that may be helpful to churches as they shift their views of community, as “Ubuntu is a personal identity based on togetherness in community, where the self is deeply interdependent with others.”³⁶ Typically this is thought of as “we before me,” but perhaps churches need to make the shift away from “them and us” to simply “all of us.”

Given the changing demographics of its community, OSLC is in a unique position that with some work it can better resemble the people of God more than ever before. In addition to the increasingly diverse community, OSLC is already in partnership with the AFC. That partnership, with some nurturing and intentionality, may be cultivated to grow into a relationship that benefits all of its participants as well as the community beyond. It is important to note that the concept of welcoming diversity into Christian communities is not only good for those who are being welcomed in, but also for the original members of the community. Jessicah Duckworth writes in her book, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* welcoming newcomers is a vital aspect to the church’s identity. “Newcomers call the church to its task of ‘making disciples.’ Making disciples is life-sustaining, life-saving work. . . . Thus, the life of the church depends upon a newcomer’s presence within the body of Christ.”³⁷ When we don’t open ourselves up to the possibilities that can be offered by welcoming newcomers, we risk becoming part of a culture in which, “our congregations have turned in upon themselves, becoming static, protective enclaves.”³⁸ Our Savior’s has the choice to either

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷ Jessicah Duckworth, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 20.

welcome in the community and diversity around them which may very well give them new life as a Christian community or to turn in around themselves and close themselves off.

Pragmatic Task: How Might the Leader Shape the Context to Better Embody Christian Witness and Mission?

Let's get back to our original question at hand: In what ways might the child-engagement worship practices of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Austin, Minnesota serve as bridges to the African immigrant Anyuak Faith Community? In short, is it really possible for something as simple as a busy bag to create a bridge cross-culturally? While this question may have originally seemed simple in nature, the answer is more complex.

How Busy Bags can Build Bridges

Through my research, I have uncovered that children tend to be a universal value across many cultures, especially those present in Austin, Minnesota. It has been established that parents care about their children and want to see them happy and successful. Jennifer Lawhead had this to say about how welcoming children plays into making adults feel welcome across cultures: "All-in-all, anyone who is kind to my baby is my person. By creating a welcoming space for my children, we are a team. That's everything. Be warm and welcoming of babies and the parents will come."³⁹ Jason Baskin agreed that welcoming children can play a huge role in welcoming adults: "Kids are a low-risk way to get involved. It may be tough for me to go somewhere but when you are going for kids, that's a whole different game."⁴⁰

³⁹ Lawhead, interview.

⁴⁰ Baskin, interview.

According to University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Director of Minnesota Center for Reading Research Dr. Lori Helman, another reason child engagement practices can assist in bridging cultures is because trust is built. “Family members are more trusting of members outside of their own community when they see care being shown to the children, and efforts being made to value their strengths.”⁴¹ Through the practice of child engagement, care for the children is shown which builds trust cross-culturally.

By providing worship materials and opportunities to engage children, we are making worship a more welcoming place for children, regardless of their cultural background. When educational practices that have been tried and proven successful can be applied to the worship arena, we are not only providing children with meaningful and concrete ways to find meaning in worship, we are also making worship more accessible because it is likely more familiar when it more closely resembles experiences they have had in school, at home, and in the park.

I do think it is important to note that we do need to be careful that our attempts at the inclusion of children do not lead to an inadvertent exclusion. One example of this is when we lack cultural sensitivity in the selection of materials. Are the images and manipulatives selected representative across cultures? Or do all of the books have images of Caucasian children? Are we being culturally sensitive if food is being depicted or used in any way? For example, the use of rice or beans is common in sensory tables in American preschools, but may be considered very disrespectful and wasteful by some other cultures. Joyce Ann Mercer reflects on a congregation that had front-loaded their worship service with child-friendly practices, but in doing so, the rest of the service had a very “adults only” feel. Mercer claims, “Almost unconsciously the church has strategically structured an environment in which children are

⁴¹ Helman, Dr. Lori, interview by Billie Jo Wicks. *University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Director of Minnesota Center for Reading Research* (April 19, 2018).

effectively excluded from participation.”⁴² When we take time to learn about these things and become more cognizant of diversity, we can be more intentional in crafting and creating experiences that draw on what we have in common, rather than things that could potentially be divisive.

Another reason to use manipulatives and other concrete ways for children to engage in worship is because through these types of experiences, language can be transcended and children can make sense through their participation. Mina Munns writes, “even those children who are not used to the language and rituals of church are able to understand deeply.”⁴³ Additionally, in a manner similar to how children can explore ideas of their daily life through playing “house,” children can likewise do the same in worship. Munns writes, “In church it is easy to imagine that the same might apply to a worship corner. As they observe, play, and explore what they see happening around them in church and other Christian contexts, children have the chance to learn more about elements of worship and to connect with God in incredibly creative ways.”⁴⁴

Adaptive Changes Needed

In a recent meeting between leaders of OSLC and the AFC, along with the synod Bishop and his assistant, I was able to hear from some AFC leaders. At this meeting, it became apparent to all involved that that while we do have a great deal in common; there are also other bigger systematic things that need to be considered before any bridges are going to have significant impacts between these two sub-communities.⁴⁵

⁴² Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 223.

⁴³ Munns, *We All Share*, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁴⁵ *Leaders Meeting for OSLC and AFC*, March 3, 2018.

Some of the bigger obstacles that are preventing these communities from living in harmony are as simple as different tastes in music and general worship styles, and as complex as living on completely different time tables. As most members of OSLC work first shift and have weekends off, a Sunday morning worship service fits well into their schedules. In contrast, many members of the AFC work 2nd or 3rd shift, often including weekends, and are typically sleeping on Sunday mornings. Dr. Kara Coffino commented that while meeting the needs of children can be a first step, there is additional, important work to do. “The needs of the families and parents also need to be addressed. Their stories need to be heard so we can create welcoming space and break down barriers.”⁴⁶

One thing that came through our meeting of leaders was the importance and value in our continuing conversations between key leaders. Building relational connections at the leader level can only have positive impacts on both sub-communities and in turn, the whole Christian community. Developing relationships in this capacity also echoes one of the contributing factors that both Jason Baskin and Jennifer Lawhead identified as contributing to the success of the Austin Public Schools in regards to embracing diversity: the success coach program. “Success coaches [contribute to the school ability to be inclusive because they] help to navigate things, facilitate communication and by being a relational point” says Baskin.⁴⁷ Baskin went on to say that churches could learn this from the schools: “Personal touch: multiple people making personal impacts and building trust.” Jessica Cabeen also says that personal connections and building relationships are important. She goes on to say, “Genuine love doesn’t need a language to let someone know I want to know about you and your culture.”⁴⁸ Dr. Lori Helman also urges

⁴⁶ Coffino, interview.

⁴⁷ Baskin, interview.

⁴⁸ Cabeen, interview.

organizations that desire to become more inclusive to begin by connecting: “Start by building connections with representatives from the communities you want to include. Take what they say to heart and try them out. Ask them to tell you how you are doing. Do fun things together.”⁴⁹

Van Gelder and Zscheile make the case that we are shaped as people based on the story of the culture we are part of, stating “All human life is shaped by cultural narratives. The stories in which we live shape our perspective and experience, even as experience shapes those stories.”⁵⁰ If we are shaped so intensely by the story around us, it is imperative that we strive to find common space where we can take time to recognize we all come with stories and share our stories, listening carefully for what is different and also what we have in common. In doing so, we can expand upon the story we have in common and develop relationship to help bridge between our differences. We must intentionally look for points of intersection and lift up these opportunities whenever possible.

When we have opportunities to live out life together and participate in ministry together, it is then important for leaders to construct ways in which we can reflect about God at work in it. “Leadership is about shaping an environment in which people of God participate in the action-reflection cycle as they gain new capacities to discern what God is doing among and around them” write Mark Branson and Juan Martinez in the book, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*.⁵¹

The big reason that bridges like busy bags cannot lead to significant change on their own is because they are operating solely out of the implemental sphere of leadership, whereas significant transformation takes place when operating in the leadership triad where all three

⁴⁹ Helman, interview.

⁵⁰ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 43.

⁵¹ Mark Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), Kindle location 570.

spheres of leadership overlap as explained by Branson and Martinez.⁵² As stated above, the need to find common intersections, live in them, and reflect on them falls in the interpretive sphere, while relational leadership might come in the form of key leaders connecting with one another, building upon programs like the Austin Public Schools' success coach program. When OSLC and the AFC are able to operate in all three of these spheres, they are more likely to be able to make the bigger adaptive changes needed that will allow them to live into a future together.

Conclusion

Our Savior's Lutheran is a classic example of a church that finds itself looking different than world around it. To more authentically be the church, OSLC needs to find ways to adapt and better embrace the diversity around them, including the sub-community, the Anyuak Faith Community. OSLC is at a crossroads and needs to consider in what ways they might be able to create cultural bridges to better live in community with the AFC. OSLC has strong child-engagement practices in place and I had wondered if this might be a potential bridge opportunity. Through my in-depth research, reading, interviewing, and reflecting I have come to the conclusion that child-engagement practices can play a part in bridging cultures, but they are not sufficient in isolation. We have to look below the surface at deeper structures in order for bigger, adaptive changes to happen. We need to move beyond asking the question of where were "they" on morning to where are *we* on Sunday afternoon? Or even better, where is it that we can all be together? "Your kingdom come, your will be done" never specifies Sunday morning in the sanctuary, so it is time that we think more expansively about the who, when, and where we are called to be God's kingdom on earth.

⁵² Ibid., location 2260.

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