



**First
Presbyterian
Church**
Gainesville, FL

Children & Youth
Ministries
Search Report

APRIL 2024

BACKGROUND

First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Florida was founded in 1867. An architectural highlight of the street where it lives, the evolution of the church's physical property has strategically complimented the growth of its congregation over the course of its 157 year history, and continues to stand out amongst the neighboring buildings today. But it's what's inside the walls of this church that make it truly special. One member of First Presbyterian described their church as "a perfect place to build deep relationships", while others characterized the congregation as "personal," "traditional," and "very musical."

Since 2020, Pastor Mark Hults has served as pastor of First Presbyterian, alongside a church staff of 12 that includes a director of college ministry, director of young adult and family ministry, director of music and organist, music clerk and event sexton, business manager, operations and administrative associate, communications specialist, two sextons, two nursery coordinators, and a preschool director. The preschool director also oversees a larger staff of teachers and assistants who connect with but don't directly report to the church staff leadership.

In 2022, the former director of children & youth ministries resigned after 13 years with the church in pursuit of a new opportunity. These ministries are now being shepherded by a devoted team of volunteers and members of the staff. In a given week, there are 38 volunteers assisting with children's ministry opportunities and 10 volunteers supporting the youth ministry. Additionally, there are close to 40 hours being invested by different staff members to ensure the continuation of discipleship offerings for children and youth.

There are 470 members on the rolls of First Presbyterian, which includes 75 children (5th grade and younger) and 32 youth (6th-12th grades). In 2023, the average Sunday morning attendance in worship was 158 but the start of 2024 has seen an uptick, with 202 congregants joining together across two traditional worship services, at 8:30 AM and 11:00 AM.

Outside of Sundays, the highlight of the week is LOGOS, which happens every Wednesday evening during the school year. This is an intergenerational program for children, youth, and adults built on four pillars: Bible study, worship arts, family time, and recreation. Children and youth meet weekly to share a meal, study scripture, learn different musical elements of traditional worship, and play and connect with one another in Christian community. Some of the adults who assist with LOGOS are parents but many are not, which allows other church members to get to know the youngest of congregants. Of the 75 children on the rolls of First Presbyterian, 40 attend LOGOS, along with 12 of the 32 youth. Noteworthy when reviewing program engagement is the fact that there are 22 youth typically present during Sunday morning worship, too, with 18 who stay and join in youth connection. Youth Connection is a 2-hour time after worship of learning, lunching, and living life together.

Interestingly, the budget of LOGOS is greater than the budget for the rest of the children and youth ministry offerings combined. For the current fiscal year (July 2023-June 2024), LOGOS has a budget of \$7,000 (\$4,000 from the church + \$3,000 from families), while the Christian education budget is \$4,000 and the youth and family budget is \$2,000. These amounts are a part of the larger church budget of \$1,823,150.

After searching for a new director of children and youth ministries for over a year and meeting no one who could adequately fill the role, Ministry Architects was invited by First Presbyterian Church to assist in this work. As a first step, Ministry Architects met with 44 individuals in six focus groups or one-on-one meetings and seven people filled out an online survey. This report reflects those conversations and provides insights into the current state of the children's and youth ministries.

THE INVISIBLE CHECKLIST

The three most common ways that churches secretly judge their ministries.

There's no such thing as a blank slate. In most churches, everyone has an opinion about the children's and youth ministries. Sometimes, it's simply a positive or negative impression. Other times, it is based on a single conversation with a happy or unhappy parent or volunteer. More often than not, the reputation of these ministries is based on an invisible three-item checklist.

Although the items on this invisible checklist, in and of themselves, do not ensure an effective or faithful ministry, they have a way of profoundly informing a church's perception of its children's and youth ministries. Ministries that check these three boxes typically build a climate that gives them significant freedom to be creative, take risks, and experiment with innovative ideas. The children's and youth ministries that fail to check these three boxes often find themselves mired in distrust, second-guessing, and discouragement.

#1: Numbers

A significant percentage of children and youth need to be participating visibly in some aspect of the church's ministries. When the participants are not seen by the congregation, either in person or through typical communication channels, a ministry will often be perceived as anemic. Because the target numbers are not typically agreed upon and communicated clearly, most children's and youth ministries are judged by a mashup of conflicting numerical goals. For First Presbyterian, the consensus is that this box is being checked. Stakeholders spoke about the numerous children and youth participating in LOGOS, youth connection, Sunday morning worship, and various summer events.

#2: Programs

In order to earn the right to experiment with changes, the leadership needs to provide the church with a few visible, effective programs that give children, youth, volunteers, and parents something to talk about. This box is definitely being checked by the weekly offering of LOGOS, along with youth connection every Sunday. This box gets a double checkmark when considering summer events like Vacation Bible School, youth camps, and the annual churchwide trip to Montreat.

#3: Enthusiasm

The joyful enthusiasm and positive attitude of the ministry staff, volunteers, parents, and the children and youth themselves are essential to building trust with the leadership of the church and with the families. Both the families and the staff love being a part of the community at First Presbyterian. This suggests that this box is checked.

MINISTRY NORMS

There are four rules of thumb –“ministry norms” – that will be helpful to keep in mind. These are not necessarily targets for success; they are simply what an average church typically experiences.

SIZE OF PROGRAM

In a typical church, the size of the children’s ministry tends to settle at a number that is around 15% of the worshiping congregation, and the size of the youth ministry tends to settle around 10%. This means, a church with an average worship attendance of 202 people could expect an average weekly attendance of around 30 children and 20 youth per week. The current weekly engagement of 40 children and 23 youth is exceeding the target for a church this size.

FINANCIAL INVESTMENT

A typical church invests around \$1,100 per child and \$1,500 per youth. The total current budget dedicated across the two ministries is approximately \$88,750 (including program budget and anticipated staff salaries and benefits). Therefore, financially, First Presbyterian Church has the capacity to effectively reach and maintain a weekly participation level of somewhere in the neighborhood of 44 children and 26 youth. With 40 children and 23 youth currently participating every week, the ministry is right on target for its current reach. However, it is not likely the ministry will be able to do more to reach the additional 35 children and 9 youth on the rolls without more of an investment.

STAFFING

In a typical church, one full-time paid staff member can sustain the participation of about 70 children. When it comes to youth ministry, one full-time paid staff member can sustain the participation of about 50 students. Given that the director of children and youth ministries will split their time between both age groups, giving 20-hours per week to each, it would be expected that First Presbyterian could sustain the participation of 35 children and 25 youth through this one role.

When additional staff contribute to the support of the children and youth ministries, the number of children and youth able to be sustained goes up. At First Presbyterian, the director of music invests 7-10 hours per week for children and youth ministries. There are also two nursery coordinators investing up to 8 more hours each week. The additional staff support means the current staffing configuration aligns well to the current needs of the ministry, with room to grow. With the director’s 20 hours plus 5 from the nursery and 5 from the director of music, First Presbyterian can expect to attend to 52 children, sustainably. With youth, the director’s investment of 20 hours plus another 5 from the director of music means 31 students can be attended to, sustainably.

VOLUNTEERS

Ministry Architects likes to think in terms of “spans of care,” recognizing that, realistically, most volunteers cannot effectively oversee the church’s Christian nurture of more than about five children or five youth on an ongoing basis. With 38 weekly volunteers for 40 children, First Presbyterian is essentially at a 1:1 ratio of adult leaders to children. With 12 volunteers assisting with 23 engaged youth, the ratio is just about 1:2, adult leader to student.

Given these volunteer numbers, each ministry actually has a capacity to reach 190 children and 60 youth. The children and youth ministries of First Presbyterian are well-supported by volunteers and poised for sustained growth, well into the future, when it comes to volunteers.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE STAFF

When a ministry is based solely on the giftedness of a single staff person, instability is a predictable result. Ministry Architects has found that the most stable approach to staffing a ministry, particularly in the early stages of a rebuild, is to build a team of three different kinds of staff and volunteers.

MINISTRY IN CONTEXT

The Architect



A person or group who designs the building plan and ensures that the building is done in compliance with the agreed-upon plan.

The General Contractor



A person or group who manages the flow and sequencing of work and the building process according to the agreed-upon blueprint, and ensures that the appropriate number of skilled workers is in place for each stage of the project.

The Skilled Worker



These people are charged with specific gifts and responsibilities for particular aspects of the work. For example, a skilled worker might have particular skills in relating to a specific age group, in planning and managing events, or in teaching others.

Each of these roles is important as First Presbyterian pursues a more sustainable model of children and youth ministry. As the church moves forward, the following observations will be helpful to keep in mind:

- The director and key volunteer leaders fulfill the architect and general contractor roles.
- There are plenty of skilled workers currently engaging with the children and youth ministries on a regular basis.

ASSETS

STRENGTHS TO PROTECT

We Want Our Church

One of the key features of First Presbyterian Church of Gainesville is that the people don't just love their church, they want to be a part of their church more than any others. In highlighting the features and experiences that are most dear to them in the life of the church, students, in particular, shared their love in comparison to the other church options they've experienced:

- When we go to camp and worship there, I like it. But then I come back home and love our worship.
- Other churches are a lot bigger than us, but we're a lot smaller church and a lot more personal.
- Any time I try to invite a friend to church, their expectation is that it will be like the other churches they've been to. But everyone hates one another there. It's like school part two. I've been and it's like a light show and there was a camera stuck in my face. And I didn't like that. Here, it's not like that. We're a family.

For young people to not only recognize the unique offering their church is but to embrace it with pride and welcome it with joy means they're not secretly pining to go somewhere else. And that is a gift that has the potential to fuel longevity.

Invested and Involved Volunteers

There are churches that have people who volunteer when asked and then, there are churches who have volunteer leaders who take the reins and make sure things happen. First Presbyterian is blessed with the latter. Not only are there enough adults for every child to have their own personal mentor, participants remarked several times how much those volunteers care. When asked what was going well with the children and youth ministries, one stakeholder immediately replied, "The love for the kids by the adults." A student remarked, "The community is very tight knit and we know that our leaders are looking out for us and personally care for us." Moving a volunteer from involved to invested is a path most pastors pray people make.

Music is Mega

In every listening session, multiple stakeholders lifted up the musical offerings of First Presbyterian as a strength and a hallmark for which the church is known throughout the community. "The music program is excellent", summed up one stakeholder. Not only are there beautiful choirs and an amazing organ, the intentionality with which this church raises up children and youth to understand and embrace traditional worship is profound. Plus, the music is not just for those who have been a part of the church for a long time. As one participant said, "Our music ministry is such a gateway to pull families in, pull kids in, and we hope in doing so, they find a place and have a longevity of growing within the church."

LOGOS Love

After hearing accolade after accolade about LOGOS, the question was asked, "What would happen if the new director decided LOGOS should go?" After a short silence and a couple glances, the brave responder said, "If someone came in and wanted to bring in a new model, they'd get run out of town." While this might be seen as a challenge in some settings, at First Presbyterian, it simply clarified the importance of this strategic approach to discipleship. In a time when research is proving over and over again how vital intergenerational relationships are to a young person's faith foundations, LOGOS brings that and more. It's the place where children receive direct biblical instruction each week. It's where traditional music is taught at all skill levels and learned to be appreciated and embraced by all ages. It's the time each week when intergenerational community is built, relationships are formed, and the whole church comes together to share in a meal and catch up on life. So long as this approach continues to align with the overarching goals of the ministries it serves, it will continue to be an asset of First Presbyterian.

ASSETS

CONTINUED

Strong Student Leaders

Last but certainly not least in the list of what is truly noteworthy in the children and youth ministries is the remarkable youth group. Small but mighty, the representation of 6th-12th graders who participated in listening sessions were knowledgeable about multiple facets of First Presbyterian, mature and confident in delivering their insights, understand that they're full members, too, and they want to serve in leadership. It is rare to hear a student say, "For example, we could do more in the worship services, outside of Youth Sunday", as one participant did.

Their bond for their church naturally seeps into the hopes they have for the future of the youth group. When asked to think 10 years down the road and share their dreams for the youth ministry, one student said, "I hope kids who are kids now are still involved in youth in 10 years." Another youth added, "I want it to be bigger, but still how it is now where everyone still knows everybody and it's still very personal." And a third chimed in by saying, "People just don't know what we have here, and that's really surprising. I want this for them." Students understand the heart of First Presbyterian and want others to experience it, too.

CHALLENGES

OBSTACLES TO MOVING STRATEGICALLY FORWARD

Depth Chart Deficiency

If you've never heard the saying, "two things can be true at once", you're about to. While it's true that the amount of volunteers involved and invested in the children and youth ministries of First Presbyterian is impressive, it's also true that many of those volunteers are tired. One participant framed it like this, "We have a lot of people who are stepping in to keep it going, but they've been doing this a long time." "There isn't anyone else to call because everyone is already here," said one leader, when asked about volunteer relief. In the nursery, one individual shared, "I work in the nursery every Sunday, because we can't find enough volunteers." As is often the case with volunteer burnout, the problem isn't the people, it's the process. "We are built on a system of hiring people to do what volunteers should be doing," commented one participant. "But," added another, "Volunteers can only last so long." This is true if the tasks of the volunteer role are not sustainable which seems to be the case for many of the roles at First Presbyterian.

Communications Conundrum

There were mixed reactions amongst stakeholders when asked about the communications of the children and youth ministries. On the one hand, weekly reminders are sent out to help volunteers regularly remember the latest information, "Which is excellent", a leader remarked. On the other hand, the website is significantly lacking as a place to find information, social media is just starting to be utilized in a more consistent rhythm, and a couple ministries of the church have started their own communication pathways separate from the larger church because, "We just needed something," said one leader. While all of these mediums are known about by staff and being attended to by someone, "there remains no common denominator to all of the communications", as one participant shared.

Unidentified Direction

There's a quote made famous by the baseball movie Bull Durham that seems to also apply to the children and youth ministries of First Presbyterian, "I'm just happy to be here." As has been shown, there is a deep love for this church and commitment to its endeavors that exists throughout the body. However, in wanting to maintain that reality, the temptation is often to not upset what has worked in the past. But the goals previously set before the church that led to the deep love and commitment that currently exists might not be the goals that will carry that same posture into the future. In fact, stakeholders are very mixed when it comes to identifying the targets the children and youth ministries should be aiming for.

- I want us to grow.
- I like that we're this size.
- I want my kids to settle into some version of a relationship with Jesus that may not make their home church happy but is rooted in God.
- I've heard more about wanting to help kids be good presbyterians over strong believers.
- I would like to see us have a bigger budget.
- It feels at times that our youth programming is just a bucket of our church and we don't use that in the overall growth strategy.

It's not that all of these ideas can't work together or that some are better than others. The difficulty is there doesn't seem to be a shared vision for the ministries. It's as if folks are saying, "We may go one way or the other but, all in all, we're just happy to be here."

If a lack of direction goes unattended too long, it will affect participant engagement, volunteer commitment, and the overall sustainability of the ministries.

CHALLENGES

CONTINUED

Passing Over Parents

With hearty thoughtfulness being devoted to children and youth, one group of stakeholders that would benefit from more direct attention is the parents. As one parent shared, “It would be nice to have a way for parents to connect. The only time we see each other is picking kids up off the playground.” Another said, “The ministry of presence is certainly there for the children, but we need someone solid with the parents.” Though there are periodic programs geared towards parents, and there have been attempts at Sunday school classes for parents, the programs aren’t consistently well-attended and Sunday school is not the preferred time for most families, given the lean towards LOGOS.

One area that seems to take priority when it comes to parents, though, is asking them to volunteer. “We need them to serve, if they’re here,” said one leader. While a different take was voiced in another session, “We’re lacking community with the parents and my hope is we can just try having something, even if it infringes on their volunteer capacity.” Modern research has supported what churches have known for decades: parents have far more opportunities to influence a child’s faith journey than any other adult a kid will encounter in their formative years. Given this truth, it would be worth considering how to better equip and care for the portion of First Presbyterian who call themselves parents.

Broken Bridges

When studying childhood development, there comes a time when kids shift from parallel play (playing *near* someone else who is playing) to cooperative play (playing *with* someone else). The same is true for ministries in a church. Some ministries work in the same proximity of the others, while some ministries intentionally work *with* the others.

Participants helped spotlight multiple examples of parallel play across the children and youth ministry opportunities at First Presbyterian:

- The disconnect between the church and preschool needs significant attention.
- There’s no celebration of moving from 5th to 6th grade. There’s no defining thing.
- There’s a need that’s not being addressed for older children on Wednesdays who aren’t interested in choir or music. They need something else to do or they don’t want to come.
- There are many students who choose not to do Trajectory. Some really like Scott and the structure but some just don’t.

With everything else shared, comments like these reveal that while the preschool, children’s, youth, and college ministries all exist fairly well in isolation, there are missed opportunities at each transitional point. Intentionally building bridges that welcome and connect children, youth, and families to the next team of leaders who can walk with them through a new life stage will strengthen each ministry and decrease the probability of disengagement between ministries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Attend to Volunteer Development and Depth

1. Establish a volunteer recruitment process:
 - a. Create a list of every volunteer position needed for every program and event taking place in the next program year for children and youth ministries
 - b. Write the corresponding job descriptions for each role
 - c. Develop a list of people who could fill those roles
 - d. Match 2-3 people with each role and extend personal invitations to be a part of the ministries
 - e. Check-in with the current volunteers to see how they are doing and what their commitment can be for the next year
 - f. Once new volunteers are recruited, set up a rotation schedule for volunteers so that the current volunteers can get a little break
 - g. Should there be too many roles for the number of available people to create a team of depth, consider the scope of the program as it relates to the sustainability of the volunteer team and prioritize needs according to goal alignment.
 - h. Decide on a way that outgoing volunteers can be thanked for their ministry
2. Set a date now for a leadership launch before school starts that brings all volunteers together so they feel informed and equipped to serve in their roles
3. Plan a quarterly check-in with each volunteer, receiving feedback about their role and the program, and thanking them for their investment in children, youth, and families.

Recommendation #2: Clear Up Communications

1. Review the current communications and analytics to determine the effectiveness of each.
2. Determine any needed changes

3. Develop a plan that includes ways to ensure that both current and new families can learn and understand how information is communicated about the children's and youth ministries
4. Consider offering a parent meeting at the beginning of each semester and handing out a parent packet of information which includes the following:
 - a. Schedule of events and happenings
 - b. Contact information for volunteers and staff
 - c. Expectations for participation (any costs, details of timing, behavioral accessibility)
5. Identify a workflow for maintaining communication mediums, answering these starting questions:
 - a. What mediums will the ministry use to communicate?
 - b. Who will be responsible for updating each medium?
 - c. Where will updates come from?
 - d. How will children, youth, and families access each medium?

Recommendation #3: Identify 3-year goals and 1-year benchmarks, aligned with shared vision

1. Gather key stakeholders of the children's and youth ministries
2. Invite parents, leaders, staff, and youth to participate in a multi-session, on-campus process of visioning a new future for the children's and youth ministries resulting in a shared vision and set of three-year revolving goals with one-year benchmarks
3. Establish a support team for the children's and youth ministries to analyze current programs and identifying the following answers for decision making:
 - a. What's currently aligned with the vision and working towards goal achievement?
 - b. What's misaligned and working against achieving the goals?
 - c. What needs to be prioritized?
 - d. What needs to be started?
 - e. What needs to be stopped?

RECOMMENDATIONS

CONTINUED

4. Develop a plan and thoughtful timeline to attend to the action steps of the above analysis, taking into account an acceptable pace of change that helps the vision and goals gain broader ownership and build momentum.

Recommendation #4: Build Intentional Bridges of Connection

1. List the key milestones currently celebrated in the life of a child, youth, or family from birth through beyond high school.
 - a. Identify which of the already existing milestones could serve as opportunities to strengthen community relationships with children, youth, or families
 - b. Write a plan of action for how to align current milestone moments with long-term goals and vision
 2. Outline action plans for how to intentionally build bridges to walk with children, youth, and families of First Presbyterian during the following transitional times:
 - a. Moving from nursery setting to classroom / learning environment
 - b. Entry into Kindergarten
 - c. Moving from elementary ministries to middle school ministries
 - d. Moving from middle school ministries to high school ministries
 - e. Preparing 12th graders for post-graduate life
 - f. Moving from high school ministries to college / young adult ministries
 - g. Welcoming new families in the life of the church
 3. Create a Bridge Team with representatives from both the church and the preschool who will identify 2-3 opportunities each semester to directly connect with and begin to know the children, families, and staff of the preschool
 4. Form a Parent Panel that works with staff to develop more frequent and accessible community building and faith-equipping opportunities for parents and guardians
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Sara is a life-long Episcopalian having grown up in Memphis, Tennessee, the land of Elvis. She has been in professional youth ministry since 1993 serving Episcopal churches in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. While no longer in full-time paid ministry, she serves at her own congregation in Louisville, Kentucky, where she currently resides. She's been part of the Ministry Architects team since 2006 as a Lead Consultant and the Director of Searches. Sara's husband Geoff works at the University of Louisville (go Cards!) and they have a teen daughter as well as two furbabies - Shasta and Jasper. Butterflies are a significant symbol of her faith journey; you'll find them everywhere in her home.



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Renée will tell you the best advice she ever received as a volunteer in youth ministry was "prepare well and love 'em to Jesus." And that's exactly why she's a part of our team. Through her 15+ years of mentoring and ministering with children, youth, and young adults, Renée knows the value of building healthy teams and loves creating approaches around the vision of seeing more and more people come to know Christ. Before devoting her days to full-time ministry, Renée earned her B.S. in Psychology from The Ohio State University and her Masters of Education and Educational Specialist Degree in School Psychology from the University of Cincinnati. She has served churches in rural, urban, and suburban settings, currently calling the east side of Columbus, Ohio home. Renée loves college football, being an aunt, and can sing at least one song from pretty much any Broadway musical. Just ask her!



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Adam is a senior ministry executive, spiritual leader, strategic pioneer, and Director of Ministries at the historic First United Methodist Church in Jackson TN. After serving in ministry since 2005, Adam was ordained and licensed as Pastor in 2017. Throughout the last two decades, he has led in a variety of church settings, both theological, and denominational. From 5000+ multisite churches to relaunches, metropolitan and rural settings, liturgical and modern expressions— each context has helped shape his ability to see varying perspectives and build a shared sense of ownership and trust with staff and faith communities alike. As a coach, consultant, trainer, and director, Adam's goal is to champion local churches and develop leaders to carry fresh vision into the future growth of churches.

A native of West Tennessee, Adam is a graduate of the University of Memphis where he received a Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership with an emphasis in Nonprofit Organization. He holds an MPS in Strategic Leadership-Religious Organization from the University of Memphis. He graduated from the National Institute of Christian Leadership in 2016 and currently coaches a network of local and regional leaders on their path of continued learning and development.

Adam currently lives in Jackson, TN with his beautiful wife Kayla and fearless toddler Josephine. For his downtime activity, he loves to root for the Tennessee Titans (Titan Up!), as well as exploring local eateries and antique shops.