

A Rally Day Friendship Welcome

This resource is designed to help your congregation plan an effective Rally Day Friendship Welcome. It offers:

- A theme, A Child Shall Lead Them, with reflections on the role of children as evangelists,
- Guidance for a time of preparation and motivation before your Rally Day, including
 - Exercises to evaluate your present and potential Sunday school target audience, and
 - Suggestions for child friendly worship and educational activities you can consider for your day of celebration.

Did You Know Your Sunday School...

- Provides wonderful opportunities for evangelism
- Nurtures personal relationships
- Connects biblical and theological insights to life
- Appeals to a wide spectrum of people
- Ministers to the entire family regardless of size
- Offers valuable training for discipleship

An Effective Evangelism Strategy

Why plan a Friendship Sunday in conjunction with the start up of your congregation's educational ministry? Consider...

The Day

Rally Day* is the start of a new year of teaching and learning in many congregations. Most often it is a day in late August or early September that signifies the end of summer vacation and the return to Sunday school*. Rally Day is an essential part of the life and mission of many congregations. It is the time to recognize and honor both those who teach and those who learn; all who nurture faith in others. Rally Day provides a unique opportunity to acknowledge the partnership of parents and teachers and other congregational members in affirming a life style that is Christ's style. It is a time for the entire congregation to rally behind God's intention that all Christians--children, youth and adults--grow and learn; a day for congregations to celebrate their ministry of Christian education!

* Rally Day is one of several terms used to refer to the start of a new year of Christian education in congregations of the ELCA. Using this resource does not require the use of this term. Likewise, the term Sunday school, while remaining for many a quick way to refer to all of the educational activities in a congregation, is not the only way to speak of educational ministry. Please adapt the ideas printed here if your learning activities take place other than on Sunday or are referred to with other words. This guide can be easily adapted to support a child-focused friendship welcome for a specific program or experience at any time during the year. Adapt and expand these ideas in ways that work best for your setting.

The Children

Children come to Rally Day filled with the activities of summer. They are adjusting to new routines of school days and new friendships. This time of the year finds many children full of energy and searching for a friendly place to belong. While most children are eager to return and enter your religious education program, many are unhappy with what and whom they may have left behind. Summer friends and neighborhood pals don't always follow your students into the church or the classroom. Because friendships are important to children, they will go to the worst places to be with their friends and stay away from the best places if their friends aren't there. The good news is friends will come if the children in your congregation invite them. Children and young people want to be with their friends!

A Tool to Strengthen Your Rally Day Welcome: "Sing and Share" Children's Music Cassette

Use this engaging tape of contemporary sounding familiar Christian children's music as an invitation tool your congregation's children can share with their unchurched friends! The tape, sampled in the 1999 Christian education packet, features more than a dozen memorable children's songs in a musical

style familiar to today's children with reflections by children and their parents on why church and faith are important to them. Designed to help kids invite kids to church, but also a wonderful gift to distribute to Sunday school children on the first day of Sunday school. (To order multiple quantities of cassettes call 800/328-4648; order code: 69-1503; 6-0001-0857-5, \$1.25 per cassette, plus shipping and handling.)

The Opportunity

We live in the midst of a large spiritually yearning public. The mission field is no longer overseas. It is in our neighborhoods and schools. Statistics tell us that as many as 50 percent of the children in your neighborhood may not attend a church, synagogue or mosque. We also know that many parents, faced with the realities of drugs and violence, limited resources and increasing demands, are looking for help in bringing up moral and responsible children. Your congregation can be a community of hope and healing in a hurting and need-filled world. Your congregation can be just what your neighbors are looking for!

Your congregation can be a community of hope and healing in a hurting and need-filled world.

Counting Down to your Rally Day Friendship Welcome - What to do, When

Follow these guidelines to plan a successful Rally Day friendship welcome in your congregation. About 12 weeks before the event (you may wish to begin earlier if some persons are away during the summer months), bring together a task force or team of adults, youth and children to plan and promote this effort. These should be motivated people with a heart for sharing the gospel with others. Try to include an equal number of adults and children or youth on your team. Granting elements of choice to these "little ones" will greatly improve the likelihood that your Rally Day celebration will significantly engage the greatest numbers of neighborhood children and adults. If you have an existing Christian education and/or evangelism committee, you may also want to involve some of the members on this task force. Because this is a focused effort, you may be able to involve people who have excellent gifts but do not believe they have time for ongoing committee work.

Begin to meet, study these materials, order resources, and organize the effort. Plan out in as great a detail as you can, exactly how your congregation will move forward with this emphasis. Set clear goals and decide who will complete which tasks.

Week 8

Write a lead article in the newsletter announcing the emphasis. Share with parents verbally and with a letter what members and children are being invited to do. At worship (before the end of the Sunday church school year, if possible) announce the emphasis and briefly explain the role children will play as inviters. Introduce the theme A Child Shall Lead Them in a brief bulletin insert highlighting the schedule for congregational engagement. Utilize the assessment questions on page 10 of this guide during your first planning team meeting to focus your efforts on your target audience for this initiative.

Week 7

Offer an adult education emphasis on children's ministry using How to Help Children Take Over the Church: Involving Children in Ministry (800/328-4648, code number 69-6089) or Take it to Heart: An asset-based guide to nurturing children, youth and families in faith community (code number 34-10655-2100). Begin a sermon series on what adults can learn about God's Kingdom from children tying in the theme: A Child Shall Lead Them. (Utilize the information on pages 5-6 of this guide to craft your message and printed reflections.)

Week 6

Conduct a tour and evaluation of your building to assess accessibility and sense of welcome to children. If appropriate, talk with the property team about areas of concern or necessary changes. Begin conversations with the worship and education teams over plans for Rally Day learning activities and worship plans.

Week 5

Encourage members verbally and in the bulletin to think about whom they might invite. Present a children's sermon on the theme and invite children to think about friends they might invite. Have children create special invitations they can use to invite their friends. Create a unique invitation with photographs of your Sunday school in action to be distributed as door hangers throughout the neighborhood. Prepare a press release announcing your Rally Day learning activities and worship schedule to the community.

Week 4

Continue publicity and verbal encouragement. Include slips of construction paper in the bulletin to build a prayer chain. Have worshipers write down the names of people they intend to invite and place chain links in the offering plate. Prepare a second article for the newsletter sharing information about any special plans you might be making: special music, groups performing, refreshments, etc. Recruit helpers. Distribute multiple copies of the "Sing and Share" children's music cassette (see page 3 for description and ordering information), and model for children how they might share the cassette and an invitation with a friend during a brief temple talk.

Week 3

Continue internal publicity among members and external publicity in the community. Have volunteers make phone calls to remind members about the upcoming Rally Day friendship emphasis. Encourage distribution of the music cassette as an invitation tool. Invite a congregational member (adult or child) who came to faith through the invitation of a friend to share a temple talk about their experience. Pray for the children and parents who will be inviting friends to come to your Rally Day activities and worship. Firm up your plans for your learning activities and worship service(s).

Week 2

Continue publicity. Provide a bulletin insert listing examples of hospitality members might consider as they make their invitations (e.g. offering to provide transportation, a meal or refreshments before or after worship, the importance of introducing friends to others, etc.) Hand out invitations and cassettes as tools to facilitate inviting. Continue preaching using the theme as part of your message for the day. Invite a young person in your congregation to give a temple talk about what it feels like to be invited and included.

Week 1

Continue motivation. Provide a bulletin insert offering ideas about different ways to extend invitations (e.g. by mail, in person, by phone, etc.) Invite a family to role play different ways of inviting during your announcements as a way to model possible family conversations for others. Pray for children and adults inviting and those being invited. Encourage all members of every age to invite their friends, family and neighbors. Finalize arrangements for any on site hospitality efforts, such as name-tags, refreshments, greeters, building tour guides, etc. Complete your preparations for your Rally Day worship and activities.

A Child Shall Lead...

Evangelism is friends inviting friends on the journey of discipleship. An evangelist is someone who tells the Good News of Jesus Christ and shows God's love through actions. Often a first step to this witness involves an invitation to faith community. Adults are not the only ones gifted to tell others about Jesus or invite others to church. God uses children to share Jesus' love with friends, neighbors and members of their family. Children are capable of not only learning about evangelism but also doing evangelism. Children are:

- * Aware of God's love in their lives and willing to share this knowledge with others.
- * Able to invite, mentor and share their faith in Jesus and their experience of church.
- * Willing to learn about faith and devotion to Christ

What Can Children Teach Adults about Evangelism?

A quick survey of the Bible reveals children have always had a central role in witnessing to God's activity in the world. Examples of Bible stories in which ordinary children ministered to others includes

Miriam and Pharaoh's Daughter (Ex 2:5-10), Naaman's Servant Girl (2 Kings 5), The Boy Who Shared His Lunch (John 6:1-14), and The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-31). Children remind us of truths adults sometimes forget:

- * People are most often attracted to churches for sociological rather than theological reasons. They come because they want to be with their friends.
- * Ordinary acts of kindness and hospitality are often used by God for profound purposes.
- * The church is a place to experience joy, meaning and community.
- * Worship involves trust, laughter, curiosity, use of all the senses, spontaneity, generosity and enthusiasm.

What Happens When Children Become Evangelists?

A child shares about Jesus and her experience of church in conversations with a friend. She extends an invitation to "come and see." The experience is positive and soon her family begins to check it out. She invites another friend, who invites another friend...and over and over again the good news multiplies through words and actions that positively influence other children and adults. Sound to good to be true? Hardly! Dozens of testimonies show it is just this simple. The key is teaching children that it's okay and good to invite. In this experience children grow in their spiritual conversation skills. They learn to see themselves as inviters and sharers of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. Children benefit from their experience of evangelism by:

- * Developing a deeper understanding of their faith as they share their faith.
- * Developing healthy, positive, Christ-centered relationships with others.
- * Experiencing the love of God and seeing the effect of the Holy Spirit changing lives as they serve others.

God uses children to share Jesus' love with friends, neighbors and members of their family.

The little ones God loves...live in your neighborhoods and some already squirm in your pews. These are the ones who can lead us.

Unpacking the Theme...

God uses children to help us be the church! It's true. Long ago the prophet Isaiah shared a vision of God's people more amazing than the limits common words could capture. He wrote a poem recalling life in the Garden of Eden, but pushing forward to the time of God's peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-10). Isaiah's vision is about a new heaven and a new earth, and a people unlike any nation ever seen. God's nation will be a place where "nursing children play by the cobra's den." God's reign will bring "the calf and the lion together, and a little child shall lead them." God loves little ones! It's true!

God loves little ones so much, in fact, God became one! God loves children so much that baby talk was the language of the day at the manger in Bethlehem. "In many and various ways" God had spoken before. Now, "in these last days" God spoke through a son, a child. God's baby talk isn't sentimentality. God's baby talk is the dramatic loving incursion of the living God. This God comes to us where we are. God reveals himself to us as a child, word in flesh, God with us. And there's more...

When this child became a man, he invited all to a place where Isaiah's little ones are welcome - the very young, the old, the oppressed, the sick, the poor - a realm where to receive a child is to receive him. After a walk one day, Jesus asked his disciples what they were arguing about along the way. They remained silent because they had been quarreling about which of them would achieve the best places of honor. It was then that Jesus took a little child in his arms, placed the child in the midst of them, and said, "Whenever you welcome one such child in my name, you receive me." (Mark 9:30-37)

God loves little ones! God was a little one! God uses children to show us heaven! This is a people, a community where we don't have to put on airs, don't have to smile and lie about pain. It is, by all accounts, a topsy-turvy people where the last are first, and the lowest is the greatest, and a little child is the way to God. It is a place colonized by those we often see as distractions, those known as the lowest and the least. But in God's family, these are the ones who are honored and loved. You have probably gotten the point by now. God loves little ones! God uses little ones!

The good news -- the little ones God loves, the lowly, the poor, the vulnerable, those not very sure of themselves or their future -- they live in your neighborhoods and some already squirm in your pews. These are the ones who can lead us, show us heaven on earth and help us be the church. Because this topsy turvy Kingdom is not immediately in our view, we must repeatedly turn to the children in our

congregation and our communities. We must continually gather up the little ones -- children, youth and adults --and put them in our midst.

Why People Bring Children to Sunday School

- #6. Influence of the pastor.
- #5. Searching for community.
- #4. Experiencing personal crisis.
- #3. Congregation offers special programs.
- #2. Seeking help with family relationships and responsibilities.
- #1. They were invited!

Edward Rauff, *Why People Join the Church*, The Pilgrim Press, 1979

Assessing Your Mission Field

1. *During your first planning team meeting take time to reflect on the following questions. Feel free to approximate numbers if accurate figures are not available. This exercise will help you visualize the mission field God is calling you to reach. For the sake of this exercise consider primary grade children (Kindergarten through Sixth Grade). Consider your own education trends with an eye to discerning the needs of children and families in your community.*

Where are the Children in Your Congregation? This year? 2 years ago? 5 years ago?

How many children are/were a part of your congregation...

How many children participate/d in at least one educational offering...

How many children worship/ed on a typical Sunday...

Are your church programs and schedules today the same or different from...

Are the schedules and needs of families today the same or different from...

2. *As you consider this historical information, look for specific events, schedule changes, population and cultural shifts that could have influenced a shift in practice. If the change is not positive, imagine how a successful Rally Day Friendship Welcome might help improve the situation with children in your congregation.*

Who are the Children in Your Neighborhood?

What are their needs? In what ways could you walk beside them? What gestures of kindness and hospitality might lead to revealing Christ in their midst?

How many children, youth and adults live within two miles of your church building? How many of them have no church home? Provide your best estimates.

How has your congregation reached out to these neighbors in the past? If it has not, why not?

3. *As you consider your current neighborhood information, what would you say about the potential for reaching children and families through a Rally Day Friendship Welcome?*

Welcoming Guests to your Rally Day Worship

Worship is usually the most important, central gathering time for members and guests. As you begin to think about your congregation's Rally Day worship, consider how an intergenerational audience of members and guests might experience the different parts of your worship service.

Does participation in your worship service assume reading ability?

- Not all children can read. Explore options that might reduce dependency on print.
- Choose hymns and songs that have refrains or repetitious word patterns.
- Print a simplified bulletin that outlines the service and insert it into the regular bulletin.
- Use conversational prayers, including the concerns of children.

- Use repeated responses, psalms, litanies and prayers that have familiar words and melodies.

Does participation in your worship service assume sitting quietly is the only way to worship God?

- Most children prefer a balance between stillness and movement. _Explore options that honor children's joyful exuberance.
- Include children in the procession.
- Include appropriate body movements in the Lord's Prayer.
- Create a movement choir or a liturgical dance troop.
- Encourage clapping and body movements during songs and hymns.

Does participation in your worship service assume leadership roles are only for adults?

- Many children would like to learn how to be worship leaders. Explore options that teach children leadership roles in worship.
- Invite children to participate in a youth or intergenerational choir.
- Have children (and their families) serve as greeters, ushers and lectors.
- Have children create prayers, psalms, litanies, bulletin covers and worship banners for use in worship.
- Allow children to bring the message through storytelling, drama, puppets, etc.

Your Rally Day Friendship Welcome worship experience will be a first and lasting impression for many new worshipers. Imagine the powerful witness invited guests will have when they see children integrated into the worship service. It tells them children are valued in your congregation and in God's Kingdom in a way nothing else will!

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Welcoming Guests to Rally Day Learning

Choose your Rally Day learning activities carefully. This time of gathering children and adults, members and neighbors, guests and friends is an opportunity to creatively engage all who participate. The goal is to foster active learning where people can talk about their understanding of God and help each other apply their faith to the issues and concerns of their lives.

As you plan Rally Day learning activities, start with the learners--the unchurched children, youth and adults you are seeking to reach. To help your activities become learner-based consider the following:

- Learners of all ages will show more interest if the activities are designed with their interests and learning styles in mind.
- Ask questions not only about what you will teach, but how you will teach it.
- Choose words and ideas that will be understood by children and the unchurched.
- Connect activities to the learners actual life experiences.
- Show how the Bible is relevant to contemporary life.
- Strive for heart as well as head knowledge.
- Show how God communicates through word and touch, songs and silence.
- Show the importance of Christian relationships and service to others.

Sample Outline _____

Consider the following elements as you plan your Rally Day learning activities:

Gather with music

- Consider singing some of the songs on the "Sing and Share" children's music cassette developed

to support this initiative (see description on page 3 of this guide).

- Have some of the children teach the songs.
- Play the music in the background during activity or craft time.

Invite learners into the Bible through a creative presentation.

- Select a lesson assigned for the Sunday of Rally Day or choose a Bible story that best reflects your congregation's desire to be a welcoming place.
- Use music, drama or Christian clowning to present the lesson.
- Include youth and children in the selection, rehearsal and sharing of the lesson.

Provide an active learning center experience as a creative way to reinforce the day's theme

- Consider three separate learning centers focused on the following learning styles: seeing, hearing and doing. Allow learners to choose the learning experience they desire.
- Plan activities that result in learners creating some kind of "take-home" piece to encourage later family conversation.

Celebrate with food and fellowship

- Include a time for eating and talking as part of the learning experience. This could be part of the learning time or move into a special meal or celebration following Rally Day morning activities.
- Consider including intergenerational exercises or games that build Christian conversation and relationships.
- Consider a theme meal or food that reflects your lesson focus.

The goal is to foster active learning where people can talk about their understanding of God and help each other apply their faith to the issues and concerns of their lives.

Making Your Rally Day Special

How will you roll out the red carpet and welcome your guests in a way that also engages and excites your present congregation to a new learning year? The possibilities are limitless. Investing the energy to plan special activities or experiences helps to communicate vitality, energy and welcome to all who participate. Review the following list of Rally Day suggestions to spur your own creativity and planning.

- Build a special Sunday school display or hold a special fair reflecting the theme: A Child Shall Lead Them.
- Gather youth and children in the weeks before Rally Day to create art for door hangers, publicity, banners, worship bulletin, and decorations. Design an event during which youth and children, partnered with adults, distribute door hanger invitations to the neighborhood.
- Find creative ways to use a variety of visuals such as balloons, leaves, quilt squares, small flower pots grown from seeds planted during Vacation Bible School, nets with colorful fish, baptismal shells, etc. Provide take-home items or information that might facilitate later family conversation.
- Host a ministry fair by setting up information booths representing the various ministries in your congregation.
- Include the installation of teachers and provide an opportunity for the congregation to commit to a new year of learning and growth in discipleship.
- Hold a potluck, pig roast, box lunch, pizza party or corn roast.
- Consider a variety show, sing-along, table games, square or line dancing, or face painting.
- Invite local public school teachers and administrators to participate or speak.
- Take pictures for a Rally Day mural. Video record the day and share video moments at various times of the year.

A Sampling of Learning Center Ideas

Consider these or dream up your own creative possibilities.

Read, tell or act out the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-50). Draw a nine foot Goliath shape with colored chalk on asphalt or paper. Have learners lie within the outline and discuss: 1.) How does this story show us that God keeps his promises with his people? 2.) How did David's faith in God help him beat Goliath? 3.) Share a personal experience or story about the triumph of the small and the vulnerable over the big and powerful.

Play a verbal memory game. One person starts by saying, "On Noah's ark were two birds." The next person adds, "On Noah's ark were two birds and two kangaroos." Continue until no one can recall the entire list of animals. Make this game easier for young children by going in alphabetical order. Discuss: 1.) Identify some of the variety of people in your congregation and community. 2.) Discuss how life in your congregation or community might be somewhat like living in an ark. 3.) What does the Bible say we have to look forward to at the end of our (life) journey? 4.) What "water promise" do you have that God will be faithful?

Play some table games. Set up six to eight games depending on the number of participants. Consider Life Stories, Racko, and Faith Talk, as well as other games that can be played in a short time period. Set a timer for 10 minutes per game and have participants rotate games playing with different people each time. Discuss: 1.) What makes playing games together fun? 2.) What lessons about faith and life do games help teach? 3.) What does playing games together teach us about each other and God?

Read a poem, tell a story or share a song that reminds you of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Have learners cut out paper hearts and write on their hearts completing the sentence: "Love is..." Tape hearts in various places in your church building. Gather everyone back together once the hearts are displayed, then send them out to read the notes. Discuss: 1.) Tell stories of when you experienced love of the kind God has for us. 2.) Reflect on how your congregation helps us live as people of love.

Last, But Not Least...

Be Ready to Gather Information from Guests!

Don't short circuit weeks of motivation and preparation by not having an adequate system in place to record the names and addresses of your worship visitors for follow up. A welcome book in the sanctuary may not be enough. The most ideal form of recording attendance for a friendship celebration are "pew cards" or "pew pads" which are filled out by both members and guests. Provide space for prayer concerns and encourage their return during the offering. Cards or pads can be easily reviewed by the ushers so guests can be immediately identified following worship by designated greeters or staff. They also lend themselves to easy follow up in the days after Rally Day.

Be Ready to Nurture Relationships with Guests!

Plan in advance the ways you intend to follow-up with the guests who attend your Rally Day celebration. It is important to engage in follow-up within 24-48 hours of Rally Day. You will see a greater number of your guests return to worship and learning on a subsequent Sunday if your "follow-up" ministry is lay-lead. Build on the web of relationships which brought your guest to church by asking the "inviters" among your members to follow-up with a phone call within two days. Have a plan to follow up with those who may have come on their own, without the invitation of a friend.

Be Ready for your Congregation to Change!

Your congregation is not in competition with other faith communities in your area. It is in competition with the hectic pace of life today and the myriad activities competing for the time and interest of people. We may have to try a little harder, reaching out in new ways, to break through the noise and clutter people face. People long for something genuine and authentic; something that will fill the

emptiness they feel. Make your Rally Day celebration an experience that will help your congregation spread God's real and relevant message to your community today!

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