



BUILDING A CHURCH

Where Youth are Participants, Not Guests

Shortly after his ordination as a priest in western Uganda in 1996, the Very Rev. Samuel Murangi learned a valuable lesson that has helped him to revitalize youth ministry at Emmanuel Resurrection Episcopal Church in Northeast Philadelphia more than two decades later.

"The diocese sent me to lead a small church in one of the villages back home," Murangi recalls. "My first church had a very active youth group that met every Saturday afternoon for fellowship and to practice music using locally made instruments, such as drums, flutes, guitars, xylophones, etc. As months went by, I realized something was missing. While the youth met every Saturday for practice, there was no place for them during the Sunday service to demonstrate what they had been practicing."

Murangi convinced church leadership to let the youth group perform one song before the sermon during the service each week.

"Eventually, I began to notice considerable improvement in their church attendance and participation," he says. "By the time I left the parish in 1997 to come to the United States, not one single young person missed Sunday service. This experience taught me that young people need participation, not to be entertained. The key with young people is to make them part of the liturgy."

As Murangi sees it, too many churches treat children as guests, not active, vital participants.

"What happens with guests? They eventually leave," he says.

And that's exactly what happens in many churches. "When kids grow up and turn 18, they leave," Murangi says. "Any guest reaches the point they have to leave and find their own home." ▶

◀ Ryan Moreno, left, Emmanuel Resurrection's director of youth ministry, leads the teen Sunday school class in a spirited game of "Duck Duck Zap," as his wife, Becky, looks on.



'Fellow Sojourners'

When Murangi arrived, Emmanuel Resurrection had one Sunday school class for the handful of children and youth who attended, Ginny Stewart recalls.

"And all of them were here at gunpoint," Stewart says, laughing.

Today, there are three Sunday school classes (Stewart teaches the middle group) and they have their own space in a nicely renovated basement on the church campus that previously had been abandoned after flooding.

"What a difference, I'll tell you," Stewart says. "We really needed to revitalize it. Now, they bring their friends."

At Murangi's insistence, the youth were able to choose the paint color for the room that serves as home to the youth ministry and Sunday school class for teens. The church

also bought a large, flat-screen TV and put couches and comfortable chairs in the room. The idea, Murangi says, is to let the youth know they "have a space of their own."

In the summer of 2017, the church worked with a Philadelphia-based youth ministry organization called Ministry Headquarters—known as HQ for short—to put on a Vacation Bible School. Ryan Moreno, a teacher at MaST Community Charter School in Northeast Philadelphia who volunteers a lot with HQ, was the team leader.

After VBS, as the number of young people coming to the church continued to grow, Emmanuel Resurrection decided to hire a director of youth ministry to take the program to the next level. At the time, Moreno was looking for a church to work with, and when Emmanuel approached HQ to see if they knew of anyone who would be

a good fit, Moreno was the obvious choice. "My goal is to get them to have a positive association with church," says Moreno, whose wife, Becky, is also a teacher at MaST Community Charter School and helps with the youth ministry at Emmanuel. "They need to be shown they have a place, that

God wants them—not just to show up—but actually participate in conversation and learn."

Ryan and Becky teach the older youth Sunday school class, which now averages six to 13 kids a week. And even though that number drops during the summer, they continue to have Sunday school year-round.

"Over the summer, a lot of places cancel Sunday school. We still have it every week," Moreno says. "It's our place to come to. They're not tossed aside for two months." ▶

Opening the Liturgy to Young People

That was the situation Emmanuel Resurrection faced when Murangi was called, first as Supply Priest in Residence in January 2015, and then as Priest in Charge nine months later. In the previous years, several families with young children had left the church, feeling like they didn't belong.

The dramatic turnaround—Emmanuel Resurrection has seen its Sunday school ranks swell from four to 22 kids since 2015, and now has an active youth group for teens—started with the liturgy. When he first arrived as supply priest, Murangi observed that one acolyte—usually the crucifer—disappeared quietly out a side door after reaching the altar. He also noticed that the two or three other children who were in church any given week would leave as well. They mysteriously reappeared in time for communion.

There was no acknowledgment that they were going to Sunday school and returning afterward. When Murangi became priest in charge, he and church leaders agreed that a prayer and formal dismissal should be added to the liturgy to recognize and celebrate the children and youth, along with their teachers. The service now includes this prayer:

Heavenly Father, assist us, your children, to put on every piece of your armor so we can resist temptation and be strong believers. Help us to stand our ground with the belt of your truth, the body armor of your righteousness, the helmet of your salvation, and the shoes of peace that come with your Good News. Give us the shield of faith to stop the arrows of the devil, and arm us with the sword of the Spirit, which is your Word. We pray Lord, that after each battle we will always be found standing firm in you. Amen. (from Ephesians 6)

Other changes followed. The Altar Guild purchased albs—the basic, white robes worn during the service—for every young person and child who wants to be part of the worship service. And they all vest for the service—whether they are serving that day or not.

Previously, when children returned from Sunday school, they would go sit with their parents. Now, they sit up front, on one side of the choir chancel. And as the congregation sings "Lamb of God," the song used in place of the Agnes Dei, the third stanza is sung by just the children and youth.

The changes met some initial resistance, but Murangi is committed to sending a clear message that children and youth have important roles to play in the liturgy. It's not just for adults.

And the kids have gotten the message.

"Parents have told me that for the last three years, they no longer struggle to force kids to come to church," Murangi says. "Kids, including my own 5-year-old daughter, remind us parents about church."



TOP LEFT. students open their teen Sunday school class with prayers and praise, often for things happening in their lives at school.

BOTTOM. students and their Sunday school teachers now gather in the front of the church for a prayer and formal dismissal before heading to their classrooms.

Revitalized Youth



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