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## A Surprise in the Labyrinth

It started with a “path of faith” made up of pieces of cardboard shaped like rocks. Each “rock” had a word - gratitude, justice, joy, praise - and the children would walk the path at the end of their worship time, saying the words aloud as they went. For Lent, we added additional stones and battery operated tea lights. A labyrinth emerged.

On the first Sunday of Lent I sent the children in pairs to walk the labyrinth. The only instructions were that they must take off their shoes (holy ground, you know) and that they could not run or push. Different children responded in different ways: some said the words aloud, some walked at a measured pace, and some stopped along the way. Two of our 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls went back for a second, and then third time. I turned to find them walking the labyrinth with their palms together in prayer.

Grabbing my iPad, I watched through the camera lens as they quietly completed their walk and knelt at the entrance of the labyrinth, bowing so low that their hair was over their faces. After a few minutes, they rose and came down the steps of the stage. I asked them, “What were you doing bent over like that?” One of them looked up at me, and in the tone of voice only girls approaching their teenage years can produce said, “Well, praying, obviously!”

## 7 Tips for Helping Children Pray at Church

This one episode filled my heart with gratitude and awe, and I began reflecting on what I have experienced this year introducing children to embodied prayer. Here is a bit of what I have learned. What might you add to this list?

### 1. Get Moving

Children do not suffer from the body/spirit dualism many adults do. Encourage them to use their bodies and senses as they pray.

## **2. Rhyme Time**

Rhyming prayers are easy to teach, especially with hand or body motions. Patricia Mathson has written many such prayers for children. I love the prayer “I can pray in so many ways.” You can see some of [Patricia’s books here](#).

## **3. Singing is Praying Twice**

We keep a list of our congregation’s “Top 10 Greatest Hits,” and we sing them with the children repeatedly during the music portion of our Church School program.

## **4. BIG Movement**

Gross motor activity helps boys in particular, as well as children with spectrum disorders, to internalize prayer. Our “path of faith,” which every child walked each week, repeating the words as they moved, helped the children come to know these words intimately. They can then connect the words to other actions (serving communion, collecting food for the food pantry, etc.) as prayerful responses to God’s grace in their lives.

## **5. Silence is OK**

Do NOT be afraid of silence! Guided imagery prayer is very effective with children. We close our eyes, and focus on God coming inside us on our breath. I ask the children to “Show Jesus what is in your heart,” and then to let these images fade. I then say, “Now it is just you and Jesus in your heart together loving each other.” The expressions on their faces tell me all I need to know. This entire group (30 kids ages 6 to 5<sup>th</sup> grade) will sit quietly together, praying for up to 10 minutes.

## **6. Learn From the Children**

Every other week or so, I invite the children to share how prayer is for them. I continually find myself awed by the intimacy and love they experience, and I am SO grateful that they are not too shy to talk about it!

## **7. Involve the Congregation**

Invite the children to share their gifts of prayer with the congregation. Our children have led breath prayer, served communion, and read Scripture as part of the worshiping community. Piles of shoes in the narthex testify to our children’s view of the sanctuary as holy ground.

## Conclusion

Praying with children gives them a gift that lasts a lifetime. Children who pray breathe hope and life into the faith community of which they are a part.

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*Dr. Elizabeth L. Windsor is Director of Christian Education at Sudbury United Methodist Church in Sudbury, MA. She also serves as the Christian Education Resource Assistant to the Bishop of the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church.*