

Children's and Youth Ministry at St. James

The Children's and Youth Ministry programs at St. James are centered on formation, relationship building, and helping children and youth feel connected to the life of the parish. Over the past few years, these programs have become more consistent and stable, and there is now a strong foundation in place to continue growing intentionally in the coming years.

Children's Ministry

Children's Chapel continues to be the primary children's formation offering on Sunday mornings. On average, we see 10–15 children each week, supported by 8 rotating volunteers. The children show up excited to engage with one another and with their Children's Chapel leaders. Strong friendships have formed through this ministry, and volunteers consistently express how much they enjoy serving. Lessons are lectionary based and are followed by a game or craft to reinforce learning in a fun, hands on way.

The **nursery** is staffed by 6 nursery workers and serves an average of 10 children weekly, providing dependable care during both the 8:30 and 10:30 services.

Communion Instruction for kindergarten through 4th grade has been very successful. I help Fr. De plan and lead this class, and participation has been consistent. From 2023–2025, 35 children have completed Communion Instruction and received their First Communion. The class focuses on hands on learning, including making unleavened bread and learning how to set the altar. Children are able to experience the Eucharist up close and conclude the class by receiving Communion in front of the parish, surrounded by their families and loved ones.

Vacation Bible School has grown noticeably over the past two years. Attendance has increased from around 100 children prior to 2023 to approximately 150 children, supported by roughly 30 volunteers and summer camp staff. VBS has become an important foundation for faith formation for children, while also offering meaningful volunteer opportunities for parishioners and helping the wider parish build relationships with our youngest members.

Seasonal and parish wide events, including the **Christmas Eve Pageant, Easter Egg Hunt, and Halloween Festival/Trunk or Treat**, continue to increase family involvement and parish engagement. Each event brings approximately 50 families to the church and offers opportunities for families to experience formation together, often leading to deeper involvement in parish life.

You Group, a formation program for 5th and 6th graders and their parents, has grown in participation over the past several years. The program currently includes 6 active families, up from 2–3 families in previous years. Families share a meal together,

participate in faith based lessons, and often break into youth only and parent only groups to allow space for deeper conversation. The evening always concludes with Compline in the chapel. This program has become an important bridge between Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry.

Looking ahead for Children's Ministry

In the coming year, I would like to:

- Expand formation opportunities for younger children throughout the year, not only during seasonal or holiday events
- Continue strengthening You Group through intentional curriculum and ongoing feedback from participating families
- Create clearer and more frequent opportunities for parent involvement, particularly around volunteering and formation support

Youth Ministry

Youth Ministry currently serves approximately 20 active youth who participate in weekly programming. There has been a clear increase in participation since 2023. When I began working at St. James, there were no consistent dates or times set for youth formation. Participation is now steady, with at least 10 youth in attendance each week.

Weekly offerings include:

- Sunday evening **Youth Group**, centered on lectionary based discussion followed by games or creative activities
- Wednesday gatherings, which rotate between volunteering at **Prodisee Pantry** and **postcard ministry** led by parishioner Karen Myrick

Youth Confirmation is offered annually, and I regularly reach out to youth who may not initially be involved to help them stay connected. I also coordinate parish mentors for each confirmand. Over the past two years, 19 youth have been confirmed, with steady participation throughout the process.

Youth trips continue to be a vital part of the program, including annual fun trips and mission opportunities. Participation in mission trips has gradually increased. These trips strengthen relationships among youth and create lasting memories connected to their church home. Youth have served and learned within communities in Atlanta, Chattanooga, and Charleston, gaining exposure to communities they may not otherwise experience.

One of the strongest aspects of the youth program is the relationships among the youth themselves. They regularly spend time together outside of church and have formed a strong and supportive community.

Looking ahead for Youth Ministry

Jr. High EYC

I would like to place more focus on Jr. High EYC, as this age is critical for long term engagement. Plans include:

- A possible Jr. High retreat at Beckwith
- A local mission or service focused experience

The goal is to strengthen consistency and deepen relationships at this stage in order to maintain the growth we see in Sr. High EYC. The groundwork for this is already being laid through the growth of You Group.

Sr. High Opportunities

I would also like to offer additional opportunities beyond Sunday and Wednesday evenings, such as:

- An early morning Bible study, potentially including parents
- Active gatherings, such as a pickleball league once the new space is completed or a walking club
- Monthly fun gatherings (bowling, ice skating, trampoline parks), which currently happen but not as regularly as desired

These offerings would help meet students where they are while continuing meaningful formation.

Acolyte Ministry

The acolyte program has grown, particularly among younger acolytes, and youth involvement in worship continues to be encouraged. The **acolyte trip to the National Cathedral** has added significant value to the program, offering youth a connection to the wider Episcopal Church. This experience has created enthusiasm, strengthened relationships, and allowed acolytes to engage with other Episcopal communities.

Looking ahead

I would like to work with clergy to plan an Acolyte Retreat focused on:

- Strengthening understanding of liturgy

- Re-engaging older acolytes
- Encouraging leadership and accountability

I would also like to begin a monthly acolyte check in, which could take the form of a dinner, practice, or informal gathering, to maintain morale and continue strengthening the program.

Forming a Diocesan Connection

Youth regularly participate in service beyond St. James through local outreach, but our engagement at the diocesan level is limited. While some youth have participated in diocesan events, including Convention and the Province IV meeting, there is room for growth.

Looking ahead, I would like to:

- Partner more intentionally with other Episcopal churches in the diocese for joint youth events
- Encourage greater participation in diocesan offerings such as Happening, which is offered annually but has only included a small number of St. James youth in recent years

What is to come...

The Children's and Youth Ministry programs at St. James are built on consistency, strong relationships, and steady participation. Moving into 2026, the focus will be on sustainable growth that supports children, youth, and families as active and connected members of the parish. A strong foundation has been established, and the next step is to expand opportunities and deepen engagement across the parish.