

## **The Blessing Center**

The initial impulse for the creation of the Blessing Center came from a children's "chapel time" ministry established within Memorial United Presbyterian Church, 343 West Ankeney Mill Rd, Xenia, OH, by Jacqueline Nowak. Dr. Nowak, the Christian Educator at that church, realized that many of those in the day preschool program using the church facilities had no contact with any of the other activities of the church. In order to bridge that gap, create a warm feeling among the children for the worship service in the sanctuary, and to receive some instruction, nurture and encouragement, she began a weekly worship service in the sanctuary that placed an emphasis on rituals, symbols, story telling, prayer and blessing. The service was modified as the response of the children was noted, so that story telling in that context became less significant, while ritual, sharing of prayer concerns and the individualized blessing of each child became the pattern.

That program ran with the approval of the Session of the church and the cooperation of the preschool staff, under the leadership of its director. The underlying principles became a point of reflection and refinement and these rose to be of key importance.

### Needs which gave birth to The Blessing Center included:

- 1) to affirm, preserve and nurture the holiness of children.
- 1) to encourage listening as a practice of Christian education, Christian worship and Christian pastoral nurture.
- 2) to bring into the life of the church a deeply grounded understanding and practice of a blessing ministry.
- 3) to provide opportunities for individuals and communities of children to pray, using their own words, symbols, movements, in the presence of caring adults.
- 4) to lay the theoretical foundation for the practices listed above that reclaims major theorists in theology, education, psychology and sociology.
- 5) to provide a clear-cut alternative to the practices of demeaning the holy status of children that underlie child evangelism mentalities and the postponement of their rightful standing in the church – with implications for all the age levels that follow childhood.
- 6) to develop a coalition of people from the parish, the seminary, the child-care arena to practice Blessing Based and Holy Listening ministries in untested arenas toward the goal of an unfragmented life of faith across age levels, across sectarian lines, across in-church and out-of-church ministries.

### Foundational Understandings upon which ministries of The Blessing Center are developed include:

Holiness of the child

Importance of rituals of song and action

Prayer sharing

Blessing of each child by name

In its formation in 2003, the Blessing Center Advisory Board expressed confidence that

- 1) The BC was not a financially dependent operation; basic practices would function in and around existing ministries without outside funding, as long as the Center was part of Memorial United Presbyterian Church.
- 2) It was expected that new families, colleagues, ministry partners and other professionals who saw the values of this approach would find an ongoing opportunity, in a variety of settings, through sharing and mutual encouragement, to gradually place this approach as a continuing reality of practicing the faith, within a diversity of congregational settings and other faith-based institutions.

Goals and objectives of The Blessing Center from its inception and early years (2003-2005) included:

- 1) The expansion of the basic ministries of Holy Listening, prayer and blessing into youth ministry, family-life spiritual nurture and education, other Church school programs and faith-based initiatives; training of practitioners; development of pastoral care aspects of the ministries; the enhancement of parish worship.
- 2) The development of a sound and thorough foundation document to be widely shared in a variety of accessible forms (print, e-print, web page) that would include carefully annotated bibliographies.
- 3) Continued development of partnerships with people, ministries and organizations whose goals are consistent with that of The Blessing Center.

Those understood to benefit from relationship with The Blessing Center:

- 1) an expanding network of educators and youth ministers.
- 2) seminary students.
- 3) leaders in relevant secular employment.
- 4) a broad population of people enabled to come to the awareness of this ministry through publications, email and post communications and informational public meetings.
- 5) parents, grandparents and other caregivers of children at home and in institutions.
- 6) other communities of children, youth and older adults.

Continuing Development of The Blessing Center

- 1) Through development of a foundational document addressing the pros and cons of the basic understandings of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in straight forward fashion, opening up the supportive literature from a long history of similar expressions – to be shared in multiple forms for increased accessibility.
- 2) Public informational meetings targeted to various populations.
- 3) Presentations at meetings of Christian educators and youth ministry and clergy groups.
- 4) Training sessions in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and Holy Listening with parents, grandparents and other caregivers.

- 5) Development of a website, enhancement of an existing Blessing Center power point and DVD presentations.

### Transitions

The initial statement of goals and objectives arose as the ministry, so simply begun, changed to become less a church sponsored activity within the job description of the Director, Jacqueline Nowak. Staff changes within the church meant that Dr Nowak became a member of the staff of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, necessitating the creation of an entirely separate guiding entity. Thus in 2004 the Blessing Center created, from a loose group of volunteer enthusiasts, an Advisory Board of nine people, with a President, Treasurer and Secretary. The Blessing Center Director serves as Ex-Officio officer of the Board.

The Director and a member of the Board attended training sessions taught by Dr. Leanne Hadley, with [the then] First Steps Spirituality Center for Hurting Children and Teens, a ministry in Colorado Springs and were certified to teach and practice a ministry central to that organization. Entitled Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, it is a "One-on-One Ministry of Healing". Shortly thereafter, because of the great similarity of basic assumptions, The Blessing Center sought and received affiliate status with First Steps.

An opportunity to teach the ways and ideas of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture arose through United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH and the Seminary gave its endorsement to the Blessing Center program, as it was undergoing expansion. Memorial Presbyterian Preschool Chapel for the preschool children continued under new leadership, ministries to parents and parents-to-be thrived through a Baby Prayer Booklet and Blanket ministry, out of which evolved a Prayer Shawl Ministry (the presentation of shawls with a blessing to those in stress). Another distinct Blessing Center practice, included certificate training in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture which provided foundations, exploration and practice in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture for parents, grandparents, children's teachers and caregivers. A wider audience was tapped also of those wishing to learn the basic model of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, in order to be enabled to use and/or modify aspects of BBSN for their particular ministries among homeless families, hospice patients, summer camping programs, youth in church and community, senior adults, dementia patients, etc.

Later a new program was added – one that trains youth and those working with teens in problem solving – "Stepping Up to Wholeness." This training practice originated with First Steps Spirituality Center in Colorado Springs and was added to the training roster for The Blessing Center. The program is designed to give adults a system for helping young people, and offer youth themselves, a process by which they can work through problems in ways that are more healthy than some common acting out or repressing tactics.

The development of the rationale for these ministries took a great leap forward when The Blessing Center Director, Jacqueline Nowak; the Director of First Steps Spirituality Center, Leanne Hadley and Dr. Donald Rogers, Colonel Cowden Emeritus Professor of Christian Education at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH, a member of The Blessing Center Board, enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry degree

program at United Seminary. Some ten others joined this effort, where Ms Nowak and Ms Hadley both studied as students and served as mentors, as the group did in-depth exploration of the foundation assumptions of BBSN. The settings so explored were The Blessing Center's *Children's Chapel*, *First Steps' Pastoral Care for Children and Teens in Crisis*, *Grief Ministry* in Omaha, NE, *Infant and Toddler Christian Formation* in Oklahoma City, *Preschoolers Christian Nurture through Congregational Grandfathering*, CO, *New Member Assimilation* in FL, *Caring for Stephen's Ministry Caregivers*, OH, *Welcoming Children into the Worship Community*, OH, *Nurturing Teens through Journeys toward Confirmation*, OH. (Doctor of Ministry documents are available in the archive section of [www.theblessingcenter.org](http://www.theblessingcenter.org))