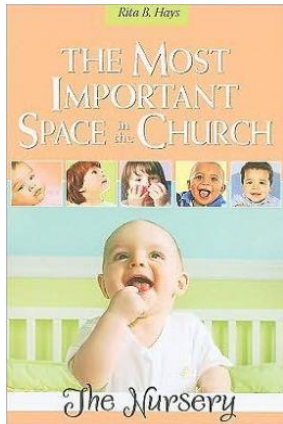


Cradle Roll Ministry



**From a webinar presented by
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PRC – Practical Resources for Churches**

Introduction



One of the books we have at the resource center is called [*The Most Important Space in the Church: The Nursery*](#). Whether you agree with that or not, offering ministry for the youngest members of the body of Christ *is* important. It's not just babysitting but is actually the foundation for the future vitality of any church. In the nursery is where spiritual formation can first take place; it's also where many visitors first meet and interact with other church members and can experience warmth and acceptance. Congregations that have a rich and spiritually rooted ministry with babies and toddlers are establishing a faith formation pattern that can continue through all age levels. But experiencing a pandemic requiring social distancing rules means that churches need to expand their ministry to our babies and toddlers beyond the doors of our church nurseries.

Why have a cradle roll ministry?

Scriptural basis

There is a scriptural basis for ministry to the youngest members of the congregation. In Deuteronomy 6:5-7 we read these words: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up."

I'm sure you're all familiar with the scene in the gospels where Jesus blesses the children. In Luke 18:15-16 we read: "People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. Then Jesus called them to him and said, 'Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children.'" Note that the text says that people were bringing *babies* to Jesus.

Evangelism and hospitality

Ministry to babies and toddlers also provides an opportunity for evangelism and hospitality. Many parents who don't regularly attend church services or belong to a congregation will still want to have their child baptized. Connecting with and supporting the families of baptized children leads to many of them joining a congregation when they see that they and their child are welcomed and valued.

Research findings

Research on brain development during the first three years of life shows that this is a time of critical importance in many areas and is a prime time for churches to make their first impressions on children. The church nursery can provide a place where God's love is felt by children through warm physical contact, soothing surroundings and music, and a reverent and spiritual atmosphere.

What cradle roll ministry can include

- Parenting support
- Baptisms and baptism preparation
- Worship that welcomes
- Church-home communication
- Church nursery
- Invitation to Sunday school

Parenting classes, etc.

Some churches offer prenatal/parenting classes or gatherings where expectant parents or new parents can get together and share experiences. You might want to invite experienced parents to these, as they can be very helpful and serve as mentors to the new parents. There are many books about parenting from a Christian perspective which can be used for these programs. A parenting book club can be based on the books [*Faithful Families*](#) and [*Liturgy of the Ordinary*](#). You can also offer classes where parents and children do activities together or have a group based on a topic such as: ways to find rest, ways to nourish (body, soul, mind), natural consequences for actions, planned obsolescence (creating a work ethic, or getting out the door).

Some churches have an annual party where the baby and parents are the guests of honor. Gatherings of parents may take place in-person or online or both. You could also create a closed Facebook group for parents of young children or other ways for parents to continue relationships. Just commiserating with parents and their struggles is important.

There are programs for moms, such as the [MOMCO](#) (short for Mom Community) but don't forget your dads. [*Who Let the Dads Out*](#) is a book about a [movement in England](#) where fathers (or father-figures) and their toddlers or preschoolers get together for monthly sessions. Children and adults share fun activities and fathers can talk about parenting and faith with each other. Perhaps there is a need in your area for a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren.

Baptisms and baptism preparation

Parents who don't regularly attend church often still want their child to be baptized. This is a wonderful opportunity to build relationships between the pastor and other church members with the family of the child. Depending on the church and pastor, baptism preparation may be a simple talk or a series of formal classes. There are denominational resources that can be used for parents and godparents for a baptism preparation meeting or classes. For instance, the Lutheran Church ELCA offers the [Washed and Welcomed Sourcebook](#) for clergy and others involved in baptismal preparation classes. They also have a book for parents called [Washed and Welcomed: Living the Promises of Baptism](#). In larger churches, a baptism class also provides an opportunity for families of babies to be baptized to get to know one another.



Gifts are often given to families of baptized babies, perhaps in a baptism basket which might include such items as a Bible storybook or CD of children's Christian music. Sometimes the family is presented with a knitted or crocheted white baptism blanket made by a member of the congregation. A faith chest is also a wonderful gift. This can be a handmade or purchased wooden chest, a decorative suitcase, or any sort of nice-looking box. It will be used as the baby grows to store reminders of milestones and events of their faith life. These can be gifts, such as a Bible, or things the child has made.

For more information about making and using faith chests, check out "[Make a Faith Chest](#)" on the Building Faith website and "[Faith Milestone - What IS a Faith Chest?](#)" on the Vintage Grace blog.

Once a baby is baptized (or otherwise becomes connected to the church), their name is added to the cradle roll, which may be an actual physical display in the church such as a banner or plaque with the baby's name, birthdate, and baptism date. Sometimes photos of the babies are posted as well. One church uses a wooden cradle hanging on a wall for each baby.

During the baptismal service, the entire congregation makes a promise to help nurture them in the faith, surround them with love, and pray for them. It is a good idea to remind the congregation periodically about those vows and involve them as much as possible in your cradle roll ministry.

Worship that welcomes

Not every parent wants to leave their child in the church nursery. They may feel uncomfortable or just want to spend more time with their child, especially if they work full-time. It can be a challenge to create a welcoming place for babies and toddlers in your worship and doing so depends on the willingness of your congregation to deal with noise and disruptions during the service. It may be necessary to “educate” people to be welcoming to young families. There are many articles online about the importance of including everyone in our worship services.

In the past, churches had crying rooms, which usually were areas in the back or side of the sanctuary with glass windows so that the service could be seen and heard by those inside, without the congregation being disturbed by the noise of babies and children. Nowadays most people are against the idea of crying rooms, believing that they ostracize those inside. Some churches now have a space for children (and parents) right in the sanctuary, often called “playgrounds.” There is child-size furniture, toys, and activities to do. There may also be rocking chairs for parents with babies.

A church can also be welcoming to families with babies and young children by:

- reserving parking spaces close to the church for those with babies and all their paraphernalia,
- providing families with care packages with age-appropriate activities and snacks,
- having changing stations in the women’s and men’s restrooms, and
- having a space such as a nursery or other room where parents can take a crying child and including a video feed or speaker so parents can still connect with the service.

With COVID-19 now a concern, consider carefully how you support children in worship. You may need to rethink giving out things such as worship bags and think about how to protect families in bathrooms and diaper changing areas. For many families, worship may need to move online. Give them information about livestreamed and recorded services. Stay in touch with them through care packages and check-ins. Don’t forget to send something for older siblings.



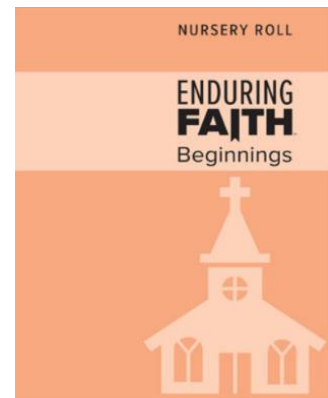
Church home communication

Regular mailings by email or snail mail help the church to stay in touch with the family after their baby is baptized. Birthday cards or postcards can be sent as well as newsletters with information about what's going on in the church. Gifts can be mailed out as well, such as a Bible storybook or CD of Christian children's music.



There are even products sold by religious publishers with prepackaged materials to be mailed out when the child turns a certain age. One of these is [Splash!](#) which is sold by Augsburg Fortress, the Lutheran ELCA publisher. There are three age levels with monthly Parent Pages which offer “ideas for faith-filled play, worship, meals, and prayer together.” There is also a music CD as part of the program. Additional products available are *Wonderfully Made: A Keepsake Book of Faith Moments*, greeting cards for birthdays, baptism, and baptism birthdays, as well as *We Do!: A Guide for Godparents*.

Concordia Publishing House from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod offers the [Enduring Faith Beginnings Nursery Roll Packet](#), with material to send out to parents for the first years of their child's life. The church periodically sends the family materials from the packet to nurture the child's spiritual, emotional, and physical development. The packet contains a suggested schedule for when the materials should be delivered to the family.



Included in the nursery roll:

- 3 parent booklets
- Baptism booklets for sponsors
- 5 children's books
- 3 birthday cards and envelopes
- 3 Baptism birthday cards and envelopes

If you're creative, you might want to consider your own series of mailings for families of babies in your church.

Sending regular communication by either snail mail or email also gives you the opportunity to include a personal note and ask the parents if there's anything the church can do to help them, such as babysitting or stopping by to help out or just talk.

Church nursery

An article on the Children's Ministry Magazine website entitled [“What New Parents Need Most from Your Nursery”](#) discusses the concerns parents of babies and toddlers have when leaving their child in a church nursery.

In order to create a safe environment for babies and toddlers, it's a good idea to have a written Church Nursery Policy. If you have a Safe Church or Safe Sanctuaries Policy already in place, make sure that your nursery policy adheres to that policy to ensure that workers are screened and that there are two adults at all times in the nursery. It's also important to have the proper adult to child ratio in place and a sign-in/sign-out policy.

A sanitary environment requires a regular schedule to clean and disinfect toys and other objects in the nursery. Make sure that parents know that children who show signs of illness won't be able to be cared for in the nursery.

All nursery workers should be properly trained and receive an orientation.

Forms that are part of your policy include applications and job descriptions for workers as well as registration forms for parents to fill out. Make sure the registration form asks for information such as allergies, how to contact the parents, if necessary, who has permission to pick up the child, and other important information.

Have information about the church nursery as well as your nursery policy available for parents.

Have a list of necessary supplies and make sure items are replaced when used. Make sure all cribs, changing tables, etc. are safe and there have been no recalls on them. Is the room bright and cheerful? Parents are reluctant to leave their child in a room that looks outdated or drab.

[“The Church Nursery”](#) is an article by Sharon Ely Pearson of Church Publishing with a lot of useful information. The Faith Formation Learning Exchange website has an article entitled [“Creating a High-Quality Church Nursery.”](#)

COVID-19 necessitates additional measures to ensure the safety of those in the church nursery. You will need to follow the regulations of your town or county, as well as those of your denomination to determine if you can even open your church nursery to children. Will you be taking temperatures or initiating any new procedures to screen babies for illness? How will you handle contact tracing if necessary? These and other questions need to be addressed if you want to operate your nursery during a time of pandemic.

If your church nursery will be closed, you can still continue your ministry to babies, toddlers, and their families by offering activities online such as story times, morning blessings, snack time show and tell, and playlists of Christian children's music. Consider also offering socially distanced family time together such as a hopscotch challenge, walking the labyrinth, harvest photos, etc.

Church nursery – not just babysitting

Many churches provide faith formation experiences for children, youth, and adults but don't consider providing them for babies and toddlers.

An article called [“Ways Your Church Nursery Can Really Teach Babies”](#) on the Children's Ministry Magazine website talks about the Cradle Roll class of Saturn Road Church of Christ in Garland, Texas. “Saturn Road's philosophy is that just putting babies in nurseries until they are 3 is a waste of time. So, they start teaching as soon as the children enter the church, even when babies are just a few days old.”

The babies are divided into three sections of 10 children or less: birth to 7 months, 8 to 14 months, and 15 to 21 months.

The article states that when observing the children, it's clear that “these tiny babies are learning. Even the littlest ones kick their legs, bounce up and down, sway side to side with the songs, and pay rapt attention in class. For the older babies, once they can talk, it's obvious that they're learning from their classes.”

The classes use repetition to give the babies stability. There is one adult for every two babies. The teachers kneel or sit on pillows at half-circle tables while the youngest babies are in jump chairs around the tables. Every baby has a chewy animal toy and key ring to play with. In the class for older babies, there are small, cushioned chairs to sit in.

The classes are taught entirely in song, with the songs written on laminated cards and placed on three big rings. When class begins, the babies are welcomed with a song that uses their names. The babies are then encouraged to pat the Bible which stays in a special holder for the class. Many parents have told the teachers that their baby's first word was “Bible.” As a story is told (or sung) the teacher uses appropriate toys and props. Often there is a prop for each baby to hold and touch and hand motions that the adults teach the babies to do.

An article on the Children's Ministry website called [“Understanding Children's Development from Age 0 to 3”](#) has useful information about how babies learn as they develop.



Nursery curriculum

There are a number of options if you'd like to use a prepared curriculum in your church nursery. Here is a quick overview of some of what's available. You can click on the links for more information.

[Deep Blue Nursery](#) helps children learn the Bible through movement, songs, art activities, and more. Monthly Bible stories and Bible verses are shared using a learning-center approach with colorful visuals.

[Growing in Grace and Gratitude Toddlers](#) comes from the Presbyterian Church USA and is for children ages 1 through 3.

[Play-n-Worship](#) comes from Group, a non-denominational publisher, and has two age levels: Toddlers & Twos, and Preschool. Some of Group's other Sunday school curriculums include resources for infants and toddlers.

[Teeny Tykes & Tunes](#) is a faith-based music curriculum for infants and toddlers.

[Wee Wonder](#) is a year-round 52-session curriculum for two-year-olds from the publisher of the Mennonite Church.

Frolic

[Frolic](#) is a family of resources that covers several of the categories we've already talked about: parenting classes, church-home communication, and church nursery ministry. It comes from Sparkhouse, the ecumenical branch of the Lutheran Church ELCA's publisher.

There are online downloadable resources as well as physical ones. An annual subscription for the online resources is based on the number of children on your cradle roll. The physical resources include a Bible storybook, board books and picture books, nursery cards for parents, and music CDs; these can be purchased separately.

Frolic includes resources in three areas:

- Frolic Faith Classes are offered using downloadable curriculum in two areas. Bible Story Classes build on stories in the *Frolic First Bible*. Theme Classes are based on the Frolic board and picture books.
- The Nursery Guide is an online collection of articles, checklists, etc. to plan nursery ministry. New content is added throughout the year.
- Monthly Enewsletters are sent to parents and are customized based on the child's age and month of the year.

In addition, there are reproducibles online including nametag templates, diaper bag tags, and sign-in sheets.



Invitation to Sunday school

Once a child reaches age three (or whatever age your Sunday school begins with) don't forget to send an invitation for the child to start Sunday school. Hopefully, if you've formed a relationship with the family, they'll realize the value of enrolling their child in your Sunday school. Then the faith formation which began through your cradle roll ministry can continue throughout the various stages of the child's life.

Additional Resources

Books on Parenting

[*Bless this Mess: A Modern Guide to Faith and Parenting in a Chaotic World*](#)

[*Expectant Parents: Preparing Together for the Journey of Parenthood*](#)
[*Little Visits for Toddlers*](#)

[*Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship*](#)

[*Parenting on Point*](#)

[*Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Became Parents*](#)

[*Your Baby Is for Loving*](#)

Books on the Church Nursery

[*The Most Important Space in the Church: The Nursery*](#)

[*The Safe and Caring Church Nursery*](#)

Books on Teaching Infants and Toddlers

[*101 Great Games for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Active, Bible-Based Fun for Christian Education*](#)

[*Age-Right Play*](#)

Articles Online

[*The Caring Checklist Your Church Nursery Really Needs*](#)

[*Dear Parents with Young Children in Church*](#)

[*How to Encourage Active Learning in Your Church Nursery*](#)

[*Tips for Taking Your Toddler to a Religious Service*](#)

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