

A New Season of Family Ministry at St. Stephen's

Step One: Listening (Spring 2026)

It began with a question: how can St. Stephen's better engage and support children, youth, and their families in their life of faith? Last fall, conversations with the Family Ministry Guild led us to commission a broad discernment process — one that grew well beyond an initial review of Sunday morning children's formation to encompass the full range of our family ministry offerings. With the help of Emily Gowdy Canady, our consultant who serves as Missioner for Lifelong Christian Formation in the Diocese of East Carolina, we spent the spring gathering input through small group listening sessions, larger conversations, and a parish-wide survey. More than 100 people participated.

What we heard was rich and honest. Families love Palmer Hall — its warmth, accessibility, and the way it invites children into genuine leadership and worship. Seasonal events like the Live Nativity, Advent wreath-making, and the Easter egg hunt hold a cherished place in our common life. Parents deeply value our staff and the relational heart of our youth ministry offerings. And across the board, people care — deeply — about the spiritual formation of children, young people, and their families. We also heard some harder things: a children's Sunday formation hour that didn't always engage all children the way we hoped; a transition from Palmer Hall to the main church that felt abrupt for many families; a desire for more community, more outreach, and more resources for parents to nurture faith at home. These were gifts, too.

Step Two: Discerning and Recommending (June 2026)

With that feedback in hand, our family ministry staff team, Family Ministry Guild members, and other key lay leaders got to work. In June, those conversations and feedback synthesized into a set of recommendations organized around several areas: Palmer Hall and the transition to the main church; children's Sunday formation; different elements of youth ministry; parent spirituality and formation; and communications.

A few themes ran through all of it. First, build on what is already working — the warmth, the relationships, and beloved seasonal traditions. Second, meet families where they are, which means offering a variety of approaches to formation rather than a single model. Third, create clearer pathways and milestones — so that as children and young people grow, they experience their faith journey as a coherent, welcoming progression rather than a series of disconnected programs.

Among the most significant recommendations:

1. Shifting children's Sunday formation away from a primary emphasis on *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* toward a locally tailored hybrid approach using multiple curricula, emphasizing embodied, active learning.
2. Moving youth Confirmation to eighth grade, so that it serves as a launchpad into high school youth ministry. We are also incorporating new curricular resources and added field trips/guest speakers to enliven the material.
3. Youth Group will now be a three-part evening structure: middle school (5:30–6:30), a joint dinner (6:30–7:00), and then high school (7:00–8:00). This replaces the old format of middle and high school together.
4. Revamping Many Parents, One Vine — our primary formation offering for parents of all ages — into a series-based format anchored by guest speakers and facilitators, with topics drawn from the landscape of family life and faith. Future plans for fostering parent spirituality and fellowship include more small groups, deeper emphasis on scripture, expanded digital formation offerings, and resources for faith at home.
5. Deepening fellowship and community-building opportunities for tweens in the fifth-to-sixth-grade transition. A new welcome event, Caroline Harris co-leading Palmer Hall monthly, and inviting 4th/5th graders into main church services as a bridge.
6. Creating liturgical milestones — commissioning services and rites of passage — to honor the moments when young people step into new leadership (e.g. acolytes, ushers, choristers, etc.) and belonging.

St. Stephen's also applied for a substantial grant from the Lilly Endowment that, if received, would provide significant resources to develop a fully customized curriculum and expand the family ministry team. We will hear back in December.

Step Three: Planning and Implementation (July & August 2026)

This summer, those recommendations have become plans — and the plans have become action.

Children's Formation

Our children's Sunday morning formation hour is being reimagined from the ground up. We have reorganized into three classrooms: one for ages four through kindergarten, one for grades one through three, and one for grades four and five. Whitney Robertson — who previously helped develop our hybrid Level III curriculum — has been contracted to build new hybrid lesson plans for the fall, drawing on four carefully chosen resources: *Love First*, *Sparkhouse Whirl*, *Mini-Revolutions*, and a few enduring elements of *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. The classrooms themselves have been rearranged to welcome all kinds of children, prioritizing embodied learning and movement, story, craft, listening, and creating. Guiding all of it is a newly articulated set of core values for children's formation at St. Stephen's — centered on the conviction that every child is cherished as God's

beloved, and that formation is a shared, mutual spiritual experience for adults and children alike. Formation at St. Stephen's follows a scriptural thread: loving ourselves, loving God, and loving our neighbors.

In practice, this means a formation hour designed to welcome children of all energy levels and learning styles — including those with neurodiversity — with activities rooted in Scripture and structured around a consistent weekly routine that builds familiarity for children, parents, and volunteers alike. Every Sunday at pickup, parents will receive a brief handout summarizing what was studied, offering a few follow-up questions for the ride home, and previewing the following week's lesson. Palmer Hall bulletins will also feature a new take home activity for parents to help discuss topics throughout the week.

Volunteer roles have been designed to be widely accessible and well-supported by staff, with orientation sessions offered both in person and virtually and planned lessons and supplies provided in advance. Throughout the fall, we will continue to seek feedback on how the new offerings are going, and adjust plans for the winter and spring accordingly. At the close of this program year, we will assess what worked best and make decisions about how to shape our curriculum going forward.

Youth Ministry

For youth, Sunday mornings will incorporate more intentional Bible study through a *Dwelling in the Word* format. Sunday evening youth group moves to a new three-part structure: middle school meets from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., all students share supper together from 6:30 to 7:00 p.m., and high school continues from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. This replaces the previous format of middle and high school meeting together, and allows for more age-appropriate conversation and programming at each level.

Confirmation

Confirmation is transitioning to an eighth-grade model — a change that positions it as a meaningful launchpad into high school youth ministry. This year serves as a bridge, with two parallel tracks: ninth graders and above complete Track One in the fall, and eighth graders run Track Two in the winter and spring. Each track includes five sessions and a retreat. The curriculum shifts to *Faith Confirmed*, with guest speakers and field trips woven in alongside parent information sessions and a group book order for all participants.

Worship Ministries

Sixth graders will be welcomed into the main church with a liturgical commissioning as ushers, greeters, and readers at the 9:00 a.m. service — a meaningful rite of passage that gives them a clear role and a sense of belonging in the nave. This year we are also introducing family usher units: families with children from age six through middle school are invited to usher together at the 9:00 a.m. service, a wonderful way to bridge families with children at different stages. Acolytes and readers will train together in

three shared sessions rather than separately, and all youth worship ministers will be commissioned together on September 20. Looking ahead, a youth-led Sunday is planned for May 2, 2027 — coinciding with our graduating high school senior recognition service.

Sixth Grade Transition

Intentional attention is being paid to the fifth-to-sixth-grade bridge. Incoming sixth graders will be welcomed with a new orientation event and a buddy system connecting them with older youth. Caroline will also engage monthly in Palmer Hall to build relationships with fourth and fifth graders before the transition arrives, and those older elementary students will be invited periodically into the main church service as a gentle, low-stakes preview of what's ahead.

Events and Community Life

This fall brings a full calendar of community-building events. Rally Sunday on September 13 will feature a Ministry Fair, commissioning services for our new liturgical ministers, and a social for parents of children through fifth grade. A family ministry party with food trucks is planned for Friday, October 2 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. And many of the seasonal gatherings that families have come to love — Blessing of the Animals, Advent wreath-making, the Live Nativity — will continue, anchoring our common life in rhythm and tradition.

Registration for the 2026-27 program year opens on August 27. We are so grateful for everyone who participated in this discernment process — for the honesty, the energy, and the love of this community that has made it possible. This is a new season, and we are glad to be walking into it together.