



A Children & Youth Ministry Conference

## Workshop Details

### **Making the Shift for Children From Participants to Leaders in Worship**

Led by Rev. Melissa Collier Gepford

Children are created to worship God—and they belong in the worshipping community. One of the greatest gifts we can offer is to welcome them fully, equip them to participate meaningfully, and empower them to lead.

In this workshop, we'll explore the theological foundation for including children in worship, then shift to the practical. You'll gain tools for equipping parents, staff, and leaders to welcome children and support their full engagement. We'll also share creative ideas and resources to help move from simply including children in worship to empowering them as worship leaders.

Wondering if children really belong in worship? Need help getting others on board? Looking for practical ways to engage children more deeply? This workshop is for you.

### **Engaging Children and Youth Through Music**

Led by Kevin Dolan

This experiential workshop explores how music can enrich interactive worship and learning. Kevin will share both the why and the how of using music in children's and youth ministry—offering hands-on experiences that help you learn from the inside out. Whether or not you consider yourself musical, you'll leave with practical tools to create meaningful, engaging programming for kids of all ages.

## **Are Youth Done? Connecting Students to Faith After High School**

Led by Ed Ostlund

What does research reveal about why students disengage from church after high school—and what can we do about it? This workshop explores how to help young people continue their faith journey beyond graduation. Join us to discover practical ways to equip young adults for a lifetime of faith formation.

## **Crossing the Gap: Approaching the Big Challenge in Your Ministry**

Led by Rev. Sally S. Wright

Every children's and youth ministry carries a vision—young people rooted in faith, growing in character, and equipped for life. But big challenges often stand in the way.

This workshop will help you identify the gap between where your ministry is and where God is calling it to be. Together, we'll explore how to name challenges with clarity, cast vision with hope, and develop faith-driven strategies to bridge the gap. You'll leave with tools to inspire your team, engage young people, and take confident steps toward the future you imagine.

## **Shared Challenges, Different Contexts: A Conversation on Youth Ministry**

Led by Angel Patterson and Virginia Anderson

Youth ministry looks different in every context—but challenges are everywhere. In this session, we'll name common struggles, explore how setting shapes those challenges, and share practical ways to adapt. Whether you serve in a rural, urban, or in-between setting, you'll leave with an actionable tool you can use right away.

## **Mr. Rogers in the Church: A Ministry of Radical Hospitality for Children**

Led by Emily Nelson Dixon

Drawing on the wisdom of Fred Rogers, this workshop explores how emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning can shape a welcoming, affirming children's ministry. We'll share practical ways to build caring connections and highlight how churches have meaningfully integrated children into worship experiences.



## What to Know About the New Testament as You Teach

(Optional Saturday Training)

Led by Rev. Dr. Philip S. Meckley

This course invites students to engage the New Testament in fresh and sometimes unexpected ways. Be prepared to un-learn, re-learn, and discover new pathways for grounding yourself in Scripture—for the sake of teaching others and shaping faith in the life of the Church. This course continues throughout the academic year as part of the Ministry Leadership Center Certificate Program. All are invited to this opening session.

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## Keynote & Workshop Leader Bios

### Rev. Dr. Erin Reed Cooper

Erin is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and has been serving in family ministry roles in congregations for over 20 years. Erin has four children of her own and lives in Richmond VA with some of those children and her wife, Emily. Erin earned her M.Div from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and her D.Ed.Min from Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta.

### Rev. Dr. Nelson Cowan

Nelson Cowan is the director of the Center for Worship and the Arts at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. A worship leader, liturgical theologian, and ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, he also teaches worship and church history at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Drew Theological School, and Wesley Theological Seminary. Nelson is married to Samantha, an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church.

### Rev. Melissa Collier Gepford

Rev. Melissa Collier Gepford is the Intergenerational Discipleship Coordinator of the Great Plains Conference, in which she helps congregations establish healthy discipleship systems. She grew up in East Texas and graduated from Perkins School of Theology, and as an ordained deacon, she connects church people to the world. Melissa is a writer, speaker, and resource curator. She enjoys drinking good coffee, working out, and testing her semi-green thumb. Melissa and her husband Bill enjoy dancing when they can and love playing with their son, Finnegan.



## Kevin Dolan (Dino O'Dell)

Kevin Dolan, known as Dino O'Dell, is a former elementary music teacher and preschool language arts educator. For 25 years, he led the youth band at Village Presbyterian Church. Today, he travels the country performing as a musician and storyteller for children and families. Learn more at [www.DinosaurODell.com](http://www.DinosaurODell.com).

## Ed Ostlund

Ed Ostlund is the UMC campus pastor at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He is an alum of the MLC certificate program and is currently a student at Austin Seminary with the MLC grad program. Ed began as a volunteer in youth ministry while working as a chef a decade ago. He and his wife have a toddler and reside in Lincoln.

## Rev. Sally S. Wright

Born and raised in Texas, Sally was formed by the rural people and towns that surrounded her. She holds a B.A. from Texas A&M University and an M.Div. from Austin Seminary. She founded [Wright Awareness Coaching](#) in spring of 2024 and enjoys working with an international client base. Her heart for both people as well as non-profit organizations have offered her a unique place in the world of coaching. When not coaching, Sally finds most of her curiosity is focused on family life. Sally and her wife, Karen, attempt to keep up with their twins, who are inevitably at a soccer game or a dance competition.

## Angel Patterson

Angel Patterson is the Director of Youth Ministry at Village Presbyterian Church. With hands-on experience serving in local youth ministry, she brings a fresh perspective and a heart for seeing young people thrive in their faith. Angel is excited to share practical insights and encouragement with fellow leaders. She is a California native, and she holds two Master's degrees from Fuller Seminary. Angel lives with her husband and two children in the Kansas City area, and she is a recent graduate of the Ministry Leadership Center's two-year certificate program.

## Virginia Anderson

Virginia Anderson is the Director of Christian Education at Belleville First United Methodist Church (Belleville, KS), overseeing ministry programming for young people in cradle to college. She has served in a number of children & youth ministry positions, both paid & unpaid, over the last 15+ years. Virginia has a passion for helping rural churches, regardless of size, live into their call to spread the Gospel & serve their communities. She & her husband Joel have 3 daughters who keep them busy, laughing, & humble! Virginia holds a Bachelor of Science in

Education from Baylor University & is a recent graduate of the Ministry Leadership Center's two-year certificate program.

## **Emily Nelson Dixon**

Emily Nelson Dixon serves as the Director of Christian Education at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, KS. With over two decades of experience in youth and children's ministries in the PC(USA) and ELCA churches, she is passionate about helping young people know they are deeply loved by God—just as they are. A committed ally, she strives to create open and affirming spaces where all feel welcome.

Since 2014, Emily has been teaching and coaching youth and children's ministers with MLC, guiding them to recognize and harness their God-given strengths in their ministry settings. With a background in musical theatre and a certificate in Youth Leadership from Columbia Seminary, she brings creativity and depth to her work.

At home, Emily and her spouse, Chris, keep up with their three energetic, hilarious children in a household filled with laughter, the aroma of delicious cooking, and an ever-growing collection of quirky art projects.

## **Matt Vaughan**

Matt holds a B.A. in Architecture from the University of Kansas and an M.A. in Youth Ministry from Southwestern College. He served two churches in youth ministry for over 17 years prior to founding the Ministry Leadership Initiative, a non-profit training organization based in Kansas City, which merged into MLC in 2024. Matt and his wife have two young adult children and reside in Prairie Village.

## **Rev. Dr. Philip S. Meckley**

Dr. Meckley serves as the Professor for Biblical Studies in the CYMT certificate program and Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina, Kansas. He holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt, an M.Div. from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, and an M.A. from the University of Notre Dame. He and his wife, Emily, have also both served as pastors (Phil is ELCA and Emily is UMC). Phil is passionate about seeing the Scriptures come alive in practical ministry settings, especially with children and youth.

