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Eric Norregaard
Wheaton Chinese Alliance Church

Ping Ng
Wheaton Chinese Alliance Church

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Making Online Children's Ministry Interactive in Wheaton, Illinois

Eric Norregaard

Ping Ng

The children's ministry at Wheaton Chinese Alliance Church (Wheaton, Illinois) needed to move online during the pandemic, but we didn't want television for kids; we wanted to increase interaction between teachers, children, and parents. Rather than broadcasting a standard worship service as a predominately one-way form of communication, we developed an approach which is online yet interactive.

We knew our traditional approach to Sunday school and worship with about 35 children would have to change when we moved online. Having a Zoom children's Sunday school back-to-back with a Zoom children's worship on the same day would simply be too long for children to endure. And even if they could endure it, it would still be mostly one-way communication. So we took our "Sunday School" and moved it to midweek while keeping an online children's worship service late Sunday afternoon where the Sunday School material is reviewed. And we structured it in such a way as to foster interaction.

Each week we prepare a Google Slides file containing what we call an eBible lesson. The Google Slides file includes a creative presentation of the Bible passage, sandwiched by embedded videos of one of our teachers introducing and then explaining the central meaning of the passage. All of this is crucial because we believe we need to do our creative best to clearly communicate God's Word, just as Jesus used creativity, parables, and metaphors when he spoke. But Jesus did more than that; he fostered interaction, he asked questions, he asked his disciples what they thought. And from this angle, probably the most important part of the packet in

terms of fostering interaction is the included homework questions for the children to complete along with their parents. The goal here is to draw the children out. Usually, there are three questions along with one or two challenge questions for the older children. We strive to create questions that do not have simple factual answers but that elicit thought and emotion such as “What do you think Jesus wants to clean up in your heart and in the world?” One of the questions always asks the child to draw some part of the Bible story. Because the children are at home and not in a classroom, they have as much time as they want to complete the assignment. We ask the parents to help the children complete the homework, take a picture of the completed assignment and email it to us. We don’t grade their homework and we don’t glance at it and file it away, but more of what we do with it later.

The “eBible lesson” is sent to parents’ email addresses and provides flexibility for the parents and children to finish the lesson on their own at their convenience. The lesson is in the form of a Google Slides file. We have been using Brite Awana as our basic curriculum as we find that it has enough material for our teachers to design their own lessons.

Then on Sunday, we have a 4:30-5:30pm children’s service on Zoom, using gallery view so the 15-20 children and 8-10 teachers can see each other. Unlike the traditional in-person worship, the children in their home environment are more relaxed as they participate in prayer, sing with muted audio, and respond to questions in the large group. One child will lead the opening prayer. Another child and his or her family will lead the singing. The children’s service teacher will show the same creative video presentation of the Bible passage that the children watched at midweek. There are six-minute, age-divided breakout rooms with about 6 children per room, led by the teachers. The questions in the breakout room usually include some of the questions given in the homework assignment in the eBible lesson. The children are encouraged to verbally share their answers to questions they have already answered in their written homework. Because they have had time to process these questions at midweek, they don’t feel put on the spot in their breakout rooms and can voice what they’ve previously written.

At the end, all the completed homework assignments that the parents have sent us will be shared with everyone on Zoom via Google Slides. The eBible lesson teacher will acknowledge each child's effort through words of encouragement. As the homework usually asks the children to draw some part of the Bible story, and as we can tell that the children usually spend significant time working on their drawings, we find that it’s important to look for the details expressed in the picture and notice the

insights the student revealed. Since we have strived to create open-ended homework questions that elicit the child's thoughts and emotions, and since the midweek setting has given them time and space to process and reflect on their answer, it's very important that we take time to pay attention to what they have written or drawn. Our goal is not to evaluate them, but to notice them. By taking time to appreciate the students' work, they realize that their work, feelings, and thoughts are being treated with respect. This incentivizes them to also do the next week's assignment as they know that their work will be appreciated. Oftentimes, this homework review segment becomes an additional teachable moment as the teacher finds the opportunity to bring up the main point of the lesson while commenting on the homework, but now the point is in direct connection to something the student has shared, so it is more powerful.

Essentially, we are - at midweek - doing our creative best to communicate God's Word and its application to their lives, then asking them to do their creative best to express their thoughts and feelings regarding God's presence in their lives. Then that bridges to Sunday when we pay attention to what they have expressed and give them encouragement. This is how we attempt to overcome the impersonal nature of the online world and foster interaction.

In making our online children's ministry interactive, we have had to respond to the needs and considerations of our unique situation. We found that parents with more than one child were unwilling to do more than one eBible lesson midweek. So, we merged five grade-specific classes into one online class in which all children from kindergarten through 5th grade were combined. So, the parent with two or three children may need to help all of them, but they are all working on the same lesson, thus making it easier on the parents.

One major challenge with having children of many abilities and maturity levels grouped together is the lack of individual attention possible; some children may be lost while others might be bored. Breakout rooms grouped according to age, and the attention given to each child's homework are two ways we have tried to address this challenge. For some of the older children who are tempted to withdraw and turn off their cameras, we have found it helpful to give them the responsibility to lead some part of the Sunday service. Again, we try to foster involvement to counter a tendency to self-isolate.

The online format is completely dependent on parental cooperation. The children in our region do not have email addresses or cell phones or social networks through which we can reach them. All communication has to go through the parents, and parental involvement is necessary to help the

children complete their assignments and send in their work. We have lost some children because there are parents who find this to be too much trouble.

At the same time, we have also gained new families and children as our members have told friends, even some out of state, about this ministry available to their children. Through making our online children's ministry interactive, we have been able to find ways to lead the children in worship, teach them God's Word, and respectfully listen to them as they share with us their own understanding of God and His connection to their lives.

This online and interactive approach is even more demanding than our previous approach. Not only does it require more time in preparation, but it requires more buy-in and time investment by parents. In our traditional approach, a parent needed only to drop off their child for us to teach. Now it requires their involvement to help their child learn what we are teaching. And it requires regular encouragement by phone or email from us to the parents to stay involved. This however is an opportunity for us to increase our interaction with families, for parents to be more involved in the spiritual development of their own children, and for the parents to see themselves as coworkers in the ministry of the Gospel.

Online children's ministry doesn't have to be impersonal. No, we cannot give hugs. But we can still learn to notice the children, draw out their thoughts and feelings, and listen carefully. Many children lack someone who is really willing to listen to them. We can learn to do that, even online. We can make online children's ministry interactive.

WHEATON CHINESE ALLIANCE CHURCH WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Year founded: 1978

Denomination or Network: Christian and Missionary Alliance

Languages Used in Worship: English, Mandarin, Cantonese

Weekly Attendance: (2019) 262

Location: Suburban, 25 miles west of Chicago

Website: wcac-cma.org

About the Authors

Ping Ng has served the children in Wheaton Chinese Alliance Church for 35 years as a teacher and for the last eight years as chair of the children's ministry.

Eric Norregaard served in Wheaton Chinese Alliance Church's youth ministry for 14 years and is now a teacher in the children's ministry.