



South Dakota Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Holy Playground Introduction Manuscript

The South Dakota Synod is excited and honored to receive a second grant from the Lilly Foundation, this time under their program: Nurturing Children in Worship and Prayer. I want to take a few moments to share with you a few details behind this grant and how your congregation can be involved. The synod's grant, called the Holy Playground, is one response to opportunities and concerns we have heard from congregations across South Dakota. A longing to welcome and nurture the faith of children and youth in our churches and communities.

The Holy Playground is one way we have sought to meet this need. There are a couple of important details to know from the start about the expectations from the Lilly Foundation. First, this initiative is focused on children, which for these purposes is birth through fifth grade. Second, the distinction "on children" is important because a focus of this initiative is on the unique brain development happening in children. The Holy Playground will help to teach about the brain science and developmental stages of children to help congregations understand the "why" behind the plan they seek to implement. Third, the focus is on Worship and Prayer.

To say it all in one sentence: The Holy Playground is an initiative to support congregations as they nurture children through worship in developmentally appropriate ways.

This grant will not address all of the concerns about welcoming children and youth into our congregations, nor was that the intent of this grant from the Lilly Foundation. Instead, we have the chance to be creative to address a more narrowly defined focus.

The Holy Playground takes its inspiration from the sandboxes that are commonplace in my playgrounds. The sandbox offers a few restrictions, rules, and social norms. There are wood boards to help it keep its shape and contain as much of the sand in one place as possible. There are rules and social norms that are important to follow, like no throwing or eating the sand. There is much creativity from cups that are used to build towers and spoons to dig tunnels. Possibilities are only limited by one's imagination. And, of course, every parent knows when their kid has been in the sandbox, because a certain percentage of it comes home, having snuck into a pocket and folds in clothes.

Our initiative seeks to offer a few rules and norms and then support congregations in being creative. There will be three cohort groups, each following a similar process. Congregations will compile a team to learn about the developmental stages of childhood and how they connect to elements of worship and prayer. These congregational teams will design a plan or program that makes sense in their context. The Initiative will then support congregation teams in implementation through mini-grants, coaching, and a resource catalog of research-supported ideas.

The first Cohort will begin in 2025 and focus on the diverse communities that we call Neighbors in Solidarity. This initial cohort will allow us to support communities more intentionally, for a longer period of time, and in ways that lift up culturally appropriate methods.



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The second and third cohorts will begin in 2026 and 2027. The time between now and the start of cohort 2026 is an important period to identify a program director, compile an advisory team of practitioners with expertise in childhood formation, and develop the catalog of resources that will support participating congregations.

More information will come as details are known. For now, know that the search for a program director is starting immediately with the hopes of filling the position in early 2025. Until a director is named, please reach out to me with any questions.

We give thanks for this opportunity through the Lilly Foundation, for the congregations of our synod who have helped inspire this work so far and give thanks for God's Spirit that continues to draw us closer in worship and prayer.