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Walk into the Bible

A church tells the oldest stories in a new way. A bold, one-of-a-kind mural project enriches children's ministry and helps heal wounds at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

by [Lynn Gosnell](#)

September 29, 2009

On a hot summer morning in San Antonio, Texas, parents and children stream into Trinity Baptist Church's Children's Center for Sunday School. Visitors are greeted warmly, and children are directed to their classrooms: downstairs for the youngest, upstairs for older children. Today's lesson is from Exodus.

"This morning you're going to learn how the Israelites were freed to find their own path," says one greeter, pressing a toy maze into a child's hand.

It's a typical Sunday morning routine at churches around the country. What makes this scene unique is the Children's Center itself: More than just a building, the center has become what Senior Pastor Les Hollon calls "a canvas to tell the stories of Scripture and hope."

Throughout the center, bright murals -- some three stories high -- tell the traditional stories in an innovative way. Paintings on every wall have turned this church building into a life-sized biblical storybook. On the first floor 250 pairs of animals -- including Longhorn cattle and church members' pets -- prepare to board Noah's ark. A light-filled three-story rotunda is an artistic aviary where species of birds both exotic and familiar perch.

In one stairwell, a group of men walk up a hill, gazing at the stars. At the top of the stairs is a Nativity scene, more crowded with children and animals than any biblical account. The second floor walls display illustrations from 20 Bible stories. One hallway is for the Old Testament, and another is for the New Testament.

Principles & Practices

This is part of a series. Learn more about the concept of [Traditioned Innovation](#) »

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Traditioned innovation is a practice of holding together the convictions of God's kingdom and its manifestation through the history of the church with the adaptations that allow for fresh ideas to be born. I found a living example of the practice in a San Antonio church.

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This remarkable project was created over the course of a year by painter and [Trinity Baptist](#) member Shawn Bridges under the direction of Children's and Women's Pastor Debbie Potter. It's a reflection of Potter's belief that children would respond to the stories of the Bible as deeply and enthusiastically as they embrace pop entertainment.

The story of how Bridges came to paint the massive set of murals is as multi-layered as the paintings themselves and shows what can happen when leaders harness imagination in the service of faith.

Q&A

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A dream for the Children's Center

In 2002, Trinity Baptist Church hired Potter, a former schoolteacher raised in the Nazarene Church, to be its new pastor for children and women. With her lanky frame and enthusiastic demeanor, it's easy to imagine Potter commanding the attention of children in the classroom and nurturing a love for learning.

A married mother of two teens, Potter was ordained a minister at Trinity Baptist in 2004. In addition to her full-time position, she also is working toward a doctoral degree in educational leadership.

When Potter arrived, the Children's Center's spacious interior was in need of updating. The two-story, 28,000-square-foot center comprises nurseries, classrooms and worship spaces for infants through children in the sixth grade.

"The walls were painted *bright* green and *bright* orange," Potter said. Money wasn't a problem because a family had left a bequest specifically for this purpose.

But as the church proceeded with changes such as knocking out walls to create larger rooms, adding a stage for performances and plays and purchasing kid-friendly furniture, Potter contemplated what more could be done. The goal was not just to create a kid-friendly space, but to engage children in learning the Bible.

She researched what other churches were doing, touring Baptist churches in Houston, Dallas and

Chicago looking for ideas. On her travels, Potter encountered elaborately decorated spaces, rich in secular imagery and undeniably fun. These were wonderful, but she knew she hadn't found her model.

"I wanted children to know they were in a church," Potter said, in contrast to simply an elaborately decorated, child-friendly environment. And she wanted this sacred space to be interactive.

"But I didn't really have a clear picture of how to make that happen," Potter said. She also was mindful of stewarding the donated funds wisely.

So Potter looked within the church for a solution and ended up meeting with Bridges, a painter and longtime member.

Potter's initial request was modest: Would Bridges paint one wall in a new game room for the older children? As they talked, Potter found herself "clicking" with Bridges, enough so that she shared more about her hopes for the ministry.

"My real dream would be that they would be walking into the Bible," Potter said.

2 by 2, beginning with the elephants

Bridges, 62, cheerfully refers to herself as a "Methacathabaptapalian," an expression that signals her open-minded, ecumenical outlook toward Christianity. A graduate of Baylor University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, Bridges uses a vivid palette and bold brush strokes in her paintings of people, animals and flowers. Although she had been an artist most of her life, she had not done murals before she started painting at Trinity Baptist.

But Bridges found herself inspired by Potter's faith and ideas. In a "loaves and fishes" moment, Bridges offered to multiply the request 100-fold.

"When we first started, I offered to paint the rotunda as Noah's ark. But when I got started, it just kept going until we thought, 'Why not paint the entire downstairs?'" Bridges said.

From the beginning, Bridges refused to be paid for the project, which would end up taking almost a year to complete. The church agreed to buy the paint (more than 90 gallons) and signed off on what is may be the largest indoor mural project in the city (quite a distinction in a city with a strong tradition of mural painting.)

The project was not without risk or doubters. "It is scary to let someone start painting over this many square feet. What if it looks bad? Shawn had never done this before," Potter said.

On May 4, 2005, Bridges donned her paint-stained overalls, pulled back her hair and went to work. She quickly sketched a gigantic Asian elephant in the three-story rotunda, a calculated choice to "go big" in the beginning.

"I knew that was going to have to be the sales job," Bridges said.

The first painting piqued people's curiosity and allayed some members' fears. Slowly, the first-floor's blank walls transformed into a menagerie of animals, ranging from the very large (elephants, camels, gorillas, lions, zebras and tigers) to the very small (birds, fish and small mammals, as well as rodents and insects). Bridges also painted tool sheds and supply rooms and a smiling image of Noah modeled after the church's then-pastor graces an entryway.

"The children could not wait to get here every week to see what was new on the walls," Potter said.

Upstairs for stories

Once Bridges got started, the project gained momentum. Potter says she had not expected it, but now wonders if she should have: "When God starts moving, you should expect the unexpected."

Every day for almost a year, Bridges showed up to paint. And every day she began her work by laying her hands on the walls, thanking God for her talent and praying for the day's work ahead. She also made a point of including the children in the painting process, giving them small containers of paint and directing them to fill in her sketches.

Questions to consider:

- What are the convictions that support the vision and mission of your congregation or organization? What are the visible signs of those convictions?
- With whom could you experiment? What talent could you allow to bloom by experimenting on “a wall?”
- Who are the “odd balls” in your ministry who ask challenging and important questions? How can you engage their imaginations in the expression of what is deeply significant for your congregation or organization?

children.

“She tried to keep everything developmentally appropriate,” Potter said.

Whimsical touches abound. In the rotunda walls, one panel depicts two zebras facing forward. Walking behind the panel, one sees the same zebras -- backside view. Animals peek from hiding places, preen and munch on leaves.

The children have responded: They often walk up and stroke the animals. Sometimes a child will become deeply interested in one particular part of the mural, returning again and again to gaze at particularly intriguing scene. Bridges also added an element of hide-and-seek to the paintings by including 80 hard-to-find Bible verses in tiny handwriting.

Gene Dawson, Sr., a 48-year member of Trinity Baptist and founder of one of the largest engineering firms in Texas, was chairman of the trustees at Trinity Baptist in 2004. He said the murals -- now valued for insurance purposes at \$1 million -- have been a great addition to the church.

“We budgeted for paint, and [Bridges] just started painting. And she kept painting and kept painting and kept painting until ... it looked fantastic!”

A congregation seeking renewal

The creation of the Children’s Center mural took place during a time of change and challenge in the life of Trinity Baptist, which celebrated its 60th anniversary this summer amid feelings of hope and renewal.

The last few years have been difficult for the church as a period of instability followed the retirement of longtime pastor Buckner Fanning. A charismatic personality and public face of Trinity Baptist for more than 40 years, Fanning helped to grow the church to 10,000 members at one point. He retired in October 2001.

When the Rev. Charles Johnson arrived at Trinity Baptist just two months later, hopes were high that this new minister would be able to transition smoothly into the church’s leadership. But the ensuing conflict created by the departure of an established leader and the arrival of a new one eager to make changes was well-documented in the local press with such headlines as, “Trinity after Fanning a church divided.” Johnson, the model for Noah on the walls of the mural entrance, resigned in 2006.

According to Dawson, the church lost nearly half its members during this period. Donations suffered as well. Potter believes that one reason the mural project was so powerful was that it embodied a bright and bold spirit during a time of transition and grieving.

“We let them pick the colors of Naomi and Ruth’s outfits, and talked about the stories they were painting.” The first time she let the kids help, she gave out large brushes and buckets of paint. “It was disaster,” Bridges said with a laugh. After that, “we learned to give small brushes and baby food jars,” she said.

High school youth who grew up in the church also appreciate the project.

“I think it’s an amazing project,” says Preston McIlveen, now a freshman at the University of Texas at Austin. “Every every time I walk past ... you think how blessed our church is to have this.”

On the second floor, the Genesis story of the creation begins with a darkly painted wall before lightening to depict a Garden of Eden. The stories of Moses, Ruth, Hannah, David and Goliath, Daniel, Esther and others fill one long hallway. On the other hallway, there are stories and parables from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, keeping in mind the primary audience is

After Johnson's departure, the church went through a lengthy period of formal self-study and introspection before calling the Rev. Leslie Hollon to be its new senior pastor. Hollon's biography posted on Trinity's Web site notes that he has "led declining churches back to health, experiencing both spiritual and numerical growth." The current membership is about 5,000.

When presiding over the church's 60th anniversary celebration, Hollon invited both Fanning and Johnson to join him at the podium. Johnson did so; Fanning, recovering from a stroke, sent a video greeting.

Calling out a gift

The leadership at Trinity Baptist believes in calling out and nurturing undiscovered or under-used spiritual gifts in a diverse congregation.

"Here we see a remarkable example of someone who dedicated their talents to create a million dollars worth of artwork for the life and ministry of the church," Hollon said.

"That's an affirmation and encouragement for other Christ-followers and churchgoers to use their talents for the kingdom and the church. And then we also have the direct benefit for the children."

As children's pastor, Potter often has fielded inquiries from other churches about creating murals similar to Trinity's. She finds these requests frustrating.

"I can't put together a packet that says, 'Go do this and you'll have this result.' When I read my Bible, I don't see that God worked the same way over and over again. He used different people for different things.

"What I encourage people to do," Potter said, "is go and look in your own congregation and find the gifts that are there."

The benefits of the murals have reached beyond the children's ministry. Hollon said the mural project has awakened an interest in the visual arts at Trinity. At the church's nearby Tripoint Center, for example, there is a concert venue and a coffee shop that hosts art exhibitions.

"If you have a gift be faithful and use it," said Hollon, who calls Bridges' gifts "a witness and an encouragement" for the value of visual arts in faith.

Bridges never received any money for the painting project, but eventually she did request payment. She asked that Trinity set up a children's art program. Today, the room housing the art supplies and work tables bears an inscription created and painted -- on the wall, of course -- by Bridges.

God, thank you for my talent.
Help me use it for your will.
Don't let me deny it, underestimate it or be lazy with it.

"Baptists really believe in lay leadership," Potter said. "We're lay-led churches. Shawn was a lay person who used her gifts to lead."

