

# Your Ministry IS Children's Ministry

Sometimes your Children's Ministry might seem like the "desperate girlfriend" of your church. Always wanting more attention. More oversight. More volunteers. More money. Whine, whine, whine.

And all for what? To take care of a bunch of sniffly-nosed, wiggly kids, who would much rather be out on a playground than sitting in a classroom learning about Jesus. Yes, it provides a service that helps keep families happy and coming back; but man, what a pain!

Yet, maybe this desperate girlfriend is little smarter than she looks. You might be surprised to learn that Children's Ministry impacts your entire church in a far more significant way that you might first imagine. I'd go as far to say that your ministry IS children's ministry. Here's four observations why.

## Why Your Ministry IS Children's Ministry: Four Observations

**1. Children comprise the highest numbers non-Christians in attendance at most churches. The 4-14 window is the most common age of conversion. It is also unfortunately the time when kids are very prone to accept Christ as their Savior just to please the adults they love and respect, rather than out of true conviction. They may lead to false conversions--terrible for both the children and the church.**

How will you reach these with the gospel while they are young?

Yet on the other hand, How will you look for true conversion before you baptize, for the sake of the children and the sake of the purity of the church? You don't want to wind up with baptismal statistics without the believing life to back it up. You don't want to encourage people to think they are Christians, but their lives clearly show that they are not.

**2. Everyone who attends your church is or once was a child. Your current leaders and members WERE all children in the past. Your future leaders and members ARE all children now. Childhood is time of curiosity, open-heartedness, and lasting memories.**

How can you fortify these future members/leaders now, helping them be a stronger part of the future church?

**3. Most people who attend your church are or will be parents or grandparents. They are called to be the primary care-givers of their kids, including their spiritual nurturing. This will be one of their life's biggest, most time-consuming, challenging callings. No matter how many programs you have at church to teach their kids, the amount of time their kids spend with their parents, observing them and learning from them, dwarfs in comparison to anything the church can offer within its doors.**

How can you equip this majority of your congregation for their major role in spiritually raising their children? How can you help their own life be a better witness to the truth of the gospel at work in the heart of sinners?

How can you help equip them for this job? How can you pour truth into their lives? How can you help them learn how to take that truth and feed it to their children?

**4. In most churches, more members, miss more adult teaching times and services, because of taking care of their own kids, or volunteering to take care of other's kids, than any other ministry of the church. More members typically volunteer in children's ministry than any other ministry of the church. Most volunteers are not trained pastors or teachers. Yet there are usually more souls being taught by them in children's ministry than any other venue of the church, outside of the preaching from the pulpit.**

How can you balance providing child-care and Bible classes for children that help support parents at church, with protecting the spiritual well-being of your members who volunteer to care and teach? How can you make sure that they do not over-serve and miss too much of the teaching that they, themselves, need on a regular basis?

Pastors are responsible before God for the soundness of all the teaching that takes place in the church. How can you make sure that the teaching these volunteer teachers provide, (and take in themselves, as they teach), is sound?

## **Common Scenarios that Have a Big Impact on the Church**

**Still not convinced of the impact of Children's Ministry on the church, present and future?**

**Consider these all too common scenarios and how they impact the core of the church's concerns:**

- Non-Christians come to church with their children. Non-Christian children come to church without parents. --**Conversion, Sound Doctrine, the Gospel, Expository Preaching**
- Parents are new converts and have no idea how to parent as children. --**Discipleship, Sound Doctrine, Expository Preaching**
- Teachers downstairs in the green, cinder-block wall classrooms teaching creative, but moralistic lessons while upstairs the parents are receiving sound, life-changing, expository preaching from the pulpit. --**Sound Doctrine, Expository Preaching**
- Poor teaching as a child that lingers into adulthood, affecting their view of God, the gospel, the Bible, and the Church. --**Sound Doctrine**
- Teachers who go online Saturday night to find an easy lesson to teach to the kids at Sunday School, not aware of the unsound doctrine it includes. --**Sound Doctrine**
- Church plants that over-stretch their few volunteers to try to have the full "wishlist" of children's programs that will attract future members --**Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- Churches with a growing membership that use any resulting increase in Children's Ministry volunteers to keep on expanding the programs they offer, without first using the increase in volunteers to relieve over-worked volunteers in their current programs. -- **Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- Parents who put pressure on pastors to immediately baptize their child who just prayed the sinner's prayer. -- **Conversion, the Gospel**

- Fluctuations in numbers of children or demographics that change what support would be most helpful to parents and children. --**Conversion, Discipleship**
- Number-hungry statisticians who pressure confessions, while creating false conversions. --**Meaningful Membership, Conversion**
- Members who come to church to serve in child-care but rarely attend the worship service. --**Meaningful Membership, Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- Members who leave the church, burnt out from over-serving. -- **Meaningful Membership, Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- No one is willing to take on the position of Children's Ministry Administrator (CMA) because it is too burdensome and thankless. It requires too many hours of work. They rarely get to enjoy a worship service or can be spared to take vacation time. They feel the pressure to fill volunteer shortages, themselves. They are left to field all program criticisms and put out all fires from disgruntled parents. --**Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- Fiefdoms of power arising from lack of shepherding. Someone other than the pastors assumes too much authority over a program for too long. They become offended when asked to change something they are doing. -- **Church Leadership**
- Families who have no family worship time because they/their kids are so busy in church programs many nights of the week --**Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**
- Difficulties between parents that show up as troubled behavior in their children. --**Shepherding Well the Whole Flock**
- Fluctuations in volunteer numbers that lead to over-working of volunteers to keep the same programs running as usual. -- **Shepherding the Whole Flock Well**

**Evangelism, sound doctrine, conversion. Meaningful membership, discipleship, shepherding the whole flock well...these are all core issues of critical importance. Do you see how Children's Ministry takes on a significant role in all of these? Children's Ministry is not just a service on the side. It affects every single person in your church, one way or the other.**

**Your ministry IS children's ministry!**

## Children's Ministry, Past and Present

**Let's take a look back at the progression of children's ministry through recent history up to today. There's nothing like looking back to look for wisdom for going forward.**

Children's Ministry, as we think of it, started in the 1758 by Robert Raikes as an outreach to non-Christian children in the slums of Gloucester, England. These first "Sunday School" classes were held on Sunday because this was the only day off for these children who worked in factories the other six days of the week. Children from Christian families were not targeted for these classes, assuming their parents would educate their children in these biblical truths at home and grow under the preaching of the Word at church.

At Raikes' Sunday School, boys and girls were not only taught a catechism of Bible truth and taken to church but were also taught how to read (and write). This would be the only formal instruction many of these children would ever receive. Though controversial among Sabbatarians who saw these schools as work, rather than an act of mercy and an aid to worship, the classes were nonetheless hugely successful and spread throughout the rest of Great Britain. By 1831 it is estimated that over a million children attended Sunday School weekly—a staggering 25% of the population.

### **Public Education Brings Changes in Church Outreach**

In 1870, public education for all children was legislated in Great Britain. From this time, Sunday Schools gradually came to focus only on Bible teaching, as well as increasingly included the children from church member families, more like what we find in churches today.

The four goals were to provide with children with:

- a testimony of life with God in the lives of their teachers
- to share the gospel that the lost might be saved
- to make disciples of all who trust in Christ
- to leave a legacy of Bible truths and knowledge of Scripture in the minds
- to prepare them to gather together well with the members of a local church

### **Children's Ministry Today**

The goals of those 1870's Sunday Schools remain largely the same today, though some, like the importance of gathering together with the whole church body, may have retreated to the background or at least not not be as clearly articulated. Churches still invite children from non-Christian to take part in their programs. They still hold out the gospel to all, that they might be saved and grow as Christ's disciples. They still hope to leave a legacy of Bible truths in their minds and heart.

But now, in most churches, Children's Ministry often spends far more time on programs and resources for Christian parents and children (perhaps this is because they are spending less time on outreach to children). And most notable of all, most churches have expanded to many more programs than the original Sunday School Bible classes and church attendance. Now, they frequently include safe nursery-care for babies, so parents can go to their own Sunday School classes. They may be recommending resources for parents to use at home with their children; and, they may have added a host of other, now-classic, peripheral programs (such as youth group, children's choir, AWANAs, After school Good News Clubs, Mother's Day Out, Sunday night missions programs, Bible camps, Vacation Bible School, and even Children or Youth Church that caters to a particular, homogenous age group.)

### **All of This Growth Has Led to Mixed Results**

These intentions, and even some of the fruit, of these increased programs of today's typical Children's Ministry has been good. But sometimes the burgeoning list of programs has led to serious fallout for parents, children and the volunteers who people these activities. The motto of "If you make the children happy, then the parents will stay" might bring more families to church, but it can unintentionally lead to malnutrition. Parents can begin to lose their sense of calling as primary, spiritual caregivers, or at least struggle to find time to fulfill it. Children may become so used to being catered for in a custom-fit, homogenous-group style that they lose their taste for the more important influences of family time and/or gathering together to worship with the whole church body. Overused volunteers may struggle with burn-out and suffer from neglect of their own spiritual nourishment at church.

### **More at Any Cost?**

"More is not just better, but necessary" is the even uglier step-sister motto that frequently accompanies the "If you make the children happy, the families will stay" motto. This line of reasoning exacerbates the problems mentioned above, in every size church.

Small, churches and church plants frequently face the frustrations of not enough man-power to keep open the children's programs that visiting families are seeking. Or, even if they do manage to have all the "wishlist" programs in place, they often tend to rely too heavily on too few volunteers. These tireless, big-hearted servants often sacrifice their own spiritual needs, week after week, to make sure the children's programs stay running.

Medium and large churches face their own version of these same problems. As the number of children and volunteers expands, the tendency is for churches to expand their program offerings, instead of first seeking healthier volunteer service limits with the programs they have. This plethora of programs can perpetuate the volunteer crisis. Yes, there are more able volunteers, but now so many more are needed to maintain the large number of programs.

Churches with more pocket money than volunteers find a solution by hiring care-givers who aren't members of their church. Others are tempted to enlist people who aren't really qualified to teach, choose a curriculum because it's an easy fit, even though it lacks biblical soundness; or, "fudge" on safe caregiver-to-child ratios to fit in more children.

And, if parents are not urged to be discerning, their children's schedules may so fill up with programs that the very families you hoped to serve with all these activities, can't find time to just be a family.

Pastors may be so overwhelmed with other aspects of ministry that they leave oversight of these matters in the hands of others who should be helpers, rather than shepherds over this segment of their church's growth.

### **Enter Church-Shaped Children's Ministry**

Church-shaped Children's Ministry is a humble, finite approach to caring well for the families in the church. It acknowledges parents in their role as primary spiritual care-givers of their children and encourages them in ways that are in keeping with the spiritual well-being of all of its membership. It looks to its pastor-leaders to set priorities for the spiritual support of parents and children; and, to carefully assess what resources (volunteers, finances, facility space, hours, etc.) the church has to offer towards those priorities. They prayerfully consider the best fit for the good of the whole church, and to the glory of God. Then, they lead the members in carrying it out.

Let's explore what Church-Shaped Children's Ministry looks like.

# Church-Shaped Children's Ministry Overview

## **Church-shaped Children's Ministry desires:**

- to provide children with a faithful testimony of life with God in the lives of their parents, teachers and other members.
- to share the gospel with children that the lost might be saved.
- to make disciples of all children who trust in Christ.
- to leave a legacy of Bible truths and knowledge of Scripture in the minds of the children.
- to prepare children to gather together well with the members of a local church.

## **Church-shaped Children's Ministry:**

- acknowledges that parents are called by God to be the primary, spiritual caregivers of their children.
- also understands that parents are not Christians, alone, but are members of the local church, who encourage and build one another up, including encouraging and helping each other to spiritually nurture their children well.

## **That's why Church-shaped Children's Ministry enlists the members of a local church:**

- to help equip each other in caring well for their children, at home and at church.
- to prepare them to be, Lord willing, future members of the church.

## **And includes programs that:**

- support, not replace, parents.
- don't get in the way with family time.
- help prepare the children to gather together well with the congregation.
- are sustainable, in terms of finances and volunteers required.

## **Church-shaped Children's Ministry is led by the church leaders, so that:**

- it feeds parents and children from the pulpit.
- it decides what programs the church offers parents and children.
- it echoes the teaching priorities of the church.
- it reflects the resources of the church (financial, facilities, spiritually-healthy serve limits for volunteers).
- it keeps the people involved in children's ministry (families, children, volunteers, staff) under their guidance and care.

**For the good of the whole church, and to the glory of the Head of the Church.**

Let's take a more in-depth look at what Church-shaped Children's Ministry looks like for pastors, parents, children, programs, member volunteers and Children's Ministry leaders.