

Shouting in the Temple

A Radical Look at Children's Ministry

Lorna Jenkins

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Published by CCS Publishing
23890 Brittlebush Circle
Moreno Valley, CA 92557 USA
1-888-511-9995

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cover design: Dragan Bilic

ISBN: 978-1-935789-93-2

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INTRODUCTION

This book explains the vision for children, which God has given me. After I had been serving in Sunday Schools for 25 years, I began to feel a deep uneasiness about the way we were doing children's ministry. I met others with questions similar to mine. The loss of children from our churches was alarming. Churches wanted answers; none of those we tested seemed to work.

For a while I co-operated with my friend, Rev. Trevor Ross in trying a few experiments in the Holland Park Baptist Church in Brisbane, Australia. When he set up children's small groups, we found there was a rapid rise in the enthusiasm and participation of the children. Dr Ralph Neighbour was also encouraging cell churches in our part of the world. His enthusiasm set me on a quest to find out how children fit into a cell church. Dr Robert Banks invited me to see the work among children of his house churches near Canberra.

At the end of our ministry in Australia, there was an unexpected opportunity for my husband and me to study at Columbia International University in South Carolina. We were among the first doctoral students in the college. I was assigned to the supervision of Dr Ron Habermas whose understanding and support I shall always appreciate. He set me free to pursue the answers to my questions. Is a cell model for children Biblical?

Is it educationally valid? Has it ever happened before? Is it happening anywhere in the world now? As I put together my dissertation, I felt a rising excitement that my vision was not only viable, but had roots in the Bible, in history and in education.

In 1993 I joined the staff of Faith Community Church in Singapore, a church that was seriously applying the cell church model. This has been a serendipity experience for me. We dreamed, worked and learned together to refine the vision into a working model. Faith Community Baptist Church was my laboratory. I was able to test my theories. I was allowed to make mistakes and try again. The staff became my allies in putting this vision into practice, especially the Children's Ministry staff. Rev Lawrence Khong led his amazing church into a style of Children's Ministry that has revolutionized my ideas of where children belong in the church.

This radical vision is not mine alone. Many people have prayed for me and challenged me to think further and higher. The children keep stretching my expectations beyond my imagination. Most of all I appreciate my husband, Brian, who has put up with long absences, and many extra chores while I have pursued my vision. He has always believed in me.

I would not have embarked on this journey, if I had not had the clear call of God. I was on the wrong side of 50 when I started. When I grew tired, God inspired me with new energy and hope. Now I look forward to a new generation of leaders who will continue to follow the radical vision for the children of the Kingdom.

Lorna Jenkins, 1999

Fifteen years later I am looking back on the children of our ministry, who are emerging into adulthood. On a recent trip to Singapore I was delighted to see many of the children I knew, are now leading the church in worship, and in the ministry team of the church. Some of the original children's staff are still in leadership. Some are "retiring" to share their experience with other churches and organizations in the city. Their replacements are people who have grown through the ministry. The dropout rate has been minimal. The passion for winning and keeping children is still strong.

The church has moved to a different model of cell church. Inevitably this has affected the intergenerational cells. The church still takes seriously the equipping of the children to become fully operational members of the body of Christ.

There is no doubt that intergenerational cell groups are a labour-intensive, demanding form of cell group. However, their impact on the lives of the children is enormous. Some churches have tried to modify the intergenerational content of their ministry to the children but it is not easy to maintain if there is no planned event where the children and adults can meet.

The encouraging trend I am seeing today, is that a vast number of churches are now striving to lead the children into the day-by-day practice of the Christian faith, rather than just instructing them. Children are being trained to pray effectively, to worship, to share their faith with their friends, to read the Bible for themselves, and to trust God in their problems of life. If they discover that God is alive and able to meet their need while they are still children, they will continue to know his reality and power in their teen and young adult years.

At last many churches are keen to make the children a recognized and welcome part of the congregation. We are going to need their leadership and power in the coming days.

Lorna Jenkins, 2017

Chapter 2

GOD'S PLAN FOR CHILDREN: THE FAMILY STRAND

Young Joel was working with his Dad in the potter's shed. It was still only afternoon, but already Dad was packing up his tools and cleaning his potter's wheel. "Why are we finishing so early?" asked Joel.

"We must get ready for Passover," Dad answered. "Your mother's been preparing for it all day. Haven't you seen her washing the clothes and the dishes and the whole house? At sundown we'll begin to remember the Passover feast. There's a lot to do."

"I saw you kill the lamb this morning, Father. I felt like crying. I can remember when it was born."

"The lamb was a special lamb, Joel. It was perfect, the best in the flock. When it died it was dying instead of us. Our sins can't be forgiven unless a perfect lamb dies. Your mother is cooking it for the Passover meal tonight. Do you remember your part? It's very important?"

"I remember I have to say, "Father, what do these things mean?"

“That’s right, son. Don’t forget when the time comes and then I’ll tell you the story about how God rescued our ancestors from their slavery in Egypt.”

“Why do you always tell the same story, Father? There are other good stories about our ancestors that I’d like to hear.”

Yes, but this story tells us how God rescued his people and brought us into our own land. We must never forget how powerful and kind our God is. I can remember my father telling us the story, and now I tell it to you. One day you’ll tell it to your children. That’s how the story gets passed on. I’ll tell you other stories another day. Now it’s time for us to go inside, wash ourselves and put on our clean clothes.”

GOD PLACES CHILDREN IN FAMILIES

God’s plan for children has two strands. The first is based on family.

God did not design the family just as a channel of food and protection. It is a small intergenerational community in which the children learn the basic skills of living with others. They learn values and traditions and the morals acceptable in their society. They also learn of the origins of their people and their belief about God. Parents are called to be story-tellers, passing on the message of who God is and what he has done for us.

Moses said:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are

to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when they sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.” (Deut. 6:4-9)

We should notice when God said this. He was proclaiming the first and greatest commandment to the people of Israel. He was calling for their total commitment, giving the word that would unify Jewish people through the centuries.

His very next word was for the children. His commandment was for them too. It was not to die out, but was to be handed down from generation to generation, within families and last forever.

He told parents how they should teach their children – in the normal routine of family life, when they got up in the morning, when they went to bed at night, when they came out and when they went in. The story of God’s love was to be passed on in the midst of life, not in a classroom. Their family were the teachers and the children could witness how they were living out God’s commandments every day.

CHILDREN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT COMMUNITY

In the average Hebrew home, this is how it worked out. Joel, the potter’s son would wake up to daily prayer. He would wash himself, dress and eat food prepared according to God’s commandments.

Every week the family remembered the Lord together. On Fridays they prepared for the Sabbath – cleaning the house and cooking, washing their clothes and themselves. No work was done on the Sabbath so they could remember the Lord.

Joel shared in all the big family events; the birth of a child, a marriage, a funeral. If someone committed a sin, the whole family would go to the temple or shrine, to make a sacrifice to atone for the sin. Breaking God's law was a serious matter and the children knew it.

Learning about God was part of their daily lives. It was both planned and unplanned. Teachable moments could arise at any time, especially since memorials of God's mighty acts were scattered all around them. Sometimes as they walked along the road, they might ask about a pile of stones. "Why is that pile of stone there?"

"That reminds us of how our ancestors crossed the river Jordan without getting their feet wet, when they entered the Promised Land." ¹³ Some people even wore the commandments of God, written on paper and tied to their foreheads or wrists. This was to show that God was in control of everything they thought and everything they did.

Our lives are not like that. We can go from day to day, year to year, without ever being reminded of the goodness of God, and the things He has done for our family and our nation.

In ancient Israel, God would not allow his followers to keep their lives private. His commandments were to be on their door-frames and gates. Each family's faith was to be apparent

13. Joshua 4:6

to the whole neighbourhood and not hidden behind the four walls of their houses.

In similar manner, Dr Ralph Neighbour, when he was pastoring West Memorial Baptist Church, in Houston, Texas, asked his members to put a small logo of the church on their mail boxes. Everyone in the community knew where to find the member of the church.

WHY GOD CHOSE THE FAMILY.

God's strategy in trusting the family to teach children about him, is based on sound educational foundations. To learn a lifestyle, you must be immersed in the lifestyle.

Learning about God is not a body of information, but a Kingdom lifestyle. The children needed to learn the facts about God in an environment where they could see His lifestyle being lived out around them. They know the teaching of their parents is true because they see it validated every day. If the teaching, which the children receive in church, is not being practised in the home, the children know that it is not true or it is not important. The consistency of life and word is crucial.

Teaching in the church can only happen for a short time on Sunday. Teaching in the home is both formal and informal, intentional and accidental. They learn both from the things we say, and from the things we try to cover up.

THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Families were not left to teach and bring up their children in isolation. It was a matter for concern for the whole community.

The people of the village would help each other bring in the harvests. Afterwards they would join to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.¹⁴ thanking God for providing food for them for another year.

Joel would have enjoyed this. Every family in his village would make themselves a rough shelter from leafy branches. Then for a whole week they would sleep outside under their shelters, having fun together.

Sometimes the whole village would go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feasts. This was the best of all. They would take several days for the journey, camping out at night. As the people came near their destination, they would begin singing the songs of David and all the hills would echo their praise.

This happened to Jesus one day. His family and his village travelled to Jerusalem. When they returned, Jesus did not go back with them. I have often wondered how Mary and Joseph could have travelled for a whole day without realising that Jesus was not with them.¹⁵

I understood better when I talked with my New Zealand Maori friends.¹⁶ Their children are seen as belonging to the tribe. They wander among the families freely. If children are at your place at mealtime, you feed them. If they fall asleep you put them to bed and later their parents will collect them.

It was probably like this with Jesus. Mary and Joseph believed he was safe within the community and did not worry. It was not till they looked through the whole community, that they

14. Leviticus 23:40-43

15. Luke 2: 43-46

16. Maoris are the early Polynesian people of New Zealand.

realised he was lost. In many of our churches people feel no responsibility for other people's children. They don't feel that they need to help the parents. Yet God sees children as part of the whole church.

CHILDREN IN THE NATION

Around the community was the nation. When the nation was gathered before God, the children were not excluded. When King Jehoshaphat was surrounded by his enemies, he knew his army was not strong enough to defeat them, so he called the whole nation to prayer.

“The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord, indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek Him. ...All the men of Judah with their wives and children and little ones stood there before the Lord.” (2 Chronicles 20:4, 13)

When the prophet Joel, was calling, the people to repentance, he told them to “bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast” (Joel 2: 6) When Ezra read the word of God, the whole nation came to hear – men, women and children.¹⁷

God never overlooked the children. They were valued and included at all times. Other nations had other systems. For instance, in Sparta, children were removed from their parents and placed in military school. In Israel, the family was the environment of learning.

17. Ezra 10:1

COMMUNITY IN OUR URBAN SOCIETY

Are these ideals applicable only to small rural communities? Have the complexities of urban life made such methods of child nurture virtually impossible?

I believe the patterns can still be very much the same. City dwellers tend to form small urban communities based on proximity, race or shared interest. People do not visit each other's homes as much as they once did, but they still gather round social events; little league, school outings, neighbourhood barbecues.

In large congregations, members look for community in small groups of believers – the cell group. If there are no official cell groups, people still cluster in groups of congenial friends.

Children hear the words of the Lord first from their families. The teaching and example is supported by other adults and friends in the cell group. Children need to have other Christian friends, who support and encourage the family. Around them is the community of the church, a place where children are recognized and included, where they may express their faith and learn to serve alongside the adults.

Many children today do not think the adult church is in any way relevant to them or interested in them. It is something their parents do.

THE GENERATIONAL BLESSING

Not only does God see children as part of the wider family, He also sees them as part of the vertical family. We are part

of a generational chain which reaches back into the history of the nation.

Tracing our ancestors has become a popular past-time, because it helps us find out who we are and where we have come from. When I was a child I read that God will punish sin to the third and fourth generation.¹⁸ I thought that was unfair. I did not know that when people sin it often takes several generations to work itself out.

However, God also makes a wonderful promise.

“Know therefore that the Lord, your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.” (Deut 7 : 9)

Over and over He reminds us that His word is to be handed down. He is not a one generation God, but the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob. When he called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations. What did he expect him to do?

“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.” (Gen 18: 18-19)

Abraham's power lay in what happened in his family and his descendents. That was God's strategy and it still is. Even

18. Deuteronomy 5:9

people who are unmarried or who have no biological children can have spiritual descendants, through their care and nurture of the young. Every person who decides to follow Jesus is a spiritual Abraham. He or she is beginning a new line of faith that can influence the world into the next century.

FAMILY HISTORY

About 140 years ago in Denmark, there was a blacksmith named Lars. He had a bad reputation as the town drunkard. Everyone knew about his swearing and his violence. One night he stumbled, half-drunk, into a hall where a meeting was being held. Somehow through the mists of alcohol, he heard the call of Jesus. He became a Christian and his life was transformed.

He needed to tell everyone of the great things that God had done for him. He told his wife and children, and they came to know Jesus. His apprentice, Hans also received Christ through his witness. Lars began to go around other villages giving his testimony. Many people saw the change in him and believed.

In time Hans, the apprentice, fell in love with the blacksmith's daughter, Martha. They married and had children but because times were hard in Denmark, they emigrated to New Zealand. They worked hard in their new country and raised a family of seven with one extra foster child, who had been orphaned in an accident.

All their children learned to follow Jesus. The youngest was my mother. She had only one child – me. I learned about Jesus from my parents from when I was a baby. I have three children. They have also heard about Jesus and learned to love him. Now they are bringing up children of their own.

This story is not to focus attention on my family, but to establish a principle. One man's conversion 140 years ago is still making ripples in the world today. At a centennial family reunion there were seventy descendants of Hans and Martha and only two of them were not Christians. There is a generational blessing. That is the way God intended that it should be.

It is not confined to direct blood-lines. Grand-parents have won their grandchildren. Aunts and uncles have won their nieces and nephews. Friends and godparents have told the story to the next generation.

In the music of Psalm 78 we hear the hopes of the people of God.

“We will not hide (these things) from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power and the wonders He had done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commandments.” (Psalm 78: 4-7)

Every generation tells the next generation the things they have learned. This is not merely a desirable option for us who are growing old. It is a burning necessity. The Psalmist in Psalm 71:18 says,

“Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare Your power to the next generation, Your might to all who are to come.”

He is saying, “Lord, don’t let me die till I have told the children about your power and might.” We seem to have lost some of that passion. I hear parents say, “I’ll let my children decide what they believe when they grow older because I do not want to influence them.” If we do not tell them our story, how will the ever know about our mighty God in the midst of the conflicting voices around them?

Not only do children receive their faith from the testimony of the previous generations, they also receive a generational blessing and anointing.

God’s promise was extended to the descendants of Abraham.¹⁹ Eli received a promise for his descendants, but it was withdrawn when they proved themselves utterly unworthy.²⁰ When King David became king, God promised that his descendants would rule forever.²¹

When God chooses to bless a person, the blessing continues to his/her descendants. Even today we see children who follow their parents’ footsteps and receive the same blessing and anointing. Bramwell and Evangeline Booth inherited the same passion for lost people that their father had.

The blessing is not automatic though. It can be withdrawn as it was from the sons of Eli, if the children reject the generational anointing.

19. Genesis 17:7

20. I Samuel 2:30

21. II Samuel 7:12-13

CHILDREN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

When the church began, it carried forward the Old Testament pattern of children being part of the community. It never occurred to the disciples to set up a special ministry for them. They assumed that children would become Christians through the teaching of their parents.

In those days, childhood was not thought of as a separate stage of life. Children were people. They shared in the life of the family. Often they worked beside their parents to produce the family income. Only the very rich could afford servants to care for their children.

When a person became a Christian, it was natural for him to say, "Come to my house and tell this Good News to the whole family."²² If a father became a Christian, the whole household did the same and they were baptized together.

The church was held in homes, so the children saw with their own eyes the things that God was doing. They saw how the Christians loved one another and shared their goods. They witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit; they joined the church in praying for Peter to get out of prison; they watched miracles of healing. Those in Joppa saw what happened when their dear friend Dorcas died. They all knew Dorcas. She had made them many of the clothes they were wearing. While they were grieving, Peter arrived and raised her from the dead.²³ What child would ever forget that! They did not need to be told about the power of God. They saw it for themselves.

22. Acts 16:15, 33-34

23. Acts 10:36-42

They also saw how the believers suffered. They knew when the disciples were beaten for their faith; they heard how James was arrested and killed. Soldiers might burst in at any time and arrest their parents. When that happened other church members would take the children home and care for them. That's why James told the church to care for the widows and the orphans.²⁴ The children knew that to be a Christian was to risk your life.

The leaders of the church were family people. One of the requirements for leaders was to be a faithful spouse and a good parent.²⁵ This was more important than a theological training or even specific spiritual gifts.

The family was seen as the model of the church.²⁶ They were brothers and sisters under God. The same qualities, which are needed for good parenting were needed in the leadership of the church.

BEING FAMILY IN THE CHURCH TODAY

It is hard for Christians these days to appreciate the power of family nurture – in Western society at least. The church has been strongly influenced by Western individualism. People are not supposed to respond to God as families or in people groups. We hear again and again that you cannot depend on the faith of your parents to save you. It has to be an individual decision.

Yet the faith of the parents should be a dynamic factor in leading the children towards Jesus. Timothy learned the faith from his

24. James 1:27

25. I Timothy 3:2-4 and 12

26. I Timothy 3:5

godly mother and grandmother.²⁷ Eunice was a believer even though her husband was not. One believing parent can bring his or her children into intergenerational blessing. Paul said to the Corinthians that the children of a Christian marriage are holy, even if only one parent is a believer.²⁸ Better yet, a whole family can come to Christ together. Initially, not every member may understand the nature of that decision. As time passes, each may make a genuine personal decision to follow Jesus. Our evangelism should not stop until all the family are won.

Today, however, marriages break up before or after faith. Our churches are full of single parents trying to be both father and mother. Grandparents and extended family often live too far away to be supportive. Church friends greet each other casually on Sundays, but have no meaningful contact during the week.

The church itself encourages the fragmentation of families. By adopting a graded system of Christian Education, it separates the age groups so there is no contact between the generations. Children and young people seldom mix. Teenagers believe they have nothing in common with the older generation, so they cannot even talk together. Few attempt to integrate them. It's easier to slice the church into departments and place a specialist at the head of each one.

For those of us who have never known church any other way, it is hard to realize how recent this attitude actually is. The teen-age sub-culture did not exist before the Second World War. The separation of the family in worship happened only in the 1950s and '60s, when churches began to run children's

27. II Timothy 1:5

28. I Corinthians 7:14

worship simultaneously with the morning service. Until then everyone went to church together. These days we have come to believe children cannot be expected to worship with their parents or to share in their spiritual lives.

WHY GOD INSISTS ON TRUSTING FAMILIES

I have asked God sometimes, “Why do you keep on expecting families to nurture their children? Even in the Bible, they did not do a very good job of it. What about the very first family? They ended in hatred and murder. Isn’t there some other way to lead children to know you? Perhaps we should make our Sunday Schools better and train our teachers harder? Then when the children come out, they would all be good followers of Jesus.”

But God is single-minded about his vision. He wants his children to experience family. That is the nature of the Kingdom; it is the very heart of God. The trinity is a community of three and the relationships within are familial. God has chosen to be called “Father,” “Son” and “Spirit” and he wants us to share that incredible family relationship.²⁹ If we are to be citizens of the Kingdom, we need to learn, as a family, how to be family.

If our children can learn to honor their earthly parents and obey them, they are well equipped to honor and obey their Heavenly Father. As they learn about fathers and mothers, children are discovering what God is like. In a family, children also learn what community is like. As they do, they learn what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

29. John 17:26

For too long, the church has failed to be family, and has failed to produce effective families. We have become an institution, a school, a drop-in centre. God does not intend that this should continue forever. The prophet Malachi, in talking about the end times, says,

“He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Mal. 4:6)

God plans to restore the family. Already we can see it happening. Organizations like Promise Keepers are beginning to blaze a trail. God's dream for children will be fulfilled. The church needs to rise up and say, “It is time we handed the nurture of our children back to the parents and families. We ourselves will be a family community especially to those children who have no spiritual family.”

The prophecy does not leave us room to say, “No.” If we do, God tells us clearly what will happen; our land will be cursed. Can you think of a worse curse than a generation of rebellious and lawless children?

TO THINK ABOUT

1. Tell your group how far your family has influenced your Christian life for better or worse. How far back can you trace your spiritual family tree? Write it down.
2. If you are a first generation Christian, You have the chance to start a spiritual family tree. Ask God to bless your children and grandchildren.

3. If you are a single person, ask God for spiritual children and grandchildren to become your inheritance. Where could you find them?
4. What do the children of your church learn from their experience of church life?

Chapter 3

GOD'S PLAN FOR CHILDREN. THE STRAND OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

If family is the first strand of God's plan for children, the second strand is spiritual maturity. He does not regard them as embryo or second-class Christians. While they are still children, God gives them all they need to live a full and complete Christian life for their age.. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest they should wait until they are adults to experience the life of the Spirit.

JESUS INCLUDED CHILDREN

There were always children surrounding Jesus. They liked him. When Jesus needed a child to illustrate a spiritual truth, he did not have to go looking for one. Many were playing round the edges of the crowd. He only had to beckon and a child came running.

They had no trouble understanding him. One boy came alone to hear the preacher from Nazareth. His mother, knowing her son, had sent a good lunch to keep him going. However, he

was so interested in what Jesus was saying, he forgot to eat it. When Andrew came looking for food to feed the hungry crowd,³⁰ the boy offered his modest meal. The people were fed, not only by the power of Jesus but also by the generosity of a child.

Jesus had a remarkable ability to speak to all generations and ages. Truth was dressed in stories, illustrations and even jokes! He did not deal in abstracts, which are inaccessible to children. He knew that if children could understand his message, it would be open to anyone who wished to receive it.

On the day Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, the children were there, praising and singing hosannas. This upset some religious people. They demanded that Jesus order them to be quiet, for two reasons. Firstly the children were acknowledging him as the Messiah. Surely they could not understand what they were shouting. People still say that children cannot understand worship. Secondly the children were disturbing the peace of the temple precincts.

That's the trouble with children. They like to sing and shout and raise a storm. They use their muscles as well as their minds. Apparently God likes it.³¹

Jesus reminded the rulers of the words of Psalm 8:2. "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise."³²

For God, children's praise is about as perfect as it can get, because it comes from uncomplicated hearts. They do not try to find reasons, they simply appreciate him. In Psalm 148, the

30. John 6:8

31. Psalm 100:1

32. Matthew 21:16

Psalmist urges everyone, male and female, young and old, to praise the Lord.³³

GOD CALLS CHILDREN

From the moment children are born, God has a vision for their lives. He calls them to serve them, and he trains them.

When he was looking for a great deliverer to lead his people out of the bondage of Egypt, he selected Moses and preserved his young life from the attacks of the enemy. When the nation was oppressed by the Philistines, God chose Samson to be the protective warrior. Before he was born, God told his parents how he should be nurtured as a Nazarite.³⁴

God spoke to children at times when no one else would listen. Eli, the priest, had lost the anointing of his youth and betrayed his calling. His two sons were exploiting the worship of God for their own lust and profit. The word of the Lord was rare in Israel and there were no visions.³⁵ Looking for a faithful priest, God chose the boy, Samuel.³⁶

His parents had a faith vision for him from birth. Even as a child, Samuel's gift of prophecy was so strong, every prophetic word he uttered was fulfilled. No wonder the whole nation came to consult Samuel about the Lord's will.³⁷

When God was looking for a king, he chose a shepherd boy, the youngest of his father's house. We read that "from that

33. Psalm 148:12

34. Judges 13:24-25

35. I Samuel 3:1

36. I Samuel 2:35

37. I Samuel 3:19-4:1

Chapter 5

(FOR THOSE WHO LIKE HISTORY) WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST

In the New Testament church children were part of God's community. They worshipped with the adults, prayed and learned with the adults. In days when many mighty acts of the Spirit were taking place, the children saw it happen before their eyes. This continued for almost three hundred years. During the years of persecution, the church continued to meet in homes in small groups.

This practice was noted by those, who opposed Christianity. In the second century A.D. a forthright critic named Celsus reported;

“They (the Christians) get hold of the children privately, and any women who are as ignorant as themselves. Then they pour out wonderful statements. “You ought not to heed your fathers or your teachers. Obey us . . . we alone know how men ought to live. If you children do as we say, you will be happy yourselves, and make your home happy.”⁴⁹

49. Origen, *Contra Celsus* 3:55, in Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) 1970

Clearly the practice of including children in the meetings was still alive and healthy at that time. The complaint of Celsus was that the children were being encouraged to give up the pagan gods their father worshipped.

Children went to school for their secular education. Church leaders wanted their children to be educated so that they could be good leaders, but they learned about their faith within the shelter of their families and the house churches. Children were staunch followers of Jesus all through those years of persecution. In the catacombs there are records of children dying rather than giving up their faith in Jesus.

THE CHURCH BECAME AN INSTITUTION

Soon after the church gained official recognition, the situation changed. The next emperor after Constantine, (who had embraced Christianity,) was Julian, a short-lived emperor who tried to turn the empire back to paganism. He decreed with some logic, that because secular education was based on pagan philosophers and stories of the gods, it should not be open to Christian children.⁵⁰

The church had to start schools for their own children. This was the beginning of a great educational institution, and it continued for a thousand years. Anyone who wanted a good education had to come to the church to receive it.

The schools were rooted in the monastic tradition. Many of the nobility could not read or write. The Christian monks had a monopoly on learning. Bible were written in Latin or Greek

50. Edwin A. Judge, "The interaction of Biblical and Classical Education in the Fourth Century," *Journal of Christian Education Papers* 77 (July 1983) 31-37.

and were hand written which made them so expensive only kings and the church could afford them. Ordinary people could only depend on the words which were read to them in Latin.

The Christian experience of children at this time was at a low ebb. Church leaders did not think it important to teach them about Jesus. So long as the children had been baptized as infants, their salvation and their place in the church was guaranteed to them. As long as they attended church, obeyed the priests and paid their dues nothing more was required of them. The clergy did all the religious work on behalf of the people.

Children learned mostly from their uneducated parents. They were strictly trained in their religious duties but knew nothing of a personal relationship with God. The stained glass windows in the cathedrals were a visual aid to portray Bible truth. Occasionally travelling players might act out a Bible story in the town, but their plays were a far cry from the facts and message of the Bible. They were full of comedy, terror and wrong theology.

By the twelfth century, the wealthier merchants began to set up secular schools for their sons, breaking the monopoly of the church on education.

THE REFORMATION AND CHILDREN

The breeze of the Spirit which brought about the Reformation also touched the lives of children. Martin Luther urged his followers to teach the Bible to their children in their homes. By now the Bible was available to people cheaply in printed form and translated into their own language. Luther even

wrote some hymns for them. Calvin composed some Christian instructions for children. One of his disciples, John Knox set up schools in Scotland, under the supervision of the church. The Pietist Christians of Moravia and elsewhere gave back to the children their community of faith. Count Nikolaus Zinzendorf wrote a catechism for them, intended not just to impart Biblical truth, but to lead them to love and serve Christ with their whole hearts. It was probably the world's first children's discipling book.

He encouraged them to worship and sing hymns. Regardless of their singing ability, he gathered them into small groups he called choirs. Each one had a 'kinder-vater', who was expected to earn the love and confidence of the children as he showed them how to copy the model of Jesus at their age. The kinder-vater would eventually lead them to become adults members of the church.⁵¹

THE CHILDREN OF REVIVAL

The sons of one outstanding family in the eighteenth century sparked off the Wesleyan Revival in England. Susannah Wesley taught her ten sons and daughters, individually to receive Christ and follow him while they were children. John and Charles were profoundly influenced by that experience.

When John Wesley began his evangelistic ministry, his care for children soon became obvious. He believed that children as young as two or three could be soundly converted and he expected to see signs of repentance and the Spirit-filled life in them. With infant mortality being rampant the urge to win children to Christ was deeply ingrained in his soul.

51. T.F. Kinloch, "Nikolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf" in Elmer L Towns, ed "A History of Religious Educators" 202

The children participated in small groups and for some, he set up a Christian school called Kingswood”. The regime was strict but the teaching was relational. Wesley urged his teachers to say,

“God loves you. He loves to do you good. He loves to make you happy. Would you not then love him? You love me because I love you and do you good. But it is God that makes me love you.”⁵²

In the United States, children were involved in the First Great Awakening. A letter written in 1705 records:

“After a day of fasting and praying together, they first attempted to induce the heads of families to set up family worship; and God gave them great success, so that most of the families in large towns hearkened to their exhortations and reproofs; and set upon the practice of family prayer morning and evening.”⁵³

By 1740 when a revival was in full swing, a Mr Blair of Pennsylvania wrote:

“There have been very comfortable instances of little children among us. Two sisters, one about seven and the other about nine years, were hopefully converted that summer, when religion was so much revived here. I (had) discourse with both lately, and

52. Elmer L Towns, “John Wesley” in Elmer L Towns, ed, “A History of Religious Educators,” 221

53. Douglas Thorson Prayer and Revival and Reformation Societies in American History, Quoted in *Intercessors for America*.

from their own account and the account of their parents, there appeared to be a lasting and thorough change in them. Their parents told me that for a long time, they seemed to be almost wholly taken up with religion; that no weather through the extremity of winter would hinder them from going out daily to by-places for secret prayer, and if anything came in the way they would weep and cry. Their parents say they are very obedient children and strict observers of the Sabbath.”⁵⁴

In the mid nineteenth century, Dr Edwin Orr wrote about the Great Evangelical revival in Ireland. He recounts an incident in County Antrim:

“A schoolboy under deep conviction of sin, seemed so incapable of continuing his studies that the kindly teacher sent him home in the company of another boy. On the way home the two boys noticed an empty house and entered it to pray. At last the unhappy boy found peace, and returned immediately to his classroom to tell his teacher. “I am so happy. I have the Lord Jesus in my heart.” This innocent testimony had its effect on the class, and one boy after another slipped outside. The master, standing on something to look out the window, observed the boys kneeling in prayer, each one apart, all round the school yard. Soon the whole school was in a strange disorder, and the clergyman was sent for and remained all day, dealing with peace-seekers, schoolboys, schoolgirls, teachers, parents and

54. Ibid

neighbors. The premises was occupied until eleven o'clock that night."⁵⁵

The attention paid to children during the Scottish Revival began a whole new children's ministry, when their conversion was at last taken seriously.

THE RISE OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

The Sunday School was begun and multiplied during times of revival. Robert Raikes was a compassionate Christian whose heart was moved by the illiterate street waifs thronging the English slums. In an effort to improve their situation, he began a school to teach them to read and write. The Bible was their textbook. His concept was a radical one: every child should receive a basic education.

Schools had to be held on Sunday because in the rest of the week the children were working twelve to fourteen hours a day in mines and factories. Before long the idea caught on, and was copied across Great Britain and the United States.

Soon churches began to change the focus of the Sunday from education to Christian education and a knowledge of the Bible. By the late nineteenth century, the great Sunday School Unions were formed and denominations were encouraging all churches to form Sunday Schools. It was a tremendous advance. For the first time people were trying to teach children about Jesus in words they could understand. Dedicated people were committing their lives to serving children and leading them into a living experience of salvation.

55. J Edwin Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening* (London and Edinburgh: Marsha Morgan and Scott, 1955) 44.

It was a new but popular idea. In Charles Haddon Spurgeon's church in London, 8,000 children were gathered in an evangelistic rally led by the Scottish children's preacher, Payson Hammond. Some of the converts became full-time church leaders in Spurgeon's church.⁵⁶

The children of the revivals filled the Sunday Schools and created a whole new industry producing materials and training leaders. The popular pattern was for the children to attend church with their parents, and to go to Sunday School in the afternoon. The parents were supposed to read the Sunday lessons and to support the teaching of the Sunday School in their family worship at home.

Later in the United States, the all-age Sunday School was born. Sunday School was such a success that everyone should experience it. There were classes and departments for everyone from the cradle to the grave. Christian Education became a respectable subject for seminaries, and ministers of Christian Education were appointed in churches all over the country. For years the Sunday School flourished as the spearhead of evangelism. It was the first step in planting new churches, at home or on the mission field. New converts joined and in many cases, felt more attached to their class than to their church. That was where the community and spiritual life of the church was expressed.

Some leaders tried to import the all-age Sunday School success into Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. The transition was only briefly successful. People of reserved British stock could never feel comfortable with the idea of remaining in Sunday School for life. After a few years the all-age Sunday

56. Ibid 121.

Schools collapsed In most places and was replaced by the small group movement.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. How did the institution of the church exclude children from the body of Christ?
2. If you went to Sunday School at some time, do you remember what it was like? What was your best memory? What was your worst memory?
3. How many of your Sunday School friends are still Christians today?
4. Have you, or anyone you know, ever been caught up in a revival? Can you describe the atmosphere as God touches the lives of people?

ask bold questions and defend impossible points of view. The people around them give them a context for discussion. They help them to build a basis for judgment in a world swirling with ideas.

In a child's experience, Sunday is the day for Christian teaching and it takes place in a church. From Monday to Saturday they learn about "the real world."

For many children in the church community the division is almost complete. What is true and works in church does not have much to do with their life experience outside the church.

6. How Children See the Pastor

One small boy was following his mother out of church. As she stopped to greet the preacher, he tugged at the hem of the pastor's coat. "Excuse me," he said. "You only speak to people up there, not to people now here."

Most children in the church know who the Pastor is. One child asked, "Where's God today?" when the pastor was absent for a Sunday. The Pastor is related to God and that makes him very important. They do not understand that he is also related to them. If he comes to visit their house, they are generally sent out to play. He is not part of their life and he seldom connects with them.

7. The Silence in the Homes

Many parents feel embarrassed about talking to their children about their own personal faith. Family life is a close encounter. The children are well aware that Dad or Mum sometimes lose their tempers and don't always tell the truth. Usually they forgive them because after all, no one's perfect and parents can't be "good" all the time.

But for many children their parent's experience of God is lived out behind closed doors. Do Mum and Dad pray when they are on their own? Do they depend on God when they are facing serious difficulties? Do they know how to say "Sorry," and ask for forgiveness? Do they ever read the Bible when the children are not around?

Many children do not know how or when their parents became Christians. They haven't heard the stories of their parent's life journey, the ups and downs and the answers to prayer or perhaps the times when God did not answer their immediate prayer but cared for them another way. These stories are just as important as seeing the wedding photos.

8. Children From Outside the Church

Imagine a boy from a non-church background. Perhaps he has been to a Vacation Bible School or an Easter camp. He decides he would like to come to church to see what it is like. Would someone sit beside him to explain what is going on. Would he be allocated to a class of strange children? Would they welcome him and make him their friend?

He might enjoy the story and like the teacher, but would it mean anything in his world? Would he be allowed to ask questions? What would happen if his speech and social manners were a bit rough? Would he be invited home to visit? Would someone disciple him and lead him in the first stages of faith? Would a group of people in the church surround him, love him, pray for him and get to know his family?

If children leave our churches today before they reach adulthood, it is largely because they never see the church the way it is supposed to be. They do not see the power of God

there. They never found out that they belong personally to the Christian community that God set up in their neighbourhood.

Churches want to do the best they can for their children but often they are unaware of the problems. This chapter is intended to be a mirror, so we can all see the church through the eyes of the children. In James' letter⁵⁷, we are warned about the foolish man who sees himself in the mirror and then walks away and forgets it. Confessing our problem is the first step towards repentance, and repentance is the first step towards a solution.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. What was your experience of church as a child? Do any of the reflections of this chapter chime a bell in your mind?
2. Judging by the attitudes of children you know, how do they think about the church they attend? Listen for their reactions.
3. Can you think of parents who have demonstrated the life of the Kingdom in their home?
4. Can you give a good example of a child from a non-church home, who was won and assimilated into the life of the church? How did it happen?

57. James 1:23

Chapter 7

A CHURCH WHERE CHILDREN BELONG

What would a church look like, where the children were recognised as part of the community and where they were expected to live alongside the adults as followers of Jesus? It can happen in different models of church, but it takes attitude of understanding and family inclusion.

For some places, it seems like a natural outcome of what the church is. Where a church is based on a strong local community of families who share their daily lives with each other and express their faith together, the children are usually accepted as a matter of course. The Mennonite and Brethren communities are good examples of the church living intergenerationally.

Writers such as John Westerhoff III have argued passionately for the idea of the church living as a community of faith which included children. Elton Trueblood envisioned a “company of the committed”. Trailblazing churches such as The Church of our Savior” in Washington DC stressed the idea of community within the church which spills over into the external world. Margaret Sawin introduced ‘family clusters’, the gathering of

families in the home for fellowship and support. In all these cases children were part of the vision.

At the same time secular schools have also been discovering the power of intergenerational groups in school through “The Peer Helpers Association” of Robert Myrick and Robert Bowman.⁵⁸ Older children are trained to befriend and assist younger ones in vertical groups.

In the midst of all this consideration, the concept of cell group church took the small group principle to its radical conclusion. The cell group became the core of the church’s life. The whole life of the church flows through it.

The immediate question that arose in western churches was, “What do you do with the children and young people in a cell group church?” Could the children remain in Sunday School while the rest of the church formed cell groups? Effectively the result would be to exclude the children from the body of Christ. It would be like moving house and leaving the children to live in the old house. It is illogical to train children in a traditional church form, and then expect them to join church cells when they are teenagers or older. They need to live and breathe and grow with the cell structure while they are still children.

Suppose we were to release our old patterns of children’s ministry and start with a clean page. What would we expect to see in a church where the children were part of the community?

58. Robert D Myrick and Robert P Bowman, *Children helping Children*, Minneapolis Minnesota: Educational Media Corporation, 1981

Chapter 8

INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH. VISIONING, PLANNING, CREATING, TRAINING

Before a church can change, it needs to receive a vision from God of what He is planning for it to be. It doesn't happen in a complete overnight transformation. The Holy Spirit stirs up a thirst for the new vision. People begin to talk about possibilities. Dreams turn into plans as the vision grows. Through prayer and discussion, the plans take shape, are adjusted, tweaked and revised. Pilot plans are tested and then tweaked again. There is the sense of the driving breath of the Spirit, drawing us onwards to new discoveries.

Cell churches need to go this process as they begin to build a new model. There is a serious temptation to work with the adults first and then bring the children into the model at a later date. It almost needs to happen that way until a sufficient base of the church has soaked in the life culture of a cell church.

The place of the children in a cell church needs to be part of the vision from the start. As the church is transforming, people need to understand that the children are also called

into the cell-church community. A team of pioneers need to be planning the transformation for the children so they can begin to experience life in a group relationship.

If the children are included in the initial vision for the future church, that sets a pattern to aim for, even if it is still only at the beginning stages. We need to keep the whole vision before us, so that we don't get distracted or diverted into temporary staging posts.

THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

This happened at Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore. When the church first became a cell church, the children were grouped in children's cell groups which met on Sunday. The groups were only loosely age-graded and the children were encouraged to relate to each other. The leaders were being trained to lead cell groups rather than "classes" and the children were learning to experience the difference.

One day at a Staff Retreat, there was a deep sense that the children were not sufficiently included in the life of the church. As we prayed, pastors testified one after another, that it was time for the children to be integrated into the cell groups in intergenerational cells. The Senior Pastor affirmed that this was his conviction from God. The church was ready to move.

The Vision for the Children needed to be written down, otherwise people might try to make changes in their own way and lead the church off-track. A written vision can give the church something which can be reviewed, to check how far the Children's Ministry is actually meeting the vision. When new leaders join the Ministry they have a clear vision statement to guide their planning. The Vision cannot be

changed lightly, because it belongs to the whole church, not just to the Children's leaders.

Here is the Vision Statement for the Faith Community Baptist Church at that time.

1. All the children of the church should be integrated into the total life of the church, in outreach discipleship and service and they should grow into full Christian maturity according to their age.
2. The Children's Ministry will reach out to welcome and serve the children of Singapore by every means available in the districts and through the community services.
3. The Children's Ministry will provide quality training, internship, consultation and strategic resources for children's leaders and pastors within our church and for other churches.
4. The Children's Ministry will send children's pastors on mission teams to visit other parts of the world and to help them minister to their children.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

When you have a vision and some specific goals, you need to set up some strategies to achieve the vision. Strategies are open to change as the situation changes. The vision remains the same. Any strategy which does not achieve the vision should be reviewed and changed. Strategies are selective and flexible.

Strategies need to be discussed by those who will need to apply them. In Faith Community Baptist Church, many strategies could not possibly be achieved without the co-operation

of the parents, the cell leaders, the district pastors and the children's leaders. The Holy Spirit speaks to people in their various roles and forms a plan that everyone can support.

STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN FAITH COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH.

1. The Children's Ministry will support and encourage the parents of the church to become spiritual leaders to their own children and to create healthy Christian families.
2. The Children's Ministry will equip every child to be able to worship and minister in the life of the church. The children will be encouraged to share with parents in celebration whenever possible and will train for worship in their own celebration.
3. Children will be members of intergenerational cells, where they experience the life of the community, and the opportunities for shared service.
4. Children will be involved in the outreach strategies of the church in visiting, cell planting, after school clubs, harvest events and school based service.
5. Children and families who are new believers, will be received into the church through friends and family, through cell groups and if necessary, through children's leaders. The whole church should be concerned with welcoming the children.
6. Children will help form a network of prayer in their intergenerational cells, in their celebrations, in their families and among their friends, to pray blessing on the country, their schools, their neighbourhood and their church.

7. The Children's Ministry will develop the ministry skills and spiritual gifting of all the staff so that they can continue into wider ministry in the church, in the wider community of Singapore and in churches around the world.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

When Faith Community Church began to transition into a cell church, we started by changing the nature of the Sunday School. We re-trained all the leaders and re-grouped all the children on a wider age basis so that they could operate as cell groups for children on Sunday morning. They were real cell groups, with the ice-breaker, worship, discussion of the Word, sharing and prayer, ministry among members and a vision to reach other children.

The children responded well to this approach and they began to participate well in their groups. The leaders developed a much deeper pastoral heart towards the children. However, there were still some Biblical principles which had not been addressed.

(a) The families were still able to hand over the responsibility for the children's spiritual nurture to the children's leaders. The parents had no idea of what was happening in the children's cells and they were very willing to allow someone else to lead their children into faith.

(b) The children were still regarded as a separate department in the church. They were not seen as being part of the body. They did not experience the richness of intergenerational life – with spiritual grandparents, teenagers, aunts and uncles. Very few people in the church, outside their immediate families, could even identify the children.

(c) The children did not have the opportunity to join in the large-scale celebration or to learn how to worship God. They did not know that their singing was supposed to bring them to meet God. Adults were afraid to invite the children into worship lest they should be a distraction.

(d) The Children's leaders were largely responsible for reaching out to community children. Yet it is often hard for them to introduce them into the church unless they have a family of their own. Parents can easily invite the children's friends into their homes and to other children's events.

(e) Children were not given any real opportunity to serve God or to minister to others. They were not expected to have any spiritual gifts. They were not trained to share their testimony or to pray for others. No one really knew how their discipleship was progressing, or even if they were facing problems in life.

Children's cell group were a big improvement on Sunday School lessons, but the children were still isolated from the body of Christ.

GOD MOVED US TO INTERGENERATIONAL CELLS

When God gave the church the vision for intergenerational cells, it was no easy change. We had to convince the cell groups that it would be good to have them there. We had to convince the parents that their children would like being there and they would behave themselves. We even had to convince children's leaders that they could trust the parents with their own children! Many of the children's leaders loved the children and had served them for a long time. They were not sure the parents would do a good job.

Before the church began to transition, the whole congregation needed to hear the vision and own it. It is not a concept that you can hear and vote on in a church members' meeting. It is a life-style which is birthed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. If we adopt intergenerational cells as if they were another program, they will prosper briefly and then the novelty will fade, and the groups will wither.

If the church wants an "easy-fix" for its children, this is not it. People need to believe with a passion that God is saying something to them about their children. They should burn with desire to see their children as part of God's community. They will need to bear the cost and stay with the vision even when they hit rocks and potholes.

STAGES OF THE TRANSITION.

The Senior Pastor's Role

(a) Proclamation

It is essential that the Senior Pastor should be the leader of a change like this which affects everyone in the church. Our Senior Pastor at Faith Community Baptist Church, Lawrence Khong, had been one of the first to catch the vision and he was more than willing to be the spokesman. For several weeks, he shared the vision for the children through his preaching. In the districts other leaders spoke publicly about the direction we had received from God.

When introducing a change of vision and practice into the church the pastor needs to preach about it for four to six weeks. The first week the people think, "That's interesting." The second week they think, "Didn't he preach about that last Sunday?" In the third week they think, "Pastor seems serious

Chapter 9

LEARNING TO OPERATE INTERGENERATIONAL CELLS

Intergenerational church did not begin in Singapore. The idea of an integrated Christian community has been an ideal right from the New Testament until now and in many different cultures and societies. In pioneer rural settlements it was normal to include the children. In places where Christians were breaking away from the traditions and standards of the official church, the children were swept along in the movements of the radical church.

Amish and Mennonite communities always included their children. The Plymouth Brethren fellowships of my childhood did not see themselves as churches but as a “little flock” which included everyone. It may not have been up-market, but it was the place where we belonged.

In more recent experiments in community church the same mindset has emerged. The house churches in Canberra, Australia, under the leadership of Dr Robert Banks, had their “church” service on Friday night so that all the children could participate. Some nights they focussed more on the children.

Some nights the children's participation was low-key, so that the adults could discuss adult-life issues.

In Latin American churches it was not possible or desirable to exclude the children so people had to get used to having the children with them. At times the need for cell group leaders was so great that older children and early teens had to be trained to lead groups. They earned the respect of the adults and helped the groups to grow effectively.

The intergenerational concept did not always result in the same structures. People prayed and experimented and listened to the Holy Spirit and modified their model. The great overall outcome was that in these churches there was no barrier between age-groups in the congregation.

The Intergenerational cell groups I describe in this chapter, happened at Faith Community Baptist Church over the ten years I was acting as Staff Consultant. It was a huge opportunity and blessing to me, because of the graciousness and trust of the Senior Pastor and the Church leadership, who gave me the permission and the space to do something new and practical within the vision that the Holy Spirit had birthed in me.

PRACTISING INTERGENERATIONAL CELLS WITH CHILDREN

When we started operating intergenerational cells, some things worked out quite easily. The children loved being part of the activity and often they came up with excellent icebreaker ideas. Even the little ones could participate if they could partner with an older child or adult.

The group would begin with a game or ice-breaker and then the leader reviewed the message they had just heard, asking and answering any questions and making sure the children understood. They would work out how the message could be applied at home or school. Often they would recall last week's memory verse or introduce a new one. They would end the group by praying for one another and sharing any needs.

By that time the adult congregation was emerging, so the children joined their families. However, the group-leaders and the staff leaders stayed back for a de-briefing of the group session and a preparation for next week's program. After that they adjourned to McDonald's for some fun and friendship together.

This was an excellent model for children's cell groups because the children were being equipped for maturity and leadership. The younger children related well to their group leaders and looked up to them with respect.

CLASS OR CELL-GROUP?

When the Children's Ministry transitions from a Sunday School class to a cell group, the old leaders find it hard to learn the new relational culture. Even after initial training, we found leaders would lapse back into being teachers so that we had to run refresher training about once a month. People who have been used to doing all the talking while the children listen, do not feel comfortable with opening up the conversation for the children to share. We tried to help them see the family as their cultural model rather than the school.

In one church which was experimenting with children's cell groups, all the groups were mixed ages, except for one. A

group of 11-12 year old girls rebelled and complained to their parents so that, in the end, they were allowed to keep their social group. This was the only group which had discipline problems. It was also the one in which there were fewer signs of spiritual growth. It was designed for selfish reasons and it produced selfish results.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

If children learn the character of a cell group before they try to integrate into an intergenerational cell group, the transition is much easier. They already know about sharing needs and praying for one another. Hopefully they will be developing a concern for their friends who don't know about Jesus. They will also have started on the journey into discipleship so they know what an active Christian life looks like.

The main disadvantage of children's cell groups is that the children are still isolated from the parents in their church and spiritual life. The parents do not get so much opportunity see how their children are growing and to lead them in practising the Christian life as a family.

As long as the children are separated from the main-stream ministry of the church, they do not know what the church does, how it operates or how they can be part of it. The church can run an Equipping Track for the children but they do not give them the opportunity to practise it with other adults and especially their parents.

The longer you have an Intergenerational Church, the more you can see its benefits. It takes time to see the children maturing, trying out the skills and learning to trust the adults

around them. Families report more positive communication and encouragement among the children and the adults.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. What sort of change would it take to convert our Sunday School into children's cell groups?
2. Would this be a good means of preparing the children for Intergenerational Cell Groups in the future?
3. Would children's cell groups fulfil the vision of our church for the children and the families?

Chapter 12

GETTING TO KNOW CHILDREN AND MAKING THEM YOUR FRIENDS

An elderly gentleman in a church some years ago, felt friendly towards the children and wanted to get to know them. But he was rather unbending in his style and didn't know how to greet them. It was his habit to pat them on the head or even chuck them under the chin and say gruffly, "My,my, what a big boy/girl you're getting to be."

One girl of eleven really disliked this familiarity. One day when he was sitting down, she approached the gentleman, chucked him under the chin, and said, "You're getting to be a really old gentleman, aren't you?"

His heart was in the right place, but he didn't know that when you want to make friends with children, you must show them respect. Children do not like to be talked down to, and you mustn't assume too much on a first acquaintance. Young children do not like to be hugged or kissed by a stranger. Older children do not like to be reminded of their size. All children like to be given some space to find out who you are and how they are going to relate to you.

STEPS IN MAKING FRIENDS WITH A CHILD

1. Conversation Openers

When you first meet someone, you talk about neutral things that you both know about. With adults it could be the weather, your job, current events or sports. Older adults like to talk about their state of health or the minor frustrations of the world. With a children's limited experience, you need to start with something they do. Sometimes you can start a conversation by praising them for something they have done. Ask them to tell you more about what happened. Or you might talk about school or holidays, or their family, or television or even computer games.

2. Finding Common Ground

As you begin the conversation, you are looking for the light to go on. You can be talking on a level of mere politeness and suddenly you notice that something has really caught their attention. With children it is hard to pick what that will be. It could be garden bugs, or dinosaurs or small animals, princesses or wolves. Sometimes their tee-shirts will give you a clue. If you ever get to visit their home, you will find it in the things they use to decorate their bedrooms. You can't be expected to know much about their chosen interest, but you have a great capacity to learn, and they may have a great capacity to tell you about it.

After that, you notice when those interests appear in the world around you. Next time you see the child you tell them what you discovered and renew the conversation. When they think you are interested, they will return to you with more news.

In one group of boys, the leader could not get to know one boy very well. He was quiet and cooperative but he also shy

and silent. He didn't seem to be interested in the things most of the boys were excited about. At last the leader asked his parents what were the boy's hobbies and they told him that his passion in life was breeding canaries.

The leader knew absolutely nothing about canaries but he took the first chance to visit the local public library and find some books on canaries. As soon as he had learned some basics, he went to the boy's home and asked, "Would you show me your canaries?" The boy didn't need a second invitation. Out in the aviary they discussed all manner of things, how canaries mated, how long it takes the eggs to hatch, how to produce colour differences. The leader learned more about canaries than he planned for. But he also made a friend. From that time the boy was excited about his leader. They always had something to talk about, and they could also talk about the important things of life in general. It is a great investment to get to know a child.

3. Sharing Life Stories

As a friendship develops, most people want to know more about their new friend. What is their family like; what is their life history; what special events have happened? This is harder for children because their life experience is so much shorter, and they can't even remember some parts of it. Sometimes they only half understand important events that have happened. Imagination and memory can get mixed up in a version which they tell you. Just keep an open mind until you can understand a little better.

However, they love to hear your life story. In the olden days before they were born, amazing things happened and they want to know what life was like then. They will want to know about your wife and family and where you live and whether

you have pets. They want to know about your sports and your hobbies and the work you do and where you go for your holidays. Your life is a whole new window into someone else's reality and they add your experience to their knowledge of the world.

We always encourage cell members especially Kids' Slot members to be open in sharing their life story. You don't have to pretend to be perfect. They won't believe you anyway. But if you can tell about some of your mistakes and what you did to fix them, they will add that to their databanks. Most of all the children will want to know how you decided to follow Jesus and what difference that has made to your life. There is nothing stronger than first-hand experience.

Children will tell you many things about themselves and their world. Not all of them will be true or they may be exaggerated. Often they may not have understood the events which they witnessed around them. Sometimes the facts may be all too true and someone is telling them not to talk about it. Be careful and prayerful with such information. Sometimes the child may need a sympathetic explanation from someone they trust. Sometimes a wise and helpful person may need to get to know the family to discover if the child is safe. This is a family matter and we have a responsibility which should be shared with your Pastor.

4. Share Your Hopes and Dreams

When our son was about six years old, the height of his ambition was to drive the trolley which carried the luggage from the air terminal to the plane. It fascinated him. We hoped that he would one day go to college and have a professional career. At six years old he didn't care about college. So we

would take time to drive to the airport and let him watch the man drive the luggage trolleys across the tarmac.

If you are very fortunate, children will tell you some of their dream and hopes for the future. Everything seems possible to them at this stage of life. So we need to treat their dreams with great tenderness. We can explore the possibilities and do some dreaming with them. One day the dream will change and we need to be ready to let that happen.

If the friendship is really mutual you would also share some of your dreams with your child-friend. Children are amazingly understanding when you tell them of your hopes and fears. They will get excited for you. They will pray for you. They will show enthusiasm when you take tests or interviews. My childhood leader had a vision of going to the mission field. We prayed for her right through Bible College, right through missionary training. We all wanted to be her bridesmaids. And we all learned about God's call to missionary service. She was an example and a model.

5. Warning!

If children trust you enough to tell you some of their inner life, never repeat it to others, or make a joke about it. Sometimes they will say things which are unconsciously funny. We may long to share the joke with someone, even their parents. But this is not fair to the child. If they find out you have broken their confidence, they will find it hard to trust you again.

The cell group should be a safe place for children. The adults must make sure that the children are protected while they are in the group. Sometimes the men in the group like to have a partner to help them lead Kids' Slot. The level of rumour and suspicion in our society has become so high, that they are

afraid to get close to children at all and certainly not alone. This is tragic because the children need safe adult friends and role models among men. If a person is known to have a weakness or history of inappropriate behaviour towards children, they should never be left alone with them in the cell group. Cell members should protect each other.

6. Sharing the Lives of Children.

Children can be inconvenient friends at times. They will often ignore you at first, but once they learn that they are allowed to talk to you, they can come bouncing into your life regardless of what you are doing. It's better to plan out times when you can touch base with them. It doesn't always have to be long times.

A short visit to a sport's match, where you can cheer them on for a while, makes you keen supporter. One cell leader took the time to see a child perform in a school concert. The child was amazed that he would come, even when he didn't have to.

When I was sick in bed at seven years old, an old lady from church came by to give me an orange and a book to read. She didn't want it returned. I loved the story and I still have her book on my bookshelves. She was my friend. Friendships which you build with a child can last for a life-time.

7. Keeping the Attention of the Group

It is important in a group that every child in the group is recognised by name and by a moment's personal attention. As you begin to talk to individuals, draw other children into the conversation so that the group develops a body life together. Sometimes you might sit an older child next to a younger one or a new child so they can help each other.

Your eyes are your best tools for gaining the attention of the children. As you let your eyes wander around the group, you catch the eye of each child so they know you are aware of them. Your watchful eyes should not be always reproving. Your eyes can laugh, commend and encourage the children so they can feel your approval. A look of sadness or disappointment is quickly transmitted. Even an insensitive child feels uncomfortable when he is confronted with a questioning stare.

Your eyes will also help you bring more children into the conversation. A look or smile will encourage a shy child to speak up. If the child is trying to do well, your eyes can show your genuine approval.

8. The Floor is a Great Leveller

Children often feel at a disadvantage because of their height difference with adults. Mabel was an older widow, whose children had grown up and her grandchildren lived far away. She enjoyed talking with the children in church on Sunday. As she greeted a child, she would sit down or drop to one knee so she could talk to the child, eyeball to eyeball. Whenever she talked to one child, other children would come running up to get into the conversation too. They liked the lady who was willing to come to their height.

For children the world is too big. People can be several feet taller than they are. Chairs and tables are the wrong size. Food is served above their heads. When you get down to the same level as the children you are showing respect for them. Of course child-size chairs and table are not easy for adults to use either.

The floor is a great leveller. Adults and children who sit on the floor are on equal terms. They can see each other's faces and respond directly to one another. Eye contact is easy and everyone is included.

If a young child gets restless, they can move around without disturbing the group. We had a hyperactive boy in our group. He would leave the circle and turn a forward roll. He would lie on his stomach or his back. The group took no notice. He would come back into the group when he was ready, and he was never out of control.

When adults and children sit on chairs, any movement is noisy. Children can think of dozens of different things to do with a chair and all of them are noisy. No leader wants to try to control children and furniture at the same time.

9. The Power of Praise

When children come to a cell group, they should not expect to be scolded all the time. Sometimes parents are so anxious about their children, they are on edge waiting for something bad to happen. If there is an atmosphere of disapproval, the children will be afraid to open up and talk to the adults. Parents, leaders and all the adults need to be ready for good things to happen. As soon as a child does something worthy of praise, someone should speak words of appreciation and approval. The child may be surprised at the good feeling they get when they have done something well. They may be even more surprised to discover the God is pleased with them too.

Children also need to be encouraged to affirm each other. Sibling rivalry can cause friction in families. In many societies children suffer severe peer pressure from their friends. Children can laugh at each other's mistakes, and overlook their

achievements. “Being good,” can be seen as being anti-social. Trading insults may be part of the chatter of the “cool” kids.

Children need to learn to appreciate each other, even the young ones. They may enjoy a friend’s success without envy, and encourage a child who has failed. There are not many environments in life where a child can learn to give and receive appreciation.

10. The Power of Prayer

Prayer is an effective tool for controlling children’s behaviour. Prayer before the meeting can certainly help the atmosphere. But it is also very powerful during the meeting. Restless and chatter may arise from boredom or cramped conditions. The Enemy can supply plenty of distractions to break up the group.

In a negative atmosphere, prayer is a spiritual weapon to bring the power and peace into the situation. Sometimes we need to stop what we are doing and ask for the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts to bring his peace and order. We may even pray for an individual child in a positive way. “Dear Father, we know that Jason is such a great kid and he has a very busy mind, and you know that too. Please come close to him so he can feel your presence and start to praise You. Amen.

One day in our Children’s Church, we had a visiting group of puppeteers. They hadn’t prepared well enough and things were going very wrong. The children were not slow to notice that the puppets’ mouths were not moving at the right times and there was a lot of backstage giggling. The story-line was lost. The children began to laugh and wriggle and get out of control. The puppet team left hastily and left us with three

hundred riotous children. It seems nothing could calm them down.

Our Children's Pastor was a quiet lady. On this Sunday she just walked to the microphone and began to pray. In the name of Jesus she banished any spirit of disobedience and rebellion from the room. She claimed the space for Jesus and asked the Holy Spirit to enter every child's heart with peace and praise. At the same time the musicians began to play quiet music and in less than a minute all the children were praising God.

We should never forget that atmosphere and space and personal relations are spiritual dimensions.

11. Encouraging Children to Talk

When people are new to doing Kids' Slot, they often ask how they can make the children keep quiet. They remember their own childhood when children were expected to be quiet in the presence of adults. I usually explain to them that a cell group is not a place where the leader talks while the children are silent. It is a place for shared conversation, where the leader guides the discussion. For some adults this feels quite threatening. They fear that if the children start talking, they will interrupt the discussion and miss the point.

In fact, interruption is a great learning moment. They want to know something and we can divert it back to the point. It is a skill we can learn. We should never ignore an irrelevant comment especially from a younger child. We may silence them, but we have lost their attention.

A child may interrupt your flow with a thought in his/her own mind. "I got new shoes. See?" The leader does not choke, or

brush the words away. He/she acknowledges what the child said and tries to lead the idea back to the point.

“So you have. Aren’t they beautiful? Did Mummy buy those for you? I bet Zacchaeus wished that he had a Mummy to buy him nice new shoes. He didn’t have anyone who loved him. No one wanted to be his friend. He was very lonely. He wondered if Jesus might be his friend...”

When you allow the children to speak it shows that you want to hear what they are thinking. Some children will have heard the Bible stories many times before. They will be glad to help you tell the story or to add some feelings. You can ask them what the story means or whether they know of anyone else who may have been in the same situation.

Often with older children you will discover that they have acquired some false understandings of the story. They can repeat back the basic facts but they can miss the point. When I talk to children about the wise man and the foolish man, I often ask them was the story is supposed to tell us. Most children think it is about house-building. If you are going to build a house it needs good foundations underneath it. I have some nine-year-old children who think there might be something spiritual about it but they are not sure what. Nine-year-olds are not very good at seeing abstract meaning behind the practical facts.

12. The Hidden Message

Children know when the adults are glad to see them go. They can tell which adults don’t want to talk to them. If none of the men in the cell group want to lead the Kids’ Slot they learn that men don’t want to be bothered with children. Worse still they may learn that Christian faith is for women, and real men

keep their distance. They know what it means when the leader is constantly looking at his watch.

When we deal with children our hearts must be open and genuine. We must laugh at our own mistakes and tell the children how we are feeling. We can seek their prayer and help and they will respect us even more. If we want to feel comfortable with the children, we need to talk with them or play with them during the fellowship time. They begin to own you as a friend.

If you need to talk to a child personally, do it in a public place where there are other people around. Listen more than you talk. Sometimes children just want to talk about something but they are not asking you to fix it. They just want to tell you how they feel. If they want to know what you think, they will ask you.

Do not condemn what they say even if the problem seems trivial. No one wants to feel stupid when they've asked a question. Don't assume they are wrong. Children are good observers, even if they cannot understand how the world works. If they find it hard to explain what they are asking, let them draw pictures as they talk. They can give you clues better than words. Sometimes you need to make an agreement to find out more about the question before next week's meeting.

An adult friend can be a great asset to a family. If the child is worrying about an internal friction or quarrel, they sometimes need someone who is trusted and objective. Parents should value such a friend to help smooth things out.

Amanda, a thirteen-year-old, was furious with her parents because they didn't want her to wear lipstick. The girl flounced

out of the house in a rage and found her adult “aunty.” “You’ll never believe how mean my parents are being to me. They won’t let me wear lipstick like the other girls. They think I’m just a baby.” Aunty opened the cookie jar and offered a drink. As they talked she let Amanda vent her feelings. At last Aunty looked at Amanda reflectively and observed, “When you do start to wear make-up, you’ll need to get some very good tuition, because doing it on your own can be a risk. Actually I hope you’ll leave it for a bit longer, because just at this moment your skin is the best it will ever look in your whole life, and I wouldn’t want to mess it up.”

“So you agree with them,” frowned Amanda.

“Well, I’ve always thought that you start to apply make-up when you start to develop skin problems and you are losing that amazing freshness. You know, when pimples start to pop up and your eyes start looking tired. By that time, you might need some colour to highlight your face to make it more attractive. But at the moment I think you look stunning. I’ve seen girls a lot older than you who don’t look nearly as good. Why don’t we both have a talk with your parents and make a plan about when you should start make-up and how you should learn to do it really well, so you look wonderful and not just self-taught.”

Amanda was looking thoughtful. “I think I know what you mean. Some of my friends do overdo it a bit. I’d really like you to come with to talk to my parents. I don’t want to make them angry but I don’t like being treated like a child.”

Amanda’s parents should be grateful for their wise friend. Another hurdle had been cleared.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. When you were growing up, did you have an adult friend you could talk to when you wanted someone else's opinion?
2. Do you know a child outside your family who is your friend now? What do you like to talk about?
3. Practise a conversation in which you meet a child for the first time and try to make friends.