

**CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES
WHAT REALLY MATTERS!**



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Rick Chromey

Children's Ministries: What Really Matters! was created
by the Children's Ministries Department of the
North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
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who submitted reflection questions for each chapter.

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This work is dedicated to all the “little ones.”

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FOREWORD

I MET Rick Chromey at a Children's Ministries conference where I attended his workshop on leadership. Rick was so encouraging and full of good information. He had the whole room laughing at his stories or feverishly taking notes as he provided practical steps for successful Children's Ministries.

When a really good book comes out with tips, tools, methods, and inspiration about how to lead well in Children's Ministries I buy a copy right away. And sometimes I buy several copies. This is one of those books where I always have several copies to give away. It is just that good!

Rick shares from a life of experience and wisdom from scripture for leading children to know they are loved by God and for Children's Ministries leaders to know that they are not alone in ministry – they are right where God intends them to be. In the first chapter Rick shares his testimony of growing up in a small church that embraced him as a young man and mentored him to use his gift of leadership in his church. Children's Ministries made a big difference in the trajectory of Rick's life. Children's Ministries matters! And there is a bonus! At the end of each chapter Children's Ministries experts have written reflection questions and activities to help the reader internalize each practical concept and encouragement to put each concept into practice in their ministry to children.

You will enjoy Rick's quirky humor and stories, his practical attention to the details of organizing your ministry, and his passion for helping you lead well. Go ahead, purchase two or three copies of *Children's Ministries: What Really Matters*, and once you have read it through share your extra copies with a fellow Children's Ministries leader.

Sherri Uhrig

Children's Ministries Director

North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

INTRODUCTION

*“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,
which a man took and planted in his field.
Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows,
it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree,
so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”*
(Matthew 13:31b–32, NIV)

I SUSPECT that you already know the smaller church. Maybe you were raised in one. Maybe you attend one now. Maybe you’re a pastor or leader of the children’s ministry in one.

Let’s be honest. Smaller churches aren’t usually impressive. Our numbers are minimal. We are gloriously ordinary, but incredibly tight knit. Most smaller churches don’t enjoy the luxury of larger congregations, particularly the employment of a dedicated children’s pastor. While exceptions abound, it’s safe to say most smaller church Bible teachers are average men and women. During the week they teach school, drive delivery trucks, run businesses, keep homes or work at hospitals. Yet when they open up God’s Word to a bunch of kids somehow they transform into spiritual superheroes.

The smaller church doesn’t have a lot of dedicated space and resources for children’s ministry. We likely have no gym, playground or fancy technology. Most of our classrooms are small, painted rather plain and packed a dozen kids to one table. The methods we use can be old school. Flannelgraph drawings. Bible quiz games. Matchstick cross crafts. And yet the stories about Abraham, David, Peter, Paul and Jesus still rattle the soul. Occasionally the pastor might drop by to greet us. Sometimes an elder disrupts to pray.

That’s what makes a smaller church beautiful: community.

Smaller churches develop people. And kids are people too. I grew up in a church that intentionally viewed children as “pastors in training.” As a

preschooler, I washed communion cups. As a child, I passed offering plates, greeted visitors and read Scripture. As an adolescent, I led worship, preached and visited the sick and elderly. In my particular smaller church, every person had a job to do and every child and teen needed to learn how to do it.

It's no wonder I grew up with a desire to pastor.

Smaller churches can uniquely plant a vision, nurture passion and hone skill sets. You don't need to be the biggest church in town to matter. Success isn't in the numbers (attendance, budget, building) but rather how well lives are transformed for Jesus

We live in a time in history when the Church has enjoyed the best in children's ministry. We have technology, professional staff, well-designed curriculum, attractive programming and beautiful facilities. From professional children's ministry conferences to one-day trainings to YouTube teaching videos, everyone who serves in children's ministry can easily be trained.

But not every church enjoys those amenities.

Many smaller churches are often overlooked in a megachurch culture that preaches "bigger is better." Consequently, we often miss our own extraordinary accomplishments and effectiveness (read: success). The truth is many smaller churches have a better retention rate and produce a better product than churches far larger in size. We just don't *know* it.

I once worked in a small church of 100 people that boasted around 25 children (preschool through sixth grade). I never considered the percentages, but one-fourth of the church's total population was kids! How many 1000 member churches can boast a comparative percentage (250 children)? Many smaller churches, by ratio and percentage, are far more effective and successful than larger, more celebrated, congregations.

Many smaller congregations also better equip leaders for tomorrow's church. I once attended a church of 125 that sent over two dozen men and women into full-time Christian service in one ten-year span. Among them are preachers, missionaries, military chaplains, people who work with the hearing impaired, musicians, children's pastors, and Bible college professors. But that small church also equipped dozens of others to lead, teach and serve in lay positions. Out of its ranks came a cohort of elders, deacons, worship team leaders and dozens of others to serve in children's, youth and adult ministry.

That's an impressive record.

That little church literally changed the world.

It's a small congregation that became a living example of Jesus' parable about a mustard seed. The church might have been planted with miniscule

kernels in budgets and buildings, programs and staff, but God gave indescribable and unbelievable growth to influence and inspire.

KIDS MATTER!

Smaller churches are exciting places for ministry! Over the past 30 years, I've been privileged to travel across the U.S. and globe, to consult, train and interact with churches (of varying sizes, types and denominations). I've seen some of the finest children's ministries in America, perhaps the world. I've observed cutting-edge programming, state-of-the art facilities and innovative classroom environments. I've dialogued with countless teachers, children's pastors and other leaders about how to effectively reach kids in the 21st century.

In the end, I know two things are true.

One, that kids matter to God.

And secondly, dynamic, growing churches embrace truth number one.

Conversely, the clearest sign of a church in decline is how little they value and care about their children. In fact, most dying (and dead) churches have few to no children. In my consultation work, I've observed that when the average age of a church reaches 50, they begin their slow slide toward obsolescence and death.

Several years ago, church analyst George Barna penned a passionate apologetic for churches to focus on children *first*. In his book, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*, Barna introduced a surprising statistic. His research concluded that out of every 100 Americans, forty-two will make a commitment to Jesus in their lifetime. But even more interesting? Barna also noted that 32 of those 42 people will make their decision to follow Jesus prior to age 12. Only four will commit to Christ in their adolescent years and the remaining six will find their faith as adults.¹

If there's any fault in Barna's statistic is its datedness. He made that conclusion nearly twenty years ago. And a lot has changed in two decades. No one, to my knowledge, has done a comparative study, but there is considerable research to suggest the "42" number may be much *lower* today. Church attendance has been sliding annually since Barna wrote his book.

Nevertheless, the central truth remains important.

Children are our most receptive audience to Christianity. If churches want to get serious about generational transformation and reversing the spiraling trend of people leaving the Church, the children are the best place to start.

¹ *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003), 34.

Kids matter.

What Barna uncovered was something I've known for a long time (and perhaps you did too): if children don't find faith before middle school, it's unlikely they ever will. Every congregation, regardless of their size, has a responsibility to reach, teach, equip and release children into future ministry roles.

That's why we need to use our resources to energize an exciting and powerful faith in kids. A passionate faith doesn't come in a pretty box or grow inside a high-tech bubble. It doesn't emerge by chance. On the flip side, negative attitudes and behaviors toward church (things like apathy, boredom or passivity) also don't happen accidentally. Most indifferent Christian teens have grown disinterested because of their church experience *as children*. Sometimes even one moment in time can make all the difference.

Several years ago, at a children's workshop training, a woman approached me in tears to share her story. She and her brother were raised in a non-Christian home directly across the street from a small church. One summer day, bored with life, they heard singing and laughter at the church (a Vacation Bible School was in progress) and decided to check it out, uninvited. Because her older brother was in a different class they were quickly split up and ushered to their own classrooms.

The woman's face cheered as she shared how those two hours changed her life. She was embraced by a loving teacher who introduced her to new friends, cool crafts, fun games and the person of Jesus Christ. "I left that church a different person," she told me. She shared how she continued to attend until her high school graduation. Today, she is an active leader in her own church as a children's teacher.

I then asked about her brother.

The teacher's face saddened, and her mood changed.

Her brother's experience was vastly different, she confessed. His teacher proved aloof and unfriendly. His tattered clothes were ridiculed. The other children mocked him. One kid picked a fight. Her brother felt alone, hurt and frustrated. He found church boring and concluded that Christian faith was unnecessary. "He never went back to church," the woman shared, "and all because of that one bad moment."

This woman's story is a powerful testimony to how faith can either fly or flee...and our chance to change a solitary life arrives in rather small windows. We rarely enjoy a second opportunity.

Children are the church of tomorrow, but we mustn't forget they're also the church of today. Their attitudes, values, theology, perceptions, principles,

preferences, commitments and decisions are all formed and forged by middle school. We must recognize a child's ability to worship and praise God *now*. We must equip and empower kids to serve in valuable ministry roles *now*. Their innocence and idealism can assist a church if we only invite them into our conversations. As Isaiah noted, sometimes a "little child will lead (Isaiah 11:6)."

Want to know a wonderful secret?

The smaller church is uniquely shaped to allow children to be involved. Larger churches may have more money, but smaller congregations have more opportunity. In a smaller congregation, there is a place for everyone—especially children. My home church taught me that truth. I'm grateful that I grew up in a church that valued me at four years of age. They took a risk to let a preschooler wash and dry fragile glass communion cups!

Larger congregations segregate the children from the adults on Sunday morning. It's not wrong, but it's necessary. That's what I love about the smaller church! Children can still fit with adults. The African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child is true. Every adult in the church plays a part in transforming a child's life for Jesus. That's why this book is packed with ideas and insights on how to involve children in the church.

If you want to energize your children's ministry, the first step is to recognize these children matter to God.

SMALL IS THE NEW BIG!

People in smaller churches often feel outnumbered by those in larger, more dynamic churches.

But let's be honest, in a postmodern culture, *small is tall*.

Don't believe me?

Order a "tall" cup of coffee at Starbucks and see what you get.

We live in a culture where things are growing *bigger* and *smaller* at the same time. We drive huge SUVs and tiny "smart" cars. We watch television on big screens and smartphones. We shop at megastores and tiny shops.

According to the Seventh-day Adventist website, the most recent (2018) survey of congregations stated there were 88,718 churches with a combined membership of 21.4 million.² That makes the average SDA church around 240 members. However, since average attendance tends to be one quarter of membership in most churches, that also means around 180 members attend the average SDA church on any given Sabbath day.

2 Seventh-day Adventist Church World Church statistics (January 9, 2020): <https://www.adventist.org/articles/seventh-day-adventist-world-church-statistics-2018/>

In fact, nearly all SDA congregations are under 200 active members.

But that isn't uncommon either. A Hartford Institute for Religion Study revealed that of all US American churches:³

- 59% are under 100 attenders
- 35% between 100 and 500 attenders
- 6.4% are over 500 attenders

In a 2015 National Congregations Study of nearly 4000 American churches,⁴ from a wide swath of denominational and non-denominational churches, several notable trends emerged:

- The average church attender is older and now over 50. Children, as a percentage of regular attendees, dropped from 33 to 28 percent between 1998 and 2012 alone. At the same rate of retraction, it would be around 25% in 2020. Less children means older congregations.
- The majority of congregations are smaller, but most people attend larger churches. In fact, the largest 7% of congregations drew HALF of all church attenders.
- The smaller the church, the more money is given. A church of 100 receives on average \$1750 per person annually. A congregation of 1000 receives on average only \$1140 annually.
- Over half (56%) of U.S. congregations are led by a solo pastor.
- The average age of the primary pastor has increased from 49 to 55 between 1998 and 2012. About half (49%) held graduate degrees.

In observing churches and studying church growth patterns for nearly four decades, I've noted a few guiding truths:

- **The 200-barrier is a church growth reality.** Some churches may balloon to 250 but either the lack of staff or inadequate facilities will burst the growth. Few churches can hire staff and build on a typical smaller church budget and may become frustrated when they encounter this barrier. Children's leaders also feel pressure because children's ministry is widely considered the "growth gene" for churches by their leadership.
- **A church that doesn't reinvent and reproduce will eventually die, although it may take decades.** Every living thing has a life cycle and its

³ "Fast Facts about American Religion": Hartford Institute for Religion Research
http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#sizecong

⁴ "Religious Congregations in the 21st Century": National Congregations Study 2015
https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/files/2019/02/NCSIII_report_final.pdf

reproductive years are limited. Eventually the ability to reproduce ends and old age sets in. Similarly, reinvention and reproduction are critical to a church's overall health. A congregation that can no longer attract and retain young families (with children) will ultimately grow old and die.

- **A church doesn't need to be larger than 200 to be blessed by God and effective in ministry.** Bigger is not always better. Many smaller congregations are "small" because their community dynamics (rural, inner-city, multiple churches) create a smaller pool from which to attract members. A church of 100 in a town of 500 people is a *megachurch* in that community.
- **Dynamic smaller churches (regardless of size) and growing churches (also regardless of size) have children's ministry as a congregational priority.** If there's a common denominator for church health and growth, its kids. From nursery to Vacation Bible School, congregations who prioritize children's ministry, finance it well and adequately staff their programs with trained leaders and teachers find that parents and children stay put.

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE IN THE SMALLER CHURCH!

The smaller church is packed with volunteers. Here are a few basic types of children's ministry leaders.

Maria, who has no formal ministry credentials, is a lay volunteer in an Ohio SDA church. Lack of time and money keep her from attending helpful ministry workshops. The church helps all it can, but few new ideas fly in this town of 900. Faithfulness and a love for children motivate Maria to stick with her church of 60. Nevertheless, she longs for creative insight and innovative ideas to energize her work with children.

Larry is a pastor for a church of 85 members in rural Idaho. He doesn't have a lot of time for children's ministry, but he's young and the church is convinced that Larry can overhaul the program. Larry studied preaching in college, but he doesn't have a clue as to what children need.

Then there's Juanita. She's a part-time, paid youth leader in Southern California. She works a 40-hour week at a local mall eatery, then gives another 20 hours to the children and teenagers in her congregation. It's not easy, and though she has attended a few children's ministry workshops in her area, Juanita still struggles with inadequacy. She wants to do more.

Finally, there's Sean, a full-time paid youth pastor. Fresh out of college, he works in a suburban Atlanta, GA church of 125 members. He once took a children's ministry class and enjoys working with kids, but his job description includes ministry to all age groups, birth through college. Sean has books packed with games and lessons, but what he wants is a philosophical framework. He wants to know "why" more than "how." He'd also welcome workable strategies that won't tax his time, people or budget.

I suspect you can probably relate to Marie, Larry, Juanita or Sean in one way or another. And regardless of where you fit in the mix, the ideas in this book will provide you with options to energize the children's ministry in your church.

NO CHURCH IS THE SAME!

But let's keep it real. There is one final truth: *no church is the same.*

It's the beauty of being a part of God's creation and Kingdom. Your congregation is uniquely fingerprinted and divinely crafted by God. So just because an idea works in Winnemucca doesn't mean it'll fly in Farmington. Your particular church has its own rich and wonderful traditions. Some ideas in this book may counter those rituals and that's okay. Some insights you read might trouble, even anger you. That's understandable. I hope merely to create a fresh conversation for children's ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist church. We need to think differently.

All know is one thing.

God is in control.

And He loves His people.

He will lead us through every obstacle and opposition, including some struggles that force us to rethink our traditions. There's nothing wrong with that. It's why this book, hopefully, sparks a conversation. If there's anything we need right now in America is a conversation.

And, no, complete agreement is not an expectation.

But I do hope you'll take some risks with my thoughts. Don't be afraid to try something new that you learn in the following pages. An idea that sounds outrageous may spark a wonderful moment in your children's ministry. I remember one time I frantically and furiously tried to figure out why an electronic device wasn't working. I even consulted the owner's manual. And then I realized it was unplugged. The funny thing is my wife asked me only moments earlier if it was plugged in and I flippantly dismissed her suggestion with a hasty retort: "Of course it is!"

I was wrong. And it's possible you are too.

Sometimes the reason our children's ministries limp, struggle and gasp is because they're no longer plugged in. They're disconnected from God's power, or a biblical principle. Sometimes we're unplugged from our culture (creating irrelevance) or the developmental needs of children (sparking frustration).

So be open. The energizing of your children's ministry may be a rather simple, yet forgotten, matter (like plugging back into some essential truths and foundational forces that guide effective children's ministry). Or it might demand a more thorough overhaul. Rewiring your philosophy. Soldering your practices. Screwing in a new "lightbulb" program.

Ultimately, I pray you find this book filled with hope. I can't imagine what God is waiting to do in your children's ministry (and neither do you). All I know is God loves to use the small, insignificant, unappreciated, disenfranchised, impoverished, quirky and dysfunctional to do some of His best work.

It sounds a lot like me. And probably you, too.

Maybe we're both another mustard seed story in the making.

1

SPARKS

“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go...consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.”

(James 3:3–5, NIV)

THE YEAR 2020 was like no other year.

In early spring, a strange new virus emerged. At first, it was largely ignored. Then, as it spread rapidly across the globe, it created a new cultural paradigm. A global masking occurred. Social distancing became the norm. Entire nations shut down completely. In America, businesses, restaurants, schools and even churches were closed by government mandates. There was fear, doubt and apathy about the disease. Some even considered it a hoax.

However, as the death count rose (over 200,000 deceased), so did the respect for this persistent, highly contagious and deadly virus. No one was immune from the deadly grip of Covid-19—short for Corona Virus Disease 2019.

But this infection wasn't the only contagion in 2020.

In early June the tragic death of a black man named George Floyd sparked racial protests across the U.S. and many international cities. Violent riots—some lasting for weeks and months—torched several American cities including Seattle, Portland, Chicago and Louisville. In the wake, a new consciousness emerged about race relations and social justice in America. It even caused an NFL team to finally drop its Indian moniker.

Meanwhile in the West—Washington, Oregon and, particularly, California—deadly and costly wildfires raged for much of the summer. The blazes created a thick, dangerous smoky haze that choked out communities hundreds of miles from the actual fires. Millions of forested acres were incinerated. Tens of thousands of homes were destroyed. In California nearly three dozen people

lost their lives, including at least one firefighter. One of the worst and deadliest fires was the El Dorado blaze in the San Bernardino forest of southern California. It was started rather innocently by a firework...for a gender reveal party.

Whether a virus or a death or a spark, sometimes the littlest things can rearrange a culture, start a movement or trigger monumental change. It's true. In our digital and cyber world, a butterfly flapping its wings in one hemisphere can create a hurricane in another.

Fire, in particular, is a helpful metaphor for understanding children's ministry in your church. Biblically, if there's a fire...God's in the middle of it. It might be a burning bush, or a pillar of fire. or a fiery furnace, or a chariot's wheels, or an upper room Pentecostal experience. And God's favorite smell? You guessed it...smoke (Revelation 8:4). Fire cleanses, warms, lights and cooks. And nobody can ignore smoke. In fact, a popular camper idiom states that "smoke follows beauty" (referring to how campfire smoke can torture particular souls).

It's true. Smoke does follow beauty. And nobody is more beautiful in a church than the kids.

Consequently, we should expect a productive and vibrant children's ministry—cloaked in God's Power and Blessing—to be particularly smoky and fiery. We should expect an effective children's programs to create friction and heat in a congregation. Children are messy, loud, frustrating, energetic and impetuous. And the more kids your ministry attracts, the more smoke and heat you'll create. And it's a smoke that nobody can ignore.

Unfortunately, too many churches miss the opportunity to fire up their children's ministries. It's tempting to chill, drown and suffocate the enthusiasm building in the children's department down the hall. But for those who dare fan these embers into roaring flames they soon discover how children can rearrange a church's culture. Like a contagious virus, a vibrant children's ministry reimagines a congregation. And if it breaks out can even ignite a movement. It's why not everyone will understand nor appreciate your own passion to lead and teach the kids. If you're fired up, you'll smell like smoke. And that's a smell that annoys some people.

But don't forget what you've already learned: to be small has its advantages. Whether its downsizing or reducing, small can be quite attractive. Tiny houses are the rage. Small towns near major metropolitan areas are exploding (which means they won't be small much longer). The fastest growing church in America? The micro-church that meets in a living room.

Small is the new big.

Consequently, smaller church children’s ministries possess special and unique opportunities of which larger congregations can only imagine. In the Scriptures, as well as real life, it’s the small, ordinary things that make big differences. *Mustard seeds. Fiery sparks. Ship rudders. Horses bits. A boy’s lunch. Zacchaeus.* And don’t forget the Apostle Paul. According to historical legend, he was a small man and, according to a New Testament biographer, also “unimpressive” (2 Corinthians 10:10).¹ And yet this short, unimpressive man changed the world. Seeds, sparks, rudders and bits all hold powerful possibilities. Someone once quipped that “anybody can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the apples in a seed.”

One advantage that diminutive organisms and organizations possess is the ability to change...faster and easier. Imagine you’re driving in rush hour and the traffic moves at a steady crawl. If there’s any good news it’s the alternative routes via off ramps, side neighborhoods and service roads. So, let me ask you, would you rather be driving a Toyota Yaris or a semi-tractor with trailer? The answer is obvious. The bigger the vehicle the less ability and options exist for changing lanes or making exits. It’s harder to make the turns necessary to adapt. You lose flexibility with size. In fact, in California’s choked freeway system, there’s only one vehicle that scoots through blocked freeway traffic: the motorcycle.

Small wins in a big way when traffic gets hairy. And let’s face it, we live in a H-A-I-R-y world. I’ve named the newest American generation—born since 2010 and currently populating children’s ministries—as the Robo Generation. In my book *GenTech: An American Story of Technology, Change and Who We Really Are* (2020), I outline the H.A.I.R. technologies that will dominate the Robo’s cultural landscape in the next quarter century: holograms, artificial intelligence and robotics.

It’s this H.A.I.R. technology that will reimagine the world we now inhabit. In fact, there will be more technological change in the 2020s than there has been in the past 20 years. By 2030, the world will look vastly different. Robots will be as common as television sets. Artificial intelligence will inform every part of life. We’ll have smart homes, smart shopping, smart appliances, smart schools and smart entertainment. Holographic 3D images will be everywhere.

And in a H.A.I.R. culture, the small will dominate.

It’s why the COVID-19 pandemic might prove less a historic interruption and more a cultural *disruption*. Think about it. In a matter of months, we reimagined how we shop, dine, learn, work, exercise, watch sports, view movies

¹ “Bald, Blind and Single” by Stephen Miller, Christian History:
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-47/bald-blind-single.html>

and attend church. Those that survived and thrived found success through acting smaller, nimbler and faster. Only months into the pandemic, nearly 16,000 restaurants had permanently closed.² Barna Research found that one in five churches will shutter their doors forever due to the pandemic.³

What did COVID-19 teach the Church?

First, we need to think different. Radically *different*.

Second, that people (and kids are people too) hunger for authentic community. We all want a friend. We may enjoy the energy of an arena concert but mostly long for the intimacy of a living room conversation. It's why smaller churches have the advantage in the coming decade. Our smallness will fuel our success...if we are open to the process...and don't mind the smoke and heat.

If we pay attention to the small things.

And children are one of those smaller things.

Recently I spent a weekend with my four grandkids, ages one to nine. I learned a lot about their worlds in two days. I was tutored in the latest video games, YouTube shorts, music, cartoons and literature. And I witnessed a lot of that H.A.I.R. culture I previously mentioned. I also realized how culturally backwards and out of touch many children's ministries are. If we're using pop culture references older than five years ago, we're out of touch.

Isaiah was right...a child will lead us (Isaiah 11:6). But will we listen to the kids? It's time we did and here are five reasons to do so.

THE EXCITING FAITH OF A CHILD

I love the faith of a kid. It's a can-do faith. Children possess an inner enthusiasm that inspires, motivates and encourages. Children remind us of the way we used to be: carefree, innocent, exuberant, risky, energetic and fun.

Children remind us of what's important. They help us understand that faith doesn't have to be stale or static. Rather, it can be dynamic, filled with questions and painted with wonder.

Those born since 2000 have been wired much differently than previous generations. They process information differently. They connect, converse and communicate differently. Their attention spans are as tiny as a tweet. They think

² "Nearly 16,000 Restaurants Have Closed Permanently Due to the Pandemic" by Kelly McCarthy for ABC News (July 24, 2020): <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/16000-restaurants-closed-permanently-due-pandemic-yelp-data/story?id=71943970>

³ "1 in 5 Churches Facing Permanent Closure within 18 Months due to COVID-19 Shutdowns: Barna Pres." By Michael Gryboski for Christian Post (August 26, 2020): <https://www.christianpost.com/news/1-in-5-churches-face-closure-within-18-months-due-to-covid-19-shutdowns-barna-president.html>

visually, prefer images and appreciate metaphors. We have to connect the abstract to the concrete. Take a cue from Jesus: the kingdom is like a field, net, or vineyard. Today's children are captivated by stories. Everywhere you look there is a story or narrative. We need to turn biblical history into HIS STORY.

And children can show us how.

If you want to energize your congregation, begin by tapping into the enthusiasm of the kids. Let them participate in your adult worship. Release them for ministry in your community. Motivate them to give of their talent and treasure without compulsion, shame or bribe.

Just don't expect perfection.

Children will make mistakes and create messes. They will fail, disappoint, annoy and upset. They'll create some choking smoke at times.

But so did you at two, five or ten years of age. No one is perfect. Kids probably annoy us so much because we see ourselves in their mistakes.

It's why grace—amazing grace—must soak our children's ministry.

If your smaller church creates ministry spaces for children to fail, then immerses these kids with grace instead of condemnation, it sends a powerful statement to everyone in your congregation. A Church of grace—unconditional, amazing, irresponsible, unbelievable, inexplicable, wild and wonderful—will be a touchstone for your entire community.

The small (child) leads the big (adult).

Smaller churches, because of the intimacy and size, can create these moments of grace better than anyone. We have space for everyone.

A MINISTRY TO PARENTS

A vibrant, energetic children's ministry will naturally attract adults to your church; and the most receptive adults are the parents themselves.

Two years ago, Jason's 9-year-old daughter begged him and his live-in girlfriend to attend a special Sabbath school program. Jason hadn't been to church in years and believed religion was for weak people. He also felt somewhat guilty for living with his girlfriend. But his daughter persisted, and Jason gave into her request.

He hasn't missed a Saturday since.

What influenced Jason (and his girlfriend)—who were married in the church only a few months later—to finally attend the small SDA church in their neighborhood was not a billboard, a flyer, television or radio advertisement. It was a child. And when Jason relented, he discovered the church of 135 people

to be a perfect fit for him and his family. He found acceptance, peace, love and grace.

Many smaller churches don't realize the opportunity they possess to attract parents. Many larger congregations employ specialized ministries as attraction points (sports, activities, social events) to lure people. However, the smaller church uses the power of relationship. Many of today's Millennials parents hold wrong perceptions about church (based upon personal bad experiences) and, consequently, it requires a rewiring (or a new, positive experience) to change their mind.

And often it's their own flesh and blood that brings them home.

A FAMILY OF FAITH

Children have far more contact with adults in the smaller church. They rub shoulders with them in the lobby and engage them in the hallways. Adults and children sing, learn, fellowship and serve together. Children are a natural part of church life.

In my own boyhood church experience I had dozens of parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. I was on a first-name basis with nearly every adult in my church. "Grandma" Lois and "Grandpa" Ron regularly came to supper. "Mom and Dad" Olson took me camping. "Uncle" Kermit taught me the Bible and "Aunt" Margaret gave me a job.

I grew up among adults who mentored my faith. I sang in the adult choir. I played Bible trivia with senior saints. I helped build the new church building. I sat among adults for Wednesday Bible studies. I folded boxes of bulletins, took communion to shut-ins and participated in all-night prayer vigils. And in every single activity I labored alongside an adult.

The children in a smaller church enjoy a unique advantage to engage in close personal relationships with adults (that is, if the adults will let them!). A key objective for a healthy children's ministry is create a "family" experience—a space where children are welcomed and connected with adults—no matter the activity, program, event or service.

DEVELOPING LEADERS

Smaller churches are uniquely advantaged to develop leadership in their children. Why? Because the smaller the congregation, the greater the opportunity for kids to actively *lead*.

In the past thirty years, I believe that children's ministries made two serious programming errors. First, they adopted a stage model. We made the children

into passive consumers who watched a show. Second, we segregated children from adults and opportunity. We separated kids into “children’s church” programs and siloed opportunity for service and sacrifice. In larger churches, it’s interaction with the wider church membership.

I think that sends a dangerous message. It’s probably why we’ve raised a generation of children to leave the church permanently after they graduate. After all, we taught them to perform and conform...but we forgot to teach them to be transformed through Jesus.

And when children are segregate from church life, they hear an unintentional message that they don’t belong. Adults will lead adults, and certain adults will keep the kids out of everyone else’s hair.

In some churches—particularly smaller ones—children are allowed to attend adult worship. But they’re expected to sit quietly and behave (“be seen, not heard”). Occasionally, we let children take the stage to sing, quote memorized Scripture or act for our adult pleasure. But does this send an equally dangerous hidden message that you only matter, as a person in church, if you’re on stage? Possibly. Regardless, it’s no wonder many children grow up with a stilted view of “church” and inherit a passive “pew potato” mentality (sit down, be quiet, listen and leave). It makes them very difficult to recruit for volunteer work later!

In the smaller church, children learn leadership skills through active participation in the life of the congregation. What if children were invited to leadership meetings (especially ones with decisions about children’s ministry)? What if older children created worship PowerPoint™ slides and served as tech advisors? Children can pray, share devotionals, offer testimonies, give announcements, read Scripture, greet people, pass offering plates and serve as song leaders.

You’ll rarely see children doing such things in a larger church. The small congregation desperately hungers for volunteers. And kids are just itching to serve...so why not turn them loose? I’ve enlisted sixth graders to help in the nursery, fourth graders to help first graders read, and second graders to assist in setting up chairs or saying a prayer.

If you want to energize your children’s ministry, tap into a philosophy that views every child as a leader...then grow their gifts, equip them for the work and turn them loose!

CREATIVE GROUND FOR IDEAS

Children love novelty, innovation and unpredictability. They also give us some painfully honest feedback. They'll let you know if the idea stinks. And sometimes they'll take an average idea and spice it to success.

What types of ideas might a church "test" on its children? Churches can try innovative schedules for Sabbath School, creative teaching methods, or new worship songs. One older small church pastor struggled for months to understand his tablet computer. After one too many frustrations, the tablet was shelved for older, more comfortable technology. It collected dust until the fifth-grade class found it. The kids were able to teach the adults several new tricks on that tablet computer.

Few larger churches will allow an 11-year-old boy to play on the church computer, let alone suggest new music for Saturday's service or offer insight about a leadership dilemma. Once again, the smaller church has the edge. Giving children a bigger role in the congregation is easier because kids are more visible in the smaller church. In fact, the smaller you are the more parts a child can and *should* play.

And there's another bonus: the smaller the crowd, the more flexible and spontaneous leaders and teachers can be. Trust me, this one is huge!

In large congregations, the organization can grow to be so big that size becomes a problem. If you had the choice between taking 50 or 15 kids to the local zoo which would you prefer? I rest my case. There's advantages in being small. Smaller churches can alter plans and change course quicker. We can respond faster to the unique needs of children. Smaller churches can be more creative with meeting times or program agendas. Our communication can be more direct and organic.

Think of it this way: a large church is like a large family. When you're single, decisions are far more organic and selfish. When I was a single adult, if I wanted to sleep in, I slept in. If I wanted to watch baseball, I watched baseball. Then I got married. Suddenly my priorities and choices changed. I begin to think about the other person, my wife. And then kids came along. That's when the stuff my wife and I enjoyed took a backseat to the whims of my kids. Every family knows the fun of finding a restaurant that suits every taste. Face it, the bigger the family the *less choice*.

It's the same thing in the church.

Some may conclude that since children's ministry in a smaller church is more flexible, it can operate with less planning. They even suggest that "winging

it” is better for meeting every child’s need. Why plan at all, especially if you can change on a dime?

But that approach is short-sighted, irresponsible...and foolish.

No one would take a family vacation just “winging it.” It would be a miserable experience. Several years ago, my family traveled to Seattle, WA for a day of sight-seeing. My guitar-toting teenaged son enjoyed the music of Jimi Hendrix and anticipated a visit to the Experience Music Project near the Space Needle. I planned the trip thoroughly (from hotels to restaurants) but overlooked one small detail: museum operating hours. As it turned out, the museum was closed one day a week and, unfortunately, it happened to be the *only* day we were in Seattle. We changed our plans and visited the Pike Place Public Market instead (my plan B). I learned the most careful plan doesn’t guarantee *everything*, but plans gave plenty of options.

An effective smaller church children’s ministry will capitalize upon the unique, individual strengths of being small. However, leaders must develop a disciplined strategy with innovative planning to involve children and their parents. And all with a view towards increasing leadership opportunities.

In a hairy culture that’s often stuck in neutral or moving at the speed of snail, it’s a blessing to operate *smaller*. And when we embrace our smallness—including the smoke an effective ministry will generate—we can ignite some powerful change in our churches.

A fiery children’s ministry incinerates aging traditions, burns off the dross of bad methodology and scorches dried out old programs. It can also brand with a distinct smoky smell guaranteed to draw attention. Yet, to the wise and perceptive, this brand will also be a pleasing odor that inspires children to learn, grow, worship, memorize, behave and lead.

The ember might be small at first. But you can be the one to fan it.

And then sit back and enjoy a blaze for God’s glory.

Reflection Questions

Pastor Nelson Silva

Associate Youth Director, Kentucky Tennessee Conference

The author mentioned: “We need to think differently.” (page xviii)

Question: If you are in a small church with few or no children, what steps would you take to attract children, families, and other adults who share your vision?

SUGGESTIONS

1. Pray the Lord sends more laborers. (Matthew 9: 38)
2. Prayer walk your neighborhood. What do you see? What is God telling you?
3. Share your observations with the congregation.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 while you notice: Who is God sending your way? What vision has the Lord put in your heart? Invite others to join you in prayer.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

- Children at play on the streets? Apartment complexes?
- Public parks, libraries, or schools?
- Other churches? Potential partners?

CONSIDER

- Joining a community leaders' network
- Introducing yourself to the nearest public school principal as well as counselor, social worker, and community liaison—how can you join their efforts?
- Sharing your vision beyond your congregation as God leads (conference administrators, youth director, neighbors, etc.)

POSSIBILITIES

Could you offer a summer camp, VBS, or an afterschool program if you get additional help?

CONSIDER:

- Asking for help from other Adventist congregations, the youth department, or neighbors and friends not attending your congregation

- Network with your Adventist academy—would they be interested in partnering with you?
- What children do your church members know? (Grandkids, neighbors, other family members, etc.) Consider inviting them to attend your events.

The author said: “We have to connect the abstract to the concrete.” (page 5)

How could you make your teaching more concrete for the benefit of your students? Consider, for instance, teaching the 28 fundamental beliefs. God, sin, and salvation are abstract doctrines. What resources can help you teach in a concrete way?

CONSIDER

- Mastering the art of storytelling
- Receiving feedback from others (especially kids) about your teaching and resources used
- Using hands-on activities
- Taking a class to sharpen your skills

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. What is the *small* in your church that is helping to energize your children? Is it your whole church? Is it your Sabbath School leader group? Is it the leaders in each division? Where does your church get to the *small*?
2. How are you creating authentic community for your adults? For your children? Are there real places for each person to contribute to the life of your church community?
3. What is the network that your church uses to support primary caregivers in their role? Is it formal? Informal? How much intentionality has been placed into making sure it is happening?
4. Can you think of a child, or several of them, who have led the adults in their lives to Christ? This is a story worth sharing—especially in your congregation!
5. Can you think of ways to make your children’s ministry more intergenerational? Think about it. This is necessary for children’s development and discipleship!