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Renewal in Children's Ministry[†]

WENDY WRAY OGREN

Although ministry to children has been around for many years, children's ministry as an organized, professional area of Christian education is relatively new.

In the cultural unrest of the 1960s, an emphasis on our youth emerged, as we became more and more concerned that "our" kids have a strong Christian faith in the midst of a world that was growing more and more secular. We decided to offer activities comparable to what teens might experience outside the church and put a Christian emphasis on them. We wanted church to be a safe place for teens to find a place of belonging and enjoy themselves while learning about true discipleship. And we've succeeded in many ways in our youth programs. Our young parents who have grown up in Churches of Christ are often products of strong youth programs.

And they bring those experiences with them as they have children of their own and desire a similar experience for them—but at a younger age. They desire—and may even expect—a place for their children to experience a sense of belonging, a place to have fun, a place where they are taught in ways that respond to their specific needs.

There are other reasons children's ministry has emerged as an area of emphasis. We may be simply following a renewed value in our cultural as we meet the needs of children. After a season when children were not valued, illustrated by soaring abortion rates and media portrayals of demonic children, we have entered a season of high value of children. One might wonder at our attempts to esteem them, but attempts they are, even as we run them ragged with activities and commitments all in the name of what is good for our kids.

As parents, we desire spiritual formation for our children and sometimes feel that we need a little help from the "professionals" to make that desire a reality. We often see our children as "our hope for the future—the future of the church" and we want desperately to hold onto them and not let them fall through our grasp. Hopefully, we see in scripture a mandate for teaching and loving and including these little ones in our communities of faith.

Whatever the rationale, an awareness of children and their spirituality has led to some powerful moments of spiritual transformation in our churches and in the lives of the children we reach. But because of its relative newness, one might wonder if there has been time for a need for renewal to develop. Nevertheless, there are several current areas of renewal in children's ministry.

AREAS OF RENEWAL

After hiring children's ministers and spending money on programs and making activities available every time the doors of our buildings open, we are realizing that spiritual formation cannot be experienced fully in the hour or two hours or even three hours per week that our children gather in our classrooms and auditoriums. Children's ministry, like youth ministry, has not guaranteed faithful discipleship in the lives of our children.

[†] This article was first presented at the Ministry Summit at Abilene Christian University in April 2003.

So we are looking again at the scriptural model of teaching children that calls for families to be the center of faith formation as they participate in the community of the kingdom. Happily, we are realizing that our job descriptions must include ministry to parents and families as well as ministry to children. We are working to equip parents to be the primary spiritual teachers of their children. We are teaching them to look for the teachable moments, to live out their faith in front of their children, to celebrate their children's spirituality.

Curriculum companies are also remembering the importance of families and are more intentionally including families in the educational experiences of children. Creating scope and sequences that call for all family members to study the same lesson on the same day promotes spiritual conversations and shared ideas. Take-home papers are including suggestions for family devotions and activities. VBS curricula is offered that is based on the premise that families will participate together in the learning activities described.

Small-group ministries are including children in those communities of faith, acknowledging that it's a little messy and somewhat inconvenient, but that the benefits outweigh the challenges in the end. Children's ministers are having conversations with colleagues asking questions about how to involve families in the faith formation of their children. Families are involved in service projects and ministry together, and children are benefiting from seeing not only their parents but also other adults in their faith community in service of the kingdom.

And yet, we still isolate our children from their communities of faith much of the time. We have become very efficient in the use of life-stage separation and age-appropriate learning. And these children that we say we don't want to lose are often expected to be seen, but not heard. Valuable, but with little of value to contribute to the community.

Of course, this is not the view of children that we see in scripture. And it is Jesus' view of children as ones to be touched, blessed, imitated, and included that we want to exemplify in our ministry to children.

THE STORY OF SCRIPTURE

As we minister to children, we must make sure that we continue to tell our stories—the *stories of scripture* that form us and mold us and give us our identity. And we must let the story be the story. We must avoid the danger of trading theology for psychology. It is appropriate and even important to keep the developmental stages and needs of children in mind as we choose curriculum, plan activities, and develop teaching methods. The danger, however, is when the canons of developmental psychology begin to take priority over telling the stories of scripture.

As I was preparing for last month's children's church, I pulled out the folder of curriculum that was to be used. The theme was "I Can Clean My Room" with the stories of the lost coin and Joseph's service to Potiphar being used to make the point. Now, I'm all for children cleaning their rooms. I wish my child would clean his once in a while. But using the Bible as a tool for socialization rather than spiritual transformation is irresponsible if not dangerous.

Rather, we should let the story *be* the story. Instead of offering our children a watered-down, age-appropriate version of the gospel, we should present the story in all its ambiguity, wonder, and confusion, and let them take from it what they will. Children are spiritual beings and are amazingly perceptive when we give them the opportunity. And they need to hear the stories of sin and forgiveness, of sorrow and redemption, of hurt and healing. They need to hear them not only because we are a people formed by scripture, but because it is where they live.

Several months ago, our curriculum called for us to teach the story of Job. That story is not often included in children's curriculum—after all, it brings up all kinds of questions that we may not have answers to. It certainly is not nice and neat. But there it was in the curriculum, so I taught it to a group of 4th graders. And as I told the story of Job, I looked around the room and saw four children who had gone through divorces in their family in the past year. I saw one girl who watched her four-year-old sister die of an undiagnosed heart

defect. I saw another whose mother was hospitalized in serious condition. And they were tracking with me as I talked about bad things happening to good people. They understood that life is not fair. And they wanted to hear about God's answers and his work of redemption and blessing. *Let the story be the story.*

And as we tell the stories that form us and give us our very identity, we must guard against trading the message for method. We rightly desire to be relevant with our children. We want the story to be told in ways that will not be forgotten. So let's continue to tell the story in exciting ways. Let's use the tools that are at our disposal. Let's take into account learning styles and education methods.

Our Story

But let's also guard against the tendency of *marketing* the message. Children's ministry is big business, after all. When the latest, greatest activity kit comes in the mail, let's view it with spiritual discernment. When we thumb through the catalogues of Christian books and crafts and videos and software and stuffed animals and puppets, let's remember what it is we're trying to teach.

And as we tell the story, let's remember to communicate to our children that it forms our very identity. As members of the kingdom of God, we are shaped and formed by Christian scripture. Because of our adoption as sons and daughters of Jesus Christ, it is *our* story.

And this story is told perhaps most dramatically every week in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. What a mistake we make when we exclude our children from this ritual by sending them off to children's church before they have the opportunity to observe, to ask questions, to be formed by the story. Recently a four-year-old boy was sitting beside his mother as the trays of bread and juice passed by. "Mommy," he asked, "Since Jesus raised from the dead, do our sins raise up too?" What a teachable moment. A moment made possible by allowing children to share in the story through the celebration of the Supper.

Their Story

Because it is *their* story there are implications for what our children do and how they live. Our children need to know that they have a responsibility as participants and messengers of the kingdom of God. They have the responsibility of moral living. Of making decisions about what they wear and say and watch on TV that glorifies God. They need to know that, because we are a part of what Marva Dawn calls an alternative and parallel community, we will offer support and encouragement to those in our community.

We will also offer admonishment and even correction when needed. We will live in community with those we like—and with those we don't. We will turn our backs on our society's addiction to activity and create space for sabbath and spiritual disciplines. And we will teach our children the liturgies of our traditions that have helped to form so many who have gone before them.

The story that we give to our children is primarily—but not exclusively—the story of Scripture. It is also the story of our heritage. Of our individual churches. Of our personal journey. All of these stories help to form *their* story as they learn what it means to walk faithfully with Jesus and know him and be known by him.

The early youth ministers and children's ministers were right—children *are* our future. They are also our *present*. And that gives me much hope for what lies ahead of us.

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