

1-1-1996

Foundations for the Child-Friendly Church

Kenneth Danley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Danley, Kenneth (2012) "Foundations for the Child-Friendly Church," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.



By Kenneth Danley

It's about a quarter till nine on Sunday morning. I get that familiar sinking feeling. I'm twenty minutes away from church—if I catch all the green lights. The six of us are in the minivan, and I'm hoping that everyone has shoes this Sunday.

We are on our way to “do” church. Will the teacher be there? Did I bring enough crayons and note pads for the sermon time? I find myself wondering about the church and its ability to produce believing children. We arrive. I push my daughter into her class, coaxing her to join the other children who are singing, “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy.” I breathe a deep sigh as I make it out the door. Quickly exchanging pleasantries with other parents by the coffee pot, I hurry off to my class. I find a seat. The teacher has begun, and my mind drifts. Joy, joy. Joy? And I think about my children. What am I really doing with them spiritually? What are we in the church doing with our children?

While the adult church experience has undergone extensive change in the past twenty to thirty years, I am struck by how unchanged the experience of our church’s children has been. The world of children has not remained constant. America of the 90s is not the America of the 50s and 60s. While I wonder how the faith of my upbringing is supporting me, I am increasingly doubtful that my children are going to prosper spiritually by receiving what was given to me religiously in my childhood. Yet, many of us “Christian parent” our

children as we were parented. What is more, many of us actually want our young children to sing the same songs (and delight in acting out, for instance, the devil’s sitting on his tack!), sit in the same Sunday school classrooms, experience VBS, and sit with us on the same family pew for worship.

Creating the child-friendly church requires fresh thinking regarding our children. First, we need to consider who they are as a generation and recognize how their era and culture influence them no matter how we parent. Then, we need to think about who they are theologically. In God’s eyes—in God’s plan—who are our children? Following the lead of author Alice Miller, we should ask: “What would it be like if all of us regarded our children as children of God? Were Mary and Joseph unique in their assumption that theirs was a child of God? What was it about them as parents which caused God to select them for such a calling?”¹⁰

I have begun to recognize a set of beliefs operating in churches that I call “child-friendly.” By “child-friendly” I mean churches that welcome children, that treat them and their families with respect, and that equip them for lifelong Christian faith. Child-friendly churches do not show any preference for the young over the old; they aim to be healthy congregations with all in their midst functioning as the Lord intends.

At the heart of many of these child-friendly beliefs is a correction to the individualist models of salvation

and congregational life that have been prevalent in our movement and age. Much of what we call “faith” is, in fact, mediated by forces existing within the group. Structural elements, social and cultural dynamics, and belief systems worked out over time by interactive and interlocking social systems are operating in this proposed understanding of the church.¹

The following beliefs or assumptions may produce a variety of expressions in local settings. The list is not exhaustive, but merely suggestive of the contours of an ecclesiology that satisfies the requirement to include, train, nurture, and equip for discipleship those who may be considered the least (in age) among us.

The child-friendly church believes that its children belong to God. Christian parenting is stewardship, not ownership.

Children are not “ours,” but God’s. Obedience to the gospel calls for a surrender of all that we value and all that we would then seek to possess. This surrender is yielded to the sovereign one who, according to his will, entrusts the same back to us for stewardship and faithful oversight. Parenting in the Christian covenant community is, in essence, stewardship. Children are a gift (Ps 127), entrusted to parents (and to the world) for purposes known to God. These purposes may include service to the child, to the parent, to the covenant community, and to the world—the synthesis of which is the subject and content of that particular child’s vocation.

The child-friendly church believes that its children are citizens of the covenant community.

The child-participant in the Christian community has a conferred status of holiness—being set apart by God—by virtue of living with a believing parent (1 Cor 7:14). In the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians, children are addressed as one of the groups within the community having a spiritual task to perform, namely, obedience to parents. Even slaves and aliens living among the Hebrews, along with children and other named groups, were obliged to live in faithfulness to the demands and obligations of the covenant. Whether by birth or by participation in the church, children are citizens of God’s covenant community, which is for us the church of Jesus Christ.

Regarding political ideas of citizenship, many societies understand that children have protection and benefits under the law and are considered citizens prior to the time when they work, pay taxes, vote, or are eligible to be drafted into government service. In the same way,

children of the church are under Christ’s covenant and thereby enjoy various blessings, benefits, and protections.

To regard children as citizens—or, specifically, members-in-trust—is a consideration of the nature of the church more than it is a consideration of the nature of children or of the state of childhood. The church is both a sign of God’s life within the world and a vehicle for its expression. Where Christ’s followers are, there Christ is. And where Christ is, his holiness—sanctification by God and for God—exists. What the church incorporates, Christ participates in. For the church not to embrace and incorporate its offspring is to help create a generation of religiously weakened individuals whose loyalties to the church and its mission reflect the ambiguity of the Christian nurture they received in their youth.

The child-friendly church assumes the responsibility for raising believing children.

It is the church, not the family, that is the original faith community of the child. The nuclear family, while a critical and primary agent, is not solely responsible for the incubation of Christian faith in the heart of the child.² Rather, the church, brought into being through and modeled after the ministry of Christ, has a common and natural concern for all participants within its circle of human relations. The child raised in the church by believing parents will have confidence in the knowledge that the authority of his or her parents is not ultimate but is itself grounded and tempered by the authority of the Lord. Christian parents do not raise believing children in isolation but benefit from the critique and assistance of the larger community of shared faith.

Jesus redefined the identification of his family to include all who demonstrate faithfulness to God (Mark 3:31–35). In so doing, he invites us, along with our children, to consider our ultimate family to be those bound together by the spirit of God. There is an African proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” A Christian reinterpretation might add, “. . . and it takes a church to raise a Christian.”

The child-friendly church believes that it needs—really needs—the children as much as the children need the church.

Jesus points to children as recipients of divine blessing and as models of discipleship. As weaker members of the church, children give opportunity for service to those with abilities and resources to meet

Child-friendly churches do not underestimate the power of ritual and symbolic gestures performed at church gathering times.

their needs. But as instruments of God's judgment and grace, children exist for more than their own need to grow spiritually. They possess God-given capacities and contexts through which God can make the divine manifest and draw people more fully into his nature and will. In the home, children function to make their parents holy³ by giving them a constant context for the application of Christian discipleship. Socially, children act to moderate and modulate their social systems (home, school, church) even as they themselves are acted upon and caused to adjust to those same systems. Spiritually, children function to bring to light the extremities of good and evil in the lives of those entrusted with their care. In so doing, they participate in God's ever revealing activity to convince men and women of sin and of their need for God's salvation.

The child-friendly church provides the spiritual protection, nurture, education, and support needed until the child can enter into self-chosen Christian discipleship.

The church commits to training its children for lifelong faith. It aims for the highest goals of Christian discipleship for each individual, and works to ensure those results. Because discipleship encompasses family, work, citizenship, and faith, the child-friendly church seeks, in an integrated fashion, to give children healthy environments in each of these areas of life. The church works to strengthen the child's family. It challenges the family to fulfill its calling to raise children in the Lord; equally, the church promises to support and complement the family in that task. When the child loses his or her family, or when the family becomes unable to parent and nurture, the church compensates in the spirit of James 1:27 to perform "pure religion." The church ensures that its children are given responsibilities and

the necessary guidance to learn the value and difficulty of work and service. The church provides social networks for each child, seeing Christian playmates as essential to future Christian citizenship and participation in the church as an adult. Finally, the church provides children with opportunities for worship and ministry—sometimes age specific and age related, sometimes intergenerational. Such faith development will by nature move the child from that which is familiar to that which is unknown and transcendent. It will seek to broaden children's capacity for love—its giving and receiving, and for meaning—its making and sharing. In the spirit of John 3:16, the church will raise children to give themselves for others and for the kingdom.

Baptism, for lifelong recipients of Christian nurture, marks the formal entrance into one's Christian vocation; it is the coronation of the one who has been raised to wear the crown. Baptism represents ordination into the priesthood of believers. The child-adult no longer lives solely off the projections and spiritual guidance of the family. He or she takes up a personal cross, stands before the judgment seat on his or her own, and announces personal allegiance to Christ.

The child-friendly church provides significant contact with the adult community of believers.

It recognizes that Christian nurture involves "formation" as a necessary prelude to "transformation." Such formation occurs through the interactions children have with persons significant to them. It begins with family and develops outward. Those who work to become known to the child and trusted by the child, and who share gifts (not necessarily material ones) with the child, will be the individuals most responsible for providing the child a life script. A child's developing sense of reality and truth will in largest measure be mediated by these significant adults. Parents play a role. But how the parents relate to these other significant adults may be more determinative for the child than the way the parents relate religiously to the child or how the child relates religiously to the significant adults.

Some religious traditions complement the parents' task by providing godparents or sponsors to fill this mentoring role. Among churches in our tradition, the mentoring occurs informally and often is undertaken by relatives of the child. Filling the role of significant adult may be an important ministry to children who do not live near extended family or whose families do not participate in the child's religious experience.

Research in faith development shows that it is critical that adults function in a child's early childhood

to certify his earliest experiences of faith.⁴ These adults may simply show interest in the child who announces, “God made me!” They are not critical or correcting of the two-year-old who mistakenly states a biblical fact or idea. These adults mediate trust within the child, encourage his imagination, and look favorably upon his movement toward Christian affections and skills. These adults pray with the child and listen to him—especially to his talk of fears and problems. They do not provide “answers” as much as they legitimize the child’s right to ask and to explore.

The child-friendly church understands children’s development and creates appropriate environments and activities with their total set of needs in mind.

If the children of tomorrow are going to join the assembly of Sunday worshippers, the architecture of our buildings will need to change. Current seating in most auditoriums is not child-friendly. For the first several centuries, church meeting facilities had no furniture for seating. It was stand, sit, kneel, lie down, or walk around. Those were their choices—perhaps not very “friendly” sounding to us in our time, but at least children were not architecturally ruled out.

Currently, our fellowship is undergoing a transformation of purpose with respect to its Sunday corporate assemblies. In many places, those assemblies are moving toward a praise-focused gathering and away from a gospel meeting style. Music is regarded as an offering to God rather than a tool to prepare listeners for the sermon. Sermons are aimed at the faithful instead of at candidates for conversion. What is striking in this transformation is the apparent disregard for children; the more we pretend that our children are invisible, the more they will remind us of their presence.

Child-friendly churches do not underestimate the power of ritual and symbolic gestures performed at church gathering times. Children may not understand

the meaning of a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, or the Lord’s Supper, but they do realize that something deep within the human soul is happening at such potent moments. Child-friendly churches keep children present even when they are unable to “understand,” to allow the children to be near their significant adults when they stand on “holy ground” before their “burning bush.”

Many churches offer a “both-and” solution to the question of what to do with our children during worship.⁵ They work to make the program of the assembly accessible to the children present. In addition, they offer worship programs and instruction times for children on their own social and academic levels. Our assemblies can be adapted to become more child-friendly. Drama, storytelling, movement, music with contemporary rhythm, and color can communicate praise and proclamation in ways that involve a variety of senses. The point is not to create a new program or product but to reflect on ways to humanize our life together for the benefit of our children and for the benefit of us all.

Much is happening now in the field of Christian nurture. The church that understands itself as a covenant community and encourages its adults to reflect theologically on childhood will worry less about programming (“What do we do with our children?”) and celebrate more the ministry of Christ in reconciling the generations.

On the way home in our minivan, my daughter asks if we’re going back tonight, and she is delighted to hear that we are. When I ask her why she wants to go back, she says simply, “I don’t know. I just like being there.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” I pray, “for being there, too.”

KENNETH E. DANLEY is Quality Management Coordinator for a behavioral care management company. He also serves as a minister-at-large among churches in Connecticut.

Notes

⁰ Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984).

¹ For further reading of social theory undergirding the formation of identity, see G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). As applied to the Christian community, see Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) and C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967).

² Although an abundance of literature exists to equip parents for the task of raising believing children, it is normal to find a cooperative relationship with a local Christian community. Some very practical advice on Christian parenting can be found in Ross Campbell, *How to Really Love Your Child* (Wheaton: SP Publica-

tions, 1977). For a straightforward description of the distinctions between church and family, and how each functions as the other at times, see John Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community: The Church that Makes a Difference* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), especially chapter one, “The Church as Family.”

³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations III* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971). See particularly chapter three, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood.”

⁴ James Fowler, “The Public Church: Ecology for Faith Education and Advocate for Children,” in *Faith Development in Early Childhood*. Edited by Doris A. Blazer (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

⁵ Patti Leach, “What You Said about Children in Worship,” *Children’s Ministry* (September/October, 1991) 9–11.