

Releasing the Potential of Your Children

The adage, “Children are the church of tomorrow” is not only poor theology; it also contributes to some of the major failure of our churches in the western world. The vast majority of children attending church-based activities do not “grow up into the church”. At a certain age, they grow out of children’s programme but are too young to find what is organised for adults relevant for them. Bored stiff, they leave the church in their thousands.

Whatever our theology and practice on baptism, most adult Christians recognise that children are capable of understanding the gospel and having a genuine faith in God. It is vital that such faith is affirmed and that we structure church programmes to help nurture and develop their life of faith and discipleship. Such children are part of the church today. They need pastoral care and teaching, as do adult Christians. They need to discover and develop their particular gifts and ministries, as do adult Christians. Once we have understood this we then need to find methods of delivery that are appropriate to their age and developing intellect. Models abound within the secular world.

If we have children in our churches and fail to respond appropriately to their spiritual needs, then they will leave us disaffected and damaged. Our children are a sacred trust from God and we must not take that lightly. We must select the best people and train them thoroughly to do our children’s work. We must budget our resources carefully so that we can provide an environment and equipment, which will support the quality of that leadership.

Why is it that the great Reformation doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers” has generally excluded Christian children? There is no biblical foundation for such an attitude and experience demonstrates that children have ministries too. Of course there are risks that call for wisdom and care, but Christian children are demonstrating a desire for Christian things today, for which they wish to be taken seriously. There are exciting stories about how children in some churches have become very active in the life and mission of their churches. One church I know has had a 400% growth because their children are actively using the gifts God has given them.

Leadership skills take time to grow and mature. If we want to have good adult leadership in the church in twenty-five years’ time, we should start to grow it now in our children and young people. God clearly does not despise youth. Examples of youthful significance are seen in Samuel, Joseph, David, Timothy, and in Jesus Himself when He was only twelve years old.

Evangelism among children is a sensitive issue but we need to rise to the challenge and employ good practice. After all, many Christian adults can trace their journey of faith back to a starting point in tender years. Imparting an understanding of the gospel message, and nurturing faith in Christ is where that journey begins. Intriguingly, I have found that the best evangelists for children are other Christian children. I could relate many occasions when

youngsters who have led their friends to the Lord in the cloakroom at school, in their gardens and at home.

The same is true for teaching and discipleship. One group of young Christian children believed God was calling them to begin a regular prayer meeting at their primary school. Initially the school teachers were uncertain but eventually provided a classroom and found a teacher who was willing to “sit in”. Some thirty children attended the first open meeting, where the children planned and provided the teaching, worship and led the prayer time without any adult aid. This weekly meeting has played a key part in the spiritual growth of the children has been running now for several years.

It is commonplace for churches to hold informal home groups for adults where fellowship, encouragement and Bible study takes place. Some churches now have home groups for children. Some guidance on study material may be provided, but the best practice is where children take it in turn to lead the group and become “enabling leaders” that encourage all to participate in discussion, just as happens with adults.

Wise church leadership always looks for helping others grow in their faith and in service for God. Away days, camps, workshops and conferences work for children as well as adults. On such occasions people learn new skills and often take a closer step in their walk with God.

In the home we expect children to play an appropriate part in family life. There are jobs that they can do. They not only set the table but can help to cook too. In good families, adults and children play together. Adults put themselves out to do what the children like on days out. Strangely, they often find themselves enjoying those days more. Should there not be parallels within our churches? Does everything have to be done by adults? Is there no room to share and enjoy doing things together? How might this affect our worship leading, music, prayers, stewarding, etc? Standards do not have to be low but they will need to be appropriate.

It is time to wake up and recognise the severe disservice we have been doing to our children by implying by our actions, if not our words, that church is for grownups only, and children are only around to be the church of tomorrow. The reality should be that the children in our midst are not only part of the church today; they are the Christian leaders of tomorrow if only we could begin to release the potential.

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This is a Rural Mission Solutions Resource Paper. Rural Mission Solutions is an aspect of Sunrise Ministries, a registered charity, number 802305. Barry is a specialist rural mission advisers. Sadly, Monica Cook, an adviser on children and family ministry for rural churches, died in 2015.