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Composition 211

19 November 2015

Small Groups, Big Change: Why Children's Ministries Need Small Groups

In their book *Sticky Faith*, Dr. Kara Powell and Dr. Chap Clark state "40 to 50 percent of kids who graduate from a church or youth group will fail to stick with their faith in college" (15). Many students leave the church before they graduate but even out of those who do graduate from the church, only half continue to go to church through college. This is a serious problem for the health of our churches and the health of our students who have not developed a personal faith because they are not being challenged in their faith or getting fully engaged in the life of the church. Most students have been bottle-fed Christianity their whole lives and cannot maintain their faith once they are independent. This problem is best addressed in early childhood, before these bad habits develop. To change this trend, children need a safe, exclusive place like a small group where they can build relationships, ask questions about their faith, and begin to engage their faith on a personal level that will last a lifetime.

Any parent can tell you that children imitate the people that they spend time with. Relationships are an important way children define who they are and who they want to be. If children are to grow in their faith, we need to surround them

with relationships that will encourage growth. In their essay, Shirley Morgenthaler, Jeffrey Keiser and Mimi Larson explain, "It is the relational experience upon which the foundation of instruction and teaching is built" (245). Teaching is not as effective and life change does not happen outside of the context of a relationship. Small groups are an increasingly popular model of children's ministry as an alternative to a Sunday School class. Small groups are generally age and gender specific groups of six to eight children led by one or two consistent adults. Ideally the small group would stay together from kindergarten through senior year of high school. Over that time, the students and their leaders are able to talk about their lives and the Bible in a way that allows the students to practice and internalize their faith.

In order for the children to freely talk in a group like this, it has to feel safe. Part of what makes it safe is its exclusivity, not allowing just anyone to show up and be in the group. The group remains constant and that grows trust. Reggie Joiner and Tom Shefchunas point out in their book *Lead Small* that any time you get a group of people together, there is tension, but they say that it is tension that gives you the chance to prove the safety of the group (50). If the leader addresses the tension in a way that accepts everyone's opinions, the children see that they should also be accepting. A small group needs to be a judgment free zone and it also needs to be private. Children need to know that what they share in small group will

remain confidential. Unless they know that what they are sharing will not be judged or shared elsewhere, many children will not be honest, and “Honesty is the only way for your few to be themselves, share doubts, ask questions, and admit struggles” (Joiner, Shefchunas, 56). Because they are kids, it is impossible to expect that everything will be kept confidential, but if the expectation is set and the relationships are developed, it shouldn’t be a serious issue. Children are able to build stronger relationships and share more of their struggles when they are in a safe setting.

While the peer relationships are important, the most important relationship for spiritual development within the small group is the relationship between each student and the small group leader. A small group leader should not be someone who only shows up on Sunday mornings and is not involved beyond that. The most important opportunities for reaching children are when the leader shows up in the child’s life outside of church. Small group leaders are encouraged to go to games, show up at birthdays, take trips for ice cream, provide opportunities for community service, and just be present. Kevin Ragsdale of North Point Ministries wrote a “Concentrate” in *Think Orange* by Reggie Joiner where he says “Young or old, single or married, thin or overweight doesn’t seem to matter quite as much as having a leader who genuinely cares enough to spend time investing in them” (252). Being present and investing in children is more important than any amount of spiritual

maturity or “coolness”. It is the investment that makes the difference. In fact, “adults who meet regularly with your kids will often ask more questions and share more experiences than provide answers” and that helps children grow more than knowing all the answers in the world (Powell & Clark, 107). Ministries that distance the leaders and the children or do not have enough adults lose out on the ability to speak into the lives of children. Joiner says “By shifting to a model that asked volunteers to be an essential part of authentic community for kids and students, the leaders felt a sense of connectivity and meaning” (196). Not only do the children benefit, but the leaders also benefit. No matter who the volunteer is, what matters most is that they build a relationship with the children.

In a church setting that emphasizes relationships and exclusivity, it can be difficult to decide what to do with visitors. In a blog for Tru Ministry, Gary Webb explains, “Kids may visit your church a time or two without being known, but if they remain anonymous, they will drift away.” This leads to the question: what is the balance that welcomes visitors but does not disrupt the small groups? In her article “Is Your Church the Friendliest Place in Town?” for Children’s Ministry Magazine, Christine Yount Jones says one of the most important things for visitors is to feel like they belong when they come to the church. With a ministry centered on exclusivity, it is difficult to be inclusive of visitors. In my experience serving as a small group leader at Center Pointe Christian Church in West Chester, Ohio, I have seen two

ways to solve this problem. One way is to have a small group that is specifically for visitors and if they come several weeks in a row then they are put in a permanent group. This model works if the church consistently has a lot of visitors, but it burns out volunteers quickly because of its inconsistency. The other way to handle visitors is to put the visitors in their age and gender specific small groups. This model works when you do not have a lot of visitors or if most visitors come with a friend. Although it can disrupt the small group atmosphere, if each group has a visitor once every month or two then they still have time when they don't have visitors. Visitors disrupt the atmosphere of exclusivity, but as long as there is a plan for what to do with them and how to make them feel welcome, the small group can be minimally disrupted.

Within these relationships, another important step to spiritual maturity can occur: questioning. The traditional model of children's ministries involves teaching a Bible story and doing a simple activity, "But an individual must go through this wrestling, this 'trying on' of ideas in order for him or her to internalize faith into an owned personal belief" (Morgenthaler et al., 253). If children are to develop a strong faith, they must feel free to ask the questions that are in their minds and talk about their doubts. When they hear a story, "Kids will want to process the implications of a story in age relevant ways," which happens in a small group setting

(Webb). If a small group is a safe place for children, then they will ask questions and discuss how to apply biblical teaching to their everyday lives.

Powell and Clark say that, in their research for *Sticky Faith*, they found that students who felt they could freely express the doubts that they had were more likely to stay with their faith (72). When children are allowed to express their doubts, there is an opportunity to share God's truth with them rather than letting their doubt fester until it pushes them away from the church. Small groups can be the safe place where those students express their doubts and ask questions that they have about faith and God. When a student is in a classroom, they may feel humiliated to ask these types of questions, but if the small group leader models that all questions are respected and tries to answer every question with equal sincerity, every doubt can be spoken and addressed.

Another important thing that can happen in a small group is learning how to find answers. Small group leaders are not going to have all the answers, but they can model how to find answers so that children can do so on their own. As a small group leader, "Your job is absolutely to help your few connect their faith to the timeless truth of Scripture. You should open your Bible together and talk about what it says" (Joiner, Shefchunas, 67). Teaching children how to look up Scripture about important topics to see what God says as well as helping them find other resources to answer their questions helps them to grow. In their essay "Elementary

Children” found in *Children’s Ministry that Works!*, Vince Isner and Dan Wiard stress that “Children need to understand that some questions don’t *have* answers or the answers haven’t yet been made clear as God unfolds his plan for the universe and our lives” (160). When children accept that there are many unknowns in faith and they will never know everything, they are more likely to be able to accept their questions and doubts as a natural part of the faith process.

Morgenthaler and her co-authors applied the theories of Lev Vygotsky and John Westerhoff to the faith development of young children. One connection they made between the two looks at Vygotsky’s theory of learning as scaffolding in which “It is the work of apprentice with the somewhat-more-learned expert that creates learning for both apprentice and expert in that community” (253). They connect this method of learning with Westerhoff’s belief that people must engage in “‘faith talk’ among other people of faith” if their faith is to grow (254). Scaffolding and faith talk should both occur in a tight-knit community: a small group. Small group leaders act as the expert who helps the children practice a faith just beyond their own ability and allow children to experiment with “faith talk” and learn how to incorporate the language of Christianity into their discussions. Learning occurs when children engage in both of these practices and build a foundation upon which they can better live out their faith.

Although it is less common with younger kids, most children are unwilling to share everything with their parents. If those children have someone they trust, they have a better chance of asking for help. As a small group leader, I had many children come to me and let me know about bullying at school or parents that were getting a divorce. Children need someone who they can depend on to support them and is able to help them through times when they do not want to share their struggles with their parents. At the same time, small group leaders and parents need to work together to ensure they are on the same page. As a small group leader, "If you're not on the parent's side, you're not on the kid's side" (Joiner, Shefchunas, 96). Without breaking the child's confidence, children will be helped more by both parent and small group leader supporting each other's influence. The only reason confidence with children should ever be broken is if there is evidence of self-harm or abuse threatening the safety of the child. Small group leaders have a unique chance to reinforce what the parents are saying at home and the parents can reinforce the lessons small group leaders are sharing in church. Small group leaders should always be supportive and open about anything the child needs to share.

Learning and questioning about faith but engaging in faith is the most important step to spiritual maturity. Children should participate in the mission of the church from an early age so they can see what a relationship with God really

looks like. Even young children can volunteer and find ways to help others.

Children can also join the whole church for worship on occasion so that they can experience corporate worship, and they can learn how to apply the principles of the Bible in their daily lives. It is important to remember, “If your few grow up in church and they only ever sit in circles, they will have missed out on something pretty significant. That’s why your next task is to move them to be the church” (Joiner, Shefchunas, 146). Acting as part of the church as a whole is important at this age because otherwise the children will grow up and not know how to be a part of the church. Small groups help children engage their faith by providing opportunities to serve and discussing how to live out their faith.

It is important for children to experience volunteering from a young age. The Great Commission tells us to “Go and make disciples of all nations,” so if we want to include children in the mission of the church, children need to be helping to make disciples (Matthew 28:19 NIV). Although it may look different for children, there are many age appropriate ways to allow kids to serve and help expand the Kingdom. Powell and Clark surveyed graduating high school seniors and found that of the things they wished they had done more of in youth group, mission trips and service projects were in the top three (129). Not only do children need to be engaged in service, but they also *want* to be engaged. As children, it is difficult for them to serve on their own, so they can either do it with their family or with their

church. Serving together as a small group is a great way to build community, to spend time together, and to engage in the mission of the church.

Small groups are also a place where children can mess up when they are trying to engage their faith. Anyone who is trying to become more like Christ is going to mess up, so it is good to have a place to fail but not feel like a failure. As children are “trying on” their faith, they are going to fail many times, but with a good small group leader and encouraging friends, it is easier for the children to get back on their feet and try again (Morganthaler et al., 253).

Benjamin Espinoza and Beverly Johnson-Miller argue in “Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education” that because of the modern emphasis on developmental theory, “*How* we know became more important than *what* we know” (12). They argue the only model of ministry that produces biblically literate children is catechesis. Their argument assumes that all developmentally appropriate teaching does not teach the Bible, but that is not true. Stonehouse references James Fowler’s theory of the stages of faith, which states that elementary children have a mythical-literal faith in which they learn through stories (159). In a small group context you can teach those Bible stories and then use the stories to engage the harder concepts of faith. After learning the stories, they will learn even more by talking about what they have learned and what it means. An example of this would be teaching the story of David dancing in the streets to talk

about what worship looks like. Or use the story of Gideon to teach how God uses weak people to show His power. These stories are written down in the Bible for us to learn from. Small groups can be both a place to learn about the Bible and a place that is developmentally appropriate.

The goal is that when students go off to high school and then college, they stay engaged in the church and feel like they are competent enough to be a part of the church. Powell and Clark's research showed that of the students that left the church in college, 80% planned to stay in the church, but they were not able to find a church or they got involved in other things and ended up not going to church (16). If children are taught how to engage their faith and are able to ask questions in a community, then they are more likely to be able to get connected in a new church. It is important to create a place where students can begin to build a foundation strong enough for them to maintain their faith when they are on their own.

This model develops stronger faith in children and it should increase the number of youth group graduates who find a church in college. Because this model is relatively new, the impact of this on churches is only beginning to be studied, but it should lead to significant growth in college and young adult ministries. These ministries will be filled with so much potential for spreading the Good News that the Church will grow exponentially.

Although small groups are an excellent model for ministry, one consideration to be made is that many churches are too small to allow for the small group model. The article “The Top-6 Christian Education Models” from *Children’s Ministry Magazine* talks about the small group/ large group model and says that the important thing about the small group time is that it gives the children a chance to “Draw closer to God while in a more intimate, community setting.” Even at a very small church, there are ways to incorporate small groups that give that setting and are exclusive. While maturity is something that needs to be considered, a group of ten to fifteen kids could split up into two small groups by age or by gender to give them a chance to experience the small group dynamic. Thom and Joani Schultz wrote their essay “Teaching So Children Learn” for *Children’s Ministry That Works!* and recommended that any ministry “give kids ‘R.E.A.L. Learning’” (86). R.E.A.L. stands for Relational, Experiential, Applicable, and Learner-based. They say that as long as your ministry has those four elements in it, it will help children learn. All four of those elements are present in a small group, regardless of the size or homogeneity of the small group. Small groups will look different in different churches because of their size and their resources, but as long as they emphasize community, questioning, and engaging in faith, they will help children develop personal faith.

Stonehouse says “Spiritual formation is a process for all of life, including childhood,” and small groups are a great way to encourage that process (22). In a time when the number of students leaving the church increases daily, it is important to help students develop a personal faith rather than depending on others.

Children need a place they can build relationships, ask questions, and begin engaging their faith. Because the small group model provides a safe place for children, they can develop a personal faith that will last through everything that life will throw at them.

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