

LEADERSHIP AND CHILDREN'S MINISTRY TIMES HAVE CHANGED

CHAPTER 1

“My times are in your hands.”
—*Psalm 31:15a*

There I was in 1990 in a basement fellowship hall. Vinyl-tiled floors, cinderblock walls, and 35 elementary children fidgeting in metal chairs finished off the environment of my very first experience as a children's pastor. Straight from commencement, I had arrived a few days earlier. What seemed like only hours had now passed, but it was Sunday morning and time for me to minister to this group of children. For the first time I heard “Pastor Andy” from people who were half my size and were missing several front teeth.

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In a matter of days, I had transitioned from a dorm and campus life that included 500 young adults whose major concern was getting to class on time and the long line at the “dug-out” snack bar, to this exciting ministry. Now I faced the questions, “Why can’t that child sit while I am telling a Bible story? Why is that parent in my personal bubble making me endure breath and conversation that were equally un-enjoyable?” The beginning of this exciting ministry required a sharp learning curve. Let’s face it. I thought I was prepared, but I quickly came to realize I knew very little about what I was doing.

Perhaps a similar experience helped you realize that your preparation was not equal to the task at hand. This can be a place of fear. It can also prove to be an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to engage the life of someone who is called to the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. My reflection about those “early days” is a combination of memories that hold great passion and enthusiasm for a cause along with fear of jumping into the unknown. These memories have now come to serve me well as benchmarks on my life’s journey. They reveal a desire to keep relevant but to cling to the lessons learned as I embarked on this road called ministry.

When I began my professional ministry as a children’s pastor, my background

served me well. In the small rural community of Hollywood, Maryland, at the age of 12, I knelt at the altar at the close of a revival service. That night, I accepted the call to minister to children. At the age of 14, God confirmed that call again at a time of re-commitment. My pastor, Joseph Hoopengardner, evangelists, and Sunday school teachers had a part in stirring up the environment for the Holy Spirit to work in the life of the son of a firefighter and teacher. Their messages of holiness of heart and passion for reaching people spilled over into my life.

My mother, the children's ministry director of our local church, provided a place for me to serve and to gain valuable experience as a Sunday school teacher. Also, I began a puppet ministry team that presented the message of God's love to children in places outside the walls of the church. These were venues as simple as coffee houses in church basements to full worship services and mid-week programs as far north as Philadelphia. By the age of 15, I had experience in teaching, evangelism, and management of peers. God was preparing me for the future He had planned.

As I entered college, I was encouraged by the religion department to start classes in education. There were few or no classes designed for training people to minister to children. During my first education class,

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I received a letter about an internship at a large church. The opportunity was also with a puppet training ministry. I jumped at the chance and applied. A few months later, I was on an airplane traveling west of the Mississippi, visiting 22 states in 10 weeks. Through that church, its puppet team, and the children's pastor's vision to make ministry to children fun and exciting, windows began to open wide in my heart and mind as to what the Lord had in store for me. I began to read everything I could find on children's ministry. In comparison to the resources available in the 21st century, that was very little. The idea of being a children's pastor had settled in my soul with a desire to make that my personal mission.

So now, return with me to that basement fellowship hall. I began this journey with a boom box, cassette tapes, an overhead projector, and pictures stuck to the wall. My weekly focus primarily hinged on preparing for one hour of children's worship and one hour on Wednesday night, so the choir could practice without children in the room. The bottom line: I created two programs a week. Now jump forward 20 years. The reality is, regardless of the church size and geographical location in the world, that simply does not "cut it" today.

I was fortunate that I was given the opportunity to grow with the ministry. Not

everyone has a congregation that will let them “cut their teeth.” Looking back over the years, I had a heart for ministry, education, and could manage groups of children, but I was clueless in understanding the leadership dynamics.

Times have changed.

No longer does doing programs become the summation of children’s ministry in today’s church. There is far more required and expected of children’s ministry leaders. The role of children’s pastor is much more complex. The expectations of children’s ministry leaders have changed. Here are some subtle and some not so subtle changes that have occurred in the last two decades:

- ***Growing in knowledge of theology and human growth and development.***

The ability to take biblical knowledge and content and structure it to the real life of a child with age-level appropriateness is essential. There must be personal confidence in knowing the growth patterns and cognitive abilities of children. A curriculum is a good and helpful tool but should not be the driving force. The driving force must come from the heart of God. The role of a God-called children’s ministry leader is to follow the heart of God in relationship with children.

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- ***Fostering strong relationship skills.*** Connecting with children is important, but connecting with parents and every age group in the church is also essential. This leads the way for intergenerational ministry and keeps children's ministries in the center of the congregation's vision. People do not value what they do not understand or cannot see as relevant. People will serve in children's ministries when they connect with its leader and that leader's passion. When you value others, your cause becomes their cause.
- ***Developing a clear understanding of self.*** Knowing how you as a leader are gifted and designed by your Creator is an absolute requirement. This paves the way for focusing on strengths rather than toiling away at weak areas that will produce few results.
- ***Having a willingness to work with the imperfect organizational structure of the local church.*** I love the Church. It has given me a place to serve. I have found it is the local church where my gifts have been best utilized. It has also been a place for my greatest challenges personally and professionally. Being a part of a church staff is not singing praise

songs and praying out loud all day long. It is simply a place where human beings called by God are still working on their stuff. In essence: the mess of the human condition still exists even after you walk through the church office doors. You are continuing to grow while working through attitudes and speaking the truth in love.

- ***Realizing that children and parents both need you.*** There is no doubt that family life is the most critical need in our culture today. Globally, it is this need for ministry that reaches families that is vital for the future. We cannot wait for what has become a crisis to get worse before we treat it realistically. Partnering with parents is the way to lead children's ministries. Strong marriages mean strong families. Team up with people who parent well and learn from them.
- ***Recognizing that the post-9/11 world needs advocates for children and children's ministry.*** In a world where the threats of terrorism, hunger, poverty, disease, and abuse run wild, advocacy for children in your community is important. Whether you minister in a rural, urban, or suburban setting, there is the need

for and a call for safety and care for children. Often, these needs are overlooked, even in the church, due to budget cuts and adult-driven priorities. Put children first and foremost on agendas and community issues so their needs will be heard and addressed.

People need to be advocates for children and for children's ministry. The local church needs people to articulate the need for funding and resources for the ministry to children.

- ***Working hard at communication.***

People want to be part of something bigger than themselves. In order to develop teams, communicate what value they will receive from serving. This becomes an art form involving the style and personality of the children's pastor. In other words, there is no such thing as over-communicating. Use whatever technology is available. Websites, blogs, social networking utilities, and organizational networks are a great help in communicating concepts. A key to this is the development of leaders who have an emotional and spiritual stake in the bigger plan.

It is not surprising that expectations in the local church have changed. Church leaders and congregations are more aware

of the allure children's ministries has to the community. Often, they make the mistake of referring to children as "bait" to get the parents to come. George Barna, in his book *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, shares his research from churches that were surveyed. Children's ministry was important to them, but more money was spent on landscaping compared to the economic and human resources spent on ministry to children. Sadly, this means that a children's pastor is faced with creating ministry experiences without the benefit of adequate resources. This challenge needs to be heard by all church leaders as children's ministries' leaders are developed and given roles of leadership in the local church.

Take a look at this excerpt from a job posting a local church placed on a blog for attracting a new children's pastor:

We want our new children's pastor to be creative, coachable, energetic, experienced in production, emotionally intelligent, connects with kids, connects with parents, connects with volunteers, sound biblical worldview, ability to teach, team-builder, relevant, cross-generational minded, team player, family orientated, technology adept, politically savvy, and juggle.

Is there a human being alive who could meet this local church's expectations? Do the people who wrote this job description

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need to re-think what they are asking for? Perhaps there is a need for a reality assessment in the establishment of a role for the children's pastor.

Often, I have been asked by a guest walking through the church door or a person in the community, "What do you do?" My standard answer to this question is, "I am the children's pastor." The usual response is, "Oh, that's nice," or "Wow, I thought you just volunteered," or even better yet, "So you have been in childcare for a while?"

May I test drive a new response I have been working on? Here it goes: "I am the person who develops teams of people who are passionate about creating fun environments that lead children to Jesus." What might be the response to this description?

Bottom Line: The church needs children's ministry leaders. Does that describe you? Are you hungry for a ministry that has a huge impact for generations? The local church can benefit from a children's ministry that connects with the overall vision and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ and the church that is carrying it out. A children's ministries leader who is a vision caster is needed, so that people will be inspired to follow. Too often this is not seen. Too often the call is ignored. But we must realize that when leadership is present and inspired by God, people will respond, fol-

low, and become leaders involved in the vision and mission.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the journey that brought you to this point of leadership in children's ministries.
2. How has your heart changed during this time?
3. What do you see that has changed in how you approach your leadership in ministry?
4. In what areas have you grown stronger? What areas are still weak?
5. Do you know someone that you could share this with who would offer good feedback? Who is discipling you? Who is a mentor in your life and ministry?