

# CHILDREN'S PLACE IN THE NEW FORMS OF CHURCH: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF THEIR MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



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*Abstract: In recent years, the spiritual formation of children has received considerable attention from scholars in the fields of theology, church history, and practical theology. In what ways, if any, are those theories and insights being received by local churches? The intent of this project was to explore ways that the new forms of church that have appeared in North America in the past 20 years minister with children and their families. Visits and phone interviews were made to 25 new-form churches. This article reports the findings of that investigation, noting patterns of similarity and difference in the views of children and the types of ministries the children experience.*

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## Introduction

As academics with a long-standing interest in the spiritual formation of Christian children, the changing landscape of the North American evangelical church evoked a question: What is happening with children and families in the “new forms” of church that have been appearing in the past 20 years? This question was the impetus for the exploratory survey conducted in 2008–2009. We coined the term “new forms,” an intentionally vague phrase, to describe the way these churches function and conduct the life of their faith communities. New-form churches, often started by young adults 20–35 years of age, meet in warehouses, shopping malls, homes, old church buildings, business complexes, theaters, even bars and pubs—anywhere people can gather regularly. They also vary widely in worship style; the names for these gatherings rarely contain the word *church* or the name of a denomination. Having a keen interest in children and their spiritual health, we became curious about this ecclesial phenomenon. Our investigation provides a snapshot into the ministry with children and families in these developing and evolving contexts.

New-form churches are alternative forms of church that seem to be reacting against what the leaders perceive as inadequate traditional evangelical or mainstream ministries. These inadequacies may include ways of being “in community,” ways of living out God’s mission, or ways of accommodating the surrounding culture. It is as if it is in the “DNA” of these churches to *do* church differently.

Many of these new churches are intentional about filling perceived ministry gaps of more familiar church models. For example, some of them appreciate symbols and ancient liturgical forms of worship. One common thread among their leaders, however, is the view that they are ministering in a post-modern, post-Christian cultural context and therefore need to focus ministries on emerging adults—people roughly 18–35 years old. These are the churches to which in this survey the term *new forms* refers.

Because about 20 years have passed since this phenomenon was started primarily for young adult singles or couples without children, we wanted to see what their ministries looked like as many in this original target population have subsequently married and begun families. We wanted to investigate how individual new-form churches seek to nurture children and families as their target population matures, and in particular to identify patterns, themes, and contrasts within the churches we visited.

### **A Bit of History on New Forms of Church**

Since the church is a living organism, change in form is inevitable because the culture in which the church is located is ever changing and probably always will be. The 20th century saw new forms of church arise. Early in that century, Gospel Tabernacles sprang up under theologically conservative leadership in cities large and small all over the United States. Influenced by 19th-century revivalism, barn-like structures were built for evangelistically oriented ministries. Some of the tabernacles were meeting halls on summer campgrounds, but many others were constructed as churches. Reacting against “mainline liberalism,” these structures, able to seat hundreds of people, were sturdy shells usually devoid of Christian symbols or other accoutrements. Evangelistic rallies and Sunday evening services would attract large crowds. Though tabernacles can still be found in many places, their popularity began to wane in the 1950s and early ’60s as the culture shifted, making the architecture and the name “tabernacle” seem out of date to a new generation of Christians.

Robert Webber (2002) describes three shifts within evangelicalism since 1950. The first phase, which began after World War II, he calls Traditional. It is marked by strong Sunday schools in neighborhood churches with

traditional worship through hymns and gospel songs, accompanied by an emphasis on mass evangelism. Though not identified by Webber as a phase, during the late '60s, a new church form arose called "body life." Beginning in California, this form emphasized personal stories during Sunday evening services and was accompanied by a resurgence of small-group ministry, an approach established centuries earlier. This period, occurring post-Vatican II, included a surge of church renewal that swept not only through evangelical churches, but even more strongly through liturgical and sacramental churches.

Next came the Pragmatic phase, beginning in the mid 1970s after the social revolutions of the 1960s, which provided another new form—the "Jesus' People" and "seeker" movements. Its approach was to create ministries that would be attractive to the non-churched and to those who had been "turned off" by established ministries and worship styles. This phase is marked by megachurches, contemporary music and worship style, and teaching ministries that target the needs of specific age groups. Seeker services that were culturally sensitive and "market-driven" began to replace mass evangelism.

The third phase, according to Webber, is led by "Younger Evangelicals," and its growth was catalyzed by September 11, 2001. He describes what this study calls a new-form movement as an urban, intercultural ministry occurring in small churches with mixed or converging forms of worship. Importance is placed on "intergenerational formation in communities" including the "priesthood of all believers," as well as "process evangelism." Characteristics of these new-form churches include intentionally identifying with Jesus, having an impact on the surrounding culture, and exemplifying aspects of communal life—concepts that are compatible with many churches beyond this movement but often manifest themselves uniquely in 21st-century forms. Their forms of worship may include centuries-old symbols and practices (not usually associated with evangelical, non-sacramental churches) such as Stations of the Cross, candles, stained glass windows, and religious art, including icons. Or, contrastingly, contemporary props such as worship backdrops of cyclone fence, metal staging, electronic instruments, and elaborate media may be used to create the setting for the worship service. These churches value hospitality, generosity, creativity, productivity, and spirituality (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005; McKnight, 2007).

As with all things new, the new forms of church are not without controversy. Some criticism seems valid; other critiques seem reactionary and based on personal taste. Webber's assessment of the theological commitment of each category addresses his perception of the distinctives of the three different phases: Traditionalists see Christian theology as a rational worldview accompanied by a response of "keeping the rules"; Pragmatics tend to see theology as therapy and answers to personal needs leading to "prosperity and

success”; and Younger Evangelicals see it as a community of faith that seeks “authentic embodiment” (Webber, 2002, p. 18).<sup>i</sup>

Jim Wilhoit (2008), an educator and observer of the evangelical church in North America, is concerned about the “erosion of intentional practices of spiritual formation” (p. 13) that had been present in earlier generations. Recognizing that the forms of those earlier practices may be outdated at best, he questions what has replaced these forms, such as corporate times of testimonies, prayer services, shared meals, instruction on global missions, summer camps and conferences—all of which had usually been intergenerational. At the outset of this study, given the trends noted by Webber, we wondered if we would find restoration of these practices in new-form churches, albeit adapted for 21st-century application.

In preparation for visiting new-form churches, we speculated how the characteristics of Webber’s phases of evangelicalism would be manifested. Would there be congruity among these new forms, or would there be evidence of earlier phases of church form and style? How would these churches view children? Would intergenerational experiences be seen as influences on children’s spiritual formation? Would ministry leaders be mindful in the visions for their churches of the spiritual nature and development of children? These are some of the issues we sought to investigate through the lens of the faith communities of new-form churches.

### **Children and the Faith Community**

Before delving into our findings, it is important to consider Scripture’s view of children in relationship to adults of that time. But it is also necessary to get an overview of contemporary perspectives on children’s spiritual formation.

#### **A Glimpse of Children in the Biblical Story**

The Book of Deuteronomy instructs the people of God that children are to be taught to love, obey, and fear the Lord God in the context of life and are to assemble with adults to learn the things of God (Deut 6:1–3; 11:18–21; 31:12–13). Other passages describe how children were present with the whole faith community as they stood to hear from God, to weep before God, and to celebrate together (2 Chr 20:13; Ezra 10:1; Neh 12:43).

In the New Testament, Jesus’ interactions with and his words about children are especially helpful. In Matthew 11:25–26, Jesus was praying and acknowledged that things are revealed to children which sometimes are hidden from those who are wise. Another time he used children as the model for

entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:2–3). After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he entered the temple, overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and then healed those in need. The children acknowledged who Jesus was by shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David," while the religious leaders and teachers simply became angry (Matt 21:12–16). An especially significant incident with children is recorded in the Gospel of Mark. People were bringing their children to Jesus, but the disciples tried to keep them from doing that. This made Jesus angry (the text uses the word "indignant"). Jesus told the disciples to stop interfering and let the children come to him. In a public gesture that was atypical for a Jewish male of that day, Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them (Mark 10:13–16).

From these few passages it is evident that children occupied an important place within the people of God. Being among God's people was significant for the spiritual formation and nurture of those children. Jesus himself viewed children highly by welcoming them and, significantly, by telling the adults to become like them for their own spiritual health. In a way, it is as if the text is saying that it is not truly a faith *community* if the children are not present.

### Contemporary Scholars' Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation

In the past 20 years, considerable scholarly work has focused on the spiritual formation and spirituality of children. The following sources, among many others, are helpful in this regard: Karen Marie Yust's *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (2004); *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (2000) by John Westerhoff; Cathy Stonehouse's *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* (1998); *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (1995) by Jerome Berryman; *The Religious Potential of the Child* (1992) by Sofia Cavalletti; and *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990) by Robert Coles. Common themes in these works include the incredible capacity that children—even young children—have to experience and reflect on God. These scholars emphasize the formative value for adults and children alike to worship together and the significance for intergenerational participation in God's story while also hearing each other's stories. They also point out the importance of equipping parents for the powerful, unique role that they have in the spiritual formation of their children.

Journal articles provide additional relevant viewpoints. One, written from a Quaker perspective over 40 years ago by sociologist Elise Boulding (1967), recognizes the need children have for solitude. Boulding writes, "It is possible to drown children and adults in a constant flow of stimuli, forcing them to spend so much energy responding to the outside world that the inward life and the creative imagination which flows from it become stunted or

atrophied" (p. 8). She calls for enabling times of solitude, even shared solitude within the home, so children may have "a sense of who and what they are, whence they came, [and] their place in God's world" (p. 37). Homes where "silence is lived" become inviting and restorative, allowing the "spirit-illumined intellect" to be developed and utilized creatively (p. 37).

In addition to the need for solitude, psychologists Keltner and Haidt (2003) emphasize the value of *awe*, something that is also identified by Cavalletti, Berryman, and others. Though not written from a Christian perspective, these authors note that awe is "easily felt in nonsocial situations" (p. 300) and is often accompanied by an autonomic nervous system reaction in the form of piloerection (goosebumps). These researchers state that the "potential power of awe . . . may bring pleasure to those who cultivate it in their lives," and "awe-inducing events may be one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth" (p. 312). If these findings regarding awe and solitude are valid for children, the implications for ministry and spiritual formation are profound.

### **Perspectives on Children from Leaders of the New Forms of Church**

Ivy Beckwith, an experienced pastor of children, in the introduction to her book *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century* (2004, p. 13–14), vividly describes her perspective on the current state of children's ministry as broken. She views it as broken when church leaders and senior pastors see children's ministry primarily as a marketing tool; when the most outwardly attractive program is assumed to be the most effective; when God is trivialized; when children are excluded from worship with adults; when programs and curriculum are used to introduce children to God; when churches create expensive "playlands and entice children to God through food fights and baptisms in the back of fire trucks. And perhaps most importantly, it's broken when the church tells parents that its programs can spiritually nurture their children better than they can. . . . A church program can't spiritually form a child, but a family living in an intergenerational community of faith can" (p. 14).

Supportive of Beckwith's position, Carla Barnhill (2007), an author and overseer of children's ministry in a new-form church, writes, "Rather than seeing children as somehow unfinished and unable to participate in the life of the church until they have learned something, we can encourage children to contribute to the community" (p. 56). Many churches view children as inherently *capable* in age-appropriate ways of loving the Lord Jesus and *wanting* to be obedient to his teachings out of their love for him. Therefore, they see their ministries as an open system of nurture in which the children have dozens of "relatives"—surrogate parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—

who get to know, love, and “co-parent” them. Barnhill feels multigenerational ministry is foundational in a child’s spiritual formation.

This philosophy is evident in a web site from a new-form church that states: “We seek to make special effort to allow opportunities for the full involvement of children in our spiritual formation. Children are not seen as simply empty vessels that we pour information into, but full participants in life with God.” Later it explains, “You are welcome to use the baby room, but we find that crying babies remind us that it is good to take time to listen to one another cry— even during the ‘important’ times of life.” In addition, it states, “God is already working in [children’s] lives. As adults, our role is to guide them to an understanding of what that work is about.”<sup>iii</sup> This view of children is compatible with the consensus of the contemporary scholars cited earlier.

Michelle Anthony (2008) is another current voice speaking to these issues. As pastor to families and children in a large new-form church, she addresses the crucial link between home and church. She testifies to a significant shift in her approach to ministry with children from one that engaged children in fun learning activities (which she acknowledges have a place) to one in which the primary goal is to grow spiritually healthy families in order to foster a new generation of kids and parents who are in active relationship to God.

One might assume that there would be consensus on the view of children among leaders of these new forms of churches, but that is not the case. Some leading thinkers of this movement—Dan Kimball, Eddie Gibbs, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Ryan Bolger, to name a few—write books that mention the role of children albeit with less emphasis than in Beckwith’s (2004) and Barnhill’s (2007) works. Yet, scores of other writings on the new forms of church—including books and blogs—make little or no mention of children. Ministry with families, if present, often merely includes parenting classes. And some of the largest churches within this new-forms movement have web sites that require following multiple links before finding any mention of children. Most striking were the number of web sites that made no mention of children or families, stating that they target their ministry to emerging adults. The question must be raised as to what these congregations will do in the next 10 years as their members marry and have families.

Sometimes our visits revealed disheartening attitudes toward children. The following are three incidents experienced at similarly styled, new-form megachurches—each serving several thousand people. First, in a sermon anecdote, a pastor recounted a long plane trip he recently had taken on which there were restless children. He stated, to the laughter of the audience, that he wanted to scoop up those children and put them in the overhead luggage compartment. Another example occurred while we met with the staff of a church and asked when the whole faith community worshipped together. One of the pastors responded, “The only way we’d ever get our kids into worship would be

to give them all Game Boys.” When asked if there were opportunities for children to be with other generations of the congregation, excitedly the youth pastor told of his “intergenerational/family” small group in which several entire families meet together regularly. After enjoying dessert together, the children go upstairs to play as a college student supervises while the adults study and pray. Only while eating dessert was this experience intergenerational.

The third instance is from a church with a multi-staff children's ministry. Over a meal, the ministry team members, who all have relevant advanced degrees, explained that they yearn to have children participate more actively and frequently with the whole faith community, but this is in opposition to the vision of the main teaching pastor. The staff stated that they have to content themselves with making experiences for the children as God-centered and formational as possible—in itself a good thing, though falling short of their vision for children.

Since Scripture seems to take for granted the presence of children in the faith community, a view that has not been upheld in recent decades by many larger evangelical churches, we wondered what the practices would actually look like in the new forms of church.

### Study Method

Beginning in April 2008, we conducted on-site visits (21) and phone interviews (4) to a range of these new forms of churches in order to observe ministry practices and to ascertain the philosophies behind their ministry with children and families. Prior to that, we explored web sites of many new-form churches, gathering data regarding their theology and philosophy of ministry with children especially, but also for families. Whenever possible we visited churches that the team had read about or knew by reputation; in-depth phone conversations were conducted with recommended churches where travel was not possible. We sought to discern if the explicit intent of the church was being carried out in its view of and ministry with children. We intended this to be an exploratory, descriptive survey looking for identifying patterns and contrasts in the ways these new forms of church minister with children. Because we would be considering a wide range of contexts, the following protocol guided our observations:

- Geographic location (state or province)
- Surrounding location or neighborhood (urban, residential, suburban, etc.)
- Building structure (traditional church, mall, warehouse, school, home)
- Media (extent of media usage in the church's ministries)



- Size (small = under 300; med = 300–1000; large = 1,000–3,000; mega = over 3,000)
- Mission statement of ministry with children
- Ministry to, for, or with children (relational, participative, passive or observational)
- Intergenerational emphasis (present or not)
- Intentional, planned experiences for children (present or not)
- Intentional, planned nurture of parents (present or not)
- Curricular focus (cognitive, reflective, narrative, presentational, or a combination)

Most of the above items are self-explanatory, but one requires further clarification. Ministry “to, for, or with children” refers to John Westerhoff’s (2000) designation of ways of working with children. Simply stated, ministry “to” children is similar to a transmissive, schooling model when adults do things such as using content-focused workbooks, learning tasks, or rote recitation to teach children about Christianity. “For” ministry intends to teach children through engaging things to watch: adults provide skits, games, videos, or music *for* children. Both *to* and *for* ministries tend to employ passive and observational modes of learning, even if children are active doing motions to music, and so forth. By contrast, in “with” ministry, the adult and child are together exploring the biblical story, seeking to meet God within that story. The adult is more of a guide than a traditional teacher. The *with* approach is more relational and participative. Each of these approaches has a place, but *with* ministry seems to align with the values noted earlier of some of the new forms of church.<sup>iii</sup>

### What We Found

The majority of the 21 site visits took place in the western two-thirds of North America. Phone interviews occurred with an additional four churches that could not be visited. The churches<sup>iv</sup> represented a wide range of Christian traditions, though almost half of the churches (12 out of 25) identified themselves as independent or nondenominational churches. Of those claiming roots in a specific faith tradition, five were Anglican, two each were Episcopal and Christian and Missionary Alliance, and there was one of each of the following: Covenant, Reformed, Methodist, and Presbyterian. The significance of the churches without denominational ties is that each congregation must establish its own set of practices or doctrines regarding children. Issues of concern for these more independent churches included the age at which a child can partake in Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, the form of baptism, as well as the expected age or faith experience of the one being baptized. Ethnically,

all churches but one (Church D) were primarily Caucasian, both in leadership and attendees. Table 1 in the Appendix represents the overall findings.

For fear of being overly simplistic, a summary of our observations can be made thusly: two categories or varying distinctives were noted—churches tended to have “DNA” that was either developed from cultural qualities that the leaders perceived the attendees expected and wanted or the leaders developed their churches around what they perceived was important for spiritual growth even if it was countercultural. That distinction did not follow tradition or denominational lines. For example, Churches G and T are part of the same denomination. While Church G follows trends of the culture, Church T seeks practices that follow more ancient traditions.

### **Significance of Size**

The location of the churches—whether urban or suburban—and the type of structure each church used, did not correlate with any of our questions regarding ministry with children and families. Six patterns surfaced, however, based on size of the church:

1. Most large and mega-churches we visited did not promote intergenerational participation or encourage children to be part of the main worship service. Space in the service was reportedly needed for adults.
2. Although the majority of the churches planned experiences specifically for children, children's ministry was “intentionally relational” among small to medium-sized churches; the form was “intentionally presentational” among larger churches.
3. Smaller churches were more intentional in nurturing parents beyond simply offering parenting classes.
4. The curricular focus was more Bible-fact based and physically active in the large churches; many of the smaller churches employed a reflective, responsive approach to the Bible story.
5. Even though the majority of churches used media in some way, the larger the church, the more media was a key part of the ministries with children.
6. Realizing that this survey was very limited, we found discrepancies in most megachurches between what they intend to do (or say they are doing) and what is actually happening.<sup>v</sup> This was not the case in the smaller churches that we observed.

### **Significance of Founding Purpose**

Seven of the 25 churches surveyed (Churches C, G, J, M, N, Q, and V) started out targeting emerging adults (20–30 year olds), often near university

campuses. As the attendees aged, married, and started families, their children became “attached” to the core program or vision of the church rather than woven intentionally into the original strategy. Consequently, their ministry with children often occurred in a “silo,” separated from the adults. The style of those ministries was often high energy and activity laden in apparent conflict with the values upon which several of those churches were founded. The resulting practices for children in these churches varied considerably from the new-form churches described earlier that began with the intent of generational inclusivity.

Several churches began with a vision of intentionally integrating children and families into their core values. Churches M, O, T, and U are some of those. Church M, a non-denominational church, ministers to children in a separate space in a presentational style, yet includes the children around the table for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. When observing this weekly ritual, it was as if a very large family was being welcomed to the loving warmth of a kitchen table, the favorite gathering spot for many families. Children were embraced, encouraged to offer praise to God, and allowed to voice requests for prayer—even childlike requests. This ritual practiced since the founding of the church seemed sufficient to bring the generations together as they lingered around the table to converse long after the benediction had been pronounced. “Punk”-looking adolescents hanging around outside the worship space said that they love their church because they feel such a part of it.

### **Variance in Ministry Practices**

There was a remarkably wide range of ministry practices among new-form churches. Some of them had intentional, consistent ways to nurture the spiritual formation of children; some also had the same for parents. A few of the churches embraced full integration of the generations, while others kept the generations separated by age. As we visited these churches, we also found a wide range of setups for corporate worship. Some churches had chairs or pews arranged in rows facing a stage or platform; other churches were set up “in the round.” Not surprisingly, for churches set up in rows, the entire service took place on the stage or platform. For the churches in the round, the focal point was either the table for the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, or it was the pastor in the center delivering the sermon. Interestingly, we noticed generational integration of the faith community if the focal point of worship was the Eucharist, the exception being Church M described earlier. Table 2 in the Appendix reflects these practices.

### **Churches with Intergenerational Nurture of Children**

Church O is a small church, intentionally established to bring together all generations of the faith community. Their weekly Sunday afternoon cor-

porate gathering begins with a time of greeting, welcoming, and blessings; then, a shared meal is followed by sharing of evidence of God's work during the past week. During the time of sharing when young children got restless, an adult took the toddlers to a corner of the large room to engage in quiet play; another adult took the preschoolers to a table to make a craft. Then came time for the worship service. The space for worship was set up in the round with an altar that also served as the table for the Lord's Supper in the center. As the adults listened to their sermon, the children (elementary and pre-school) went to their own prepared space for an age-appropriate homily that was participative and reflective, employing symbols to aid reflection. Afterwards, the children were welcomed back to the main worship service in time for the Eucharist and celebration. The congregants served each other the elements of the sacred meal. Then the people gathered in triads to pray for each other. Each group welcomed a child into their midst to pray with them.<sup>vi</sup> Then, prior to a benediction of blessing, the service concluded with a circle dance around the altar in the ancient Jewish folk tradition. Because this church values complete integration of children, every work team that does tasks for the church and community includes a child as part of the team.

Church U has a similar view of the church and welcomes children to be present at every church event including classes and committee meetings. During the worship service, families are especially encouraged to worship together, although children may go to a specially prepared space during the message. This worship space, in a traditional-looking old church, was filled with couches in the round, rather than pews or chairs, giving it the feel of a very large living room. Child-protective gated areas in the corners of the sanctuary had couches and quiet toys so that families with very young children could stay together during worship as their little ones safely crawled or toddled around. If a baby fusses or cries, the congregation knows to use that noise as a signal to pray for those in our world who are in need or cannot care for themselves. The leaders of this church seek to impart "language acquisition" of the Christian life for faith formation, a reason why they desire children to be present during the service. The church is full of the congregants' art; the work of adults was displayed in the worship space, while children's work filled the hallways. Family retreats happen often because they believe that more often "formation happens in context without content"—where children see adults live and interact with them without explicit biblical teaching, like co-parenting in faith.

Church T, intentionally multi-generational and inclusive, has a worship space in the round with the altar and table in the center. Following a time of robust worship music, these children leave during the message for their own time of reflection and response to a biblical story that relates to the theme of the main worship service. With their own liturgy modeled after the main liturgy (including a child-sized altar), the children's worship time draws

attention to the presence of the Spirit of God. This time for the children includes a blessing and a benediction before parents pick them up to be part of the corporate Eucharistic celebration. For both children and adults, the focal point of the worship in their separate areas is the altar. Children are so valued here that in order “to be part of the church, adults ‘must’ be involved in ministry with children (Personal interview with the children’s ministry leader, October 6, 2009). Additionally, congregants meet weekly in house groups established by geographic proximity, several of which are family groups with all ages present for the whole time. In warm weather, picnics and barbecues are held for the entire faith family on the church’s extensive property.

Although children in Church I stay with the whole congregation only through the worship music, ministry leaders carefully attend to the children’s spiritual formation. Using the rotation model, the children engage in the same story for several weeks, each week involving a different learning modality such as art, drama, or other activity directly related to the biblical text. One of the weeks is always spent in a large room that they call “Sacred Space.” This special area is a beautiful dark-wood-paneled room with large pillows in deep, rich colors, a fireplace, a kneeling bench for prayer, candles, and classic religious art on the walls. The pillows form a circle around a low table with candles that serves as an altar. Here a child may request special prayer or to be anointed with oil. The leaders state that the children love this space. Adults have mid-week opportunities to attend an “Institute” that equips them to be disciples of Jesus. During this time, the children study and also practice spiritual disciplines. Parents can enroll in a course called “Playing in God’s Story,” the aim of which is to help parents engage the whole family in the biblical story. Intergenerational interaction occurs as the entire faith family worships together at least 16 times every year in order to hear each other’s faith stories. Children are always present for the Lord’s Supper, and, during Lent, the children are provided the opportunity to serve the elements to the whole congregation.

Church P chooses to be small and to stay small. This church seeks to live out the role of the faith community differently than most North American churches: They intend to practice community living and a rule of life. When interviewed, the pastor stated that discipleship happens in “dinner circles” that include the deliberate discipling of children in that setting. When establishing this church, the leaders asked themselves, “How do we give children an experience that engages them in intentional community?” Pictures of kids are everywhere because “we value keeping our children with us.” Also, during worship, the church asks adults to “lay down their rights” for the sake of the children, and for the adults to embrace the opportunity to strengthen their own ability to focus on God amidst the sounds of the youngsters. The same is asked of the children, meaning that sometimes they need to be quiet for the sake of the adults. To ensure that single parents get a respite, the church asks

other adults to “adopt” the single parents’ children during the worship time. The pastor said, “We value the experience of keeping our children among us during worship, considering the Lord’s reminder that they hold for us something of the Kingdom.”

Churches H, I, O, T, and Y have taken forms of liturgy established by the early church and modified them so that today’s children can experience and understand them. This is in keeping with values held by many leaders in the movement toward new forms of church and also supports observations made by Webber (2002, p. 18).

### **Churches without Intergenerational Nurture of Children**

The worship services of the mega new-form churches in this survey were presentational, and the worship spaces were virtually free of Christian symbols, though one prominently displayed a rustic cross. During the corporate worship time, the space was dark with spotlights on the speaker or musicians. Children were not part of these experiences. Each had a concert-like feel. Attendees stayed at their seats and watched except when they stood to sing. Participation by singing was expected but not necessary because the volume of the instruments often drowned out the voices of the worshipers. These churches seemed remarkably like the description Webber gives of the pragmatic church that was characteristic of the evangelical period of the late 20th century even though the churches in this survey identified themselves as new and innovative. Since these churches had experienced significant attendance growth, perhaps that made it difficult to retain their original ecclesiological values.

No new-form large or megachurch in our survey exhibited generational integration in that there were no times when the generations of the faith community were together. In an interview with the founding pastor of Church N, on January 19, 2010), he stated that the church began with children present during the worship service, but parents did not like that, so the church now has a separate experience for the children. Yet, a couple of the large churches had begun to shift their view of their responsibility to the children of their congregations.

Church E, a well-known megachurch similar to Church C, is one of them. In recent years, since its founding in 1997, it has undergone a significant paradigm shift in its ministry with children and families. Even though children’s ministry is still separate, the leaders have gone from a *to* ministry to one that is *for* and *with*. They dispensed with the children’s store where kids could “buy” candy and other items with points they had earned for attendance, memorizing Bible verses, and other activities. In the space where the store used to be, the children’s leaders have placed a large cross where children can kneel to pray, have created an area for “stones of remembrances”

celebrating God's action in their lives, and have erected a prayer wall where requests and praises are displayed. According to the ministry staff, the children do not appear to miss the store—they do not ask about the store or the rewards they used to buy with their points. During the children's large group gathering, about 10 minutes is provided for silence and reflection. Even though the generations are rarely together except for baptisms, the leadership is committed to equipping parents to be comfortable and skilled in the spiritual nurture of their children.

Church G provides a striking contrast to Church E. Established in 1999, Church G now has about 3,000 attendees, including 600 children each weekend.<sup>vii</sup> The church desires that the children perceive this to be “the best hour of their week,” so they provide a climbing wall and large inflatables for bouncing in order to offer “play with a purpose.” On the Sunday morning of our observation, the lesson for the day was about Abraham. Children (ages 4–12) chose an activity such as Wii, crafts, puzzles, or Nintendo for the first 20–30 minutes. Then came “Spin and Shout,” when adults in ridiculous clothes clown around and everyone does silly dances to music unrelated to God or worship. Next followed the “yucky Olympics” where Vaseline was spread on faces to see if marshmallows when tossed would stick so leaders could have beards like Abraham. The leader then asked a few Bible-related questions of the whole group but answered them himself in short order. Small group time, called “Connect,” came next and lasted about 5 minutes. After that, kids came back to large group for a game show, followed by a comedic skit about Abraham and Sarah (the kids were “warmed up” for this part by the question: “If you could give your boogers a flavor, what would it be and why?”). The skit was followed by 10 more minutes in small groups to discuss the story, and the rest of the nearly 2 hours was spent in activity zones until the main service was over. A 6-year-old reported, “This church is fun, and the best part of being there is playing.” Church G uses a curriculum that bills itself as “high energy children's ministry.” It delivers on that claim. It is clearly evident that intentional practices with children among new-form churches vary greatly.

### Observed Patterns; Ensuing Questions

Here are several patterns noted during the exploration of new-form churches followed by questions relating to each pattern:

- The size of a church correlated inversely with the level of children's involvement with the whole faith community—the larger the church, the more removed children were into their own separate spaces. *Since the North American culture tends to equate size with success and effectiveness, what might this mean for the children who are part of those*

*huge churches now? Will they feel part of the faith community, or will they need to be re-evangelized as adults?*

- *Churches established at the outset with children and families as part of their purpose were more successful in maintaining that involvement than churches that attempted to shift in this direction later. If some churches are content to be intentionally small because they feel that a communal approach is a better way to nurture a child's faith, should large churches adapt their ministry approaches with children? If so, how?*
- *The amount of media used in the worship service paralleled the amount of media used in children's ministry. Several churches employed "media-driven" presentations; others, primarily smaller churches, did not use media at all. Does it matter if worship experiences are media-driven or media-enhanced or without media? How might the impact of media usage in ministry on the church's children be assessed? Is engagement or attention effective evaluative criteria?*
- *Churches that valued interaction between generations viewed children as full participants in the faith community. What are possible explicit and implicit implications for children if they are not full participants?*
- *Generational barriers seemed nonexistent if the focal point of worship was the communion table, whether or not the church was from a sacramental tradition (e.g., Church H and X were; Churches O and T were not). In what ways might churches that place more emphasis on Bible teaching than on the sacraments achieve generational harmony?*
- *New-form megachurches made quality use of media, sound, and staging but lacked visual symbols or banners that were explicitly Christian. Given the belief among some traditions that those visual symbols are helpful, what difference does it make, if any, in a child's formation if Christian symbols are absent?*

### Questions for Future Study

Since this was intended to be an exploratory survey, no attempt has been made to draw definitive conclusions about new-form churches' ministry with children. Consequently, there are unanswered questions including the following that call for focused research:

- Is the place of children within the faith community as evidenced in both Testaments applicable today? If so, in what form? If not, why not?
- What relevance does Jesus' view of children have for today's new-form churches and, for that matter, more traditional churches?



- If some churches are content to be intentionally small because they feel that is a better form of Christian community, why are other churches who also state they value community so focused on attracting large numbers of people that it seems to result in generational segregation and affinity silos?
- Does the size of a church in and of itself make a difference? Is size a factor that influences a person's choice of church?
- If "this church meets my needs" is a view characteristic of North America's consumer culture that influences the decision of many adults, what impact does that have on their children?
- What kinds of intentional, habitual practices in the life of the church enhance the formation of all the people of God toward conformity to the character of Christ?
- What long-term effects, if any, might church practices have on children?
- If there is validity in the writing of Boulding (1967, p. 8) that children can "drown" in a "constant flow of stimulation," and, if Keltner and Haidt (2003, p. 312) are correct that solitude and a sense of "awe" are powerful for personal change and growth, how are these concepts best communicated to parents and children's ministry leaders?

These questions are significant for any church to ask; but this is especially true for churches that seek to forge a new or renewed perspective of what it means to be the church in the 21st century. We challenge new-form churches, especially the large and megachurches because of our findings, to be sure that their *ministry practices* are actually fulfilling their *ministry purposes*.

### Personal Reflection

For the past 20 years, I (Scottie) have taken delight in researching and writing about ways children are able to enter into sacred space and encounter the living God through the Holy Spirit in all kinds of contexts.<sup>viii</sup> This survey of new-form churches has contributed significantly to my realization of the breadth of ways the church ministers with children. It has been especially encouraging to see many of the young new-form congregations with a "DNA" that seeks to bring the whole faith community, including children, into the presence of God during times of corporate worship, shared meals, and community service. I am very hopeful that these mainly small and mid-size churches can become voices that lead others to join them as they seem intentionally to resist the influence of popular culture as much as possible as they seek to form the people of God to be faithful and obedient followers of Jesus Christ.

Appendix: Table 1

*Summary of the Data from the Survey of the New Forms of Church*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church A -CA	S	Office Park	Little	Mega	Teach kids the Gospel for Gospel living. Conform to overarching biblical principles.	NO	To	Yes, Separate	Happens in their own Bible 'college'	Cognitive & Presentational	V
Church B -WA	U	Multiple sites	Lots	Mega	Know culture, love people, see lives transformed to live for Jesus. Nothing specifically relating to children or families.	NO	To/For	Yes, Separate	Parenting class	Cognitive & presentational	V
Church C -MI	S	Mall	Some	Mega	We want kids to know God, and as part of our community, develop compassion and justice to serve.	NO	To/With	Yes, Separate	Parenting class	Biblical narrative w/presentation	V
Church D -CA	S	Office Park	Little	Mega	To have a fun, safe place for kids to learn about Christ and Christ-like character.	NO	To/With	Yes, Separate	None	Cognitive, hands-on	V

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church E -CA	S	Office Park	Some	Mega	A community where kids can hear God's truth, experience His love, grace, and respond to Him with freedom; soul formation.	YES	For/With	Yes, Separate	Emphasizes equipping families	Story plus contemplation & response	V
Church F -GA	S	Traditional Church Bldg	Lots	Mega	Strives to be biblical w/relevant teaching, heart-felt worship, teaching kids to love God's word.	NO	For	Yes, Separate	Yes, 5x per year	Cognitive	V
Church G -KY	S	Commercial area	Lots	Mega	Spaces designed with kids in mind so that they'll have a chance to encounter a God who loves them in a way they understand.	On occasion	For	Yes, but mainly Separate	No	High energy activities w/pre-sentation	V

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church H -IL	S	High School Auditorium	None	Large	Sanctuary of Transformation: a safe place where people can meet God and be transformed into strong, confident, active servants of Jesus Christ. No statement for children.	NO	With (but 'to' temp.)	Yes, Integrated & Separate	Not much	Giving children an identity as beloved	V
Church I -MO	R,U	Traditional Church Bldg	Little	Large	Doesn't <i>have</i> a mission, <i>is</i> one. You can belong before believing. Sees children as part of community; wants them to enter into The Story.	YES	With	Yes, Integrated & Separate	"Institute" to help parents learn nurture	Rotation model plus reflection	V
Church J -IL	S	Old Theatre	Some	Med	Passion for Jesus; transforming lives; globally reproducing churches. None specific for children.	YES	To	Yes, Integrated & Separate	Hopeful. Resource for family devotionals.	Cognitive. (Hoping it's relational too.)	V

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church K -NE	U	Chapel at a university	Little	Med	Gospel content, cause, and community. No for statement for children.	NO	To	Yes, Separate	Not evident	Cognitive	V
Church L -PA	U	High School	Some	Med	Loving community for children & families. Lead & equip parents. Goal: freedom and grace in Christ.	YES	For	Yes, Separate	Strong emphasis	Hands-on & presentational	T
Church M -IL	S	Park District Bldg	Some	Med	Teach children Christian principles and the love of Jesus through various modalities through drama, song, video, and games.	NO	To/For	Yes, Integrated & Separate	None	Cognitive, presentational	V
Church N -CA	U	Traditional Church Bldg	Some	Med	To care, shepherd, and be on the mission on which Jesus sent His disciples.	NO	To/For	Yes	Being developed	Hands-on	V

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church O -MN	U	Traditional Church Bldg	None	Sm	Ancient way of Gospel living w/all generations to discover what following Jesus faithfully as God's people looks like today.	YES	With	Yes, Integrated & Separate	Holistic in context	Catechesis of the Good Shepherd	V
Church P -PA	S	Office Bldg	None	Sm	Grace acknowledged in worship, shared in community, extended in service. None specific for children.	YES	With	Yes, Integrated	Holistic	Godly Play monthly for all ages	T
Church Q -WA	U	Old, restored church	Some	Sm	Focuses on young adults, calling them to friendship with God in Christ Jesus. Nothing for children.	NO	None	No	None	N/A	V
Church R -WA	S	Borrowed Center	Little	Sm	Called them to community to dream, play, relate in God's Kingdom, engaging w/the Trinity to heal the world.	YES	With	Yes, Integrated	Hopeful-Target Group: new parents	Non-programs w/Kinder-musik & Godly Play	V

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church S -AB	S	School Gymnasium	Some	Sm	A place to belong and to become closer to God, closer to each other and closer to the world in age-appropriate ways.	YES	For/With	Yes, Separate	Family small groups	Hands-on & presen- tational	V
Church T -IL	S	Traditional Church Bldg	None	Sm	No matter what age, we gather to learn about God and feed on his Word and nurture each other in the ways of Christ.	YES	For/With	Yes, Integrated & Separate	Holistic	Rotation w/Reflec- tion	V
Church U -MN	U	Traditional old Church Bldg	Little	Sm	Has <i>dreams</i> ; no mis- sion statement. All ages are full participants.	YES	For/With	Yes, Integrated	Holistic	Rotation w/Reflec- tion	V
Church V -GA	U	Trad. Church Bldg/& Coffee Shop & Bar	Lots	Sm	A church for "people with words." None for children.	NO	N/A	No	No	N/A	T

Appendix: Table 1

*Continued*

Geog. Location	Physical Location	Type of Structure	Media	Size	Mission Statement	Inter-gen. Emph	Ministry TO, FOR, WITH	Intentional Experiences for Children	Intentional Nurture for Parents	Curricular Focus	Visit/ Telephone
Church W -AB	S	Church in homes and electronically	Lots	Sm	Unclear. Nothing specific regarding children.	NO	N/A	No	No	N/A	T
Church X -IL	S	House	None	Sm	To be a church that lives life together—all generations.	YES	With	Yes, Integrated & Separate	Holistic	Cognitive	V
Church Y -IL	S, LI	Meets in an apartment complex	None	Small	To introduce non-churched children to the love of Jesus.	YES	With	Church established for children	Holistic	Story, contemplation, liturgy	V

**Grid Categories & Explanations:**

The assigned letters are sequenced by church size: from largest to smallest.

Geographic Location (Meaning state or province)

Physical Location (U = urban; R = residential; S = suburban, LI = low income)

Type of Structure (traditional church, mall warehouse, etc.)

Size (sm = <300; med = 300–1,000; large = 1,000–3,000; mega = >3,000)

Mission Statement

Intergenerational Emphasis

Ministry to, for, or with children (See John Westerhoff's *Will Our Children Have Faith?*)

Intentional Experiences for children

Intentional Nurturing of Parents

Curricular Focus (if available-cognitive, reflective, narrative, etc.)

Contact made (V = Visit, T = Telephone interview)



Appendix: Table 2

*New-Form Church Practices Regarding Children and Families*

	Planned Nurture		Generational		Center of Main Worship+		
	of Children	of Parents	Integration	Division	Table*	Preacher	Stage
Church A	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church B	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church C	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Church D	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Church E	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church F	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church G	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church H	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Church I	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Church J	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Church K	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Church L	No	Yes	No	Yes	—	—	—
Church M	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Church N	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Church O	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Church P	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	—	—	—
Church Q	No	No	No	Yes^	Yes	No	No
Church R	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Church S	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Church T	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

Appendix: Table 2

*Continued*

	Planned Nurture		Generational		Center of Main Worship+		
	of Children	of Parents	Integration	Division	Table*	Preacher	Stage
Church U	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Church V	No	No	No	Yes <sup>^</sup>	No	Yes	No
Church W	No	No	No	Yes <sup>^</sup>	—	—	—
Church X	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Church Y	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

Note: \* Table refers to Communion, the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, depending on the tradition.

<sup>^</sup> These churches consistently and intentionally target their ministry to young adult singles.

~ Churches H, J, M, O, T, and Y have children separate for the sermon or homily but bring them together for the Lord's Supper or Eucharist.

+ Churches with (—) either had a telephone visit only or did not have children as part of their faith community.

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<sup>i</sup>Note that the term *emerging church* is deliberately not used to describe any of these new-form churches due to lack of consensus or application by new-form leaders. Additionally, that phrase has been used in the literature to describe the church since the mid-1960s. It is a descriptor intended to reveal that the church has never been static but is changing in ways and rates depending on the historical context.

<sup>ii</sup>Reference to website not given to protect anonymity of church.

<sup>iii</sup>We were not surprised, though disappointed, to find all three forms of children's ministry implemented during our visits to the new forms of church. Ideally, in a thoughtful children's ministry, all the forms would be present in a given church, but *with* ministry should be the dominant worship experience.

<sup>iv</sup>Churches in this survey are identified by letters of the alphabet from A thru Y, ranking them by size, and the state or province in which each is located. For additional information about the churches, please contact the lead author: [scottie.may@wheaton.edu](mailto:scottie.may@wheaton.edu)

<sup>v</sup>One example is Church G that desires children to “encounter God” yet the environment is so loud and fast paced that discerning God’s presence would be a challenge for anyone. Another is Church A whose pastor recently wrote a widely read book that describes the importance of slowness to be able to sense being in God’s presence. When asked how that works out in the life of the church, the response of the church staff was that they had not read the book nor ever thought about that.

<sup>vi</sup>When I (Scottie) visited this church, a 10-year-old girl invited herself to pray with me and another woman. I was a visitor and stranger; this child prayed first, a memorable prayer for me that focused with praise on God’s work in my own life.

<sup>vii</sup>Note: This church has a Wednesday evening service when elementary-age children are present with their parents through the music portion of the service.

<sup>viii</sup>I have written about this work in *Perspectives on Children's Spirituality: Four Views*

(Michael Anthony, ed., Nashville: Broadman Holman, 2006), and coauthored with Cathy Stonehouse, *Listening to Children on Their Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

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