

HOW TO BUILD
A BETTER
CHILDREN'S
MINISTRY



A FRAMEWORK *for* MAKING
LIFELONG DISCIPLES

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INTRODUCTION

A mountain of spiral-bound curriculum, a box of black trash bags, and a note from my predecessor greeted me on my first day as a children's ministry pastor. I can't remember the exact words in the note, but they went something like this: *Chris, I'm praying for you. Feel free to discard or use any of this curriculum, but if you choose to get rid of it, use the black bags so nobody sees what you're throwing away.*

That second sentence was my first clue that a gigantic elephant stood in the room. At the time, I wasn't sure how long this creature had been a resident, but I would soon discover it had become quite cozy and moved about freely—without anyone noticing.

That first day began a months-long process of discovering exactly what I'd gotten myself into. (Do any of us in children's ministry—and ministry in general!—really know what we're getting into before we, well, get into it?) Like in most churches, the leadership and congregation there expressed a desire for excellent children's ministry. In fact, 90 percent of churches list children's ministry as one of their top priorities. But even with this church's stated desires and intentions, their methods were misguided, just as so many churches' are. And it started with their hiring practice.

I was no different from the church's previous children's ministry directors. Like the ones before me, I loved children and desired to see them love Jesus. And I'd even earned both an undergraduate and graduate degree in childhood education before going to seminary. But nowhere in my college or seminary training did I take a course in what has filled most of my career: *organizational leadership*.

That, my friends, is the elephant in the room. Very few of us instinctively know how to run an inspiring, scalable, sustainable children's ministry. And that's one of the biggest reasons the average tenure of a children's director is eighteen months—barely enough time to unpack and hang artwork on the walls. Kind, caring, gifted, and skilled children's directors walk out of our churches every day because, in addition to making disciples, they're asked to be event planners, bookkeepers, recruiters, schedulers, trainers, and sometimes facility managers. They don't just sit around on Sundays and sing “Kumbaya” with groups of children. And teaching kids the Bible is only one part of their job. When I was in this role, in any given week I worked directly with children only two to three hours!

A children's ministry director wears multiple hats at the same time. It's a lot. And once you throw organizational and visionary leadership on top of the heap, most of us just want to go curl up and take a nap. If you serve in children's ministry, you might be raising your hand, jumping up and down shouting, “That's me! I need help!” What you need is not another list of things to do. Instead, you need a guide. I'm here for people like you.

Let's begin with the big picture. For those of us for whom leadership doesn't come instinctively, a framework is a good place to start, like the one that emerged for me.

Survey, Foundation, Structure, Adjustments

In 2013, I watched a construction crew build a house from beginning to end. It was sort of like one of those time-lapse videos, only in real time. A year prior, we'd bought a home in an area of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, victim of the devastating 2011 EF5 tornado that literally remade the landscape of the town. Our home was one of the few left standing.

Most days I made our dining room my office, its window overlooking the ruins of a home next door. It's still remarkable to me how I could have been sitting in a virtually untouched home a mere fifteen yards from a house beyond repair.

One day, bulldozers demolished the remaining structure and took the debris away in a parade of dump trucks. Then, over the course of three

months, a series of construction crews built a new house. My productivity dropped substantially as I watched nearly every step of the process. It was fascinating.

First, they *surveyed the land*. Before building, the contractors plotted the high and low points of the lot so they could position the new home in the best location while avoiding as many pitfalls as possible.

Next, they *laid a foundation*, a poured slab of supportive cement I thought was far too thick for a one-story home. But what do I know? I suppose when your home's been destroyed by a tornado, you'll pay extra for some reinforcement.

Then they *built a structure*. First the workers erected walls, then they put on a roof, and finally they installed drywall, flooring, lighting, cabinets, doors, and windows. When the house was finished, the owners moved in.

Over time, the family *made adjustments*—changes and improvements that weren't part of the original design, like installing extra outdoor electrical outlets, adding gutters to help divert rainwater, and screening in their porch to combat Alabama's mosquitos. In the second year, they even moved the garden they'd initially planted, presumably to a place with more sunlight. Refinements like these allowed the home to better serve the family.

As I watched this process play out, I realized this home paralleled what I was doing at the time: building a children's ministry. Since then, that neighbor's home has become a metaphor I carry with me. In fact, it gave shape to this book:

- Conduct a *Survey*
- Lay a *Foundation*
- Build a *Structure*
- Make *Adjustments*

Your context, the place where your ministry exists, has a story. It is up to you to *survey* your church and community to discover as much

of this story as possible. Just as building a home without first surveying the ground is a fool's errand, so too is building a ministry without first surveying your context. In Part One of this book, I'll share some insight to help you begin or continue this process.

Just as a home needs a *foundation*, your children's ministry needs one too. This is a set of contextual knowledge, vision, values, and culture that all stand the test of time. Just as the foundation of a house doesn't change—unless in need of repair—the foundation of your ministry should change very little over time. In Part Two of this book we'll cover how to build the foundation of your ministry.

A house's *structure* makes it livable just as structure in your children's ministry enables it to care for people, teach God's Word, and reach your community. Structures are more flexible than foundations. You can move some walls if you need to, add a row of cabinets for more storage, or change out the flooring when the carpet gets, well, gross. But since people don't want to live in a home under constant renovation, you'll want to develop smart ministry systems that provide plenty of stability and dependability to your children's ministry. Part Three of this book will guide you through building structural systems to bring the supportive foundation of your ministry to life.

Then over the years, homeowners often turn to *adjustments* to suit their unique needs. Similarly, ministries must make adjustments over time to solve problems and capitalize on opportunities. You can try something, and then if it doesn't work, make changes or get rid of it altogether. Innovation keeps people engaged in the work of building something great while remaining focused on the mission. Much like a home that needs renovation and repairs to serve generations of families, so a children's ministry must challenge itself to grow, evolve, and meet the needs of their people. That's what we'll cover in Part Four.

Take What You Need, and Leave the Rest

This system isn't unique; you'll find other organizational paradigms that look similar. And it's not formulaic. Take what you need, and leave

the rest. My goal is to use what I know you already have—a love for Jesus, his Word, and his people—and help you build a well-run ministry system so your passion can reach its potential unto the glory of God.

How does that sound? My deepest desire is that this book will give you hope. Your ministry life can be better. You can grow in confidence as an organizational leader in your church. You can build a better children's ministry. And your church can help you do it.

Let's begin in Part One with how to conduct a survey of your current children's ministry or the landscape at your church if you're considering starting one.

PS: I made good use of those black trash bags.



PART ONE
Conduct a Survey

Chapter 1

CHALLENGES

Imagine most of you either lead, are invested in, or are considering starting a children's ministry. You're my kind of people! You love children. You want to see the next generation of Christians love Jesus. But maybe you have the feeling that children's ministry can be better.

So, all right, team. Huddle up, grab some water, take a knee, and let's ponder four challenges a church can face when it comes to building a better children's ministry. (Sorry to sound negative, but they honestly all start with a dose of "lack.")

Challenge #1: A Lack of Contextualized Ministry

Why does your church have a children's ministry? Perhaps they want to keep up with the church down the street. Maybe they believe it's simply what churches do, and they want to fit the mold. They may have even felt pressured by a group of parents, a denominational leader, or a parachurch ministry.

But maybe (just maybe) your children's ministry is a priority, a strategic investment of time and resources in an attempt to contextualize ministry in your local community. This phrase may be new to you, but *contextualized ministry* has been around for quite some time. It simply means building your ministry with an eye to your local community—the people and places around you.

Often, contextualizing ministry will look like coming alongside the

natural interests of people in your area. The church my family and I attend in Chattanooga, Tennessee—a city with a sizable mountain biking community—has a mountain biking club, and many have found friendships and community through this group. Likewise, beginning or growing a children's ministry in a church with lots of young families is a way to contextualize ministry by meeting their felt needs and interests. I like to call this type of contextualization *concurring*. In so doing, we affirm the good desires of our communities. But a ministry should do more than just concur with its context. Sometimes, contextualization also needs to be confrontational.

Because our first allegiance is to the kingdom of God and not this world, the church must confront the idols and injustices within its context. Faithful, contextualized ministry refuses to stand by while people ruin their lives with addictions, greed, or isolation. It also won't tolerate neglect or disparagement of the most vulnerable—racial minorities, the elderly, disabled persons, and, yes, children.

I can think of perhaps no better example of this sort of confrontational contextualization of ministry than the work of two men during the Protestant Reformation.

On January 16, 1537, a pastor named Guillaume Farel and his then-unknown, twenty-seven-year-old assistant, John Calvin, presented the Little Council of Geneva with a series of proposals for the government of their city. Among their suggestions was a return to the church's practice of age-specific teaching for children. Their proposals not only called pastors to this work but also parents and laymen. They recommended that parents were to "exercise pains and diligence" so their children would be "individually taught to confess the faith."¹ Lay leaders were to engage in the teaching of children with a rigid set of examinations to hold children accountable.

While these encouragements may seem less than radical today, in 1537 they were considered a progressive affront to the establishment. They cut across the contextual fabric of the Roman Catholic Church, which had virtually stripped people of access to the Bible, believing it

best handled, interpreted, and taught by the priests. In fact, according to Farel and Calvin, the papacy had overthrown a centuries-old tradition of children's ministry.

From the perspective of Calvin and his contemporaries, their efforts in the area of children's ministry were anything but novel. Instead, they believed their proposals were a part of recovering a long-lost practice dating back to the apostolic era.

To me, what's most impressive about Farel and Calvin's work is their bold contextual confrontation. They looked the most powerful institution in the world square in the eye and said, "We will not stand by while you allow people, namely children, to be mistreated. Not on our watch."

The challenge today—at least as I see it—is that, in large part, we've lost the zeal of people like Farel and Calvin. While they saw children's ministry as one of the most vital works of the church, today it's often relegated to second- or third-tier status.

Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to help lead your church to something better. Learn your context, and then build a ministry that both concurs and confronts.

Challenge #2: A Lack of Vision

"Over the course of our four days at VBS, we'll need to prepare 1,200 meals."

This was how my assistant children's ministry director began one of our meetings. (I love her so very much. She does phenomenal work and gave full approval to my using this story.) I sat at the other end of the table and watched as the shock of that statement spread to the team we'd gathered to help lead this new initiative.

Let me give you some backstory.

Our church had always hosted a traditional morning VBS. It worked fine for our community, people enjoyed it, the kids loved it, and it was largely considered one of the church's most successful ministry events. Nobody had asked for anything to change. It was like owning

a thirty-year-old washing machine that still worked. *Nobody move it. Nobody think too much about it. Certainly don't replace it until it breaks.*

But as the leader of the children's ministry, my job was to consistently ask, "Is [fill in the blank] achieving our vision for ministry?" As I looked closely at our VBS, I realized the answer was probably no. Morning VBS simply didn't do a good enough job within our stated vision and values.

Let me back up again.

This church was situated in a growing, suburban area just outside of Chattanooga with a growing number of young families relocating in search of less-expensive land, bigger homes, and better schools. These families needed a church that could support them in their work of raising disciples. Bordering this community were lower- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods largely made up of racial minorities pushed from Chattanooga's downtown core during the past few decades of gentrification.

Because of who God had placed in our immediate communities, we longed to be a church that was not just multicultural or multigenerational, but multi-everything. We wanted to be a place for the struggling single mom with three kids who barely made it to church, wealthy families who needed to see the gospel as their only hope in life and death, and the marginalized who found themselves pushed around a city while the wealthy wielded their property-owning power. At its core, this church stood as a beacon of extending hospitality and justice to people of all walks of life because they believed the kingdom of God was more central to their identity than any social, racial, political, or economic reality.

As I thought through the lens of our church's multi-everything vision, a morning VBS simply didn't move the needle for the following reasons:

- Our dual-income young families used VBS as childcare for the week. While we were glad to relieve their nannies of their morning duties for a few days, this did little to help parents learn to disciple their children.
- Our VBS team lacked men, as most of the people in our congregation available from nine o'clock to noon on

weekdays were stay-at-home moms. If we were to pursue a multi-everything vision, that meant more men had to be involved.

- A morning VBS didn't meet the needs of our marginalized neighbors. For a variety of reasons, these families were often unable to make morning events work within their schedules.

As I sat with these observations, I knew we needed a change if we were to remain committed to our vision and values. And so I proposed an evening VBS to open the possibility that our dual-income families, nine-to-five working men, and marginalized families could take part.

But that wasn't the only change I put forward. I also suggested a \$6,000 budget for hosting a dinner before VBS began each evening. While this request was quite large, I pitched it to our elders as (1) an act of hospitality to make attending VBS easier, (2) a sacrificial service to our neighbors, and (3) an opportunity to gather as a community to build friendships over a series of shared meals.

Our elders agreed without hesitation because this fit so squarely with our church's vision. Then we not only talked about how many meals would need to be served, but about how many man-hours this endeavor would require and how difficult the logistics would be. Was I being manipulative by not outlining these realities initially? Not in the slightest. Our elders agreed not because they thought the task could be reasonably accomplished, but because they were crystal clear on our church's *why*.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is known for a saying: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."² This applies not only to life itself but also to ministry, and his words became one of my guiding principles. If you can inspire people with a clear, compelling *why*, they'll follow you to the ends of the earth. However, if you burden them with the *how* or the *what*, without the *why*—a vision—they may help for a while out of duty, but their service will be short-lived.

Here's a timeless truth to carry with you: *Vision sustains action.*

And so, after my assistant children's ministry director began that meeting with "Over the course of our four days at VBS, we'll need to prepare 1,200 meals," I stopped her immediately. Normally, I don't pull out this trump card on the spot, but in this case, it had to be done. The stakes were simply too high.

The team we'd gathered around the table was about to pull off one of the most ambitious projects our church had done to date. Leading with the *how* and the *what* instead of the *why* could have derailed this seismic shift in one of our most beloved events right from the start. These people needed to hear vision, vision, vision, and then more vision. Our primary job wasn't to help them estimate how many bags of taco shells to purchase; our job was to give them a *why* that could bear the *how*. Providing food was the secondary role of this team. The primary role was to demonstrate the generosity, hospitality, and kindness of the gospel of Jesus.

Perhaps this rings true of your experience. Churches around the world decline and die every day, not because their communities don't need them, but because they've failed to see what they're passionate about, what they can do well, and the needs of their communities—and then inspire their people with the transformative message of the kingdom of God. They fail when it comes to vision.

If you're a children's ministry director or pastor, you must understand this. Yes, you must plan, organize, and schedule, but all your plans, organization, and schedules will crumble if you can't lead with vision.

Challenge #3: A Lack of Priority

To be fair, not every church fails to prioritize children's ministry. But by either benign or active neglect, your church may have done so.

A few years ago I sat with a group of church leaders trying to figure out how to get an influx of new members involved in the life of the church beyond attending Sunday morning worship.

"We need to get them serving," one suggested.

“Agreed!” another seconded. “But where? Where’s the best entry point for most people?”

A third leader recommended, “What about serving in children’s ministry? Seems like a good place for new people to get their feet wet.”

“Hold on,” I interjected. “You’re telling me you want to put our children in the care of people we hardly know?”

“Yeah. I mean, kids are resilient. If people mess up, it’s sort of a lower-stakes risk.”

Everyone around the table agreed. *No harm, no foul* was the general consensus. We would encourage *strangers* to serve in children’s ministry.

I wish I had submitted my resignation that day.

This story is illustrative of small, seemingly insignificant decisions that cause churches to slowly deprioritize children’s ministry. Both knowingly and unknowingly, in the way we speak, act, and think, we perpetuate the narrative that children are less important than adults. This is a tragedy. I’ll just call it what it is: pastoral malpractice. And it harms our children in at least four ways:

1. We put our most vulnerable people (children) with our least qualified adults. Not only is this nonsensical, but it’s unfortunate both from an instructional and safety perspective (even if background checks are part of the process).
2. We understate the enormously challenging task of teaching children.
3. We cheapen the work of discipling children. If parents see a church assigning a low value to discipleship, how can we possibly expect them to place a high value on it?
4. Our children are watching. My eight-year-old notices what our church prioritizes. She hears what gets airtime during announcements. She sees where the best staff and volunteers serve. If we want our children to see their value

but consistently give them the short end of the stick, they have a steep hill to climb.

I'd like to tell you this moment of malpractice was the worst I've heard, but it's not. Far from it. A seasoned elder once suggested we hire a young female right out of college as our children's ministry director because we could "pay her less."

While speaking at a children's ministry conference, I asked as many people as I could what they studied in college. Maybe 10 percent studied something in the field of elementary education, Bible, Christian education, or child development. *Ten percent!*

Before you think I have my head in the clouds and don't actually live in reality, I do understand that churches must budget resources. As a part of my job, I put together church budgets, so I know the constraints well. And I'm also aware of people who successfully work in fields for which they have no professional training, including the many faithful and effective children's ministry workers and leaders who labor without official credentials. But although I don't want to be too harsh in what I say next, I am seriously concerned about an overall tendency I see in our churches, and I want to be upfront with you.

Children's ministries have too many vocational leaders with no qualifications other than simply being willing and available. And our leaders, of all people, need to know what they're doing (as well as having a genuine sense of calling, not simply a sense of duty). If we demand high levels of training for those who work in our elementary schools, especially principals, it's certainly not too much to ask for a similar level of training and competency when it comes to the nurture and care of our children's spiritual lives.

Every time I share this dilemma, the first rebuttal is that of the pragmatist: "But we don't have enough highly qualified people to meet the demand." I agree. I'm sure we're a long way off. But the worst thing we can do is simply stare at the problem, believing we're helpless. The people of God are never helpless. We can dream of a better future with

bottomless hope because our God is redeeming all of creation for his glory. There's not one square inch of it, including the role of children's ministry director, over which he isn't sovereign.

The only way to change the situation is to think and act differently. Change may not come in our generation, but that's a selfish way to think of change to begin with. We're people of eternity who know nothing will be perfect in our lifetime here on earth. And yet that shouldn't stop us from doing hard things for the glory of God and the good of his kingdom.

First, we need to ask *why* we don't have enough highly qualified children's directors. Here's my assessment of the situation: *We never talk about it as a viable career option.* Instead, the role of children's ministry director is too often seen as a stepping stone to something "more important" or maybe a side hustle for a stay-at-home parent. Too seldom is the role given the visibility, dignity, and importance required to inspire someone to think, *I want to give my life to that type of work.* After all, that's why young children so often want to be a police officer or firefighter, a doctor or nurse. We elevate, dignify, and cast vision that helps them see why those jobs are important.

But here's the challenge: Until a critical mass of churches elevate the role of children's ministry director or pastor to a professional level equal to that of an assistant or associate pastor, we'll continue to lack highly qualified people to meet the demand. Will your church be part of the change? Or will it be part of perpetuating the role of children's ministry director as being too low in the staff hierarchy to require high qualifications?

Here's the good news if all this has you feeling defeated: You can't change the whole system on your own, but if *you* don't change, the whole system won't. Do your part, in your local context, to raise the status of children's ministry directors. Your great-grandchildren will thank you.

If you're a children's ministry director or pastor, you might have read this section with a sense of powerlessness. You might feel there's little you can do to change your church's priorities. (You may be right, but

a way to ensure you're right is to give up trying.) Ask the Lord to provide places for you to share your vision for children's ministry. Work in a way that demonstrates how seriously you take your role. Over time, people will notice. Your church won't change as fast as you need it to. It may not even change during your tenure. But you can still work toward a better future for the children of your church by taking small steps of faithfulness each day.

Challenge #4: A Lack of Mission

Several years ago, I had lunch with a group of fellow children's pastors. While our conversation was wide-ranging, one comment stood out among the others: "Our church does nothing for missions."

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Nothing!"

I questioned that, because her church was set to host the largest Vacation Bible School in the area only two weeks later. The church made a significant investment of money and personnel each year, and, quite honestly, it was a fantastic VBS. For some reason, though, welcoming hundreds of children into her building didn't read as "missions" to her. The modern church has romanticized and segmented missions to its own detriment.

One church I worked for had a missions pastor. His job was to coordinate trips to places like India and Ukraine as well as to develop our volunteer schedule at the local food pantry. His budget was enormous—we spent more on plane tickets each year than on our entire children's ministry.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. These trips overseas were incredible. You can't put a price tag on changing someone's life. If we'd spent a million dollars and only one person came to know Jesus because of it, every penny would have been worth it. All that being said, we missed a huge opportunity because we segmented "missions" into getting on a plane or serving an under-resourced community.

Instead, I wish that the pastor had normalized missions as the regular,

everyday activity of our life together as a church. I wish he would have helped us see that women's ministry, nursery care, greeting, making coffee, serving as a deacon—and, yes, children's ministry—are all missions. I would want that pastor to look me in the eye and say, "You don't need to go to Kenya to change the world. You need to go to the nursery and hold a baby." And you know what? The statistics would have been in his favor.

A 2019 study found that two-thirds of Christians come to faith before age eighteen. Forty-three percent come to Christ before age twelve, while less than a fourth of believers come to Christ after age twenty-one.³ This same study found that only 4.7 percent of Christians come to faith after age thirty.

Modern research shows that our worldviews are largely shaped during the ages of eight to twelve and are virtually locked in by the age of thirteen. "What you believe at age thirteen is pretty much what you're going to die believing," George Barna said in a 2013 book. Research compiled by his Barna Group showed that children between the ages of five and thirteen had a 32 percent probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. That likelihood dropped to 14 percent for teenagers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.⁴ Another survey cited by the International Bible Society indicated that 83 percent of Christians make a commitment to follow Jesus between the ages of four and fourteen.⁵

Study after study tells the same story. The church has an incredible opportunity to reach young children. With all due respect to the necessary work of international missions, the ripest mission field for most any church is their children's wing. While serving in children's ministry might not provide the adrenaline rush of overseas or even crosstown ministry, it's by far the most effective use of our time.

To help congregations see this opportunity, church leaders need to change the narrative from duty to delight. Serving in the nursery or a Sunday school class isn't a run-out-the-clock situation; it's the adventure of a lifetime. You get to speak Jesus into the life of another soul while they're at their most receptive age and stage. What a privilege!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In later chapters, we'll explore how to prioritize children's ministry in your church's unique context and how clarity around vision and mission can lift your congregation's eyes to this ministry's importance. For now, though, I'll leave you with this wisdom from my friend Abbey Wedgeworth. I try to remember it when I feel discouraged: *Children aren't problems to be solved; they're souls to be shepherded.*

That, dear friend, is the essence of what must change in children's ministry.