

Presentation Proposal for 3rd Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization

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In this paper I address issues of Biblical poverty within the church community. In secular settings, bible-engagement is considerably more fluent and skilled. Difficulties occur in cross-over into church culture.

The emergence of children's ministry in the last couple of decades, as follow on from youth ministry in the preceding decades, presents us with a set of new concerns.

Children are being removed both from their family and from the whole community of faith for the purposes of Christian education or discipleship.

This common practice is increasingly being revealed as detrimental both to the children in several different ways, and to parents and the wider church community in several ways.

Children are placed in an education or entertainment styled environment. Both of these genres distort the focus of discipleship. Our specialist children's programs grew out of a (distorted) recalibration of the 19th century social justice driven Sunday school movement. The educative focus of Sunday school then was authentic; children working coal mines and cotton mills needed the opportunity for out-of-hours education.

In contrast to the educationally underprivileged children of industrial England, the developed world post modern urban children are **over educated**.

And they are **over entertained**.

Ironically it is from children's ministry specialists – the very providers of such programs - that the call for finding another way is coming.

Children, who are on a weekly basis evicted from the 'main' church service, are being trained to leave church.

Children who are removed from their families in order to be discipled are being denied access to the foremost biblical model of faith sharing and discipleship.

Being removed into an age-staged environment has led to the simplification of biblical content and lowering of expectations of biblical literacy among our children. Despite higher levels of literacy in our society than ever before, with children developing sophisticated text analysis and interpretive tools in primary school, children are not often given space to read the text for themselves, or to wrestle with its possible meaning, employing the tools which from secular education most students have at their disposal.

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A voracious hunger for substantial amounts of literature has been demonstrated in the last decade through the popularity of large volume works, like the Harry Potter series. Children are demonstrating their capacity to read a lot, to follow multiple and complex threads and meta narrative across multiple volumes. At the same time, our kids church programs are less and less literacy rich, and in some cases, even discourage the thoughtful analysis that children have been taught to do, and would seem appropriate for a rich and complex text such as the Bible.

The discrepancy between literacy level and tools and literary practice in personal and corporate Bible reading for adults is just as great as for our children.

Many adults are not encouraged to approach the text using even the basic skills taught in undergraduate literature or arts courses.

Furthermore, adults are not encouraged to pursue these processes with their children who are also skilled at least to a certain extent.

My experience in pastoral ministry of listening to parents bears witness to a generation of parents who feel ill-equipped, disempowered and unable to nurture their own children in Christian faith. Many parents see the rise of specialist children's ministry and salaried staff positions in children's ministry as evidence of their own incompetence and the concrete need for someone else with greater 'expertise' to fulfil this role.

This is a tragic view, prevalent even in churches where the 'priesthood of all believers' is held in high regard.

Clearly the removal of our children from regular, meaningful, active participation with adults in the community of faith damages the faith development of our children and of adults.

The rhetoric of removing children to a program that is better suited to their needs, whilst leaving an adult community to pursue 'meatier' material begs the question:

What are children's spiritual/faith development needs?

What is 'meatier' for adults?

From the ranks of children's ministry specialists, across the past two decades the call for families' ministry as a more appropriate category has arisen. We resist the term 'children's ministry' in isolation.

We affirm the right and responsibility of parents to be the primary evangelists and disciples of their own children.

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We wonder whether renewal in Bible-reading practice in our churches and faith gatherings might offer a fruitful way forward to support parents and children and the whole faith community in discipling one another.

One of the major difficulties cited by churches regarding the inclusion of children in church gathering is the sermon time.

This extended, usually philosophical, generally adult oriented monologue is problematic for our children.

Perhaps it is time to be inspired by the authenticity of children, their appreciation and skills for reading the Bible and a commitment to justice and empowerment for families in the gathered community.

Perhaps it is time to renew our passion and practice for the creative reading of scripture and to repent of the idolatry of prioritising a sermon (both in terms of minutes spent during church, and preparation time outside of church).

I would like us to affirm to our children that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is the Word, the sermon is not. **Children are hungry for the Word.** **They are not hungry for sermons.**

What are adults hungry for? For the Word?

Let it be so.

To finish today I would like to lead us in a declamation of scripture in multicoloured variety: May simply reading this text, so intricately woven for us, provide a pattern for our biblical engagement with our children.

(Divide into yellow, red, blue and green sections: rehearse coloured words in sections, then re-weave all of the strands together in a complete reading - See appendix.)

Questions:

1. How are parents supported concretely and publicly in the discipling of their children?
2. How do/can our church logistical decisions prioritise engagement with the biblical text – offering equal access to people of all ages?

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.