

Think of a number between 1 and 98 (excluding anything divisible by 11).

Got it? Good.

Now list what you think are the top 5 factors a person of that age needs in their experience to become and continue as a disciple of Jesus (ie. their most significant missional and pastoral needs).

Let me see if I can guess a few... respect, love & care, being listened to, time, a community, an opportunity to contribute, prayer, access to the Bible.

How did I go?

Now take your first number and reverse the digits – for example 36 becomes 63 and 50 becomes 05.

List what you think are the top 5 factors a person of this age needs in their experience to become and continue as a disciple of Jesus (ie. their most significant missional and pastoral needs).

How many in common were there with your first list?

My guess is that the two lists aren't too different. Humans have basic needs that are on-going and common to all ages.



"Parents are really scary - I just can't relate to them."

"I'm just not a kids' person."

"I've moved on from Youth Ministry - I'm off to Bible College to get serious with God."

### Many people think of themselves as suited to ministry with a particular age group.

I wonder if we are blinded by our culture's heavy emphasis on niche marketing and targeting?

Splitting society into ever-more specific age groups and convincing them that they need a different product, rather than a generic one they might share with their neighbour, is a brilliant way of selling more units. But surely after decades of mass media advertising we are awake enough not to trust the 'you're so special because you're different' seduction.

The church has a theological claim: we are one within the order of creation, we are one in our need for one Saviour and we are one in the reaffirmation of Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit.

As we have made great gains in seeing a common humanity among people of different geographic and cultural origins, we seem to have lost our grip on the oneness of people of various ages. We have a radical opportunity to be counter-cultural in affirming the call and the capacity to be one body of disciples.

# Worship

Discipleship

Entertainment

Recreation

Education

Teaching

Therapy

Healing

Having and communicating a clear sense of what we are doing as we gather is important for our children. They listen and watch us.

Why do **we** go to church dad?

Why do we **have to** go to church mum?

Why do **you** go to church granny?

Why do **I** have to go to church, too?

When we gather to worship, what is it that we are to do?

**Entertainment may be limited in appeal to various groups, but we are not about entertainment.**

**Education can be scaled and graduated – but we are not about education.**

**Therapy is shaped around a specific apparent pathology – but we are not about therapy.**

Recreation, Teaching and Healing are three outcomes that may occur when we authentically gather as disciples and engage in community intentionally seeking the ways of God. Across the centuries we have seen great spiritual movements grow up around the application of these disciplines in Christian practice. Schools and hospitals and art galleries remind us that when we attend to knowledge, health and beauty we are swimming in a current sourced from the Spirit.

But of themselves, neither education, nor entertainment, nor even therapy constitute the goal of gathering. None of these are the structure, nor the evaluative criteria by which we are to be formed. There is great danger if we cast the Kingdom of God as a school – for we will be endlessly looking at ways to ‘pass a test’ or move up to the next grade. In the same way there are dangers in a therapeutic model – tempted as we will be to ‘make progress’ and become ‘better’. The dysfunction of church as entertainment is a further twist on the ‘grading and improvement’ schemes that distort us. When church becomes entertainment we transfer the criteria of achievement from ourselves on to others. Our expectations for betterment move into passive-consumer mode. The same denial of grace is at work in all three forms of faux-church.

What are we gathering for?

to simply be disciples,  
inhabit the Kingdom,  
incarnate the presence of Jesus,  
proclaim the goodnews,  
exercise the gifts of the spirit.

## Back to our Feast...

The open community meal is a wonderful biblical model for what and how it is to be in the Kingdom of God.

And yet, we do still manage sometimes to adjust even this robust vision to suit our predilection for rating things and going one better.

The Bible in several places offers us the idea that new life in the Kingdom is like being a baby – participating in the

**wonder, vulnerability** and **resilience**

of life, of the purest and most direct of intimacies. And then there's the nourishing metaphor of the milk of salvation. The Gospel in its great life giving power, purity and mysterious complexity is best related as 'milk', mother's milk; a substance that brings life and growth.

Every now and again, this metaphor is turned on its head – usually I think by someone who has never breast fed a child. It is suggested that being a newborn, in the way Jesus, Paul and Peter all celebrate, is something to be shunned. The purity of the gospel is minimised as 'first steps' and salvation's milk should be replaced by something 'meatier'.

We need to read the texts in the Bible that speak of milk and meat very carefully. We need to read them with our babies at our breasts and the statistics of over-indulging in meat-eating in front of us.

It appears that some in the early church were keen to create a spiritual superiority of special knowledge. Paul vigorously resists the idea that there is any improvement to be made on the Gospel. Infants need mother's milk because it is superior quality nourishment. Even modern 'formulas' can't compete with the complexity and nutritional richness of breast milk.

I am not suggesting that no one is weaned. I am suggesting that getting on to 'meat' does not mean a higher quality or cleverer or more advanced relationship with God than that which a baby has in complete dependence and intimacy with its mother.

One of the chief complaints I hear as grownups(!) express their insecurities about worshipping with children or younger people is that they will miss out on their 'meaty' teaching. They imagine that what we do with our children or youth will be less nourishing. The point of being an infant and requiring milk is that it is more, not less, nourishing sustenance for human development.

**Thus our children need to be fed with the best quality theology and biblical teaching. If adults are in on that experience, it's hard to imagine that the quality won't be good for them also.**

## I Peter 2:2

**Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.**

What does a child need to grow?

What does an adult need to grow?

What do you think of as 'meaty' teaching?

Have you ever observed a child being confused by clear teaching?

Have you observed a child thinking and wondering about things that they hear grownups talking about?

What teaching is not suitable for children?

What would you teach a child that you would want to 'correct' with deeper, truer teaching later?