

Leadership

Memories

An annual reflection on Children and Families ministries in the Baptist Union of Victoria

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Our memories are powerful. Through them we are able to hold onto life in many forms, in ideas, in narratives, in how things felt, or smelt or tasted. And in terms of what things meant. Our limbs and digits remember sequences of movement – dances and scales on the piano.

But most powerfully of all we remember how things felt. The emotional content. We remember feeling welcomed, thrilled or pushed aside, afraid.

Jesus' claim of Lordship extends over our memories. And a good thing too, for many of us need our memories healed, disciplined, reconciled or released.

Our memories, though are not merely private and internal. We share collective memory, and this is a powerful constituent of community. We remember together. Wisdom is shared with the next generation, a sense of deep identity is sustained across the generations.

The Bible is rich in memory. The people of Israel continuously told the story among the many generations: "We were slaves..." so each generation was connected into the redeeming patterns of God's power.

Jesus gives us a pattern of memory, a memory meal to share, which we are only worthy to share in if we are weak, sin-ridden, faithless, treacherous, compromised and likely to fail again soon. – So a memory meal for all.

We have a Baptist memory too, that needs rehearsing. Do our children know that we were persecuted for not baptising our infants, insisting that they are not children of the institution, but children of grace?

Do we articulate to our children that they are welcome in the community, not through an institutional ritual but by virtue of the Biblical invitation of Jesus and the lavish grace of God, whose children we all are? Do we remember that is why we don't baptise our children? Or have we forgotten and invented a different story, made of nonsense about them not being 'ready' or having 'understanding' – as if any one of us could ever claim to be ready for what the wildness of God will do with a life, or can understand God? Surely we remember Job!



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Our memories form us, our decisions of value, our decisions of future. Our sense of what 'should' and 'should not' be.

What memories inform and transform our thinking about children? Maybe you remember a time of big Sunday Schools with hundreds of children, of a time when volunteers ran Sunday Schools. Of men who went to work and women who tended to households and were home based. Maybe you remember a time when the Baptist Union had a Primary Aged ministries co-ordinator, an early childhood team, of a time when children were sent out of church while grownups had communion, of a time when everyone went to Sunday School, including grownups and everyone sat in church, families all together. Of large church Kindergartens. Of church sports-club parades. Of days when a divorced person was a rarity, a scandal.

Most of these things either no longer exist, or are a shadow of what they are remembered as. Their memory raises questions of what community engagement and mission means. Of how to nurture young disciples, of what kind of structures yield fruit in kingdom terms.

We look back on those days, and remember a time when our country thought of itself as basically decently Christian, when church and community were intertwined, of church programs that were fully subscribed.

So much has changed. Churches are empty, some are bursting, some are segregated, families are re-organised, mums are professionals, dads are ironing, churches have 'staff'.

The rhetoric of 'community engagement' is back. I myself am a personal fan of this. But our memory tells us we have been here before. We are now revising that paradigm. We realise in our remembering that we ran community engagement programs as instruments to 'get people to church' or even 'to come to faith'. Now we see that we were all the time engaging with people, while wishing that we and they were somewhere else. That is relational and ethical death. And it is spiritual treason too. We recognise that while we were wishing we and they were somewhere else we were missing the kingdom in our midst, and perhaps, unwittingly denying or limiting our allegiance to the powerful presence and Lordship of the risen Christ.

As we learn from the limits in our remembering, Christians are now engaging in playgroups and sporting teams and musical ensembles, as the site of faith, discipleship and the kingdom. The church is no longer the destination.



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Children and Families ministries are particularly given to this kind of discipleship making. It can happen on the run, where we are in our homes, at the school gate, in the club rooms, packing away the Lego.

This mission is informed by an even deeper remembering, in which we tell the story of Jesus, who never invited a person to church. The gospel rememberers and writers do not portray him participating in (temple) worship, only critiquing it. A deep remembering of the early church where 'leaders' were embedded in secular occupations. And gathering was a communally contributive phenomenon.



This mission is calling us to restructure – at the Baptist Union Office. But there are other places that a re-ordering might be in order; our churches may review their staffing and structures; we may be called to restructure faith practices in our families, and restructure theological education and ministry formation both in response to and to continue to serve and lead in mission. To restructure our time – our days – our investments – our spaces for art and politics and compassion - for prayer.

As we restructure we do well to invest in the deepest of memories of who we are (the *imago dei*) and who we follow (Jesus of Nazareth) and who's action we are part of (*mission dei*). In the midst of many memories, these are the deep memory templates to shape us.

