

Church: The Boring Bits for Kids (they're not what you think)

It is generally assumed in our culture that kids will find church boring. It is lampooned in movies and sitcoms, and most of our churches behave as if it were true as well. There seems to be a tacit agreement somewhere in the ether that church is meant to be for grown ups, and that kids will find that boring.

So lets leave that to Hollywood, along with their blond haired blue eyed Jesus, and get on with what we know, as followers of Jesus (not the blue eyed one) to be reality.

CHURCH NOT BORING!

Church is not a thing we attend. It is not an event or a service. We 'be' the church (bad grammar intentional for emphasis!) Saying church is boring, is like saying I'm myself boring – which is an appalling disengagement from identity.

Of course this leads to what makes being the church not boring – just like being myself isn't boring, because I relate to others, I love them, serve them, we dialogue, create and play together. So being church is not boring, because it's not wrapped up in just being itself itself, but in relating with others, loving serving, creating, conversing, playing.

CHILDREN NOT BORING!

Now the whole time I've been describing church – what have you had on your brain screen? I've had people of all ages – and genders and life situations. That is the church, right. Children are constitutive of church too.

Uh oh! I just heard a few heresy warning buttons go off. Children in church – but have they been (dramatic music here) baptised? Look, probably not. I was baptised when I was 14, loved Jesus to bits, had no idea what I was really doing – because who can ever really know? What I know now is that tomorrow morning God will be faithful – and will be asking me that same old same old question "So Beth, ya'with me or what?"

- The mercies of God are new every morning,
- my sin is fresh blood on my hands at the end of everyday, needing forgiveness and cleansing,
- and the faith to follow each day is given, a gift, not built up in credit or stacked in years' supply.

We can't live off the fat of the faith of years gone by.

What is precious about my baptism – looking back – is that I did something that would become a daily pattern for me – submitting to being overcome by the Spirit, submerged beneath God's current, dying to sin and getting up in the presence and with the help of my sisters and brothers, ready to follow Jesus and be reshaped on the journey.

So – back to those children – not yet baptised – but discovering the rhythms of praise, confession, grace, mercy, justice, serving and loving God and Neighbour. Here is where the 'individualism' of our Baptist tradition can spin us topsy. If we can recognise that no one person 'is' sufficiently the church, we are able to affirm many constitutive parts of the church, that are not baptised. I'm not talking about members meetings. I'm talking about actually being the body of Christ on this planet and in your local neighbourhood. I reckon kids are in on it.

Multi-Age Worship

Being the church is for a person of any age the same exceptionally challenging, exhilarating, humbling, strangely-natural, sometimes barely noticeable, earth-shattering, brain-makeover, life re-assigner. Old or young.

What we do when we gather on a Sunday is another matter...but there are some questions to ask here as well.

KIDS ARE CLEVER

One of the strongest points of agreement I have with my own kids is that largely adults underestimate how smart kids are (and boy - it annoys the living daylights out of my sons!)

Often we think that we need to exclude children from church because they won't understand it, and so will be bored. In other contexts, I see the opposite principle at work: kids are totally drawn into spaces where they don't understand everything – and it is not boring but fascinating. Sometimes, admittedly, this has a dark side. Primary aged kids want to see MA movies, because of the grown up factor. Largely the material in these presentations that is unhealthy for children is also not really especially healthy for the grown up psyche either.

As a kid growing up in church – I was constantly surrounded by a mix of familiar elements – same bible, books never switched order on me and I could find what I was looking for there – people who prayed and gave and created and loved and read – music and colour. And then there was the stuff I didn't get. There was always someone speaking who I couldn't quite follow every word, but there were some ones in there I knew. And so it kept me on the edge of my seat, thinking "I'm not done with this yet, there's more to figure out. This story of God goes on and on – even old people are still scratching their heads and asking questions and debating."

I like my kids to sit in church and not get it all-to need to ask questions – to see that they haven't figured out all the deep mysteries of the universe by colouring in a 'Jesus loves me' poster.

THE SERMON IS NOT THE BORING BIT!

We often fall for the old game of thinking the Sermon is the problem. The sermon is not the most boring bit - heck! We're talking about the Bible – how could that be boring? (I'm deadly serious).

And thinking about it, pastors/preachers, don't you invest a huge slice of your week into preparing the sermon – to be engaging, to wrestle honestly with text and how God is calling us to live in our context? That has got to be scintillating for kids: grown ups – thinking about abandoning their old habits – taking risks – looking to the adventures of the Spirit. If I was a kid I'd be buzzing.

Recently as I've visited some churches, I've noticed a few things about the ways in which kids have been given the 'boring' message, before we were anywhere near the sermon.

THE EXTENDED BRACKET OF WORSHIP SONGS

Many times, I see a hot band, the drummer is hittin' the skins, the lead guitarist is on fire, the keyboardist is intensely reworking the chord chart, the singers are ice-creaming their microphones. The 50 year olds are all having a ball, and the 8 year olds are colouring in or playing on their DS or reading JK Rowling (again). Why are children disengaged?

Multi-Age Worship

2 Reasons:

NO INVITATION

No one has verbally or physically invited them to participate. The Worship leader is as removed as a singer on TV. If you are a worship leader, get in amongst the people and connect with eye contact with the children. Children of this generation can easily assume that music is a passive thing to be watched. There are plenty of “how to” resources on this in Party On Together.

NO CONNECTED MODELLING

The second reason lies with mum and dad. If the worship is really great mum usually has her eyes closed, her hands raised, lost in wonder, love and praise with Jesus. And Dad probably has his hands in his pockets and is in emotional shut down mode. Sorry for the gender stereo types – I do know families where it's the other way round – but both of these modes make parents emotionally unavailable for their children, and that is what is required in this situation to help kids engage. Children need to be ensconced in the experience of mum and dad – or friendly others .

My sense is that the greatest threat to the spiritual well being of this generation of children is not the internet or licentious advertising or alcopops (thought all of these require our attention) but this generation of mostly disempowered parents, lacking in self confidence to engage spiritually with their children and to share faith with them. I am sure there is a chicken and egg sequence in this, but the current result now is that the professionalization of “children’s ministry” has gutted the average parents’ confidence, experience and equipping in doing the discipleship life with their own kids. If I were pastoring a congregation this would be my number one priority: to equip and encourage parents in do the life of discipleship in their own homes. If a bloke can’t share faith in a real way with his kids, what chance do we think he has being salt and light with his neighbour or at work?

THE ANNOUNCEMENTS

Kids often lose the plot in the announcements. This is the time in the service where we get to hear why dad won’t be home to play footy on Tuesday night and why mum will miss the hockey game on Saturday. The announcements are often very adult centred, and are presented in a strange ‘business’ like style – rather than ways that encourage a sense of community extending to those who are not active independent adults. I’m not saying don’t do announcements – just let’s rethink which bits of church are best done together (reading and thinking about the bible) and which bits are best done separately (duck duck goose and announcements).

Actually, when I was a pastor, this was my number one priority. Our whole evangelism strategy sat on people being authentic faith story sharers – for parents, with their kids as the first priority, but also recognising for the rest of the congregation that we share this responsibility with each other. This means having a story to tell, discovering what God is doing and then simply pointing to it and saying “Look what God is up to!”

Multi-Age Worship

WHERE IS THE COMMON GROUND?

Many churches have a once a year 'children's service' or 'anniversary service'. This service is often constructed along the pattern that the adults are used to. It is in the adult space. With the adult stuff. We need to recognise that lots of this is not familiar to kids – and that they don't know what's going on or what's expected of them. In this situation, they will be reserved or inappropriate – just as an adult would be in a similar situation. Not because they are not clever enough – their brains are asking a squillion questions, but because of the socio-cultural messages given.

The pattern (Sunday club/kids church) children are accustomed to is much more bible focussed than the adult service. Kids church or Sunday school is about the bible and most everything will hang off that. That rarely happens in adult services. The Bible is tucked right back at least mid way through the service. However, reading and considering the Bible, is our common ground. It is the thing that we share, regardless of age – the act of reading the bible together and exploring its challenges and call are the familiar territory for everyone. In finding a way forward for boringless church, promoting our engagement with the text – in terms of time and method – offer us life-giving possibilities that welcome children, equip adults and declare the reign of God.