

Editors Note:



The simple (or organic) church movement is made of all kinds of people from all kinds of denominations and backgrounds. We have tried to primarily present articles that are written from a positive viewpoint. Some writers (and also bloggers, and other participants of our site), however, present their ideas in a strong contrast to more traditional views of church. We do not want to offend our readers. It would, however, not be appropriate for us to edit these articles, so instead we present them in their entirety so that each reader can get a full understanding of what different people are saying and decide for himself how these principles and thoughts apply to their own situation.

We don't expect you to agree with every word you read here, and neither do we. However, it is important that we join this global dialogue that is occurring, so that we can discern what God is speaking to us both as individuals and as churches. Read, pray, dialogue, and may God speak to us all about how we can be the disciples and bride He has called us to be

How did the early church teach their children? Did it involve Sunday school, children's church, or nurseries?

At a Virginia house church conference, before a panel discussion was about to begin, I whispered to a friend that I bet the first question was going to be: “How do we handle the children?” Sure enough, it was. This, in my opinion, is the number one question asked by those contemplating the house church. It is a tremendous stumbling block, but it shouldn’t be. This chapter will examine three things: first, the differing philosophies or mind sets that the institutional and house church have toward children and the church; second, practical issues that arise; and third, the advantage to children of the church in the home.

In an article I once wrote, I asked the question: “What do you do for the children?” I am ashamed to say that the first draft of that article read: “What do you do with the children?” I had subconsciously succumbed to the philosophy or mind set of much of the institutional church: children are a problem, they interfere with the almighty “service,” where important, paid professionals in robes or coats and ties give important speeches, and where serious, quiet, and holy listeners sit deathly still in pews. So, the question becomes, what do we do with the children while we are doing the important things in the “service”?

Jesus never, ever said: “Suffer the little children to be packed away in the nursery.”

Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, ever worried about what to do with the children. Jesus never, ever said: “Suffer the little children to be packed away in the nursery.” Can you imagine the children being led to Children’s Church during the Sermon on the Mount?

The Scripture doesn’t say much on handling children when believers gather. But I can’t imagine that the believers back then didn’t have children. I imagine not much was ever said, because the early Christians didn’t make such a big deal about the issue. The churches were in the home; families lived in homes; children met with the church in the home.

Although the scriptures don’t say anything directly concerning the children and the gatherings of believers, there are glimpses. For example, children are explicitly stated to have been present at the feeding of the five thousand, and the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 14:21, 14:38.). On a missionary journey, “all the disciples and their wives and children” accompanied the apostles, as they left, to pray on the beach (Ac 21:5b). Finally, when Paul’s letter was read to the Ephesians, it addresses the children directly: “children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Ep 6:1-2). How could the children hear that exhortation read in church, unless the children were in the church meeting?

And despite the relative Scriptural silence on kids and church, I can guarantee one thing: there weren't any Sunday Schools and Children's Churches. If Sunday Schools are essential adjuncts to church life, why is the Bible silent on this subject? His building plan, the Bible, is complete in every detail. Where is the Christian who would deny that the Bible is a perfect blueprint? Interestingly, there is not even a hint of Sunday Schools in God's blueprint.

Sunday Schools were not even originated to teach Bible stories or Christian morality, but were started in nineteenth century England to give poor children of mill and mine laborers a chance to read and write. Who had primary responsibility for training children before the appearance of Sunday Schools? The family. I think it is the contention of most house churches that the family still has the primary responsibility for the instruction and nurturing of Christian children. That may be the reason most home churches (just like the biblical New Testament church) don't have Sunday Schools. And this really is a barrier to Christians who contemplate leaving the institutional church for the home church. It is amazing how many Christians worry about the spiritual welfare of their kids to the point that the parents will poison themselves to death on the corrupt religiosity of some institutional churches, just so long as there's a good youth program. I am convinced that many institutional churches realize this, and capitalize on it by providing jam-up "youth ministries," in order to keep their "tithing units" from leaving. (Of course, I realize that often there are other, sincere motives involved, too).

Although it is the family's primary duty to raise children up in the Lord, it does not follow that the home church should be uninterested in their welfare. Quite the contrary. If kids see their parents' church as a drag, they'll tend to think Jesus is a drag, too. Thus we must discuss practical ways for the home church to make children know that the church belongs to them as well as to their parents.

In discussing practical ways to integrate children into the life of the home church, we must understand at the onset that if parents bring the traditional mind set of the institutional church into the house church, nothing will work for the kids. The institutional church has the mentality of juvenile segregation: push them out into the Sunday School wing, so everything can be Holy and Quiet. This, of course, is unbiblical. How quiet do you think the kids were during the Sermon on the Mount? The institutional church is liturgically rigid in its "order of service," and kids, being as unprogrammed and unpredictable as they are, can never fit within that rigidity. So the first practical thing to do in the church in the home is to relax – there's going to be more noise and interruption in the house church. People with children need to quit feeling guilty about it, and people without children need to exercise more tolerance than they would in the institutional church.

The second practical thing to do is to develop close relationships between each adult, and between all adults and all children. This development is possible in the home church, in a way that it is not possible in the organized church. With close relationships, when little Johnny is about to flush the cherry bomb down the toilet, an adult who is not Johnny's parent can firmly request that the little hellion extinguish the wick, without fear of alienating little Johnny or little Johnny's mom. Close relationships are extremely important.

The third practical thing that should be done is to find creative, workable ways to involve the kids in the meeting with the adults. Where did the idea come from that the meeting (or the church) belongs exclusively to the adults? I know of one house church in which the children are generally musically gifted. The young folks play guitars, violins, and flutes, and feel free to lead out in song or music. Other home churches encourage kids to share testimonies, or to recite memorized scripture, or to ask for prayer requests. During one meeting, my particular home church allowed the teenage young people to lead the meeting with Scripture and music. The meeting was entirely different – it gave us variety, and helped the young people join in. During another meeting in my home church, one of the sisters conducted a “Sunday School lesson” for the young children with the adults present. The adults were forced to adapt to a young child's viewpoint (something that all adults should do periodically), and the kids were able to have fun with their parents as they learned the spiritual lesson being taught.

The fourth practical thing I would suggest is not to be hidebound by “house church theology.” Sure, we don't believe in Sunday Schools, but the world's not going to end if someone has something special for the kids, or if he takes them aside in another room once in a while. And we don't believe in pacifying the kids with entertainment to keep them out of our hair, but there's nothing wrong with showing them a video once in a while (even, heaven forbid, if the video is a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and not spiritual).

A fifth practical suggestion that one house churcher has suggested is for each meeting home to have announced house rules, so that children and parents might not inadvertently harm anything (for instance, “no eating in the living room.”).

A sixth practical suggestion is to tolerate fussing infants as much as you can, but if they get too loud, make sure the parents understand that the baby should be taken out of the meeting until he cools off. If a parent doesn't do this, the parent should be communicated with. Remember, relationships are important. We need to constantly put ourselves in the shoes of our brothers and sisters – and our kids are, in the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let's prefer them

in love.

My seventh, and last, practical suggestion, is never to let the meeting become boring – neither for the children, nor for the adults. If the meeting is dead or too long for the adults, imagine what its like for the kids! Their attention span is probably about half of ours. We need to constantly put ourselves in the shoes of our brothers and sisters – and our kids are, in the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let's prefer them in love.

We finish these thoughts on children and the house church by presenting the manifest advantages of the home church for young folks. We should not look upon children as an obstacle to getting folks into the house church. We should look at the advantages of the house church for kids, and point out these advantages to potential house church converts.

One big advantage of the home church for young people is that the youth get to see their parents in loving, supportive relationships with one another. They get to see their parents open their hearts to God in a real, personal, nonreligious, un-phony fashion.

Another tremendous advantage is that the kids are not given second-class status in the church: they are not segregated, put out of sight, out of mind in nurseries, Sunday Schools, and youth ministries.

One of the biggest advantages, in my view, is the close relationships that develop between adults and children of other adults. In my home church, I constantly pray for the children involved. There are only six couples in the church, and only fourteen children. It's very easy to find out what's going on in the kid's lives, and easy to pray for them daily, individually, by name. I submit to you that this doesn't happen very often in the mega-church.

Conclusion

I close with a brilliant spoof by Doug Phillips of Vision Forum on his church's "Youth Program". Although not describing a living-room sized church, his points are still quite relevant:

“I have the privilege of worshiping in a small, family-integrated church. When asked about our various church programs, I explain that we are blessed with more than thirty different organizations to which our members belong - they are called families. I further explain that we have more than sixty youth directors - they are called parents. In fact, we have such a full schedule of events that there is a mandatory activity every day of the week - it is called family worship . . .

With so much responsibility on their hands, our youth directors have to really get their collective acts together . . . They have to study God's Word more than they have ever studied before so they can wisely lead their organization. They have to be creative so they can solve the diverse problems of their special interest groups. They have to learn to be patient. They have to learn to love. They even have to reprioritize their lives.

This last part is crucial. Only by reprioritizing life, and structuring their organizations properly, will our youth directors be successful. They know that. They also know there is a price to pay. But most of them are willing to pay the price, because they have decided that the greatest activity they can do in this life is to be a youth pastor and to run a special interest organization called the Christian family.

Here is what we are discovering: The more we commit to faithfully shepherding our mini-congregations, the more blessing we experience. Moreover, the more we study what God's Word says about these little congregations, the more we see the wonder and the brilliance of God's plan of equipping the Church and transforming the entire culture through these often forgotten, twisted and even maligned organizations called Christian households.”

Dan Walker