



## Doing Children’s Ministry Differently

Book Excerpt: *Children’s Ministry in the Way of Jesus* (IVP Books, 2013)

David Csinos and Ivy Beckwith

Lakeside Community Church is changing. When it began over twenty-five years ago, the five families that embarked on this church plant met in a local community center in the suburbs of a mid-sized city in North America. Their goal was to “bring God’s message of salvation” to their city, often through community outreach programs. Over the years the church grew and grew, and blueprints were drawn up for a large auditorium and a gymnasium to replace the original sanctuary, which would become the children’s and youth ministry wing.

A few years ago one of the members of Lakeside’s pastoral team became interested in conversations surrounding how to reimagine and expand common understandings of what it means to be authentic followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century. He shared a few books and blogs with his senior pastor, who thought that the authors had some good points. The senior pastor wondered if Lakeside had been losing touch with the culture of its city, even though it had always sought to be “relevant.” Armed with a book budget, he searched through the virtual shelves of online book-sellers for more resources about how to engage contemporary culture while remaining faithful to a commitment to follow Jesus.

And these two pastors weren’t the only ones starting to see things differently. As they were becoming energized by their searches for new ways of being the church and following Jesus, so were others in the congregation. Eventually, after careful consideration and countless board meetings, Lakeside Church decided that the time was right for beginning a missional offshoot in

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This article is excerpted from the Introduction to their new book *Children’s Ministry in the Way of Jesus* (IVP Books, 2013) and is reprinted courtesy of IVP Books.

the downtown core of their city. The new group, iChurch, aimed at making a larger impact in the city and connecting with a new demographic of potential members.

Led by a seminary-trained, hip-hop-loving pastor in his mid-thirties, iChurch attracted a number of young couples, many of whom had children. The fact that the community met in a coffee shop meant that people who had been disenfranchised or skeptical of more mainstream churches could find a place where they were more comfortable.

For the most part this new missional gathering focused its energy into reaching twenty- and thirty-somethings in their city's gentrifying downtown core. Anticipating that some of these young people would bring along their children, they hired Marvin to be iChurch's part-time children's director and began renting a room for children's ministry in an art gallery across the street from the coffeehouse.

The young children's director was commissioned with running a program that would reflect the missional, forward-thinking vision of iChurch while teaching children what it means to be authentic followers of Jesus in today's world. Marvin searched high and low for a curriculum based on the sort of values that iChurch embraced, but came up dry. Without the time and budget to develop his own curriculum, he began looking for books and online resources about children's spiritual formation with new forms of Christianity so that he could adapt a more conventional yet readily available off-the-shelf program to suit his community's particular context and needs.

Marvin uncovered a few blog posts and read some recent books about ministry with children, but he was still overwhelmed with the daunting task of developing a program that nurtured children in this new faith community. Where was he to turn for ideas and support? Many of the children's ministry resources that he'd been encouraged to use by the leaders of iChurch and other children's ministers actually reinforced theology and practices that the leaders and members of this new faith community were questioning and

moving beyond. It seemed like literature about new ways of being disciples and resources for children's ministry were worlds apart. Marvin began to wonder if children even have a place within the burgeoning conversation about how to be disciples in the world today.

Across the pond Sheila was also beginning to raise important questions about children's ministry. As the director of children's formation for a diocese of the Church of England, she was responsible for overseeing children's ministry throughout the region. She was known to pass along a magazine article or recommend a podcast to children's ministers and leaders, and she was always on the prowl for innovative ways to nurture children's spiritual lives.

One unusually warm spring day a few years ago, she made her way to a large urban church to attend a lecture by a North American pastor who had been experimenting with expanding understandings of and practices for following Jesus, and had written a few books on the subject. She found herself wanting to stand up and shout "Amen!" or "That's right!" as the speaker talked about how the church needs to make the shift from modern to postmodern ways of being disciples of Jesus. "After all," he said, "as much as some people decry the word postmodern, we live in a postmodern world. We need postmodern churches and postmodern faith."

At the end of the lecture Sheila rushed to the microphone that was eagerly waiting to take questions from members of the audience. When it was her turn to speak, she introduced herself as the director of children's formation for the diocese and asked her question: "How do the sorts of shifts in culture and church that you spoke about affect how we do ministry with children here in the UK as well as in other parts of the world?"

The speaker paused for a moment, seemingly caught off guard by Sheila's poignant question. "That's such a great question," he replied. "And it's one that I've thought about many times. Unfortunately, I don't have an answer. And I don't really know if I'm the right person to offer an informed

response to your question. I do think that children are important members of the church—this is something that I’ve come to believe more and more since becoming a parent a number of years ago. But I think that people like you—innovative leaders who are committed to kids and who are knowledgeable in areas such as formation, education and theology—you’re the ones who can lead us in a revolution in children’s ministry, a revolution that helps us better form children into disciples of Jesus. So, please, search for a response to your question. And when you find one, let me know what it is, because the future of children’s ministry—and the future of the church—depends on it.”

Sheila went back to her seat filled with energy and passion to explore ministry with children in this time of transition, change and challenge in the church and the world. She went home and immediately began ordering books that the speaker had mentioned in his presentation so that she could understand these new forms of church that are sprouting and growing around the world. She knew that a number of people in her diocese had started a “pub theology” group that was geared at discussing Christianity amid current cultural shifts like postmodernism, postcolonialism and globalization. She began attending their gatherings and visiting churches that were exploring innovative and fresh ways of doing and being church.

Over the next several months Sheila wrote articles for Anglican magazines. She began a blog about new kinds of children’s ministry, and compiled a short bibliography of resources about children’s ministry and contemporary forms of church. And all the while she reflected on and experimented with how to do children’s spiritual formation in ways that reflected the expanding theology, practices and values that she was coming to develop. She approached the diocese for funding to develop a curriculum for children’s education that was appropriate for churches and other ministry leaders who were making similar shifts in their views and practices of Christian faith, yet remained faithful to her Anglican

tradition. With each step on this journey Sheila was reinvigorated with an energy that was contagious to the children’s ministers in her diocese. Within a few years she had changed the face of children’s ministry in the Church of England through infectious spirit and her curriculum, “Come to Me.”

## Children’s Ministry in the Way

These two fictional scenarios mirror situations we’ve encountered and stories we’ve heard from folks in many parts of the world. And to a degree we see ourselves in Marvin and Sheila. Change is happening in the church as clergy and laypeople ask important questions about the shape of theology, ministry and the Christian faith in contexts characterized by profound cultural shifts. Resources abound that describe and prescribe these movements to reexamine and rediscover faithful Christianity in many corners of today’s world.

In the past number of years we have been involved in churches and broader conversations that are intentionally seeking to explore new ways of following Jesus and helping others do so in our present age. Through our involvement in these churches and through talking with many others who are on similar journeys, we have discovered that current models of children’s ministry don’t always fit in these forward-looking faith communities—there’s a disconnect between what adults are learning and doing and what children are learning and doing in the very same congregations. And this worried us. In the words of Melvin Bray, “I don’t know that we can have a new kind of Christianity if it’s just for adults and [if] we don’t find a way to pass our faith and our faith traditions, these new faith traditions and rituals that we’re creating, along to our young people. It’ll die on the vine.”

This made us think about what children’s ministry in the “way of Jesus” (children’s ministry that is faithful to the teachings and

life of Jesus) might look like in churches and in other ministry contexts that join us in our frustration over this disconnect. What would this type of children's ministry value? How would this sort of children's ministry view children and their places within the church? How would this kind of children's ministry teach the Bible, deal with children's questions and nurture relationships?

As we envisioned children's ministry in the way of Jesus, we also realized that it had implications for all kinds of churches and contexts. As we shared ideas in conversations with colleagues and in presentations at conferences, we were overwhelmed to learn that children's ministers, Sunday school teachers, camp leaders and parents in all sorts of churches and from all over the world are wrestling with the same questions we wrestled with on our journey to write the book. We realized that the concepts, ideas and practices we share in the book have implications for anyone who is truly interested in the helping children love God and live in the way of Jesus.

As we seek to remain true to the conversations and ideas surrounding faith and ministry in our contemporary world, we realize that what matters most is faithfulness to Jesus and the way of faith and life that he shared through his words and actions. An exciting and innovative approach to ministry is worthless if it diverges from the peace, love, wholeness and restoration inherent in the gospel, and if it does not educate and encourage children to become authentic and faithful disciples of Jesus.

## Guiding Assumptions

### Many Paths on a Common Quest

There's been a surge in the past decade or two of folks who are trying to move the church forward, folks who are writing, ministering, and speaking about how to be Christian in the world we find ourselves in. As it has always been throughout the history of Christianity, people in all sorts of denominations and

contexts are expanding their views and practices surrounding what it means to follow Jesus in our world here and now.

Our experiences have taught us that while many of these people are on a similar quest, there are different roots that are being planted and different branches that are sprouting. As followers of Jesus have set out on journeys to reimagine church and faith, they've taken all sorts of new paths. Some leave well-worn trails and bushwhack, breaking with old traditions and forging new ones in the process. Others trace their steps backward and reflect on where they have come from and how to reinvigorate their church, denomination and faith tradition. Others still courageously venture out on paths that may be new for them, but are really trails older than the hills through which they wind.

We haven't had one particular path in mind. Instead, we've tried to remain true to the broader quest shared among all these pilgrims. We find pockets of vitality in all sorts of places, from churches breaking new ground on their journeys to live in the way of Jesus to age-old denominations that may seem to grow dim as they struggle to retain members, but are really waiting for a phoenix to rise from the ashes of former flames. So whether an Anglican diocese like Sheila's is seeking fresh ideas for doing church, a group of folks who aren't part of established churches are gathering at a local pub for sessions of "theology on tap," or a band of renegade Catholics or Baptists—or, better yet, Catholics and Baptists together—are meeting together to explore how to live as authentic Christ followers in today's world, children's ministry in the way of Jesus matters.

### Gathered and Scattered

What is church? Ask ten people and you might get a dozen answers. For some, church is where people attend worship services. For others it's a community that gets together to encourage and support one another on their faith journeys. For others still church is an

organized religious denomination, like the Presbyterian Church or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. We believe that the church is all of these things and more. We have a very broad view of church, one that makes room for all sorts of ways that Christ followers gather and scatter in the world. So when we speak of the church, we aren't just referring to Roper Street United Church and to the official practices and activities that occur there. We're referring to all the ways that we as followers of Jesus are the church, as individuals, families, NGOs, community organizations, denominations and, yes, even local churches.

### Sporadic Involvement

The days of children and families coming to church on a regular basis are over. We can't assume that children are going to show up every week, that their parents are going to bring them to every (or even most) church activity. In a presentation a few years ago, sociologist of religion Reginald Bibby asked a large group of ministers to raise their hands if they considered two Sundays a month to be a good turnout for even the most committed families in their congregations. There weren't too many hands that weren't in the air.

With this in mind, we believe children's ministry needs to become more than just Sunday school, church services and midweek programs. While we value these traditional forms of ecclesial life and, as you'll see, we believe that children need to be part of them, children's spiritual formation can't rely on Sunday mornings to form authentic disciples of Jesus. After all, church is more than Sunday services!

Pastors, parents and teachers need to become more creative and innovative in their approaches to forming children, looking at how to make a significant impact in the lives of children who have won perfect attendance pins and those that are only nominally involved in local parishes. We hope that what we offer in this book will spark ideas for how you can nurture the spiritual lives of children

in whatever context you minister—in families, local churches, camps, schools, community centers and all other places where children's spiritual lives are nourished.

## For Better Formation, Let's Do Children's Ministry Differently

In a 2012 article Donald Stuss lamented the disconnection between medical research and treatment. It takes much too long for research in the medical field to evolve into outcomes for patients. The solution, in his view, is to do science differently.

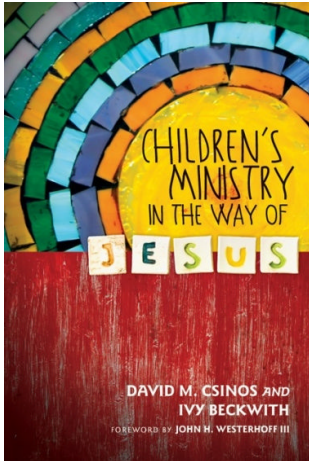
How do we do science differently? Stuss shares four elements of emerging approaches to medical research. First, patients need to have meaningful roles in how their treatments are developed. Second, scientists need to see all research as part of a continuum or web, with the more basic aspects affecting those that are more complex. Third, researchers need to become interdisciplinary, and researchers in different fields, institutions and specialties ought to work together. Finally, scientists and those in industry need to collaborate early in the research process.

This short article highlights how valuable it is to think creatively, to try new approaches and test out new ideas. And the four ideas Stuss offers can be adapted for improving Christian formation. We continue to hear so many people involved in ministry with children and youth (and adults) lament about how difficult it is to get children interested, to keep youth involved in church and to connect Christ with the rest of their lives. And almost everyone seems to have their own opinions about the person, attitude or model that's to blame for these problems.

But maybe medical researchers aren't the only ones who need to do things differently. Maybe to do better spiritual formation, to form better disciples of Jesus, we need to do children's ministry differently.



# BOOK DETAILS



*Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus*

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## Doing Children's Ministry Differently

"Popular approaches to children's ministry equate good children's ministry with glitzy, fun programs that parents and congregations appreciate for giving them respite from children's presence. In contrast, Csinos and Beckwith define children's ministry as serving and caring for children, leading them in turn to serve one another and the world as Jesus' followers. This insightful book will help congregations – not just 'children's ministers' – explore what Jesus meant by teaching us to welcome and be led by children."

– Diana R. Garland, dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work and coeditor of *Journal of Family and Community Ministries*

In *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* children's ministers David M. Csinos and Ivy Beckwith draw on research in human development and spiritual formation to show how children can become disciples and churches can become centers of lifelong discipleship. They write:

*Children's ministry at its best isn't really about programs. It's about ministry. . . . Children's ministry isn't merely providing cognitive input about that one moral or theological point each story or lesson was meant to teach. It's not about helping children fall in love with the "dreamy Jesus" portrayed in their Sunday school workbooks. It's about helping them live as committed disciples of the radical way of life Jesus calls us to. . . .*

*When we use the term children's ministry (or ministry with children), we refer to all those ministerial practices and activities that are done with children. As you'll discover in these pages to come, ministry with children happens when adults of all ages form friendships with young people, when we work to ensure that all children – regardless of age, ability, culture, race, gender, class and family life – receive radical hospitality, when we worship as a congregation with young people as active and meaningful participants, when we engage in theological (and even non-theological) conversations with children, when we take their questions seriously, and when we link arms with young disciples to work for justice and care in the world.*

### Key points:

- Children's ministry is not about programming; it's about formation.
- Children's ministry in the way of Jesus takes children seriously.
- Children's ministry has the power to shape the way church is often done.
- In churches exploring new kinds of Christian faith, children's ministry can't continue using models and theological assumptions that the wider community has moved beyond or unlearned. Children need to be part of these forward-thinking faith communities.

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