

## **Praise for *Inside the Transformative World of Children's Ministry***

"Any lead pastor who claims to believe in children's ministry needs to study this book. Kyle Tyler articulates a vision for children's ministry in the local church that is very different from what many of our congregations experience. Tyler's vision is theologically robust and educationally sound; it provides a philosophical framework from which healthy and sustainable Christian formation can happen in intergenerational communities of faith. Pastors and congregations with the countercultural courage to implement this vision will enjoy the fruit of thoroughly Christian and Wesleyan discipleship that forms people in the way of Jesus. I recommend this thoughtful and practical resource."

Rev. Jeren Rowell, Ed.D.

President and Professor

Nazarene Theological Seminary

"Kyle Tyler combines his years of experience in children's ministry with his theological and biblical training to present a book that is practical and theologically solid. Children's ministry needs a voice that understands the complexities of leading ministry with children while not forgetting the importance of providing ministry that transforms children into the image of Christ. This book provides sound and practical advice for all children's ministry leaders. I am thankful for such a solid resource, which I will use in my Foundations of Children's Ministry class."

Rev. Leon Blanchette, Ed.D.

Chair, Department of Christian Ministry

Chair, School of Theology and Christian Ministry

Olivet Nazarene University

*For my mother, my first children's pastor.*

*And for my wife, my partner in ministry always  
and crime when necessary.*

**INSIDE  
THE  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
WORLD  
OF  
CHILDREN'S  
MINISTRY**

**KYLE TYLER**



**THE FOUNDRY  
PUBLISHING**

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# FOREWORD

I needed this book a few decades ago. And I think I may finally be old enough to write the foreword to it. Why? Time has proven to me that the longest and deepest impact of my pastoral ministry resides in the memories of the children who caught the culture of the church while we adults were busy running its programs.

Our most effective evangelism is to infect children with our love of Jesus. I think senior pastors, church boards, and leaders need to get their arms around this reality. Our love for immediate success in adult conversion and instant church growth has given us a distaste for a field of seedling oaks. We prefer the grown “show-and-tell mighty oak” to hundreds of little acorns sprouting toward a future that will unfold well after we are gone. Over time, the best chance of having strong churches in the next generation is to invest in the newest generation among us. And this is hard work.

For all these reasons and more, I am glad that Kyle has written this book. He is realistic, humorous, non-stuffy, and passionate. He lives what he has written and is fulfilling a call to help us all do ministry among and with children better than we currently are.

I commend several things to your attention. Catch his spirit. Children need a specific culture more than they need a program that adults pat themselves on the back for launching. This culture values children and their families. It listens to them, prepares to serve them, and organizes the social life of the church to include them. It needs trained volunteers who are also highly valued and supported. It needs a senior pastor who knows how to view children as key congregational constituents, not noisy little ones who need to be entertained while the adults do their thing. It needs a safe environment, space to function, and a budget that reflects the value of children. It needs an intergenerational footprint that has lots of people who know the whole family, or single-parent families who believe they have been graced with an extended family via the church. And it needs a team of leaders working together, not in silos, for the good of the children.

If these issues are important to you, you have found your book. Kyle will walk us through the practical challenges and rewards of doing children's ministry well.

I received an email recently from a child I baptized sixteen years ago. She was planning a college visit where I now serve as president, five hundred miles from her home.

"Why would you be interested in Trevecca in Nashville?" I asked.

Her answer humbled and surprised me. "The way I felt in the church when I was a child made me think that maybe it was your leadership that created the kind of culture that made people feel valued, loved,

and bettered. I'm taking a chance that you're still doing that where you are now."

An acorn turned into an oak. I plan to enjoy the shade of another tall tree in the making.

Dan Boone  
President  
Trevecca Nazarene University



# INTRODUCTION

Along with phenomenal colleagues, from whom I've learned much, I've been privileged to host children's pastors at leadership conferences across the U.S. Part of my role in these hosting gigs is making everyone laugh, and there are no shortage of children's pastor jokes to be made. We rib, good-naturedly, other pastors and pick the church apart in ways that only people who deeply love the church can. We make fun of the hardships of children's ministry and the daily grind of the children's pastor. My friend and I have written song parodies that are all about the struggle of the children's pastor, including plenty of self-deprecation and stereotypes of the role.

We wrote "You Make Everything Difficult" to the tune of "You Make Everything Glorious," a worship song made popular by David Crowder. Our parody is written to Sunday school curriculum writers about the ways they make a children's leader's life so hard with all of the supplies we have to collect just to teach a Sunday school lesson. It's not uncommon to open a leader's guide and see that you have to make homemade pudding, gather some dry garbanzo beans, cut fourteen

different shapes from construction paper, have a myriad of chenille stems available (that's what pipe cleaners are called now . . . did you know?), and pick through animal crackers until you have two by two of every available beast.



## **Children's leaders are a different breed.**

Have you ever taken a group of preteens to a restaurant? We wrote another song, "Finish Your Fries," to parody Brandon Heath's contemporary Christian hit "Give Me Your Eyes." His song is about seeing the world through Jesus's eyes. This is much more respectable than our song, which is about taking preteens to McDonald's. If you've never taken a large group of eleven-year-olds out in public, do it so you can identify with Jesus in the wilderness—except that your temptation will be to drive off and leave everybody there. Usually, you are working within a budget and the kids need to order within a certain dollar amount. Sometimes they each have their own money, but they're so used to their parents ordering for them that they ask you to explain things on the menu. You're like, "It's a chicken sandwich. Mayo. Lettuce. Yes, it comes with fries, but only if you get the value meal. No, they don't serve tacos. No, I don't think Big Macs are gluten-free. Kids, remember, Sprite only! No caffeine!" It's stressful. Then you manage the spills and the noise level and the bathroom breaks, all while your own McNuggets get cold.

Yes, I'm overstating. But there's some truth underneath. My colleagues and I write these songs and do these bits at conferences so the children's leaders can all laugh together at our crazy lives. We get each other. We've all been there with the pudding and animal crackers. We've all been there with the preteens and extra pickles on their burgers. Children's leaders are a different breed. It's nice to be with our own.

The different nature of the children's pastor's job propelled me to write this book. I've been a children's pastor for more than a decade now. Recently, I've moved into a role of training and support, helping to equip other staffs and children's leadership teams. I've been on staffs of varying sizes, seen budgets of varying dollars, faced ecclesiologies of varying degrees of similarity to my own, and come to a simple realization: sometimes church leaders (pastors, board members, etc.) really aren't sure what to do with children's ministry.

Ministering to kids can be overwhelming. I get it. Most senior pastors don't come from a professional children's ministries background. There are the exceptions, of course, but purely from anecdotal evidence it would seem that more lead pastors start their vocational ministry with youth, worship, or discipleship than with children's ministry. Really, the idea of vocational children's ministry is a relatively young phenomenon, in the church world anyway. Simply put, children's ministry has not been in a lot of lead pastors' wheelhouses, and they have relied heavily on either the experts, or volunteer moms and dads, to lead in that area.

What if you are a local church leader without an expert? Or what if you and your children's ministry expert are struggling to get on the

same page? Or what if you've gotten to the place where you're ready to hire an expert and you want to make an informed decision? This book is for you.

*Inside the Transformative World of Children's Ministry* is for lead pastors, executive pastors, church boards, deacons, and other leaders in the church who are seeking insider knowledge on ministry to children, and perhaps a better understanding of the person or people who lead that ministry. This book will take you into the life of a children's leader, be it a director, pastor, or volunteer. We'll explore what children's leaders hold dear and how you can best support and partner with them. We'll open up the kid-min contraption to see the gears turning and figure out what's turning them. Sometimes we'll examine the vocation of children's ministry at a philosophical, bird's-eye view. At other times, we'll wander a little further into the weeds of ministry.

Our children's ministry leadership team at The Foundry Kids surveyed children's leaders from across the U.S. who serve in varying church sizes and who hold various positions. The survey included only people who were "in charge" of children's ministry at their churches. This was mostly made up of full-time children's pastors, part-time children's pastors, full- or part-time children's directors, and volunteer children's directors. We'll refer to the whole group throughout this book as children's leaders. Obviously, a church has to be a certain size to afford salaries for full-time staff members, so it's likely those full-timers represent churches of over two hundred. It's often our smaller churches that can't pay a professional children's leader, so the volunteer directors

are typically representing that sub-one hundred demographic. These are often very involved parents who saw a need and stepped up to fill it. One day they were volunteering to teach Sunday school in their kid's class, the next they find themselves in charge of children's ministry for the whole church. They are not trained professionals in the world of ministry to kids, but they are still passionate about seeing children's ministry thrive!

I'll reference the aforementioned Children's Leadership Survey throughout this book. The questions were often open-ended and provided excellent insight to what sort of support children's leaders need from their church leadership. They were able to speak freely about their education, their wins, their losses, where they saw communication breaking down, when they felt valued, and when they felt forgotten.

If you're looking to add intentionality to your children's ministry, *Inside the Transformative World of Children's Ministry* will help you have a shared language and speak from a place of empathy as you address the issues at hand. I'm interested in spurring churches to a stronger culture of ministry to kids and families. I'm interested in shaping relationships between children's leaders and church leadership. I'm interested in offering the tools to equip and empower a children's leader to be the best he or she can be. I'm interested in the church raising kids who stick around. I want staff relationships to deepen, volunteer needs to crystallize, and ministries to grow. If you share these same goals, keep reading! Perhaps by the end of this short book, children's leaders and other church leadership will be laughing at the same jokes because you're all

insiders now. You get it. Let's see what makes those gears turn. Finish your fries. I'll try not to make everything difficult. Let's jump in.

# ☀ 1 ☀ WHY IT MATTERS

One evening I sat in a church board meeting before it began, quietly surveying the people in the room. There was a young dad of three who owned his own construction business, a highly educated and well-spoken school administrator, a retired coach, a stay-at-home mom, a nurse, a salesperson, and our pastors. I was preparing to present the good, bad, and ugly of children's ministry in our church. We would talk about parent involvement, volunteer recruitment, children's baptism, how Sundays and Wednesdays were going, etc. I had a report prepared, but something struck me as I looked around the room. I began to wonder about the personal testimonies of the people sitting at the table. So, when my turn came, I asked a simple question before diving into my report. "How many of you had a significant encounter with Jesus before the age of twelve?" All but two people raised their hands. I knew I was on to something.

George Barna conducted a series of studies regarding the age at which people accept Christ as their Savior. In his research, he noted a startling statistic. The chance of someone embracing Jesus as their

Savior is 32% before the age of twelve. That chance drops to just 4% in the teenage years, and raises to 6% for those nineteen and older. Barna writes, "In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim."<sup>1</sup> I had this statistic in mind when I asked the church board members to raise their hands. Their participation seemed to validate Barna's research.

These statistics are why children's ministry matters. A person will never be so likely to embrace Jesus as he or she will in the formative years. Hope isn't lost at the age of thirteen, but the battle certainly begins to turn uphill. Children are naturally inclined to believe. Faith is not an intellectual struggle the way it is with many adults. Love is not something that has to be taught.

When my wife and I first became parents, we were thrilled. We were also scared. We had enjoyed our nieces and nephews, but we always sent them home at the end of the day. We were just the fun aunt and uncle, not the people in charge of their lives. The very first night alone in our own house with our own baby, we quickly came to grips with the reality that we had to not only keep this little one alive but we also had to help her thrive and flourish. My wife was an educator, and I was a children's pastor, but we had no real idea how to take care of our *own* baby. Somehow, like most parents do, we figured it out.

I remember looking down in the crib at my little baby daughter, thinking of all the things I was going to teach her to do. I would teach her how to swing a golf club, how to play guitar, and how to catch a



baseball. I picked her up and changed her diaper. I sang to her. I read her a book. I played on the floor with her. There would be time for her to learn all those things, but for now it was just good to be in her presence. I adored her.

Our routine went on. My wife and I cared for her, keeping her fed, bathed, and warm. We doted on her, kissed her face about a billion times, and tended to her every need.

As she got older, there were certain things we definitely had to teach her. We had to give her tools to learn to walk, to potty train, to hold a fork, and to hold her little sister. Eventually, I began teaching her music and baseball as well.

One thing I realized, though, that we never had to teach her, was that she loved us. We didn't teach her love. We didn't have long sessions of working on love over and over at the table until we got it right. She caught on to love by being loved. I didn't have to show her a picture of my wife in a book and remind her that we are to always love our mommy. She picked that up on her own. She was born into love and was naturally inclined to love.

The same went for her love for Jesus. She heard about Jesus from day one as we prayed with her. Jesus was central in our household. We gave him praise together every day. My wife and I loved Jesus. Naturally, our daughter picked up on that as well. We have to teach Scripture. We have to teach theology. We don't have to teach love. We

show love. Loving Jesus comes more naturally for children because their worldview is still being formed.

As children develop socially, cognitively, and emotionally, they develop spiritually. Catherine Stonehouse, seminary professor and expert on children's spirituality, writes, "In the process of development there comes a right time for learning certain lessons at the unconscious, feeling levels. Because of this, persons are drawn to specific theological ideas at particular stages in human development." In the earliest days of a child's life, this theological idea is as simple as, "God loves me. I love God." By allowing them to live in this truth daily, it can become reality.<sup>2</sup>

Simone Biles was nineteen years old when she won four gold medals for the U.S. Olympic team in Rio de Janeiro. At the time, her name, face, and accomplishments were omnipresent. She set records in gymnastics, and she was a lot of fun to watch and cheer for. Commentators compared her to Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps, and Tiger Woods, all athletes who dominated their respective sports in their prime. Just like those other athletes, Biles started training at a young age. Her parents recall her as a young girl always climbing and jumping, rambunctious and full of life. She discovered gymnastics at six years of age on a daycare field trip. It wasn't long before she was training with a coach. Less than five years later, she was ranked at the top level of the Junior Olympic system.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the story, as they say, is history.

What if Simone's parents had waited to put her in gymnastics when it was closer to time for her to compete in the Olympics? What if they had said, "Well, you might show some promise, but the 2016 Olympics

is more than ten years from now. We'll get you going a little closer to time!" What if they had recognized that she had some skills, so they put her in a fun gymnastics class so she could run around and play in a gymnastics environment with other little girls? What if they had decided that was sufficient? Would Simone's life have been a terrible one? Probably not. Would she be the Simone Biles the world knows? Definitely not. Not only did it take her parents recognizing the opportunity they had to get Simone some real, high-quality training, but it took her parents, trainers, and friends sticking by her as she put in the work for all those years.

Let's jump over to the church. Imagine we said to our kids, "We'll get your training started, but you won't need the strong theology or a grasp on hermeneutics until you're older, so we'll wait a bit. Instead, we'll put you in a pleasant, church-centered environment so you can hang out with your friends and do church-related things. That'll be fun, right?"

Sure, our kids would be good with that arrangement. They would love to play, maybe watch a video with some talking vegetables that teach a nice moral, and eat some snacks. But we can fast-forward to adulthood and see where this lack of planning and investment takes us. We're left with young adults who have lots of spiritual questions but no tools to use in their search. We're left with young adults who might have all the books of the Bible memorized but no grasp on how to understand or apply it. We're left with young adults who love the church for social reasons, but when things get tough, or relationships get thin, they turn to other social outlets instead.

If our goal as church leaders is to nurture spiritually mature, strong, world-changing adults, it begins with orthodox teaching *by* spiritually mature, strong, world-changing adults *to* our kids. And our kids are ready for this kind of teaching.



**A child who has never heard of Jesus won't scoff and roll her eyes like an adult might. Rather, she's more likely to believe in even the most supernatural parts of the story because believing comes much more naturally to kids.**

Kids are comfortable learning about God because mystery doesn't scare them. Instead, it inspires wonder. The world around them is full of mystery. It's a part of life. Not only are they not afraid of it, but they're drawn to it. In *Opening Your Child's Spiritual Windows*, Cheri Fuller talks about the wonder window. She quotes Miriam Rockness, author of several works on home, family, and faith. Rockness says, "Wonder, amazement, awe—such are the characteristic signatures of childhood. Children, novice to their ever-changing world, are alert, aware and alive to the natural bounty constantly being revealed."<sup>4</sup> When a child hears about the Red Sea parting for the first time, he's less likely to say, "That's impossible!" and more likely to say, "Whoa! Really? Cool!" A child who has never heard of Jesus won't scoff and roll her eyes like an adult might. Rather, she's more likely to believe in even the most super-

natural parts of the story because believing comes much more naturally to kids.

We have a window of opportunity to help children embrace a giant, mysterious God. The four to fourteen window is a popular age range often cited in the world of children's ministry. However, I would contend that starting at four misses too many opportunities when children are babies and toddlers. Barna talks about this: "Physicians assert that children begin to absorb values as early as two years of age . . . Starting the developmental process when children are young is a reflection of the underlying philosophy: Because this is part of a spiritual battle, the longer you wait to pursue influence, the more difficult it is to counteract the influence of other parties that have been imprinting their values upon children."<sup>5</sup>

Absorbing values may begin at two years, but laying the foundation of love and trust begins at infancy. So don't be fooled by the four to fourteen window. Back that age four up to first breath. And, if you believe God goes before us, working preventively in our lives, back it up to the prayers offered as soon as a little life is conceived (or whenever prayers for that life began). Faith questions will come, but capitalizing on this window to help kids know God, enjoy God, and embrace God even in the mystery will help them ask those questions with hearts and minds that have foundations rooted in faith.

In addition to being able to embrace mystery and catch on to love, children are also really good at loving. We may not take the time to teach them the word "soteriology," or explain the Trinitarian heresies

that they should avoid in sound theology, but we can teach them about God's love for them. We can teach them how to respond to God's love and how to extend it to their neighbors. James K. A. Smith, professor of congregational and ministry studies at Calvin College, asks, "What if education (in the church) wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?"<sup>6</sup> I'm suggesting that if an eight-year-old child was polled in our church's children's ministry and didn't have the books of the Bible memorized, couldn't recite Psalm 23 from heart, and perhaps had never even heard the story of Jonah, but she was certain God loved her and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she loved him back, we would be on the right track! We would be establishing deep, relational concepts that she would be more likely to carry with her than if she was first discovering them just then at eight, or a couple years later in her early adolescent years.

I believe our churches' ministries to kids should resemble the deliberate coaching that Simone Biles received on her journey toward Olympic gold. She got excited about gymnastics in a fun introductory class, but she wasn't left in that kind of class for the rest of her formative years. She was put in a position to succeed because she had adults around her who were willing to embrace her natural abilities and help her hone them. Our kids have natural abilities to love and believe. Show value to your church's ministry to children by making it a priority to cultivate those abilities! To make such a commitment will require that your children's leaders have proper training. It will take the participation of your whole team to take this ministry to a deeper, more intentional level. Church leaders, spend some time with your children's leaders, observe ministry

in action, and talk to them about how children's ministry can improve in your context. Together, you can bring up Christians who have for years experienced a rich relationship with a loving God, even before they know all the answers. Because our faith is first about who we know rather than what we know, in this way we would be establishing firm faith foundations upon which they could build mature and fruitful relationships with God. Could we raise a generation of Olympians?



**Saying things like, "These kids are the church of the future" actually communicates that kids are still learning to be real Christians. Kids are the church of today because they are Christians, just like you and me, today.**

## **NOT JUST TRAINING**

So far, we have been talking about children's ministry in terms of *training*, but it is important to make a distinction between *training* and *being*.

When Simone Biles was nine years old and training with a coach for a seemingly unreasonable number of hours each week, she was not yet an Olympic gymnast. But she was a gymnast.

Our children may have a lot to learn about what it means to be Christian, but that doesn't mean they're only *in training* to be Christians. They can *be* Christians right now. Being Christian is not a collection of things we know; being Christian is defined by our relationship with Jesus. Do you recognize God's love for you as your Savior, your King, and your Friend? Do you love him back as your Savior, your King, and your Friend? Then you are a Christian!

Saying things like, "These kids are the church of the future," while said with a good heart, actually communicates that kids are still learning to be real Christians. Kids are the church of today because they are Christians, just like you and me, today.

Consider the journey of faith. A first grader who has recently committed his life to Christ is on the same journey as the saint in your church in her seventieth year of following Jesus. She's much further along in her journey, but they're both walking the path. When we think and talk about our kids, let's use the language of present rather than future. Kids have trouble living for the future. It feels really far away when your entire life has only been seven years. By our words and actions, we can give them confidence to live in the present knowing they are Christians and very much a part of the church today.

A practical way to communicate to our children that they are important is to begin listening for stories of kids in your church who are doing things that are uniquely Christian. They don't have to be huge things. Put feelers out to some parents and children's leaders, asking them to bring you stories of kids helping neighbors, living an active prayer life,



or inviting friends to church. When you hear such a story, find a way to highlight it to your congregation. Include it in the pastor's sermon, interview the child in the service, or feature a story on your website. Be sure people know it's a real child from within your congregation. Children can be wonderful sermon illustrations for living an incarnational Christian life! This will communicate significant value (1) to the kids in your church, (2) to your children's leaders, and (3) to the other adults in your church about the way you view children and children's ministry.

If being Christian is about what one knows, kids are just in training. If being Christian is about *who* one knows, kids can be Christians right now! Kids are a vital part of the church—right now.

## **THE FUTURE**

I promise I'm not talking out of both sides of my mouth. I realize I invited you to invest in training kids, then I pointed out to you that training for the future isn't all we're doing. I believe strongly in involving kids in the present life of the church. Now I'm going to point us toward the future for a moment. It all works together.

Children's ministry matters not only for the present and future of the young Christians in your church, but for the future of your church and *the Church* (as in holy catholic). That's not news to you. You know your church won't last forever if young people aren't reached. What is your congregation actively doing to reach young families? Might I suggest an investment in children's ministry?



**Each church experienced exceptional growth.  
Each church made ministry to kids  
and youth a priority.**

Gallup polled adults across the U.S. to ask what appeals most to churchgoers. The top two poll answers had to do with sermons that (1) taught about Scripture and (2) were applicable to life. The third most popular answer among Protestants was “Spiritual programs geared toward children and teenagers.”<sup>7</sup> This response was the second most popular option among Catholics. According to the survey, effective sermons and a robust ministry to children/youth should be getting the most of our attention.

A study was done within one Wesleyan denomination looking for churches that stood out from others in terms of growth. Specifically, nine churches made the cut for the study. Each of these churches studied began with an average worship attendance of fewer than one hundred persons and grew at a percentage rate double the average of their peers. Based on the study, a book was produced called *Shift: How Nine Churches Experienced Vibrant Renewal*. While there were several commonalities found in these churches as they grew, one specifically points to the subject at hand: “As vibrant pastors submitted to a three-year process of surveys and summits, one specific aspect of disciple-making became clear. All nine made a priority of making disciples of children and teenagers.”<sup>8</sup> These churches focused on giving kids opportunities to

serve, discipling kids as young as nursery age, and equipping parents to better disciple their own kids at home. Each church experienced exceptional growth. Each church made ministry to kids and youth a priority.

I like to joke with people that my mom is the first person I ever converted to Christianity. I was two weeks old. Impressive, I know. Though raised in a Christian home, my mom had moved away from any relationship with Jesus in her teenage years after her parents' divorce. She found a life of sin, met my dad who lived the same kind of life, and got married. In a few years, they decided to have a baby. Fast-forward several months and my mom is introducing her brand-new baby boy to her family. My uncle, my mom's younger brother, was a fresh-faced young minister and offered my mom a piece of advice. She has told the story many times, so I have no trouble recalling his words. "The best thing you can do for that baby is to raise him for Jesus." Soon after, my mom found herself at the altar rededicating her life to Christ.

It was her desire to see her baby raised right that brought my mom back to the church. According to the Gallup survey results, chances are there are several people sitting in your congregation who care a great deal about your church's ministry to their children. Your church is more than just a nice place to drop the kids off—children's ministry might be why they're sitting in the pews. It might even be what brought them to church, or back to church, in the first place, much like my mom's story. Simply put, a strong children's ministry can grow the church.

For me, this is the gear that turns all the others. This whole conversation is worth having because children's ministry matters. It's the present. It's

the future. It's our best chance at helping to establish a lifelong relationship with Jesus. Every "how" that we approach from here on in will be driven by the "why" established in this chapter.