

Three Leadership Arts Essential to Children's Ministry

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Patterns and Wisdom

Patterns simplify things. They show repetition which enables one to predict what comes next. The predictive nature of a pattern is something we teach children at the earliest ages. You see it in preschool handouts and in elementary-aged math. Recognizing patterns is important because they allow us to adapt to the unpredictable. Additionally, they allow us to look from results back to the source to then draw logical conclusions about what it took to get from point A to point B.

We draw truth from patterns everyday. We are shaped by them in ways we are not even aware. Collectively, we call decisions based on patterns wisdom. Wisdom, however, stems from God's Word. We see this in Proverbs 2:

*"For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
or he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones."*

Wisdom comes from the Lord. I believe God grants wisdom to those who have seen things played out over and over and then have chosen those paths which lead to the desired effect... and have veered away from those which do not.

We are wise, then, when we take heed of patterns which lead to success and employ them to our benefit. What are the patterns we should apply to successfully lead children to Christ? How do you find these patterns; where do you begin your journey as a leader?

About four years ago I was blessed to have God lead me to create a free social network for those called to serve in Children's Ministry. In a matter of weeks, CMConnect.org quickly became a network of over 1,000 members. Four years later, there are over 9,100 members from over 110 countries.

Being at the center of this network allowed me to learn from a vastly diverse number of people called to Children's Ministry. I invested myself in thousands of conversations via blogs and forum discussions. These conversations changed everything about my ministry.

Early in the formation of the community, I remember seeing certain patterns evolve. At first they were topical; then, they became sub-topical as people drilled down into deeper truths. Members questioned basic assumptions about what it means to minister to children. Do you need puppets? Is flannel board valid? Are clowns really scary? Can men serve in Children's Ministry?

Not once did the conversation delve into denominational-based arguments we see at the root of so many church splits. I expected it to happen. I had some friends who warned me to watch out for it. On the contrary, a noteworthy pattern emerged. There is unity in the hearts of those called to serve children in ministry. I think this is uniquely profound and worth celebrating.

I almost missed it; but, God did something incredible a little over a year ago. On a flight to Sacramento, California I fell asleep while journaling. I had just accepted my role as Executive

Director of the International Network of Children's Ministry (INCM) and had been reading and praying about the core things at the center of our calling. I was searching for patterns. I woke up as we were descending over the mountains, and I can only describe it this way, God inspired me to write. What I wrote that day evolved into a 100-day conversation about the concepts central to succeeding in ministering to children.

Five Initiatives for Children's Ministry

Our team at INCM took my notes and began a discussion which led to the development of our five initiatives. Last year at the Kidshaper Conference in Melbourne, Australia, INCM unveiled these bright spots... all key things we see as patterns in churches and ministries that truly understand our calling to Children's Ministry:

1. Impart God's truth to this generation
2. Provide a safe and relevant environment
3. Communicate with families
4. Network with a community of leaders
5. Pray for the international children's ministry community.

The five initiatives represent a pattern worth replicating. They represent bright spots where God's blessing is evident. The fruit is there!

As leaders began to commit to the five initiatives and join INCM, a seemingly spontaneous conversation ensued. This new conversation was stemming from those serving in the most dynamic children's ministries in the world. These experienced veterans had lived the pattern. They heard the initiatives, and said, "Oh yeah, I get that... this is what we've been doing for years."

The response confirmed that we had unveiled a pattern evident of God's blessing. Yet, it begged the question, "Is there still another pattern?" Indeed, there is.

As we met with these experienced leaders, we began to look for other patterns asking, "What are the leadership arts essential to growing a healthy Children's Ministry?" Again, God revealed a pattern evident in leading churches where His blessing is apparent. When we opened the conversation we discovered the online community resounded with little evidences of these patterns. We dove in deeper.

In studying these essential leadership arts, we see the beginning of a growth process in the specific challenge areas for anyone serving in children's ministry. Simply stated, the three arts essentials for Children's Ministry leaders are develop, lead and disciple.

Develop

One of the major challenges facing those called to serve in Children's Ministry is their ongoing spiritual development. It can be a challenge to stay plugged in to the Spirit when you are serving every weekend. Leaders who stay the course for many years have this in common - they have learned to walk in faith, assured of their salvation and are constantly renewed by a devotion to God which keeps them refreshed.

Leaders have taken the time to develop their personal relationship with Christ. Sounds simple, but it is essential; furthermore, we see this pattern repeated over and over again. The leaders who stay the course are assured of their calling first from God, then from their family as well as from their leaders.

If you are starting out in Children's Ministry and want to become a leader, take time to determine why and if it is truly God's calling on your life. Look for affirmation from Him and from others. Search the scriptures as you develop your own leadership style and calling. It is the development of our personal walk with God which leads to a broader development from our community and, eventually, the ability for us to develop others... including the children we serve.

Developing others hinges on one's ability to lead a team committed to the vision of the local church. It is this art which we see leading churches looking for when hiring full-time ministry staff. Over and over Senior and Executive Pastors searching for a Children's Minister look for a "leader of leaders."

Lead

Churches with healthy Children's Ministry teams have at the helm a "leader of leaders." We consistently see a commitment to lead. The leaders who quickly understood the five initiatives had moved from a place where they understood God's calling on their life to a personal commitment to allow Him to use them as a leader. The fact they see God as the leader and themselves as His tool is an important point to note and it is evident in how and why the lead.

The pattern we see emerging is one of confidence in God's calling which leads to a realization of God's vision for the local church or community. The successful leaders move from this realization to the drafting of a strategy. While the strategy will be unique to the needs of each ministry community and align with the leader's vision, it will be grounded in humility and is submissive to the bigger vision of the church.

Steve Jobs once said, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." Innovation is necessary because a leader is constantly navigating change. So, once the vision is discerned from God and a strategy is communicated to see that vision implemented, we see leaders committed to evaluation and reevaluation in a constant cycle of change.

Another bright spot worth noting, CM leaders don't ever lead alone. The develop art comes into play as successful leaders are, while leading change, leading others. It is this mix of the first two arts, develop and lead, which births the success of the third leadership art: discipleship.

Disciple

Discipleship is exemplified in Jesus' uniquely divine leadership repertoire. Leaders understand and commit to the Great Commission. They see their role as fulfillment of what Jesus commands in Matthew 28 "... go and make disciples of every nation..." This calling is central in the lives of leaders.

There is no way to escape the significant role of discipleship in today's thriving children's ministries. Leaders are consistently identifying potential leaders and training them to serve in ministry, going well beyond managing volunteers. They are empowering a "royal priesthood of believers" to do the work of the gospel.

When discipleship is successful, we see CM leaders releasing those they have trained to lead in their own ministry. Releasing disciples takes many forms. It ranges from moms who are recruited to direct vacation Bible school programs to preteens tasked with running sound booths or students leading small group discussions.

Three Leadership Arts for Children's Ministry

Leadership in any ministry runs a wide array and spectrum of skills. What we have found, in summary, is not an exhaustive list of leadership arts. Rather, we see a pattern worth replicating. Summarizing the pattern into three points allows for a deeper evaluation and an ongoing conversation. This is the starting point:

1. Develop - walking in faith, developing self, developing others
2. Lead - casting vision, creating strategy, navigating change
3. Disciple - identifying leaders, training them to serve, releasing them to lead

The patterns are there. We see the evidence of them in thriving, fruitful Children's Ministry programs and teams. If it is true that the study of patterns leads to a sum knowledge from which to draw conclusions... and if the study of such things leads to wisdom... should we not commit to them in our ministry to children?

If you would like to discuss this article, and I hope you do, I invite you to join the free, online conversation going on now at CMConnect.org. Join us as we, "... consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds..." and help develop a movement of leaders committed to taking a knee to teach a child about God's eternal love.