

SERVING GOD TOGETHER

– bringing age groups together in the ministry of the church¹

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus was very clear about the importance of children and over the centuries, the church has not ignored the message. Right from the start children were incorporated in some way in the life and teaching of the church. The early church leaders stressed the importance of bringing up children in the faith. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote: 'This then, is our task: to educate both our children and ourselves in godliness; otherwise, what answer will we have before Christ's judgement seat?' ¹

No respectable leader in the church of today will disagree with John Chrysostom. Our children certainly need to be educated in godliness! That is why we have Sunday Schools and children's church and excellent resources and training for teachers. That is why we have Christian Education; many churches even a dedicated Children's Ministry Department, to ensure that our children get the best Christian education possible.

There is just one problem.

Faith is caught, not taught.

Faith² is transferred from person to person more or less in the same way an infectious disease, like chicken pox, is transferred. Three basic conditions are required to catch chicken pox:

1. Someone must already have chicken pox;
2. You need to be in close proximity to that person;
3. For long enough to be infected

In the same way, faith is transferred from one person to another if:

1. The first one is living a life of faith, and
2. The second one is in close proximity to the one who has faith,
3. For long enough to 'catch' it.

Of course, one cannot disregard the important aspect of a personal decision, in fact, a lifetime of decisions to follow and keep on following Christ. To become a believer is not 'automatic'; there is a choice involved. Nor do we downplay the independent work of the Spirit in changing the hearts and minds of people. However, when we consider how people come to their initial decision and how they

¹ Chrysostom, *On marriage and family life*

² 'Faith' in this case refers to the knowledge, values, decisions and actions flowing from an ongoing personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It implies 'discipleship' or 'followership', rather than mere 'belief' or 'religion'.

continue steadfastly in a life of practical faith, the role of 'infection' becomes evident. We shall return to this statement.

Unfortunately, this vital truth is too often overlooked, so we end up investing our time and resources in strategies that fail to produce real transference of faith. In this paper, I want to point out that the modern church is in a great danger of losing the children and the youth if we continue putting our trust in programs, books, and lessons and if we continue separating the age groups, as has become customary. By saying this, I do not deny the place of good teaching material, nor of faithful adults who are willing to impart knowledge of the Bible to the little ones in a structured setting. We have to ask, however: Is this the best way to pass on faith? In the same way, I do not ignore the fact that there will be times when people will meet according to their special needs and circumstances. This might include meeting in different age groups. The question, again: Is this the best way to pass on faith? If segregation of ages becomes the norm in a church, what will be the long-term effect? It would be a disaster if we unwittingly create the kind of situation Asaph warned of in Psalm 78, leading our children to become like their forefathers, "a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God". (ESV)

I shall focus on five areas:

1. Where are we going with our children's ministry? Some dangerous trends
2. What do social sciences say about the values of bringing generations together?
3. What does research in churches reveal?
4. What does the Bible say about generations being together?
5. What are the implications for our church today?

It is impossible to cover this important topic in one session, but I trust the Spirit will open our hearts and minds to start understanding something of the challenges and opportunities lying before us as we enter the future with the children God has given into our care.

1. WHERE ARE WE GOING WITH OUR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY? SOME DANGEROUS TRENDS:

1.1 Schooling instead of faith formation

For many centuries, formal education was only available to the children of the elite. Most children grew up in the family trade where they learned from the older generations how to farm, fish, do carpentry, etc. Children learned about God and a life of faith from their parents and the elders in the community, by listening to them and by watching them.

- The institutionalised church, in particular the Protestant Reformation, introduced radical changes to the education of children. Martin Luther and his successors desired everybody to read the Bible and eventually, through a series of influences, public schools as we know them today, developed. In the process, even 'education in godliness', to use Chrysostom's term, became a task of the public schools.
- The Sunday School Movement, started in 1780 by the English newspaper editor Robert Raikes, introduced a next phase. To help children working in the mines and factories to have the basic skills of

reading, writing and arithmetic, he introduced school on Sundays (their only day free). He used the Bible to shape the learners' skills and morals. As mandatory schooling for all children was later introduced, the need for formal schools on Sundays disappeared and Sundays were reserved for religious education, eventually leading to the Sunday School we know today.

The value and positive role of Sunday Schools cannot be denied. Many church and community leaders can testify of the impact good Sunday School teachers and lessons had in their lives. So what is the danger in Sunday School? The terminology exposes an underlying paradigm: *Sunday School. Teachers. Classes. Lessons. Curriculums. Books. Tests. Certificates.* These are all words from the world of secular education, where the focus is very much on knowledge (head), a little bit on skills (hands) and almost none on values (heart). By using the model of secular schools in church, we run the risk of reducing faith to knowledge. The dangerous assumption is that knowing the Bible is equal to knowing God! In addition, knowledge is easily rewarded (a golden star to the clever child who can recite a Bible verse) and true faith often overseen (no star for the slow-to-learn child who cannot recite her memory verse, even though she manages to keep on following Jesus in a non-Christian home).

And then we are sad and confused when these bright children, full of Bible knowledge, finish Sunday School and disappear from the church scene! Why should they stay? They have passed their final exams and are leaving school – never to return!

1.2 Feeding instead of discovering

With the 'school' mentality comes an approach of treating children like baby birds: blind, helpless, incapable of flying. They are fed Biblical truths like babies. To be sure, Paul used this image of feeding milk in his letters (1 Cor 3:2) as do the author of Hebrews (5:12-13), but in their case they referred to spiritual babies, immature children in faith – and these probably were adults!

What is the danger of 'feeding' children spiritual knowledge? Spoon-feeding children can prevent them from discovering the truth in Christ, from being challenged by it and from shaping their lives according to it. They can be prevented from entering into a living relationship with God and growing in maturity if they are treated like babies all the time.

In the Bible, there are numerous examples of children who were more mature in their faith than the adults around them (Samuel, Naaman's slave girl, Jeremiah, Jesus in the temple). These children had a calling and purpose in life. They did not regard themselves as helpless infants – they had a mission and they were willing to die for it! Why should children today be treated like inferior human beings, pampered and spoiled and protected from the challenges of life?

1.3 Fun instead of faithfulness

In his classic *Book of Martyrs*, first published in 1554³, John Foxe describes how young children in the early church, some merely seven, eight years old, were put to death for their faith. When given the

³ Forbush, xii

choice to deny Christ and live, they refused and rather jumped into the fire with their parents, or bowed down to be beheaded. The persecuted church of the 21st century is no different. Numberless testimonies regularly reach us from all over world of children standing up for their faith, even facing death, because they are committed to Christ. The blood of such martyrs, including children, indeed was, and still is, the seed of the church (Tertullian, 2nd century).

Where the church is free and protected by the state, we seem to forget this. The general idea seems to be: faith and church are NOT supposed to be threatening or challenging. It has to be *fun*! It has to be *entertaining*! Children often have a hard deal in school and at home – Church should be different; it should be a place where they can relax and have a great time. They should not be exposed to more hardship and suffering, but be allowed to laugh and play. Therefore, we bring in clowns, puppets, videos, lively music, gifts, and toys, because we have to compete with the world outside with all its wonderful entertaining events and programmes.

The Kingdom of God includes joy, love, and the comfort of fellowship, for sure. All children should experience this in the church. The church should be the place where they feel safe and accepted. Play is of great importance in the fellowship of believers. It is the language of children and every adult should be able to speak this language. In the same way, enjoying worship and making music to the Lord is very important, as is storytelling and creative ways of studying and discovering God in his Word. This, however, is not the full picture of a life of faith. Faith is also about the cross and about dying to yourself, of living for Jesus with courage and following Him to the end – not as a ‘law’ or a way to buy your ticket to heaven, but as a grateful response to his saving grace. To deny children this understanding is to deny them life itself.

Children are more courageous than we often think and are able of doing far more than we often expect of them. If they understand their place in the Kingdom and are filled with the love of Jesus, they will stand up as disciples, as change agents in the world and even as true martyrs for Christ.

1.4 Separation instead of togetherness

Taking children out of church and putting them in separate children’s services is a modern trend. For many centuries, children were part of almost all the meetings and ministries of the church. Many of the older generation remember their childhood in church as being with the adults in worships services, in prayer meetings, even going on outreaches with them. For now, the issue is not whether they *enjoyed* being children in worship services that often were child-unfriendly. The point is, it was the custom, and this custom is changing very fast, with serious dangers to it.

Separation of generations in church has many forms. The most common is to run separate worship services, one for adults and one for children, called ‘children’s church’. Some churches will have even more age divisions, adding youth services and special services for the elderly.

Another place where generations are often separated, is in small group ministry, such as home cell groups. Home groups normally meet weekly in homes to study the Bible, to pray and to build the faith of the members. There are home groups where all generations are included, but often these small

groups consist of people who are very similar in age and even gender – groups for men, groups for women, groups for youth, groups for students, groups for parents with young children, groups for retired people and so forth.

Separation of ages can become the culture of a church, including outreaches, missions, evangelism and social service. Some churches are organised in such a way that the different generations never meet, not on a Sunday or any other day of the week. If the families spend enough time together at home, it will not matter as much, but unfortunately in the busy modern society families often do not have family time at all.

Why did the church split up into age groups?

There are many reasons why churches separate age groups. The normal explanations are that it is more effective, that the members of the church prefer it so, that children are bored in the adult meetings and enjoy being on their own and that they can be ministered to in a way that suits their level of understanding. Some offer strategic reasons for separating age groups in churches:

a. Developmental theories

We already referred to the influence of public education and in particular the concept of Sunday Schools in the church. Because teaching faith was confused with teaching knowledge, churches started to ask, what is the best way to teach our children (Biblical knowledge?) One of the answers was, teach them according to their ages!

Psychologists like Jean Piaget stressed the vast differences in the learning abilities of children at different ages. Their theories had a definite influence on teaching methods in public schools. Soon churches adopted these theories in their teaching methods of children in church and separation of ages became a norm.

This sounds very reasonable. The question is – is this the best way to teach children faith, trust, love, obedience, courage and perseverance? Is this the best way to develop their spiritual gifts and ministries?

b. Church growth strategies

To ensure numerical growth in church membership, different strategies have been adopted in the past decades. One is to form 'homogenous units'⁴, in other words groups of people who are the same. The idea is that people like to hang out with others who are like them. This meant that church meetings were developed to target specific groups of people and for every group a different meeting was designed – for old people an old people style of meeting, for young people a youth meeting, etc. It makes sense, but one of the side effects was that churches split up into small groups of people of similar age, with almost no interaction between generations.

⁴ Donald Mc Gavran, 1970, referred to the 'Homogeneous Units Principle' in missions. Homogeneous Units are groups of people who share the same language, culture and class. To plant a church you must keep this principle in mind and adapt your message and style to attract people from a specific unit.

One popular church growth strategy is to increase the numbers by attracting families. A sure way of drawing in families is to provide a lively children's ministry where children can have fun (and parents can take a break!) Again, this sounds very reasonable and statistics prove this a successful way of growing your church in numbers. The question again - What are the long-term effects on a church and its members?

c. Personal interest

Let us be honest – sometimes we do not take decisions because they are in the best interest of the children, but because it suits us better. It is more difficult to put generations together than to separate them. It is more challenging to have grandpas and teenagers and toddlers in the same meeting than to have them all neatly placed in their own meetings. “The easiest thing to do in the local church is to divide up the various ages and do separate ministry. It is not as messy [as cross-age ministry]. It takes more time, energy and effort to do intergenerational ministry”⁵. To put different people together means we have to adapt, make space and allow others' needs to be met, which can be hard to do. And because we are basically lazy, we choose the easiest way out.

These seem to be mostly valid reasons and experience shows that separated worship services and small group meetings indeed are easier and simpler for all ages. Children and especially youth often prefer to be on their own and adults enjoy handing over the responsibility of their children for a few hours to concentrate on adult discussions and sermons aimed at their own needs.

The question, however - Is it *good* to separate generations in the church? Is it good for children, youth and for the adults, including the elderly?

2. WHAT DO SOCIAL SCIENCES SAY ABOUT THE VALUES OF BRINGING GENERATIONS TOGETHER?

Before we look at Biblical evidence, it is interesting to look at some of the findings in the fields of psychology and sociology. From the vast body of research only a few examples will be highlighted.

2.1 Erik Erikson (1902-1994) became famous for his description of a person's development in terms of stages. From the first stage, where a baby has to learn to *trust* people around him, he goes through eight stages, ending in *ego integrity*, where an older adult looks back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment and wisdom. What is important is that Erikson focussed very much on the interaction between generations. Children need parents (including other adults) to move through the stages, but adults also need children in their development, too!⁶

2.2 Lawrence Kohlberg was interested in how people develop moral values. In the early years, children base right and wrong on *punishment and reward (fear)*, while a mature adult will make moral choices based on a deep inner *conviction or conscience (love)*⁷. Kohlberg clearly explained that interpersonal

⁵ In Allen H.C. and C.L. Ross 2012, 35

⁶ Erikson E. 1963

⁷ Kohlberg L. 1973

relationships are a key to developing a moral framework. Values (like chicken pox!) are passed from person to person.

2.3 Margaret Mead was interested in how culture is transmitted from generation to generation. She did research in the South Pacific islands and later compared it to modern society to show how the ancient cultures (where the grandparents passed on their wisdom to the younger generations) are replaced by new cultural systems, where the children know more about their world than their grandparents do. The most important thing, however, is that “the continuity of all cultures depends on the living presence of at least three generations”⁸. The key is communication, dialogue and willingness to learn from one another.⁹

2.4 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger were interested in how people progressed from being apprentices to being full members of a profession. They looked, for example, at the formation of midwives.

- The first step as an apprentice midwife is to have *access to the practices*. She is allowed to accompany an experienced midwife and observe what she does.
- The next step is to *participate in the activities* by assisting the experienced midwife.
- This leads to the apprentice *accepting the ethos* (values, principles and practices) of the midwife profession.
- Eventually the apprentice *identifies with the community* of midwives, when she says: ‘I am a midwife, too!’

They called these “communities of practice”, by which they meant a group of people who learn together to fulfil a specific role in society. Instead of learning as an individual or learning from books, people in communities of practice share their knowledge as they participate with others in daily living. “Communities of practice share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”¹⁰. The community of practice becomes their home and they feel they belong to it¹¹.

What is important to us is that the gathered body of Christ is an example of such a “community of practice”, where the members learn from each other by regularly *doing* faith together. Children (“apprentices”) grow in faith and Christian living by joining mature Christians as they live out their faith in daily life, until these children fully identify with the beliefs and values of the community and testify: “I am a Christian, too!”

What these social scientists confirmed over and over again is that culture, values, skills and identity is passed on from generation to generation as long as they spend enough time together, in other words, children must be ‘infected’ by their elders to become like them. If the generations are separated, children are ‘infected’ only by their peers, with devastating results.

⁸ Mead M. 1978

⁹ Allen & Ross, p.92

¹⁰ Wenger E.

¹¹ Allen & Ross, 103-105

3. WHAT DOES RESEARCH IN CHURCHES REVEAL

According to Eddy Prest, *“Inter-generationalism goes deeper than various age groups of people simply being together. It insists on a definite interaction, relationship and conversation between the three or four generations present. It carries strong concern for ‘bridging’ generations into acceptance, belonging, communication and conversation that provides maximum potential for the interflow of personal faith”*¹². It is active and intentional. In this way it differs from multi-generationalism which refers to *“social environments in which several generations are in proximity with each other but not necessarily in relationship”*¹³.

Research on intergenerational faith formation in the church context led to conclusions aligning with the social sciences.

- Christian Smith¹⁴ explains that religious socialization takes place in two spheres:
Individual family households
Multigenerational religious congregations
- Cory Seibel¹⁵ points to research refuting the belief that young people are attracted by same-age events. *“There’s been a growing body of recent research that has demonstrated a consistent theme beginning to emerge. It has shown us that one of the most powerful factors that enables churches to reach and to retain young people, even unchurched young people who we’ve been led to believe are beyond our reach, a factor that can have such powerful impact is intergenerational hospitality, where we take the initiative to reach out, to encircle, to include young adults within our circle. We find that there is a hunger and a receptivity there.*
- J Burns & M De Vries did a study on the faith of university students who grew up in churches. One of the most important conclusions was: *“The most common faith-nurturing factor in more than 90 percent of those surveyed was that those students who continued in their faith had a half-dozen mentors present during their growing-up years”*.
- Kara Powell and Chap Clarke¹⁶ did research on the concept ‘sticky faith’ (faith that lasts for life). They came to the same conclusion as Burns and De Vries, that a child needs regular interaction with at least 5 adults to fully integrate faith in their lives (they call it the 5:1 principle). The more generations spend time together, the better the chances faith will ‘stick’.
“Intergenerational relationships fostered intrinsic religious motivation which led to increased participation in religious practices and spiritual disciplines, as well as influenced how youth committed to and served their faith community.” - Brenda Snailum¹⁷

¹² Prest, E

¹³ Snailum, B in Seibel, CL 2009

¹⁴ Smith C.

¹⁵ Seibel, CL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C20ANw0I518>

¹⁶ Powell K & C Clarke 2011

¹⁷ In Seibel, CL 2019

- Holly Allen & Christine Ross¹⁸ compared children growing up in intergenerational churches with children from segregated church contexts, and found that “the intergenerational children in this study were more aware of their relationship with God, that is, a larger number of them spoke more frequently and more reciprocally of the relationship”. Their prayers were more relational in character, too.
- Paul Welter discovered that not only did children gain from intergenerational ministry, but adults, too. “Adults gained new spiritual ideas from children, particularly regarding faith, hope and love – how to heal, how to continue growing, how to become honest again, how to regain trust, how to challenge fears, how to forgive, how to mourn”¹⁹.

“An intergenerational church, comprising at least three generations, is vital for a growing and sustainable church. In the same way, a denomination’s future is dependent on the active presence of many generations. If a church or denomination is not intergenerational, it will die.” - Whitesel and Hunter²⁰

The conclusion from these and other studies: If you separate generations in church, you reduce the chances of deep, lasting faith formation in children. They will attend church as long as it is fun, or while their parents have the authority to force them, but their faith will not ‘stick’ and they will leave the church as soon as they are not obliged to go any more. Their knowledge of God will be superficial and they will not be able to remain in a lasting relationship with Jesus, especially if their faith is put to the test.

This should be seriously considered as we continue to separate generations in our churches!

Research points to the importance of keeping generations together as much as possible in the ministry of our churches. But more importantly: Is it Biblical?

3. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT GENERATIONS BEING TOGETHER?

There are several challenging passages in the Bible referring to generations worshipping and serving God together. The following is a selection from these passages:

Deut 16:13-14 – “Seven days after you have gathered your harvest in from your threshing floor and from your winepress, you should celebrate the Festival of Shelters. Enjoy yourselves at this festival—you, your sons, your daughters, all your servants, and the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows living in your towns.”

In the second speech of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy (4:44-28:68), the covenant of grace between God and his people is described in practical terms. Amongst other ways in which the Hebrews

¹⁸ Allen H C and C L Ross, 164-167

¹⁹ Welter P. 1984

²⁰ In Seibel, CL 2009

should honour God as the only God, they should celebrate his provision and protection at appointed festivals. These are occasions for eating and drinking, fun and enjoyment, gratitude and freedom in the presence of a loving God – “child friendly” in their very essence. None will be excluded, and Moses makes a point to mention that not only the children and servants in the households will be brought along, but also the landless religious servants, the foreigners, the widows and the fatherless children. All shall be equally welcomed and blessed at the festivals and all shall enjoy God’s grace.

Deuteronomy 31:12-13 - Call together all the men, women, and children, and the foreigners who live in your towns, so that everyone may hear it and learn to honour the LORD your God and to obey his teachings faithfully.

In this way your descendants who have never heard the Law of the LORD your God will hear it. And so, they will learn to obey him as long as they live in the land that you are about to occupy across the Jordan.

Before his death, Moses spoke to the whole nation of Israel for a last time. He gave his last assignments and urged them to commit to God. It was a long and serious speech. It was in the desert, probably hot and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, he did not exclude anyone. All the leaders, all the men were there. However, not only the men - the women and the children and the foreigners, too. (Deut. 29:11). They were not regarded too young or too unimportant to be left out, and when he finished, he instructed Joshua and the leaders to continue this practice. This was to become the culture of their meetings: When they teach the people the Law of God, they should call everybody to listen. The children should be included, too, so that they can learn to honour God and obey his teachings faithfully. No separation. No “children’s church”. All together.

This poses a challenge to the church today. If God told Moses and Joshua to bring all the generations together when His Law is explained, how should we look at the way we do church? Of course, we cannot force a vaguely understood model from the ancient Hebrew context onto modern Christian meetings. However, we cannot ignore the principle of inclusion, of welcoming all the generations, when the people of God meet.

Joshua 8:35 - Joshua read Moses' Teachings in front of the whole assembly of Israel, including women, children, and foreigners living among them. He did not leave out one word from everything Moses had commanded.

Joshua understood God’s instructions when his turn came to teach the assembly of Israel. All, including women, children and foreigners, were present. Moreover, he did not cut the sermon short – he read every word of the Law. How did they deal with the noisy toddlers, the crying babies, the bored teenagers? We do not know, but they were regarded as Israelites and therefore were included in the whole meeting.

1 Chronicles 25:6-8 - All these Levites sang at the LORD'S temple under the direction of their fathers Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman. They played cymbals, lyres, and harps for worship in God's temple under the direction of the king.

They, along with their relatives, were trained, skilled musicians for the LORD. There were 288 of them.

They drew lots for their assignment of duties, the youngest as well as the oldest, the skilled musicians along with the students.

David organised the worship duties of the priests and Levites even before his son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. David was a musician and a songwriter, for him worshipping God probably was more important than winning a battle. He taught the temple musicians all he knew and then gave them an assignment – they have to pass on their skills and knowledge from generation to generation. The way they had to do it was by worshipping together, the young students with the skilled masters. They formed a true ‘community of practice’ in which they all learnt together and all found a home, a place where they belonged. This is a remarkable strategy. David could have decided that God will only be pleased by worship in perfect harmonies, choosing only the best of the best to perform. However, he threw the youngster into the mix. The short-term result would have been less than perfect performances, with the unskilled, young musicians adding a measure of discord to the overall sound. He was not concerned about the short term, however. He thought about the future. Will the temple musicians be able to worship God in a thousand years if only the best are chosen and the learners are excluded? Apparently not!

Once again, we are challenged by a principle. How is worship organised in our modern churches? How are the young musicians trained? Do children learn to worship in the presence of the experienced generation, or are we focussing too much on immediate results to care about the next generation?

2 Chronicles 31:16 - except those enrolled by genealogy, males from three years old and upward--all who entered the house of the LORD as the duty of each day required--for their service according to their offices, by their divisions.

Hezekiah was 25 years old when he started to reign in Judah. His main task was to restore the temple service so that the Israelites could worship God in the proper way. To restore the temple service he had to organise the priests and Levites according to the instructions Moses and Aaron passed down. Amongst these arrangements was the distribution of the tithes that the people brought to the temple. Because the Levites and priests were in full time temple service, they could not earn their daily bread in another way and therefore they had to receive ‘salaries’ from the tithes.

In 2 Chronicles 31 it is described how these tithes had to be distributed. Then in verse 16 a very interesting fact is mentioned. All the priests who were in the register, all who had daily duties in the temple, had to receive a portion, from 3 years old and up. Three years old and having duties in the temple, and being ‘paid’ for it! This is very challenging, so much so that Bible translators have been struggling with this verse. Some place it vaguely in the future – ‘all who would enter’ (NET, NIV), others replace three with thirty (CEV, ISV, GNT and MSG)! Most of the English translators, however, keep to ‘three’ for *shâlôsh* and render the participium *habô*, ‘all who enter’, as an ongoing action in the present. What is clear, in any case, is that children grew up in and identified with the designated ministry of their families. As soon as they left their mothers’ sides, they joined their fathers and the other men in their daily tasks. It might have started with very small tasks, but by observation and practice, they would have learnt the trade, gradually growing in responsibility. This leaves us to

consider the staggering possibility - children of three years old were regarded as pure and responsible enough to do duties in the temple. God trusted them to handle his holy things with respect and care!

Which makes me wonder: Do WE have duties for children of three years old in our church ministries? Do we trust them enough? Do we trust the little ones in the same way God trusts them?

2 Chron 20:12– 15 - “Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord.

Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly.

He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.

The country of Judah was in an enormous crisis as three nations joined to attack Jerusalem from the east. King Jehoshaphat immediately resolved to seek the guidance of the Lord, by proclaiming a fast and summoning the leaders from all over Judah. As he stood at the temple, crying out in despair to God, the nation stood with him. Men, women, little ones (*tappam*, referring to toddlers) and children (*benim*, referring to older children). Imagine the indelible impression it must have made on those children, seeing their king, the elders and their parents humbling themselves before God in this time of desperation. No frantic activity trying to solve the problem – as adults often do - but quiet and faithful commitment to God. And then the powerful encouragement of Jahaziel, followed by the miraculous deliverance the very next day. What if the children were not present to witness all this? What if the adults sent them home in the face of the dangers? One intergenerational experience like this could cement the faith of three, or more, generations.

Joel 2:15-16 - Blow the trumpet on Mount Zion; give orders for a fast and call an assembly!

Gather the people together; prepare them for a sacred meeting; bring the old people; gather the children and the babies too. Even newly married couples must leave their homes and come.

Joel prophesied in the kingdom of Judah shortly before the Babylonian exile, about 660 BC. He spoke of terrible days to come, but also of the wonderful promises of God. In this chapter, God is calling his people one more time to repent and turn from their evil ways. This is a desperate call; do not take it lightly, do not hesitate! To show their deep repentance they had to fast and meet and pray for salvation. Nobody was excused from the fast, not even brides and bridegrooms. Nor were the children, including ‘suckling babies’.

Children fasting and repenting of their sins? Babies taken from the mothers’ breasts to fast? Is it possible? We do not know the exact meaning of Joel’s call. We cannot picture how the people implemented the fast. In some way, however, the people of Judah refrained from eating for a period, probably according to their age. In the Coptic Orthodox church in Egypt and Ethiopia, it is not strange to see children fasting with their parents. From birth they learn how to sacrifice and discipline their bodies to the glory of God. In Egypt, they follow a guideline of 1 hour fasting for every year of age.

What is important to notice is that they do it within the community of believers. As in the case of Joel, it is not an individual, separated activity, but a community of all ages joining in their desperate cry to God. Maybe we should learn from our brothers and sisters – including children – in the old churches about including all when we cry out to God.

Ezra 10:1 - While Ezra was down on his knees in front of God's temple, praying with tears in his eyes, and confessing the sins of the people of Israel, a large number of men, women, and children gathered around him and cried bitterly.

When their leader Ezra suffered as he became aware of the sins of his people, the men and women suffered with him. The children were not excluded. As they saw their parents and uncles and aunts kneeling down, they were equally touched by the Spirit of God. They might have been too young to share in the guilt, and yet they were convicted of sin. They cried as bitterly as the leaders.

How will children ever forget such an experience? How will they ever turn their back on Jesus and the church if they were part of such a deep and honest confession? The sad thing is that in many churches where the Spirit is moving and people fall on their knees in recognition of their sins... the children are not present. They are outside under the trees, having children's church.

Can we allow our children to be excluded from such deep spiritual experiences where all, young and old, confess their sins?

A remarkable fact in the history of the church is that major revivals were often sparked and fuelled by children and young people, and that confessions of sins were at the heart of each and every revival.²¹ What will be the chances of a modern revival if we continue separating adults and children in our church ministry?

Acts 21:5 - But when our time with them was over, we left and went on our way. All of them, together with their wives and children, went with us out of the city to the beach, where we all knelt and prayed.

It is clear from the book of Acts and the letters of Paul and Peter that the early church met in homes where all were present. Adults did not send their children to the neighbours to go and watch a video while Paul shared the gospel. No, they were present. They heard the stories and testimonies; they saw the wounds and the scars on the bodies of the visiting apostles and evangelists. They heard the prayers and saw the miracles. They were part of the body of Christ.

It is no surprise that the children in the church of Tyre joined their parents when they went to the beach to pray for the departing Paul and Luke. It is interesting to notice the details in Luke's narrative. All (women and children included) went to the *beach* where they *knelt* and *prayed*. What is significant about the *beach*? It was one of the busiest and most crowded places in the city! Ships came from all over the world to load and unload their cargo. Merchants from many nations gathered there to do trade. Roman soldiers would have been plentiful and heavily armed, patrolling the beach, keeping

²¹ 4/14 Window - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoSwE2Bfu_0

order and removing troublemakers, if necessary by force. Now, we must remember that the church at that time was neither popular with the Jewish traders, nor with the Romans. In fact, the book of Acts is a story of the severe persecution of the early church, with Paul being one of most 'wanted' Christians about. It was dangerous to be recognised as a follower of Jesus. To *kneel* down in public and to *pray* to Him was asking for trouble! Still, here we see this brave group of Christians going down together to the beach, kneeling down and praying. The question is – why did they not send the children home? "This is dangerous, not a place for children!" they might have said. Nevertheless, we see the opposite – the children were there, kneeling with them in public, praying to Jesus.

This was the calibre of children produced by the first churches! Strong in their faith, courageously testifying for the Lord. It was only possible because they were with the older generation who set the example. Paul and the church elders knew they had to take the children with them, to share with the elders in the experience, because it was the only way in which the church would have survived into the next generation. The children of Tyre and Antioch and Philippi and Ephesus grew up in 'communities of practice'. They learnt their faith by being with the elders all the time, watching, learning, doing, believing.²²

How shall we produce children of courage and faith in our churches? Maybe we should go and ask Paul and the church leaders in Acts. They might upset our churches...

4. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR CHURCH TODAY?

We have seen how God's people in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament kept generations together when serving the Lord, when confessing and praying and testifying. We saw the results of research done in various social sciences. What shall we make of it?

The worst we can do is to ignore it and continue doing what we are doing because it is the easiest way out. If we close our eyes and continue ignoring children, we are not only cowards, but irresponsible, unworthy stewards of our most precious assets, the children God entrusted to us. We could be the cause of the eventual decline and destruction of the body of Christ. May God forbid!

Our challenge, then, is to go back and carefully evaluate our ministries in terms of the place of children. Are they welcome? Are they included? Do we create an environment in which they can grow to their full capacity as members of the Kingdom?

It certainly starts at home. Do we as parents and grandparents really have time to share the stories of God's marvellous deeds with our children? Do we as uncles and aunts show interest in our nephews and nieces; do they see us as worthy examples to follow?

²² Hare D.R.A. 1993, comments: Regarded from a sociological point of view, this may have been one of the reasons why Christianity spread so rapidly in the Roman world. There were popular religions for men (Mithraism) and for women (the religion of the Bona Dea). Christianity offered a family religion in which both sexes and all ages could participate together.

We shall have to ask about the activities of the church. The worship services on Sundays will have to be revalued. Do children experience their parents and the other adults in adoration before God? Are they invited to participate in music and prayer, in service and offering, with the older members of the church?

Small group meetings will also have to be reconsidered. If children are not part where the older generations meet and talk and care for one another, how will they learn to do the same? Even more, if children are constantly excluded, how will the adults learn from the children?

Over many centuries children proved to be brave and effective witnesses. Why then should we exclude them from our outreaches and missions? Is it possible to plan our ministry in the community in such a way that children will be active members of the team?

There is no part of the church's ministry where children cannot be welcomed. Camps, seminars, healing services, teachings and counselling, even leadership trainings and management meetings – children are gifts to the church we should receive and welcome and include with joy.

This might be the time for the church in Africa to rediscover what John Calvin realised centuries ago:
“Children are as vital to the ongoing life of the covenant community as elders, pastors, and deacons. Children do not grow into participation in the worship, service, and life of the community, but partake of it and contribute to it from the first day of their lives.”²³

May His Kingdom come in and through our children and us.

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²³ Jensen, D.H., 2005

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