

## Why Families Worship Together at Faith Church

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*Ministry Priority 2 - Family Discipleship: We believe that God created us male and female; that marriage is the union of one man and one woman for life; that understanding and application of the gospel begin at home; and that the father is intended to be the family shepherd. Because God designed the family to be the primary context for discipleship, we strive to keep families together as much as possible, incorporating children into worship and the overall life of the church at an early age.*

At Faith Church, we insist that families worship together as early and often as possible. We offer the options of nursery (birth through age three) and Kids' Cove (age four through second grade) with the expectation that Christian parents, and especially fathers, will introduce their children to corporate worship (and to the overall life of the church) by the time their children enter third grade. We believe the *earlier* the family worships together, the *better*. Why? Here are three reasons of a theological and pastoral nature. If you're already sold on the idea of families worshipping together, then there's no need to proceed. If currently you think this is the worst idea since Cheetos-flavored Lip Balm (yeah, it was a real thing), then continue reading.

### 1. Jesus Wants Children Front and Center

First, we insist that families worship together because when children come up in the Gospels, Jesus displays a "bring-them-close" rather than a "send-them-away" mentality. Jesus doesn't think of children as second-class citizens or as distractions to be dealt with. In fact, children have a lot to teach the adults. As Jesus says to the grown-ups, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become *like children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:2). In the foreword to the book *Incorporating Children in Worship*, William Willimon describes one of the key scenes from the Gospels:

Jesus was teaching with everyone gathered around, all attempting to pay attention (Luke 18). In the middle of Jesus' theological commentary one of the grownups in the class shouted in exasperation, "Send these kids away! Don't we have children's church or a nursery or something to get rid of them?" A couple of children were scuffling in the dust. "I'm being distracted by these unruly kids," one of the adults complained. And do you remember what Jesus did on that occasion? He took a child in his arms, embracing the one whom the crowd wanted to send away. Then in an evocative act Jesus placed the child "in the midst of them," as if to say, "I am placing the child at the center in order to help you pay attention. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these."<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Parents are the Primary Disciple-makers

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom and David D. Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), ix.

Second, we insist that families worship together because Scripture teaches us that parents bear the primary responsibility for the spiritual development of the children under their care.<sup>2</sup> During the weekly worship hour, children should learn from their parents. They should sit with us, observing how we bow our heads in prayer, how we sing praises to God with joy on our faces, and how we listen actively to the preaching of God’s Word. As parents, we should model for our children white-hot worship of the almighty God.

“But corporate worship is boring for my kids,” some parents protest. If by “boring” you mean “not entertaining,” then I would suggest you need to rethink the purpose of worship. Worship is not intended to *amuse* you or your children; it is intended to *form* your family. If you think of worship as one of the many entertainment options for your Sunday morning, then you and your children will never prioritize worship. Why would you? We can’t compete with little league sports, amusement parks, and top streaming platforms. And even when you do participate in worship—when there’s no more amusing option on a particular Sunday—you will not benefit fully from the worship gathering. You’ll approach worship with a sort-of cinematic criticism: “The score was weak. The lead actor wasn’t dynamic enough.” Your evaluation of what you think is a performance will keep you from the formation that God intends for you in this participatory event.

If by “boring,” you mean “my kids can’t comprehend corporate worship,” then maybe you’re right. Or maybe you’re underestimating them. Children absorb far more than we/they realize, and this is true even when they are fidgeting, flipping through their *Jesus Storybook Bible*, or scribbling in their journal. As we sing the hymns and praise songs of the faith, our children are infused with a deep sense of the greatness of God. As we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world, our children learn something of the vastness of their spiritual family. And even if many of my sermons go over their heads, my years in ministry have taught me that children are far better than we think at catching the big truths of the Bible. And, unquestionably, what they *will* catch is that there is something special about gathering with God’s people, with mom and dad, around this book called the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

### **3. The Traditional Ministry Model Isn’t Working**

Third, we insist that families worship together because, well, it’s time to try something different. David Kinnaman is a social researcher who has interviewed tens of thousands of young adults. Using a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, his company, Barna Group, analyzes the spiritual journeys of today’s young people. In Kinnaman’s 2011 book, *You Lost Me*, he concluded that the church has a dropout problem. At the time he collected data for *You Lost Me*, 59 percent of young adults with a Christian background reported that they had dropped out

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see my book, *Give Them Jesus: Raising Our Children on the Core Truths of the Christian Faith* (New York: FaithWords, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Parents, consider this: When your children were very young, too young to comprehend words like “Republic,” “indivisible,” and “liberty,” did you insist that they be excused from the room when the principal or teacher led the class in the Pledge of Allegiance? Of course not. And why not? Because, intuitively, you know that the rhythm of rising and reciting these words instills something important in your child, whether or not the child comprehends the words. The same is true of corporate worship. The *rhythm* of worship is formative for the entire family.

of church involvement. In Kinnaman's more recent book, *Faith for Exiles* (2019), he indicates that the proportion of dropouts has increased: nearly two-thirds of all young adults who were once regular churchgoers have left the church.<sup>4</sup>

If the goal is to impart a lively, lasting faith to the next generation, the modern church is failing—miserably. Perhaps it's time to rethink our practices, beginning with the idea that our children and students need to be segregated from the congregation.<sup>5</sup> For decades, the dominant ministry model has been the one that isolates children and youth and creates flashy environments where frothy talks are given. Make no mistake: whiz-bang events are effective at drawing a crowd.<sup>6</sup> But the research summarized above reveals that the current ministry model is *not* effective at producing deep-soil disciples.<sup>7</sup> Matt Chandler and Adam Griffin rightly conclude, “The more home-centered your ministry focus becomes, the more success you will see in leading every generation to follow Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

### Short-Term Happiness vs. Long-Term Health

I'll sum up the subject like this: We're all inclined to choose what's easiest for our family this Sunday. We're tempted to pursue *short-term happiness*. Would it be easier for you to send your third grader to our Kids' Cove leaders this week? Sure. But at Faith Church, we're committed to assisting your family in the pursuit of *long-term health*. Our desire is to see parents play the lead role in discipling their children; to see fathers serve as family shepherds; and to see your eight-year-old kid grow into a twenty-eight-year-old adult who loves Jesus and serves in the local church.

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<sup>4</sup> David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 15; see also David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith*, Reprint (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of age-based segregation in ministry contexts, see Chris Schlect, *Critique of Modern Youth Ministry*, 2nd ed (Moscow: Canon Press, 2007). Schlect notes, “The Scriptures couldn't be more clear: the charge for bringing up children in every area is given primarily to *parents* ... Responsible youth ministry in the church, though perhaps difficult to execute, is simple to understand: it involves teaching and exhorting parents to raise their children biblically” (17, emphasis original).

<sup>6</sup> Brett McCracken captures the fallacy: “Because our metrics for success in the American church have for so long mirrored the metrics of market-driven capitalism (bigger is always better; audience is king), we assume if a ‘cool church’ is packed to the gills with cool kids, it's working.” See “In Praise of the Boring, Uncool Church,” *TGC*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/uncool-church/>.

<sup>7</sup> There are many reasons for this. One of the primary ones is that the model itself tacitly teaches our children and youth that the church exists, not to glorify God, but to *please them*. For years, we send young people off to their high-octane, just-for-me environments, never having done the important work of helping them integrate into the life of the body. No wonder they graduate from high school and suddenly are overcome by the feeling, “I don't belong here.” I contend that the real problem isn't that young adults are leaving the church; but that they were never fully there in the first place.

<sup>8</sup> Matt Chandler and Adam Griffin, *Family Discipleship: Leading Your Home through Time, Moments, and Milestones* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 161.