



Redeeming the Time: Part II

by Melissa Woltmann

In part one we examined five main areas of youth ministry and some of the problems facing them today. Yes, it is discouraging, but I refuse to believe that the Lord cannot change the trends happening in youth ministry. So, what would the Lord have us do?

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
~ Proverbs 22:6

We must get back to basics. Not too long ago Dan found a youth ministry book from the late 1800's. We were amazed to find that many of the same games and activities used 120 years ago are the same games and activities used in many of today's youth ministries. **Everything old IS new again.** We seem to have fallen into the world's marketing trap that we must constantly change so the children do not become bored. But that isn't true. Your Sunday school class changes every one to two years. Junior Church, Wednesday evening program and VBS participants change every four to six years. Youth groups change every five years. Any teacher will tell you that their class is never the same from year to year. Change is good, but in the right areas. For example, your group could play softball ten different times and never play the same way twice simply by changing the rules around.

But change must not occur in the core of what we teach. The methods may need to change based on the dynamics of the class but the message must remain the same. How do we counter the problems previously discussed in part one? In our Sunday schools we need to get back to Bible stories being taught as true facts not just nice little stories like Aesop's fables. The lives of the men and women of the Bible were real. The miracles in the Bible were real not scientific phenomenon. Our children are bombarded 24/7 with worldly, humanistic, and atheistic views from school, videos, television, music and more. The hour (or less) you have with your students every Sunday morning is GOLD! We must teach the children that despite what the world (and Satan) throws at them they can always rely on God. Teaching them examples from the Scriptures of real people who were going through similar problems and showing them how to apply the lessons learned to their lives makes the Bible alive to a child.

In the area of Vacation Bible School (VBS) we must change our thinking, our traditions. I realize that every church is different, has different needs and has different facility set ups. Let me share what we do when we find ourselves in charge of organizing VBS. Keep in mind that this is a very flexible schedule and can be adapted to any church setting. It is meant as an example and not to be set in stone. We have been able to adjust our schedule to 1 ½ hours Monday through Friday, but prefer the 2 hour format.

We pre-register the children in Junior Church for their two different teams. This saves a little time on the first night and creates an air of excitement for the coming week. We also tell a little more about

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the theme and the coming week; we have already been pumping VBS for several weeks with little teasers of what would be coming. We encourage the children to arrive during registration time each day; this is actually 15 minutes prior to the start time. We split the children into two groups: ages 3-5 and 1st through 6th grades. Each age group is divided as evenly as possible at first with teams adding to their side by bringing visitors. Both age groups are together during the opening (15 minutes) and closing (10 - 15 minutes). After the opening the 3-5 year olds are dismissed to their class room for lessons, verses, crafts, snacks and activity times scaled down for their attention spans; the teachers keep within the theme but on a pre-school level. After the pre-school dismissal, the older group, 1st through 6th grade, has a 30 minute message, or lesson, with an additional 15 minutes for one on one time generally used to learn verses, books of the Bible, etc. and to complete simple Bible puzzles such as crosswords or word searches which review the material of the day. The key for this time is workers, lots of workers. After the Bible time (45 minutes worth) we move to game time (20 minutes) where crazy theme-related activities are carried out. We return inside for closing (10-15 minutes) when the team point winners are announced and for a quick trip through the Bible Buck Store.

We did a VBS recently where snack time was immediately following the closing. An after VBS snack time gives the opportunity for families to stay and fellowship or grab the snack and go if necessary. We specifically do not include craft time. We have found that the teachers were finishing the crafts defeating the purpose of the students being able to accomplish something for themselves. Personally, we do not use currently published VBS materials. We have found there is little time to complete the papers during VBS. We also avoid wasting materials because there are more than needed or not having enough materials for those attending. Remember the goals: teaching and training in the Scriptures. Traditions have to change if we are going to redeem the time. (see also the article "VBS: Are You Ready?")

Junior Church ministries face two specific problems. The first is to "baby" the children. Earlier we discussed that the adults leading these programs seem to behave as if the Bible is too hard for children to understand. Yet, Jesus' teachings indicate that we as adults must become as a child in order to understand. How ironic! We also identified the second problem as focusing on entertaining or babysitting.

In our Junior Church ministry we have broken the mold of the typical Junior Church setting. We treat Junior Church as just that - a junior church. We have announcements. We conduct a song service (5-10 minutes) sometimes including the children who are playing instruments for specials. We take an offering, admittedly much differently than in "Big Church". We have girls' against boys' contests each week to see who can bring the most offering by weight. The heaviest bucket, judged by a balance scale, wins that side a piece of candy at the end. We have 30 minute lessons each week. In our case, Dan generally goes through each book of the Bible as an overview, teaching the main stories, people, lessons, key thoughts and verses. The Beatitudes (each verse) and the Ten Commandments (each commandment) are also taught in depth. Occasionally, Dan interjects other lessons based on holidays and what is going on in the church. For example, during a



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building program he teaches the importance of God's house. During Missions Conference he focuses on missions lessons. During the last 20+ minutes until church is dismissed we incorporate activity time. It is a time of review using drill, games and trivia. We drill the Books of the Bible, for how can they learn Scripture if they do not know where to look. We have added modified sword drills to the regular kind. In a modified sword drill, Dan will give hints about the book, read a verse or give key facts for the children to locate the book of the Bible. For instance, he will read the verse "*A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stirreth up anger.*" He then tells them it is in a chapter 15; the book talks about wisdom. They will look it up and tell him it is Proverbs 15:1. Believe it or not, our juniors can do this. Yes, it does take time, but because of what they have learned in Junior Church they are more attentive when the preacher preaches. Many times I have watched heads snap up when the preacher talks about a lesson they have had in Junior Church or find the message passage before their parents. The Scriptures are for everyone including our children. They must be taught what the Bible contains and how to find that information. Yes, on occasion, we use videos or puppets, have a party or play trivia games such as Bible Jeopardy or Bible Baseball but each activity, while fun and entertaining, is used for a purpose and works together with every lesson that is taught.

Wednesday evening programs are a concern me. We need to be more diligent in the materials that are being used, just as we should be more diligent in our Sunday school materials. In the early 1990's I began noticing little foxes in the teacher's study guides. Comments such as "in this version it states..." were common in the materials that our very fundamental church used for Sunday school (we did change publishers). I am now seeing these same statements in the Wednesday evening programs, both in the teacher and student materials. It is not enough to simply request from publishers KJV only material. While the printed Bible passages may be KJV, the study guides are the little foxes and contain liberal thinking. Some of the staunchest KJV churches have these materials in use right now and do not realize it; these are publishers that have been used for decades -- they have always been trusted. I have witnessed church after church fall by the wayside with the pastor scratching his head because he could not figure out how his people came to a liberal way of thinking. Teacher, do not assume that your pastor approves of the full content in the material your church uses. If something does not ring true to you or seems questionable, it probably is. Take it to the attention of your pastor; he has much responsibility and would appreciate your catching questionable material. Pastor, do not assume that all the materials used by your church are what you want your people teaching and studying. We have seen numerous churches fall because of the weakness in the materials that filtered into the people's thinking. Watch for the little foxes.

Finally, the largest focus in youth ministry is the youth group, the teens. As stated in part one a strong foundation must be laid in the early years, the elementary years, for a strong, effective youth group. A church cannot wait to reach their youth until they are teens; you will be too late. Many youth pastors go into youth ministry because they want to work with teens; it will be fun. However, they do not realize that they must build their youth group with the young children. Teens must be won over. They are skeptical; they have formed much of their own philosophy of life whether right or wrong. They have established relationships, for good or bad, and are reluctant to begin new



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ones. The worst thing a youth pastor can do is to become discouraged because the youth group is not growing in numbers his first two years. At this point, he either leaves for greener pastures (in his view) or he begins the slide toward entertainment over substance. Parents, the best thing you can do is to support your youth pastor or youth workers. Youth pastor (workers), stand firm and fight. Prepare the teens who are willing; they are your primary focus. Reach those teens as best you can who come occasionally. More importantly, change your thinking and forget what you were taught in college about building a youth group. To build a strong, effective, serving youth group you must begin with the elementary children; they are your future youth group. You must be willing to invest the time it takes to build a vibrant youth group...which could take 5-7 years before you reach your desired result.

Youth ministry is a must for a church. If there are children in the church, then you have a youth ministry – regardless of their ages. What is it you would like to see in your church's children? If you want to see active adult choir members, start a children's music ministry. If you want to see missionaries and preachers called out, give children age appropriate opportunities to serve. If you want adult members with a strong Bible knowledge, start a children's Bible quiz team. Whatever goals you set for your church, decide what you would like to your teens and adults to do, then begin training the children.

We must redeem the time we have with our children. Ephesians 5:1, *Be ye therefore followers (emphasis added) of God, as dear children.* The word "followers" in this passage indicates to be an imitator. Children are great imitators. Here Paul tells us to follow God as a child does.

Don't you think we need to be something worthwhile to imitate?