

Contents

Introduction 9

CHAPTER 1 We're Using Old Maps 17

CHAPTER 2 A Little Less Disney,
a Bit More Mister Rogers 29

CHAPTER 3 The Old Map of Children's Ministry 49

CHAPTER 4 Charting the New Map 75

Intermission 111

CHAPTER 5 Our Single Most Strategic Opportunity 115

CHAPTER 6 Getting Unstuck from Our Stalemate:
Moving from Declaration to Dialogue 127

CHAPTER 7 The Formational Church 157

CHAPTER 8 The Formational Home 193

Commissioning 235

Acknowledgments 239

Notes 241



Gaining Perspective

As Matt mentioned, prior to each chapter we want to provide an opportunity to gain perspective about where you, the reader, might be as it relates to the information you'll engage with throughout the following pages. These will mostly take the form of experiences or questions. Our purpose in providing these is simply to help make this book a meaningful experience.

- On a piece of paper, draw a horizontal line and on the left write the word “church.” On the right, write the word “home.” Where on this line would you place the burden of discipleship of children within your church? Plot that point before you begin reading this chapter.
- Write down why you plotted the point where you did.
- What were the factors in your own discipleship that informed this decision? Include experiences, people, and entities that made a lasting impact.





We're Using Old Maps



A healthy perspective can change everything.

MATT: A few years ago, my son wanted to go on a Caribbean cruise for his senior trip. I'm not really into the cruise ship scene, but this is how our eldest wanted to commemorate the completion of his journey through high school. So we started planning, saving, and replanning. It was one of those 2020, 2021, 2022 cruise trips that kept getting delayed year after year due to COVID-19.

The day finally arrived. We pushed off, pointed southward as the evening sunlight was fading, and we set sail hoping for a grand adventure like no other. After a day of excursions together in our first port, we returned to our seaworthy vessel. We cleaned up and were just about to head to one of the restaurants on board when we noticed that the ship was beginning to move. Katie, my wife, remarked something like, "Guys, we're moving—come out to the balcony!"

As we stepped out onto the deck we noticed hundreds of other

forming faith

families participating in this ritual of waving goodbye to the locals as we began sailing away. I remember thinking at this moment how satisfied I felt about the day (though I don't particularly like cruises), and I was even looking forward to the new adventures that awaited our family in the days to come. Then, suddenly I was jolted from these thoughts with a grinding sound as the entire ship seemed to sway just the slightest little bit. *Did I just feel what I think I felt?* I wondered. *Have we stopped?* Confusion ensued among the ship's passengers as we hypothesized and theorized from our balconies—passing observations from left to right through buzzing chatter. This situation seemed . . . odd. What could it be?

Our cruise ship was stuck on a sandbar.¹

When your vacation makes international news, it ceases to be a vacation. Due to minor damage on the ship's hull, we were unable to continue sailing. The following day the captain announced that this cruise was officially canceled, and there would be more communication in the days to come. With a ship that accommodates four thousand people, this was going to take a while.

It's remarkable how quickly your mindset shifts from "What fun things are we going to do today?" to "How are we going to get off of this boat? And how in the world are they going to get a few thousand people home?!" It's a swift change in perspective.

Yet, over the course of the next few days I was struck by the incongruence of the cruise liner's perspective on communication in light of the very real circumstances. Where passengers were thirsty for communication on basic disembarking logistics, the cruise liner persisted with printing and distributing the daily newsletter promoting festive family events, karaoke locations, theme nights, and the adjusted times of the dinner show. Even the cruise director (you know, the overly hyper-energetic guy who pops onto the loudspeaker

every ninety minutes to share the latest exciting announcement) went about his job as if it were business as usual. Actual information about the disembarking of the ship dripped out at a very slow pace, and passengers were forced to discover most critical information on their own by waiting in very long customer service lines.

The cruise liner needed to drop the daily-fun script, and to move to a new script—one that matched the moment. By not doing this, chaos and anxiety ensued. The cruise leaders lacked perspective on how to navigate the moment they were facing.

When I think about our encounter of being stuck on a sandbar, I can't help but think about the cultural moment the church is facing. Sam, Mike, and I—all three of us—deeply love the church and have dedicated our lives to the strengthening of the body of Christ.

We stand beside you as ministers of the gospel and we ask, Do we have a healthy perspective on how to form the faith of today's kids? Gaining perspective on forming faith—that's what this book is all about.

Forming Childhood Faith in Today's New World

I'm an imaginative person. Will you join me for a moment? Let's tap into our imaginations and think of the face of a child or a young person whom you care deeply about. Perhaps it's your son, daughter, or grandchild, a child or student in your ministry, a relative, or a student at your school. Now, when you think of the future world they are headed into, do you have concern about how this world will form children? Does your heart leap forward with a longing to somehow ensure their faith is formed to be resiliently rooted in Christ?

Pastor Jon Tyson has said, "Secularism is here and it's coming and we're probably in a moment in our generation of such decline, we probably won't be able to stop it."² Today's eight-year-old child (the age of a young person at the heart of your church's children's

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ministry) will spend his or her adult life primarily between the years 2032–2092. As time ticks onward, these children will likely grow into young adults and experience the expansion of secularism through items that are new to us like artificial intelligence (AI), the metaverse, transgenderism, emerging digital currencies, ChatGPT, transhumanism, non-fungible token currencies (NFTs), and a long list of other seemingly Orwellian ideas.

In light of the current secular trajectory, it's fair to ask, "Is the church adequately preparing today's eight-year-old to thrive in his or her faith in a very different, post-Christian, highly secularized future?"

After a decade of commissioning eleven research projects and ministry impact studies, this prevailing thought has become abundantly clear to Sam, Mike, and me: *we're using old maps*.

Acknowledging the Map Is Outdated

I've always been fascinated with maps. I can remember gazing at ancient maps in elementary school textbooks. For our eldest son's fifth birthday party, Katie and I made fake "old" pirate maps as invitations, where we crumpled the paper and burnt the edges to make them look officially aged (so fun!). And any time I come across an old regional US map, I'm always squinting to find my hometown.

One thing I've noticed is that one's view on mapping technology is largely dependent on your generational upbringing. My baby boomer parents used the ole Rand McNally maps. Remember those? They were so ridiculously massive that when my mom would open the map up in the front seat of the minivan, my stepdad would have

to crane his neck around the obstruction to have a clear view out the front windshield so he didn't run off the road!

Then, by 1989, if your family was on the leading edge, the Garmin may have found its way into your vacation vehicle of choice. Thanks to NASA, the space age ported right to our dashboard, and we would follow the green line to our final destination.

Then in 1997, along came MapQuest. As a Gen Xer, I started ministry in a role that required quite a bit of travel about this time and thought MapQuest was brilliant. What made it so smart was that if I were leaving Nashville, Tennessee, headed to Knoxville, then driving over to Charlotte, North Carolina, and from there to Atlanta, then to Birmingham, Alabama, and finally back to Nashville, I'd print out each leg of the trip and give it its own manilla folder, and off I'd go. I practically needed a filing cabinet in the back seat!

Then for our younger millennial and Gen Z brothers and sisters, of course you remember the convenience of Apple Maps when it launched in 2012 (not to mention Google Maps and Waze!) right there in the palm of your hand. We've come a long way in terms of mapping technology, and we tend to tap the push notification when that software update is available, as we always want the most updated information.

Recently I came across another kind of map just outside San Antonio, Texas, as we toured the old Spanish, Catholic missions (ending with the Alamo). While touring Mission San Jose, we entered an adobe-clad room, and there it was, stretched across the wall about five feet tall by about eight feet wide. I stopped dead in my tracks while Katie and the boys moved on to the next room. Check it out.³

Have you ever had an experience where you sense that an object is speaking to you? Like a line from a song, a verse from the Bible, a scene from a movie, or even the sight of a famous painting? I was

forming faith



having one of those moments. I couldn't move. Katie and the boys had to come back and get me. There's a powerful story here.

This map was published in the 1500s. Created by the Italians, it was, no doubt, a well-funded endeavor to accomplish such a great feat. With limited visibility, limited mobility, and limited technology (compared to today, of course), look at what they created! It's quite remarkable. So, let's use our imaginations once more and pretend we could bring these Italian mapmakers back from the dead and have them right in our presence.

What would we say to them?

I think we would say something like, "Wow. Thank you. Thank you for the price you paid and what you created with such limited information and technology compared to what we have today. Again, thank you. That is impressive work." That's gratitude. We would lead with abundant gratitude for such an outstanding achievement.

I think what we would *not* say is, "You guys are a bunch of idiots. Look at how off you were compared to satellite maps." No, we would never say that! We would lead with a spirit of gratitude for all they accomplished with limited technology and mobility in a bygone era.



But here's the thing. If today's child educators were still using *this* old map to teach geography, geopolitical boundaries, and navigation to our children, we'd be outraged! We'd say, "This is an outdated map. We have more information now than we did when this map was created. If we keep using this old map to educate our children, it's going to lead to long-term consequences."

Church leaders and Christ-following parents, this is where we are in the church today: *children's ministry today is using old maps.*

When it comes to children's ministry, we simply have more information today than when our current map was drafted. We have more information about:

- The use of edutainment
- The importance of Bible literacy and Scripture engagement
- Mental health and adverse childhood experiences
- Mobile technology, social media, and digital disruption
- The influence of loving, caring adult volunteers who engage children relationally

forming faith

- The frantic pace of the family (travel e.g., sports)
- And not to mention the primary factors that lead to lasting faith in children

Where Did the Current Model of Children's Ministry Come From?

I distinctly remember a cross-country family vacation from my childhood when we departed Denver driving east. I can still recall looking out the back window of the minivan and seeing the Rocky Mountains off in the distance. I fell asleep that evening in the back seat of the van, and in what seemed like the blink of an eye, I woke up and asked my stepdad, "Where are we?" He responded, "Oh, we're just a couple of hours away from St. Louis." (He had driven all through the night.) "What?!" I exclaimed. "How did we get here?!"

For the one sleeping in the back of the minivan, you really don't know exactly how you arrived at another city almost twelve hours away. Although I was "there" in the minivan, I wasn't actually experiencing the navigational process from Denver to St. Louis the way my stepdad was. I was there . . . but I wasn't there.

For many of us working, leading, or volunteering in children's ministry, it's kind of the same. We are working off of a map that was drafted decades ago. We (Boomers and Xers) may have been around then, but most of us weren't the ones who drafted it. We were there, but not there. Then for our younger millennial and Gen Z brothers and sisters, the old map of children's ministry may be all you've ever known. You were likely raised on the old map.

Let's pause for a moment to reflect on where exactly today's common model of children's ministry comes from. Most children's ministries today were built off 1980s and 1990s assumptions that were

published in books and blogs and taught at workshops in the early 2000s; and most of us are still operating off of this common blueprint today. We even call our contemporary model of children's ministry "innovative" because it uses current entertainment, screens, videos, mobile technology, and discussion-based child development pedagogy. Although today's children's ministry is oftentimes referred to as innovative, the reality is that it's a blueprint designed for the past. Like when we compare satellite maps to our Italian mapmakers from the 1500s, we simply have more information now than we did when today's model was designed. And recent outcomes research data says it's not working.

Gen Zers (those born between 1997 and 2012) are the product of the old map of children's ministry, and the eldest among them are launching into the world as young adults as of the time of the writing of this chapter. As David Kinnaman, a leading Christian researcher and president of Barna Group, has said, "The Church is woefully unprepared for Gen Z."⁴ Meaning, we had the chance to form them as children, then as students. But only 10 percent of them—whom Kinnaman calls "resilient disciples"⁵—are thriving in their faith as young adults, still engaged in the church.

A 10 percent success rate is a hard pill for all of us to swallow. To make this practical, as a leader of an organization myself, I think, *If our ministry was losing 90 percent of our church partners or donors, how long would we be able to remain in ministry?* Not long. We would have to come to grips with the fact that our approach to success was failing.

As faithful pastors, leaders, and shepherds, we are wrestling with both our outcome rate of only "10 percent" success and the inadequate process described as "woefully unprepared" by David Kinnaman.

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forming faith

Our approach to forming faith isn't working. Why? *Children's ministry today is using old maps that were built for an era gone by.*

At best, the rate at which we are forming thriving disciples is low. We need a new map. We need a map that's *known* to form lasting faith in kids. This will require courageous pastors and parents like you who are willing to learn new (and old) insights to draft a map that's both rooted in ancient, biblical faithfulness and updated to address the complexities that surround today's child.

The Power of Perspective

Maps are wonderful navigation tools because they provide perspective to users. A good map allows them to know where they are and how to navigate where they're headed, but it also provides the perspective of the trip's scale, direction, and distance, and what might be around them along the way. While a GPS is useful for turn-by-turn directions, a map is beneficial in navigation and discovery. This is the power of perspective: it changes our journey because it orients us to where we are in the context of what's around us.

Likewise, windows allow a means to view, know, and understand the world around us. The windows on the cover of this book represent God's two agents of formation: church and home. These two entities benefit from the windows on their walls, which help them to understand the atmosphere of the outside world as well as provide light and warmth to those inside the walls. Windows, like maps, provide an opportunity for perspective.

As we move forward together through this book, like looking through a window, we must first grapple with the perspective we're choosing as we consider ministry to children. Understanding the point of view you're starting this journey with will help you gain the proper perspective as we think carefully about the why, what, who,

how, and where faith is formed. As we move into chapter 2, we will grapple with two very different perspectives on not only how to engage children, but how to shape the future of the world. Consider these two perspectives as we prepare to press onward:

One: If our primary investment in children—the most vulnerable among us—is in *shielding* and *entertaining* them, we will likely form within them a safe-yet-fragile foundation..

Two: However, if our primary investment in the most vulnerable among us is in *forming* them, we will become artisans who shape a generation whose inner spiritual resilience is so compelling that future communities will gasp at their Christlike beauty.

A healthy perspective can change everything. May we find the hope, courage, conviction, and compassion we need as we evaluate our perspective on effectively forming the faith of the next generation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Would you say of your church's children's ministry, "We are adequately preparing the kids to thrive in their faith in a highly secularized future that may be far different from today's"?
2. What makes your children's ministry successful? How do/would we know that?
3. Is there a gap between the vision, mission, strategy, and goals of your children's ministry . . . compared to how you actually operate?
4. What are the primary methodologies, programs, and tactics you are relying on to achieve your goals, mission, and vision? What do you spend the most amount of time, energy, and resources on?