

Peg Melhaff has been working with children at River Ridge Covenant church for several years. Peg shared with the congregation this Spring her passion for children's ministries. This document captures how River Ridge Covenant church views this vital ministry and encourages all to share this passion.

The Importance of Children's Ministry

I believe strongly in children's ministry and I believe this is what God has given me to do at this time. I have received more from it than I have given. George Barna's research confirms that most spiritual attitudes, beliefs and decisions happen before age 13. No apologies here – children's ministry is our most important work. I have been stunned & awakened several times recently with articles & lectures telling us we are failing – strong words I know but let me share with you research that underscores a major shortage of focus on Spiritual Formation in the lives of our youth.

Consider this: in the book, "Soul Searching" by Christian Smith, it is stated:

"We talked with teens we interviewed about what they get enthusiastic about, what pressing issues they are dealing with and what forces & experiences & routines seem most important and central in their lives. Most teenagers talk about friends, school, sports, TV, music, movies, romantic interests, family relationships, dealing with issues of drugs and alcohol, and specific fun or formative events they have experienced. What rarely arises in such conversations are teen's religious identities, beliefs, experiences or practices. Religion does not naturally seem to appear much on teenager's open-ended lists of what really matters in their lives. This is not surprising, it simply reflects the fact that there is very little built-in religious content or connection within the structure of most adolescent's daily schedules & routines. Religion seems to become rather compartmentalized and back rounded in the lives of most teens."

He goes on to say:

"In depth interviews with US teens we found the vast majority of them to be incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices and its meaning or place in their lives." One 15 year old white conservative protestant boy for instance explained "If you do the right thing and you don't do anything bad, I mean really bad, you know you'll go to heaven, if not then your screwed, that's about it."

Josh McDowell In his book "The Last Christian Generation" says it's a crisis. Right now 80 – 85 % of teens are walking away from the church after high school. They have been raised with programs & events but not with process-driven ministry where the Word of God was internalized into their lives. They lack relationships with Mom & Dad, their church leaders and with significant adults. I don't know about you but this really weighs heavy on my heart. It's a wake up call to me & it scares me.

So, why do I share this with you now. I think you need to be aware of this crisis too - & if you want more information & resources because you want to be active in you own kids lives, see me after – I have lots of info. But also it seems to me we have been given an opportunity here as a church body –kind of a new start. We are at a crossroads. Those of us who worship at River Ridge Covenant Church do so because we have connections here. Relationships. We are a family of believers that is committed to Christ and to one another. Relationships are the answer. I am here today to ask you to consider what God wants you to do with that. We have an opportunity to redefine ourselves in a way. I want us to be known as a church for the whole family, building relationships around our kids and families that have a real impact on our kid's lives. This is critical for all of us. The kids are the future of our church – I for one don't want to put 25 years of my life, (I already have 13) into a church that is going to fade away – I want it to count for something. The Lord has put it on my heart that these kids are our future – they are important to him and we are not doing enough for them.

Gallup research surveyed 1000 people who say they are very satisfied with their church and found some key issues prevail. These people who are satisfied are regular weekly attenders, they have best friends inside the church, they report that they feel the leadership cares about them and they have (77%) of them have eaten a meal with their church family within recent months.

Relationships! Now we need to build this into our kids programs too. Teens report they don't see any passion in the adults at church. That's us folks – they are watching us. Is this important to us?

Adolescents need spiritual care givers who will: 1- pray for God's spirit to work in their lives. 2- pray for their spiritual battles in the midst of a perverse world. 3- guide them into meaningful engagement of the truths of scripture and 4- walk with them into a personal encounter with the living God.

You may think that meeting Brad (our youth director) for coffee at Cutters, which Brad does twice a week is a small thing, but it is *not* – it's a huge thing. You *want* Brad to have a relationship with your kids, you want them here for youth fellowship, games, food, laser tag and of course the bible study. In their lives when decisions are made they need relationships with spiritual, godly people who care about them and can guide them to make plans that please our Lord. We as adults need to be more involved, you need to support the adults who work with our youth weekly and you need to understand the importance of our work with children and youth. Sometimes all that is required is a ride to the event – but we have to provide it. Its critical. Are you encouraging your kids to participate?

Do the kids see that this is important to you? – Because if its not important to us it won't make much of an impression on them. Is our fellowship together – which by the way God also directs us to do, is that fellowship important enough for you to invest some time in outside of Sunday morning?

The values we want to see building in our youth start with the nursery. I pray that our new senior pastor loves kids as much as Gary does. They are esteemed, considered so important as to be given their own talk each Sunday morning – and they ARE that important. We are building a foundation that will carry them into their teen years, we are building relationships. When you volunteer to teach and get to know our young kids you are building relationships that give them a foundation to stand on. I think I have the easier job – running the elementary program certainly has different challenges that the youth but more & more these programs fit together. Studies also have shown if you can teach a junior hi student the importance of serving in the church he or she will be plugged in for life. This is because he or she sees the adult, in relationship with him living their faith.

I am here this morning because the Lord has impressed upon my heart that we need to be more intentional about all the kids ministries in our church. Please Please join with me this summer and fall as we shape our program for our kids. Brad needs your support and help. I need teachers and volunteers in all our programs. We have a chance to fellowship together in several events in the next weeks & months. The Jr & Sr hi students are helping Jill & I in a year-end event for the elementary kids called the Fiesta fun fair. It's a celebration for our younger kids and their friends & families. In the Fiesta celebration coming up on June 3rd, in our youth Sunday, in VBS, in CHIC fundraisers, even in fellowship time after church we need to be aware of the impact we are having on the kids and be more intentional about teaching & serving them. It is so important to the health of our church and we can start new here. We are family, a family I have come to love. It is about the health and the future of our kids, Its about the health and the future of River Ridge Covenant.