



9 Priorities for the Children's Ministry Leader



by Greg J Baird



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What matters most in your role as a
Children's Ministry leader?

Here are a few thoughts and the order I
would place these priorities (although,
obviously, there is significant overlap).

This isn't necessarily an exhaustive list,
and certainly individual situations might
mandate different or additional priorities.

But, based on my experience, leading
effectively in children's ministry requires
these focused priorities.

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Priority #1 - A growing & healthy walk with God.

Seems obvious, doesn't it? After all, isn't that what we're all about – helping others to develop a growing & healthy relationship with God? Yes & yes. It should be obvious, and it is what we're all about. But that doesn't mean it is always a priority.

One of the unique challenges about being a church leader is that much of what would normally be done to grow a person's spiritual life is actually our job. We are (usually) paid to be at church. We are immersed in the world of “spiritual things”. We work at helping others know what that means & develop their own spiritual lives. Sometimes this results in our own spiritual life becoming just that: work. We get so focused on the path to spiritual growth for others that we let our own path grow up with weeds. I can't tell you how many leaders I've talked to where this has become a problem. And I have been guilty of this, also.

So what is the answer? I wish there were a simple formula. But there's not. It takes an on-going commitment to personal spiritual growth. It takes recognition of the difference between my own walk and my work. It takes a plan to do the things you need to do in order to grow personally. That plan looks different for each of us, but generally speaking, it must include:

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Priority #1 - A growing & healthy walk with God.

1. Daily Bible intake. And this means for the purpose of personal spiritual growth, not for preparing your next lesson.

2. Regular time in prayer. I have learned that prayer is a way of life...an on-going practice throughout my day. I want to be in continual conversation with God just as I would if one of my friends was hanging out with me throughout the day. It also should be intentional, specific and, at times, shared corporately.

3. Corporate worship. Yes, you need to be in church. I know – and I’ve been there – your church only has one service; you have to lead during both services; you don’t have enough leaders to be able to attend the services – I’ve heard (and made!) all the excuses. None of them fly. Find a way to be in church on a regular basis. Here are 4 compelling reasons to make sure you are in service:

- Because you need it for your own spiritual health. Is this not obvious? Why would being in service be important for everyone else but not for us?
- Because you need to set the example for your family, and for their spiritual health. Is it ok for your kids to believe that not being in church is ok?
- Because not attending church yourself implicitly gives your volunteers permission to not attend church. Again...is that the message we should be sending as the leader of our ministry?
- Because you need to hear the heart of your pastor. Church is where this happens in a public setting. Yes, you hear from him privately, but as part of the body you need to hear his heart – his passion, his instruction, his vision, etc. – publicly, just like the team that you lead does. How can you align your ministry with his leadership if you are not consistently hearing his heart?

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Priority #2 - A growing & healthy relationship with their family.

As I think of how to address this, my heart breaks for the leaders who I have seen sacrifice their family on the altar of their ministry (as Jim Wideman would say). And there have been times when I have been just as guilty.

Friends, you simply cannot do this. You will regret nothing more than looking back after a long and “successful” career in ministry only to realize you lost your family along the way. It would be better for you to get out of ministry than to do this. Rarely does this happen on purpose. Few of us would ever say that our ministry is more important than our family. But, all too often, our calendars do not reflect that belief. It’s important that we check ourselves on this on a consistent & regular basis.



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Priority #2 - A growing & healthy relationship with their family.

Here are a few ways to make sure we keep our family a priority amidst the demands of our ministry:

- **Manage your marriage.** Not very romantic sounding, is it? But the idea of managing carries the thought of being intentional. Plan for its success. Handle challenges with timely & focused attention. Make it a priority. You know what you're supposed to do – do it! And if you don't, that just became your #1 priority!
- **Understand the importance of your child(ren).** I've always reminded myself that if I am wildly successful at leading children's ministry, but fail to guide my children to a life-changing relationship with Jesus, then I've failed. Seriously, why are we willing to pour ourselves out for other people's kids only to neglect our own, or give them the leftovers of our time & attention?
- **Maintain your physical health.** This is part of making your family a priority? YES!! I have come to believe this with all my heart. I'm not talking about being fanatical, but just eat right, make sure you exercise & do what you need to do to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This will enhance your ability to make both of these first 2 priorities work, and may, in fact, help you keep them a priority for longer!

I challenge all of us to consistently step back and see how we are doing in these two areas. And if you find yourself at a roadblock you can't find your way around, seek counsel from another ministry veteran – we don't have all the answers but we've made enough mistakes that we might be able to help you!

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Priority #3 A strong & supportive relationship with their lead pastor & staff.

A few days ago I was on the phone with one of the great young children's ministry leaders that I coach. He asked me if I felt it was appropriate for him to approach his senior pastor – maybe invite him to lunch – to share his heart for children's ministry while also inviting his pastor to help him align the ministry more closely with the vision of the church. I gave him an emphatic “YES!! Do it!!”

There is little you can do that is more valuable to you as a leader & your ministry as cultivating strong relationships with senior leadership & other staff at your church. Now I recognize that sometimes there are challenges you face when trying to cultivate this relationship, and perhaps we'll address that in another post. But here are just a few ideas on how to be proactive in developing a strong & supportive relationship with your lead pastor (and other staff, too!):

- 1. Recognize the demands that are placed on senior leadership in the church.** Research shows that it is one of the most stressful jobs in America! Eugene Cho article called Death By Ministry highlights the condition of many pastors. Senior leadership at your church carry burdens you know nothing about – yet too often we become upset at their seeming lack of engagement with what's happening in our area. Give him a break & work within his work context rather than yours.
- 2. Seek to understand the vision he is trying to lead to in the church.** Do what my young friend is planning on doing & reach out to your pastor to ask him to share & clarify the vision. More often than not this will surprise & delight them. Beyond that, listen to his communication – from the pulpit, to staff, in other areas...intentionally listen for the vision he is casting.

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Priority #3 A strong & supportive relationship with their lead pastor & staff.

3. Be proactive in encouraging & supporting senior leadership & other staff. Why? Because they are your fellow servants in Christ. Isn't that enough? Though we may not always fully agree with them, or feel they are giving as much as they should to our efforts, we must still always support. It is never appropriate to undermine the work of senior leadership (or other staff) in the church. Pray for them (ask them what they would like you to be praying for). Encourage them with your words. Speak well of them to others. You get the idea.

4. Share your heart & vision for your ministry. One of the best ways I found to do this was to send brief, weekly updates of what's happening in children's ministry. Share stories of wins. Keep it positive. Show them how God is moving. Thank them for their support. You'd be surprised how far this can go.



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Priority #4 Aligning ministry vision with the overall vision of the church.

Try this little exercise:

1. Hold your thumb up and, with both eyes open, align it with something at least 10-15 feet away (a door knob, exit sign, etc.).
2. Keeping your thumb in place, close your right eye – notice what happens to the alignment of your thumb & object.
3. Open both eyes again.
4. Now, keeping your thumb in place, close your left eye – notice what happens to the alignment of your thumb & object.
5. For most of us, looking at the object with both eyes open allows us to see both our thumb and the object relatively easily. When we close our left eye, our thumb remains aligned with the object but blocks it, not allowing us to see the object clearly; but when we close our right eye, our thumb “jumps” to the right of the object, giving us 2 objects to look at – neither of which we can fully focus on. (This is because our right eye is dominant for most of us. It may be the opposite for you, or it may not work at all – as with any illustration, it doesn’t always apply perfectly).

This little illustration is an example of how our vision for ministry ought to work. The “object” is the end vision of our church. When we align our vision (our thumb) but keep both eyes open, we can see both clearly & pursue our vision within the context of the greater vision. Closing either eye represents allowing our vision to either block or misalign with the overall vision of the church – neither is acceptable, nor will either be a viable long-term growth strategy.

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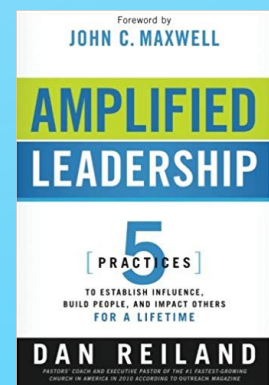


Priority #5 - Equipping and Developing leaders

Two necessary practices of leaders that I find are often confused or viewed as the same are equipping and developing. These are two of the most important pieces of the puzzle to growing your people & your ministry. What is the difference?

Dan Reiland's book **Amplified Leadership** gives the best explanation I've ever seen. I would strongly encourage you to get this book but let me share briefly how Dan distinguishes between these two practices:

- **Equipping** prepares someone to accomplish a specific ministry function or task.
- **Developing** invests in someone primarily for his or her personal growth.
- **Equipping** is primarily transactional.
- **Developing** is primarily transformational.
- **Equipping** changes the ministry.
- **Developing** changes the person.



Get this book!



Which is more important? Neither. Both are critical, necessary and contribute greatly to the growth of your leaders, your team and your ministry.

Dan addresses both in detail in the book, which I would consider to be the best ministry practitioner book I've ever read (and I've read a lot!). You'll have to get your copy to see what Dan says to further explain the differences, and to see his step by step plan for doing both.

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Priority #6 - Shaping quality leaders

I often tells Children's Ministry Leaders that your ministry is not about the kids. I usually get a look something like this:



But it's true! As the leader of your ministry, your job is to equip leaders to do the work of ministry (check out Ephesians 4:12 for your one-sentence job description that talks about this).

Why is this true? Because, as my former boss John Maxwell says, "Everything rises and falls on leadership."

Here's where that statement takes us:

1. IF . . . "everything rises & falls on leadership" . . .
2. THEN . . . my ministry will only rise to the level that I & my leaders can take it . . .
3. SO . . . my highest priority as the key leader (once priorities 1-4 are taken care of) is to shape leadership.

Period.

The question then becomes "how do I shape quality leaders?"

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Priority #6 - Shaping quality leaders

The question then becomes “how do I shape quality leaders?”

I believe it is through the 2-lane track of equipping & developing leaders. You can't really separate equipping & developing. Of course, you have to have leaders in order to equip & develop them, what we often call “recruiting”...but that's another conversation. For our purposes, we'll assume we have people on the team.

So how do we “equip & develop” quality leaders?

1. Realize that, because it involves people, it looks different in every church & in every situation, but the fundamental elements are the same.
2. Understand the basic differences between equipping and developing.
3. Apply the “Quality Leaders” formula:

$$\frac{IE + PD}{T} (G) = QL$$

Looks complicated, doesn't it? It's actually pretty easy to understand . . . but very difficult to apply.

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Priority #6 - Shaping quality leaders

Shaping Quality Leaders is one of the most challenging & time consuming responsibilities of the children's or family ministry leaders. This is why, I believe, we tend to focus on the "tasks" of our role instead of shaping leaders – you can't "check off" that you're done shaping leaders. Anyway, here's what the equation stands for:

***Intentional Equipping, plus Proactive Development, over Time,
multiplied by God, equals Quality Leaders***

Intentional Equipping

1. Equipping = to furnish or provide with whatever is needed for an undertaking (Dictionary.com)
2. We need to specifically prepare our leaders for the tasks we are asking them to complete. It should be on purpose, with a specific goal in mind, relating to specific skills.

Proactive Development

- Developing = to bring out the capabilities or possibilities
- Developing is less about tangible tasks than it is about intangible investment... which leads to accomplishing more tangible tasks.
- As key leaders, it is our responsibility to shape people spiritually, emotionally, mentally & relationally into better leaders – not just equip them for a task.

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Priority #6 - Shaping quality leaders

Over Time

- Shaping leaders does not happen in a day – it happens daily, over a great deal of time.
- The process of shaping leaders requires a commitment to the process – time, resources, etc. It is hard work.

Multiplied by God

- We need to shape leaders with great sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit.
- We need to shape leaders by first saturating the process in prayer.
- We need to shape leaders guided first & foremost with the principles of God's Word.

The result of this shaping process is what I call Quality Leaders

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Priority #6 - Shaping quality leaders

A few additional thoughts on shaping Quality Leaders:

- I believe a minimum of 50% of a key leaders (you & me) time should be specifically devoted to shaping leaders.
- Both Intentional Equipping & Proactive Developing are critical. Developing creates width & depth in our ministry, but equipping is easier, so too often we lean toward equipping when, in reality, we need to lean toward developing.
- When you shape leaders over time, you create a team of leaders which expands ministry possibility, creates new options for growth, spreads responsibilities & grows your own leadership influence.
- You can fake equipping, but you cannot fake developing. If you are not growing as a leader, you will soon be unable to develop leaders around you.
- Both equipping & developing should be driven through relationships.
- Everyone should receive equipping, but developing should be fairly selective. Leaders who show potential, have a proven record of growth, are available & willing to commit to the developing process, show spiritual maturity (not necessarily depth, but the right direction in growth), etc., are those who should be focused on for developing. And, just as Jesus did (masses who were taught, 70 disciples, 12 key disciples, 3 core disciples, 1 main disciple), we can identify levels of development on our team).
- Equipping should be the first to be handed off to other leaders (delegated), but part of the developing process is to teach leaders you are developing how to develop others leaders, also. This is when your commitment to shaping leadership really begins to take root & multiply your efforts exponentially.

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Priority #7 - Equipping parents to disciple their own children.

Entire books are being written about this priority, and the “family ministry” movement has been gaining momentum for some time now.

Why is that? Primarily because many are realizing that the church should not be primarily responsible for the spiritual formation of children. Though the church gladly took on that responsibility, and though parents willingly abdicated it, the truth is, we can’t impact children like their parents can. We are to be partners, and we are to offer programming & teaching which impacts the lives of children, but we can’t replace parents as the primary spiritual influencers.

Consider this quote by Reggie Joiner, founder of the Orange movement:

“No one has more potential to influence a child’s relationship with God than a parent...The most awkward attempt of a parent to pray with a son or daughter is a thousand times more powerful than the most seasoned believer who’s not their parent.”



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Priority #7 - Equipping parents to disciple their own children.

I believe that equipping parents is the most important role the church can have in this process. Again, that is far too large a topic for a single blog post, but here are a few ideas to get this started:

1. There must be an intentional commitment to the parent equipping process. Ideally this is from “the top down”, meaning it is with the backing of your churches senior leadership. It doesn’t mean they have to be fully engaged, but supportive. As part of the commitment, your internal processes, structures, staffing, programming, etc. need to be designed to enable this commitment.
2. There must be a vision cast for the equipping process. Parents need to understand that you are there to help & assist them, but they are the ones primarily responsible for spiritually investing in the lives of their children.
3. There must be practical equipping opportunities offered to parents. More and more resources are becoming available to help equip parents. Some you might consider include: Spiritual Parenting, The Legacy Path, Parenting Beyond Your Capacity, Faith Begins at Home & Revolutionary Parenting. Resources to help you understand how to implement family equipping in your children’s or family ministry might include: Church + Home, Shift, Family Ministry Field Guide, Think Orange & Collaborate.

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Priority #8 - Creating engaging program with the goal of life-change.

While parents hold the primary responsibility for the spiritual formation of their children, that doesn't let us in the church off the hook. When kids arrive at our doors, we need to do whatever is necessary to engage them in the spiritual formation process.

My definition of children's ministry (besides "controlled chaos") is: ***partnering with parents to guide kids toward a HEART for God.***

The HEART part of that includes 5 elements that I believe must be part of our programming structure and include (click on the link for further explanation of each):

- 1. Heartfelt Relationships***
- 2. Engaging Teaching***
- 3. Authentic Worship***
- 4. Real Service***
- 5. Telling the Good News***

These five elements allow for us to create engaging program with the goal of life-change.

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Priority #8 - Creating engaging program with the goal of life-change.

Within these five elements, to break it down further, I believe these components must be present in every program offered...it must be:

- ***Child-centered. Safe attractive & age-appropriate.***
- ***Application-oriented. Easily understood & applied in practical ways in the child's everyday life.***
- ***Relational. Built on strong, positive & on-going adult/child relationships.***
- ***Creative. Dynamic & attractive to children and incorporating many different forms of communication.***
- ***Fun. A place the child wants to come to.***

One final thought on programming: always remember that people come before programming. Program should provide the inviting environment to promote relationships for the purpose of spiritual understanding.

If children aren't having fun in your ministry, they probably are learning from it, either.

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Priority #9 - Everything else!

I understand there are other important aspects of our ministry that have not been talked about in the previous posts. I get it. There are things that are urgent that we need to focus on. But I believe almost “everything else” qualifies as temporary priorities, at best.

Here’s a great quote from Craig Groeschel:

“Our greatest fear should not be failure, but succeeding at things that don’t matter.”

You see, most of what comes across our desk really isn’t all that important. Yet most of what’s really important doesn’t come across our desk on it’s own. We must define our priorities and doggedly pursue them.

This means we learn to focus. This means we learn to delegate. This means we learn to say ‘no’. This means we make decisions according to our vision. This means we manage our time for influence. This means we raise up leaders. This means we don’t chase “the latest and greatest”.

This means . . . we maintain our priorities.

Here’s something I encourage leaders to do:

Strive to make 75-80% of what you do things that ONLY you can do.

The rest . . . well, that’s everything else.

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About Greg J Baird

Greg, founder of ChildrensMinistryLeader.com, has been a leader in Children's Ministry for nearly 30 years. He led in 4 churches, with attendance from 250 to 10,000. He has served as coach, consultant, author and speaker to leaders in over 30 countries and on 6 continents.



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