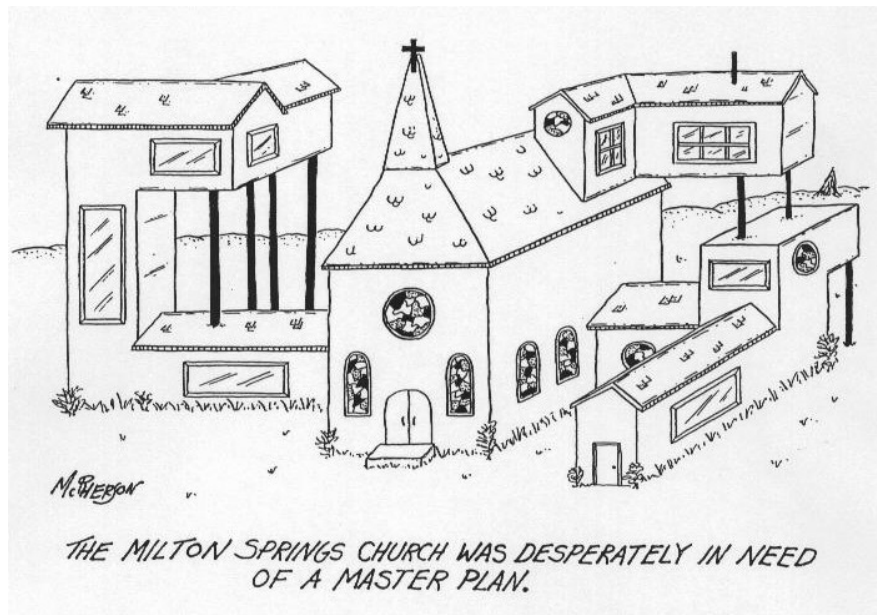


Philosophy of Children's Ministry
Rev. Barksdale Pullen



Just what is a philosophy of children's ministry? A Mission Statement? A Vision Statement? A Purpose Statement? Are they all the same thing? Does one build upon another? Are they simply nifty catch phrases so the children's director has something to do?

What is a Philosophy of Ministry?



Think of it as a jigsaw picture. Each piece represents some element of your worldview, the resources of the local church, and the vision God has laid on your heart. When all the pieces are put together you have a picture of the children's ministry for the local church.

Why is it important?

Simply stated a philosophy of children's ministry is important for two reasons:

1. It gives direction to the ministry. Resources are limited and we must decide where the Lord is leading the ministry. Sometimes

- we are faced with several good ideas, but only one will really fit into the philosophy of children's ministry at a local church., so the philosophy gives you a grid to evaluate ideas.
2. It gives the children's director a guide in which to organize his/her time.

So, what pieces are needed? When constructing a Philosophy of Children's Ministry I like the looking at the following pieces:¹



Doctrine of Authority

It is important to note that we need to put the pieces together from a Reformed perspective. As Susan Hunt has reminded us, *We must think through an issue theologically, because our ministry is a reflection of our theology.*” For example, if we begin with the piece of a low view of Scripture (Basis of Authority) this can lead us to a distorted picture; from choosing unbiblical curricula to deciding how we will discipline children.

Marc Anthony, in explaining the philosophy of ministry, writes,²

The first and most fundamental Piece, the Basis of Authority, is Holy Scripture. The Word of God is the basis upon which all thinking rests. ” A high view of Scripture is the Christian educator's ultimate frame of reference. A high view is one that accords with Christ's view of the Bible. Jesus said, I “tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18). In John 10:35 the Savior states unequivocally, The Scripture cannot be broken and in John 17:17, Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ”

What is our *Basis of Authority*? In the Westminster Confession of Faith the first chapter is dedicated to our understanding of the Holy Scripture, we read:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and

¹ Anthony, M. J. (2001). Introducing Christian education : foundations for the twenty-first century. Grand Rapids, Mich., Baker Academic. Pp26-28.

² Ibid, p26

of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manner, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased. (I.1)

And

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. (I.6)

In a word the Shorter Catechism, states,

The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

In the Presbyterian Church in America, our Basis of Authority is found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice and the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of the Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.



Who are our children?

The first place we turn is God's revelation itself in Genesis 1-3, where here we see the story of the creation of humankind and draw out the doctrine of the image of God. From the image of God we see several characteristics³ of children that affect the our relationship with them:

Active and Purposeful Human Beings act in the world in a way as to make sense of things around them, to make connections, and see relationships to order to more effectively have dominion. As

³ The list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 71-72. (Donovan Graham has recently authored *Teaching Redemptively*, published by Purposeful Designs ACSI)

the teacher enters the classroom they need to take advantage of this created tendency in students as they develop learning strategies.

Rational Human Beings seek to perceive and understand the world around them they have the ability to reason.

Creative Human Beings form and make things and ideas from the world around.

Moral Human Beings act in a way that is according to standards of right or wrong and thus bring about justice or injustice.

Finite, Fallen, and Redeemed –Teachers must recognize that although they reflect the image of God, they do not do so perfectly because that reflection is marred by sin. However, since the teacher is redeemed, the Holy Spirit which gives them the power to act in a righteous manner as their relationship with Him grows.

Free and responsible Human Beings make judgments according to our purposes, acting within the bounds of our nature and are responsible for our behavior.

Exercise dominion Human Beings think, create, and act in purposeful ways to exercise control in the world around them.

Social Human Beings are created to live in relationship with God, with others, with myself, and with creation.

Merciful & Just –Out of God's love for them Human Beings are to extend mercy and justice to others.

Dependent Human Beings are created to live in dependence upon God for our very existence, and upon other and creation.

Understanding children is found in the fact that we are all created in the image of God, yet that image is tarnished by the effects of the Fall.

In working with children we also recognized that these characteristics become more fully developed as the child matures. We have the example of the Lord Himself who is God, but who was born as a human being. When we read in Luke 2:52 that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (NIV) we tend to have an acknowledgement of what that means, however it is not spelled out in detail, therefore discernment is needed on the part of the teacher in working with children at different levels.



Why are we here? (Purpose Statement)

What is our perspective on the *Purposes and Goals*? So often in children's ministry we think in terms of education, that is, passing on the stories of the Bible and the theology of the Catechism, which is good and proper, however our ministry should be much more than passing on head knowledge. Robert Pazmiño defines Christian education:

as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained divine and human effort to share or appropriate the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, sensitivities, and behaviors that comprise or are consistent with the Christian faith. It fosters the change, renewal, and reformation of persons, groups, and structures by the power of the Holy Spirit to conform to the revealed will of God as expressed in the Old and New Testament and preeminently in the person of Jesus Christ, as well as any outcomes of that effort.

In other words we are training the whole child inculcating into their lives a Christian World and Life View.

From this point, we begin to develop the general purpose of the local church. As you enter into this area of tangibly building the children's ministry based upon the first two Pieces, I think there is an important distinction to keep in mind. The Children's Ministry of the local church is both a *support* and *stand-alone* ministry. By support ministry I mean that often the children's ministry is called upon to provide support to the other ministries of the church by means of childcare. That does not mean simply babysitting, but realize that when the church is doing an outreach event, childcare may be required by the children's ministry. But Children's Ministry is also a stand-alone ministry in that children are members of the covenantal community and are capable, and willing, to participate in the life of the church. For example, the Children's Ministry can carry out outreach events such as concerts and Backyard Bible Clubs to reach the local neighborhood. (We hope that these events are carried out in conjunction with the other ministries of the church, but the point is we are simply not reactionary to the other ministries, but pro-active in doing ministry.)

So, how do we develop the general purpose of the children's ministry of the local church? We begin by remembering the basic tenets of our covenantal theology and understand that we minister to the whole person.

What are some of the basic tenets?

Classically there are several components to reformed theology; however I believe these are the most pertinent to our consideration of education⁴:

⁴ Based upon the Reformed Distinctives of Great Commission Publications' curriculum.

Glory of God This is one of the fundamental characteristics of God. 1. God's goal is all that He does is His glory, in the sense of (a) displaying His moral excellence to His creatures and (b) evoking their praise for what they see and for the benefits that it brings them. 2. Human beings' goal in all of their actions must be God's glory in the sense of doxology by word and deed. 3. God so made us that we find the duty of doxology to be our supreme delight, and in that way the furthering of our own highest good.⁵

Sovereignty of God - The Biblical idea of God's sovereignty includes all that is involved in the divine kingship and this means at least three things: Ownership of all Creation, Authority over all Creation, and Control over all Creation.

Redemptive-historical Perspective - The Reformed approach to the Bible is to see it as the complete, unified counsel of God. Therefore, Reformed theologians interpret every small portion of God's Word in the context of the whole.

A God-ward Focus - As human beings encounter any biblical truth, it teaches us about God and ultimately elicits worship from us as we discover him to be sovereign Creator, Redeemer and King.

Christ centric - The subject of Scripture is God's unfolding story of salvation, and Jesus is its focus.

What are the implications of these tenets? What are the results of training the whole child?

In my opinion the purpose of Christian education is to glorify God by enabling individuals with the tools necessary to see all of life from the perspective of our relationship to God through Christ, and behave according to the rules of our relationship with Him.⁶

First, this definition recognizes that ultimately all we do is an attempt to glorify God - not only in deed but also in word and thought. For an individual to glorify God is not to imply that we as humans can glorify Him, but rather we demonstrate His glory by bringing attention to *all* that He has done.

Second, the definition recognizes that our most basic relationship is with God, and that is only restored through Christ, by the Holy Spirit regenerating us. This aspect of the definition recognizes the culmination of the covenant in creating a proper heart orientation in the person.

Third, this definition asserts that from a proper relationship with God flow the other basic human relationships - self, others, creation - all of which are governed by

⁵ Ferguson, Sinclair B., David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer. 1988. *New Dictionary of Theology*. The master reference collection. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press., p 271-272

⁶ The basic formulation of this definition came from Dr. Allen Curry, Professor of Christian Education at Reformed Theological Seminary. Curry, Dr. Allen. 2002. *Covenant Education*. In *PCA Children's Ministry Conference*. Atlanta, GA.

God as we reflect the character and activity of God in Creation. In order to do this in a way which glorifies God, we must properly inquire of ourselves, society, and all of creation.

How is this goal of education accomplished? How can the Covenant be applied to the educational process? It can be seen in the context of the Covenant, the restoration of the four basic relationships.

Personal with God

The first relationship is a person's relationship with God. It must be acknowledged that in all redemptive activity, it is God who must initiate and apply the atoning work of Christ. Perhaps, in the restoration of this relationship this unilateral action is seen most clearly. Sin alienated humanity from God, yet the promise of God that He would take us as His people, required that He send one who would redeem that relationship by paying the penalty of sin. From a deepening relationship with God, one goes through the process of sanctification, one is conformed more to the likeness of His Son, which in turns transforms one's heart that they would seek to reflect the character and activity of God in creation. As the Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden and were faithful servants and obedient children, so as I seek the face of God I too can be a faithful servant and obedient child.

Personal with Personal (The Teacher)

The second relationship, knowing myself, is applicable as I enter the classroom as teacher. What is the role and function of the teacher? How should we think about teachers? What methods would I use? How would I seek to enable learning in my students? Norman Harper, former professor of Christian Education at Reformed Theological Seminary, said, "The most important thing any teacher brings into the classroom is their own redeemed personality." The implication is that a restored relationship with God, through Christ, will have an effect on the process of education and my role as a redeemed teacher. My character as a redeemed teacher should reflect the following⁷:

Image of God –I recognize that I am made in the image of God and that implies that as I go through the process of education I seek to reflect the character and activity of God.

Finite, Fallen, and Redeemed –I recognize that although I reflect the image of God, I do not do so perfectly because that reflection is marred by sin. However, since I am redeemed the Holy Spirit gives me the power to act in a righteous manner as my relationship with Him grows.

⁷ The list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 106-107. (Donovan Graham has recently authored *Teaching Redemptively*, published by Purposeful Designs ACSI)

Giftedness I realize that God has gifted me with certain abilities for His glory. Part of my task is to seek to develop these gifts and maximize them in the education process.

Sanctification –From a Reformed perspective sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.⁸

Prophet, Priest, and King The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains how Christ executes the offices, and in turn we should strive to reflect these same characteristics as we teach. Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation. Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.⁹

Shepherd This Biblical metaphor assists me as a teacher in caring for the sheep under my care by setting boundaries and providing for their needs. Depending upon the child's age and abilities, they will require more or less shepherding.

Justice & Mercy As I seek to discipline my students I need to be just in the administration of this discipline, and seek restoration of the relationship with myself and the other students as quickly as possible.

Humble walk with God As I seek to counsel with the students and act and react in different situations they need to see that there is a difference in my countenance – a redeemed personality.

These traits should influence my character, but they should also influence my practice of education. What is the role of the teacher? What methods should the teacher use?

In my role as teacher I acknowledge that students develop, following the model of Jesus who grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:52 NIV) As I ponder my role I realize that wisdom is required, because human beings are unique creations with different gifts and abilities that require me to be creative to reach my students. The Psalmist assists us when he writes, "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior" (Psalm 25:5 NIV) Here the Psalmist describes a progression in the teaching process. At

⁸ PCA, Stated Clerk of. 1983. *The confession of faith with larger and shorter catechism*. Brevard, NC: Committee for Christian Education and Publications of the Presbyterian Church in America., Question 35

⁹ Ibid. Shorter Catechism Questions 24,25,26

first I may be a dispenser of knowledge to young children or as an introduction to a new subject area. However, as the child attains a knowledge base then my role as teacher shifts to that of a guide creating opportunities for the student to explore and experiment in a subject area, thus recognizing the developing image of God in the student. Then my desire would be that of the writer of Hebrews that the student would master the subject area and become teachers themselves, and in turn teaching me as I seek to grow in wisdom and stature. Therefore, there is not one role that I would assume, but rather being sensitive to the nature of the student my role will develop from a dispenser of knowledge, to a guide, to a co-learner with the student.

When I consider the various methods to employ I again recognize the diversity in the students, their giftedness and abilities. In a sense the methods are as varied as the children themselves. For those children with learning disabilities I will explore ways to teach that will reach them at their strengths and build skills for life-long learning. For students who are mentality or physically impaired, again I will seek to call upon the creative aspect of being made in the image of God to teach in an atmosphere requiring extensive modifications. For the regular education environment I again seek wisdom in the teaching process. Several general methods¹⁰ can be gleaned in all of these situations:

Lecture –This form of teaching can be useful for dispensing a knowledge base quickly in a logical manner on which the student can build later.

Discussion –This form is useful to pool information from the group and share experiences to gain a better grasp on the information.

Case Studies –This form of teaching is useful for allowing the students to use their knowledge base and apply it.

Small Group –Human Beings are created to be in social relationships, so in this method the students can take a project, or task and each contribute meaningfully to the solution.

Hands-on Experience This method recognizes the need for students to apply the material they have learned.

Meaningful Tasks This idea recognize that the goal of education is to equip students with the tools necessary to have dominion; therefore tasks are not picked simply to fill time.

The restoration of the second relationship, to know myself, has a great effect on the educational process. As I conform more to the image of Christ this will have a measurable effect on my role as a teacher and on the methods that I employ in the classroom.

¹⁰ The list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 176-177. (Donovan Graham has recently authored *Teaching Redemptively*, published by Purposeful Designs ACSI)

Personal with Others (The Student)

The third relationship, my relationship with others, is applicable as I enter the classroom and view the students. How do I understand the nature of students? What do I assume that the students are like? We see in the Covenant of Creation that human beings were created in the image of God, and that is my starting point for viewing my students and me. Part of my task as a teacher will be to assist them in redeeming that image that has been marred by sin so that they are equipped with the tools necessary for dominion reflecting the character and activity of God. I also recognize that this redeeming activity is progressive that the individual will develop morally, physically, spiritually, cognitively, and affectively.¹¹ From the image of God we see several characteristics of the students that affect my relationship with them.

Personal with Creation

The fourth relationship, my relationship with Creation, is applicable as I enter the classroom and prepare to teach the curricula. What realms of knowledge would be studied? What are the broad content concerns, given the nature of students? How would I organize curricula? From Psalm 19 and I Kings 4 we receive guidance:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
3 There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
4 Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (NIV)

and

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt ...He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (NIV)

From these passages it would appear that all of creation is open to our investigation so that we may have dominion in a manner which is glorifying to God.

¹¹ Downs, Perry G. 1994. *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House., p 69.

The fourth relationship, my relationship with creation, is also effected by Christ's reconciliation. Therefore, as a Christian teacher I see all of creation open for investigation as I seek to educate my students to properly bear the character and activity of God in creation.



What do we want to accomplish? (Vision)

In many ways this piece is dependent upon your local church's vision. Begin by asking the questions: Why did God place our church at this address? What is the gift-mix of the congregation? What does the community look like? Are people there for a life-time, or do people transfer in and out every few years? (One church developed a three year plan to cover the basics of reformed theology at various age levels, because they realized that every three years are so their church members were transferred to another base or job.) Is there a segment of your community you want to reach? Do you need to find people who would like to begin an outreach to children using English as a Second Language (ESL)? Do you need Spanish speaking Backyard Bible Clubs? Are there a special needs children who need a Sunday School class? Are your children available in the summer for summer camps, or do the children in your church go away for the summer? Do the children in your church have a good Bible foundation and need to be encouraged to live out their faith? Is there Biblical illiteracy in your church and you need to lay a good foundation?

In developing a vision spend time in prayer and in counsel with others in the church who have a heart for children. Often as you pray and think about the greatest needs in your congregation *and* the gifts that God has placed in your congregation the vision begins to take shape. Another point to keep in mind – the vision may change with time, so do not be locked into the ministry looking only one way.

For example, in the church where I serve the general purpose statement for the church is:

As the **family** of God,
We **worship** the Triune God,
Teach the truth of God's Word,
And Equip His people to **Reach** the world.

However, for this year the Session as adopted a passion, or vision, statement that all the ministries are to work toward, it is:

To see the gospel increasing characterize our relationships as a church family, and compel us to communicate and demonstrate the love of Christ to those in our community who do not yet know him.

So how does the children's ministry embrace this vision this year to facilitate an inreach and an outreach component? Remembering that the children's ministry is both support and stand alone, what can we brainstorm some of the following ideas:

- J Church wide Family Camp Weekend
 - o Ministries work together to create momentum event for the fall
- J Pre-school VBS and Elementary BYC
 - o inreach & outreach
- J After school programs using Fun with Faith Clubs
 - o Concentrate on area public and private schools where member's children attend
- J Focus Wed night to be consciously visitor friendly
- J Art camps in summer, Special needs summer school
 - o Take advantage of school teachers who have summer off to provide week long camps
- J Cut some programs and encourage families to spend that time together provide Sunday Schools in Spring to assist family with summer family ideas for building community in the church and reaching out to their neighborhoods.
- J Etc ...



How are we going to accomplish this? (Structure)

Once again the answer to this question is dependent upon the structure that is in place, or how willing the leadership is to changing the present structure. For example, is the best time for a mid-week program on the traditional Wednesday night, or are there circumstances in the community which would make Tuesday night the better choice for reaching your community, or should there be a mid-week program at all? Are we trying to accomplish different things on Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening or are we trying to do the same thing three different times? Is the Wednesday night group of children the same as the Sunday morning group of children? Should Wednesday evening turn into a sports ministry for outreach using programs such as Upward Basketball? How many programming opportunities do we have?

For me, programs are simply vehicles to build relationships. So I am willing to change the vehicles to meet the needs of the community to build more effective relationships with believers and non-believers. This might mean having:

- J Backyard Bible Clubs, or having a Vacation Bible School
- J one Sunday School hour, or two
- J Mid-week program or not

- J Summer Camps or day camps or not
- J Art, music, craft, or sports camps or not

The basic idea is to take the vision and work backwards to determine what is needed to accomplish the task. Ask questions such as:

- J What people are needed?
- J Money?
- J Space?
- J Supplies?
- J Approval?
- J Support?



Implementation

Put it into action. Begin by getting the leadership on board with your philosophy of children's ministry. Then move on to key people in your ministry, and be prepared to modify the vision based upon their input. Then recruit the appropriate people and resources needed. And always promote the ministry to the congregation *and* parents after all it is a covenantal community.



Did we accomplish our task?

Evaluate. . Did we accomplish the task? Do we need to modify the philosophy? The Lord will bring new people into your church with new gifts, the community will change, and you will change.

The main thrust is that our children's ministry should not be simply babysitting or reactionary, but rather deliberate in what it is trying to accomplish.

