

## What About Kids In Organic Church?

### Part One: Integration Is Better Than Segregation by Neil Cole ([Church Multiplication Associates](#))

A friend of mine recounts the story of his son coming home from Sunday School. He asked the boy the most common questions asked at 12:15 every Sunday: "So how was your class? What did you learn?" The boy suddenly was overcome with a look of frustration and remarked: "With a book that big there's got to be more stories in there than the one's they're telling us! They're keeping something from us!"

That sent my friend into a pilgrimage that led to involvement in organic church planting.

One of the most frequently asked questions we receive about organic churches is, "What do you do with children?" It seems that without segregating the kids from the adults we don't know what to do. Apparently, grown-ups can't learn anything if their kids are present and vice versa.

Many years ago, prior to any child labor laws, in an attempt to empower, evangelize and educate children being used in coalmines John Wesley began what is now known as Sunday School. Prior to this, there was no separation of congregants based upon age.

Today, we can't seem to cope without it. We now feel that the only way children can truly be taught is when they are separated from all others but kids their own age. Why is that? Does life itself also follow such a compartmentalized fashion? Of course not. In fact, the truth is that children learn more at home with their whole family than in school with their peers. Perhaps we can begin to see better learning, of both child and adult, if we do not separate according to age.

In order to have a spontaneous church multiplication movement, we must not confine expansion with controls. For this reason, I don't recommend that there is only one way to take care of kids in a simple church. In fact, we usually give two or three options and let churches decide for themselves. My experience shows, however, that there are better ways than others. Integration in church life has proven more powerful than segregation based on age.

I have three kids that are growing up fast. They have been a part of church from the very beginning and have been in a large mega church, a small traditional church and a simple organic church. They can tell you the best part of each experience and the worst as well.

In the traditional Sunday School approach they learned many things for which I am grateful. But it was always cognitive learning rather than experiential. They knew facts about Jesus, David the giant slayer and the Lions in Daniel's den, but they did not learn how to love their sister or how to share the Good News with a friend at school. They learned about character qualities, but never actually had the opportunity to experience them and see them lived out in others.

A few years ago, my family received a call to a new kind of ministry. At the time we lived in a suburb determined by the FBI to be one of the 15 safest cities over 100,000 in population in the United States. We had our own house with a nice yard on a quiet street.

Our new call was to urban Long Beach, a place where gangs not only started but also franchised around the country. We moved into a rented smaller back house with an alley instead of a yard. Many would think this was not the best move for our children. I have to admit, there were a few moments where I wondered myself. But deep inside I knew this was the right decision.

Looking back, I wouldn't have traded the experience we had in that back house for any other.

When we moved to the city and began organic churches our kids began to learn in a more experiential fashion. They saw lives transformed. They listened to people share their horrid stories of abusive life-styles and then watched them live for Jesus. My son has even had a few roommates along the way who needed some stable and loving home life for support. He has learned something about love, kindness and hospitality that he never could learn on a flannel graph.

One of the sayings that we often repeat in our movement is that “when a child receives Jesus he doesn’t receive a Jr.-sized Holy Spirit and a Jesus action figure to play with. He receives the full-power of the Spirit of God and is no less spiritual than any adult.

With that in mind, we expect great things from our children and we are usually not disappointed. It is very common for the kids in our church to have the best questions and to share the most profound thoughts. One time when we were on a tangent about the rapture my middle daughter, who was about 12 at the time, had a puzzled look on her face. She asked, “When the rapture comes do people all go up?” I said, “That’s what is usually taught.” You could see the wheels turning in her head. Then she said, “Well, if the earth is round and we all go up, doesn’t that mean that we’re all going to different places?” I’ve never been asked that question before and it took the mind of a child to think it up.

The children in our church are often the ones most desired to pray for the prayer requests because they pray with a child-like faith and their prayers are often answered.

It is common for us to have small toddlers in our church. Rather than send them to another room with a baby-sitter we let them be a part of the church. They worship with us, pray with us and usually waddle from one lap to another. To be honest, I can’t remember a single disruptive moment. Because the kids are trained with this sort of church they just know how to be a part of it. I will never forget a time when a small boy had surgery to correct a lazy eye he had. He came to church and couldn’t wait to say something during the praise and prayer request time. He sat on the edge of his seat and his feet barely touched the floor and he opened his eyes wide and said with great wonder, “Jesus fixed my eyes,” as he slowly turned his head around the room to show everyone. Wow, what awesome worship. Jesus must love this. Why on earth would we want to send that away to watch the latest Veggie Tales video in the bedroom?

Early in the beginning of our movement, my associate Paul Kaak was concerned with how organic church would work out for his young child Elijah. Their family went on vacation for a couple months in a rural part of California and decided to start a church during the vacation. Elijah was an important part of the new church. He recalls a time when they were all praying very intently and he noticed how quiet it was. With small children, quietness, though long desired, is not always a good sign, so Paul opened his eyes to see if Elijah was getting into some trouble. To his amazement he saw his boy sitting right in front of him fascinated as he watched his mom and dad interceding for others. So many kids in America only see their parents pray at the dinner table. Paul was convinced right then that integrating kids into church was powerful.

We have forgotten that much of the Christian life is caught by example rather than taught by fill-in the blank coloring books.

It is a real blessing for kids to see their parents worshipping God and I am always moved to great joy and tears listening to my own children as they sing praise to their Savior and pray for other people. I could never go back to the days when we sent them away to another room to be entertained while we took God serious without them.

Later in that same summer of rural church planting, a bee stung a small girl on her head. While the adults were all trying to help with getting out the stinger and finding some ice, Elijah stepped

right up, put his hand on her head, and prayed for her to be healed. The little girl felt better almost immediately, and the adults were again led by a child. I wonder what our churches would be like if we allowed childlike faith back into the heart of our common church life. The disciples wanted to segregate the children and not bother Jesus with such unimportant things, and He rebuked them (and us) by telling them not to take the children away, for all of us need to learn from their kind of faith (Matt. 19:13-15).

My children will all tell you that this is the kind of church they love being a part of.

A few years ago while I was doing ministry in Japan I had a dream that my oldest daughter Heather (who was almost 15 years old at the time) started a church with her friends in Huntington Beach, CA where she went to school. After I returned I told her about the dream as I was saying goodnight to her to let her know she was on my mind while I was traveling.

The next day, after school she came home and said to me, "Dad, my friends want to do it." I asked, "Do what?" She replied, "Start a church." She told me that they were tired of the old boring type of church where they try and entertain them for a couple hours and they wanted to be a part of starting a new church. Because she had seen organic churches start a few times I told her, "Well, you know what to do, go do it and I will be available to help if you need it." The next day she came home from school and they had planned church to start that next Thursday in her friend's living room (in Huntington Beach), they had invited many from High School and had arranged for a friend who was a musician to lead worship. That Thursday their new church was born.

My children have learned things by being a vital part of the beginning of new churches that they could never learn in a traditional Sunday School. They have watched people come off the streets addicted to speed that turn and follow Christ. They have seen them transformed into powerful agents of the kingdom of God. They fully believe that God is powerful and able to change lives, not just from the stories in the book of Acts but from the stories they have seen in people's lives. They now have a very real faith and compassion for lost people. I know many church kids who are actually afraid of lost sinners, but my kids have learned to love them. I have taken them with me into the barrio of East LA to share Christ with kids who are growing up in crack houses and among notorious gangs.

One evening Dana and I were going out on a date and we left the kids at home. After dinner we called them to make sure Zachary, my youngest was getting ready for bed since it was already getting dark. My oldest answered the phone and said that Erin and Zachary were still out back in the alley. I told her to get the kids and bring them in immediately. Zach got on the phone and was excited to tell me that the mean old lady across the alley had backed out of her garage and had said cruel things to Zach and Erin as she left. I asked what they were doing in the alley this late. Zach said he was waiting for her to return because he and Erin had made things for her. Zach had made her a picture to try and help her to become a little happier and Erin had written a sermon to tell her about Jesus.

When I told Zach that he needed to come in and get ready for bed he burst into tears and said, "But dad, she is old and doesn't believe in Jesus. She probably doesn't have long to live and I want to tell her about Jesus. We've been praying for her and want to give her these things." I know few adults who have wept for the souls of lost people, let alone those who have treated them unkindly.

These kids obviously were filled with the Spirit because they had deep compassion for this lost soul that had consistently been mean to them. I was tearing up with my son. I let him bring the picture over to her the next day. It didn't change her demeanor at all but over the course of a few years she did seem to lighten up a bit.

A few years later my son was listening to a P.O.D CD and heard the song "Youth of the Nation" about the sad end of many young people who live without Christ and die without hope. He was so moved by the song that he came into our bedroom late because he couldn't sleep. I asked him what was wrong and he said he'd decided that he wanted to go back to public school so he can help people like those in the song.

These attitudes toward the lost have been embedded in my children because they have made sacrifices to bring the gospel to lost people and they have seen lives change so dramatically. They know the power of the gospel and they believe in it. These lessons have been learned experientially and will stick with them for the rest of their lives. Instead of just hearing the stories of other people's faith thousands of years ago, they are living stories of faith today.

In fact, it is my hope that these children will grow up and see church differently than previous generations. Instead of viewing church as an entertainment center, to be evaluated by how well it suits our own individual needs, they will see church as a missional community that they bring something special to. They will not evaluate church as consumers looking for a good product, but as a family that is on an important adventure together, each with special abilities needed for the success of our common mission.