

Introduction

In about March 2013 I began an informal project entitled "Young People, Church, and Spirituality". As the name suggests, I was interested in exploring how MHCC meets the needs (general and spiritual) of our young people, and perhaps how we don't meet those needs. "Young people" was loosely defined as people 0-25 years. Basically I raised a long list of questions related to this issue, which I announced in church and on the email list, and invited people's responses.

Today, I am going to share a little bit about what I found, and the implications of what I found. But first I want to spend a few minutes building a picture of why I was interested in this area, then I am going to introduce our panel members, who can illustrate better than anyone the value of our young people in our church community.

Why am I interested in this area?

Because I am interested in people, generally. Because MHCC has a philosophy of inclusion for all, but many people have noted a general trend that when our children reach a certain age (usually mid to late teens) they tend to stop attending church services - sometimes abruptly, other times gradually. This has got me thinking about:

- *Why* is there a pervasive trend of exodus of young people in the church?
- Is this trend inevitable?
- Are there things that we could do differently?
- CLARIFICATION:
 - I believe this pattern to be across numerous churches, rather than specifically MHCC
 - This pattern is not necessarily a problem. Another important part of our church culture is that everyone is welcome to come, or to not come.
- But I tend to think that we could always do better, and it is worth having a look at how things are working and where things could be different. It seems the most important question to ask is, *How can we ensure that we don't drive people away?*

I think a greater population of young adults in the church would be valuable for many reasons:

- fresh energy and perspective they might offer,
- Investing in the longevity of the church
- lots to learn
- it is the desire of many parents for their child to maintain the faith with which they have been raised.

It could also be valuable to our young people:

- Childhood is such an important time in shaping identity, beliefs, morals, resilience, etc - I believe that church can play a role in supporting this development
- Adolescence and young adulthood can be such a vulnerable time - increased emotionality, development of sexuality, personality, identity, I think spirituality as well. Also a time of great pressures - school etc, and from peers - exposure to antisocial influences.
 - During this vulnerable time, having the support of a church community can be helpful (in my opinion, the opportunity for accepting relationships ie feel comfortable to be myself, is the mediator of support)

And another reason...

Since having my own children I have become enthusiastic about, and continually amazed by, the process of child development - from a helpless baby through to a fully functioning adult. I feel I am learning so much from watching how my children develop - that sense of sequential development whereby each new development is dependent on a previous milestone having occurred. I won't comment on whether this *is* a miracle, but I can say with confidence that it *feels* like a miracle to me - we have a very clever Creator. I love watching the world through my children's eyes - I love trying to explain things to them. I love imagining what it would be like to have never before encountered things like shops, animals, trees, music, or evil. I even love, 99% of the time, the "why" question - I love that process of having to explain why the world is the way it is, and questioning myself as to why I believe what I do, why we do things the way that we do. e.g. "Why can't I visit the house of the girl I just met at the park?" "Why do we clean up because our friends are coming to visit?" "Why would the workmen across the lane from us bring in a portalo, instead of coming to our house to use the toilet?"

Experiencing the world with children, I think, brings a fresh perspective. Young people allow us, if we let them, to experience God in a different way. I want to learn to listen to young people, and to learn about God through them.

PANEL

When I was preparing for this talk I came across a list of questions that were asked to children of a range of ages, that explored their understanding of God. I thought the questions were a simple and useful way of approaching young people's perspectives, so I asked a bunch of kids in the church to answer the questions. We also went through the questions with the teenagers, and we had quite a fruitful discussion based on their responses. I thought it would be really interesting for the church to hear some ideas straight from the horse's mouth, so thanks to our panel for kindly volunteering to share their thoughts with the rest of the church.

Plan - introduce panel, ask them a question, hear responses, then share some responses from some younger people in the church.

Thankyou to the children who participated in answering the questions, and the parents who helped them

Q. 1. “When you hear the word ‘God,’ what do you think of?”

- Jesus' daddy
- Prays
- The Bible
- I think of when God tries to help us or is kind to us
- He gave me glasses and he doesn't break the glasses

Q. 2. “If you had to explain God to someone who never heard of God, what would you say?”

- God makes everything. He gives us rainbows
- I think God is dead because we can't see him
- Like a soft teddy. Like [names favourite teddies]
- God is in your heart
- God is wonderful and he's very nice

Q. 3. “If you were God, what kind of prayer would you like to hear?”

- Thankyou Jesus for this food
- Thankyou for everyone being kind
- Dear Jesus thankyou for the beautiful me

Q. 4. “Jesus told the adults who lived when he did that they would not get to heaven if they were not more like children. What do you think Jesus liked so much about children?”

- Jesus liked children playing with toys
- That they are very very cute.
- They are good for the family when the parents are lonely
- They're people

Q. 5. “Is there a special secret God is trying to tell people? If so, what is it?”

- Maybe that everyone should try to be kind
- No
- I don't know (most common)

Q. 6. “What do children know about God that grown-ups have forgotten?”

- We can't explain Him and we can't see Him
- That God is really good for us, he helps us, makes us be excellent in our work
- I don't remember

Q. 7. "If you could get God to answer one question, what one question would you ask God?"

- Why can't video games come to life?
- Can I have plenty of food and water?
- God I wish you could help me when I want to be something
- May you be a tunnel? Or a balloon? Or a track? Something like that

Do you think your answers have changed over time? In what way?

Why do you come to church?

What I found

- Responses from about 20% of church (not too bad). Young people had input as well, not counted in stats cos I approached them specifically.
- 2 key headings for responses: Comments related to relationships, and comments related to education. Education - what our kids are explicitly learning about God (Bible stories, content of children's church lessons, etc). Rships - the interactions with people that occur around the learning of explicit knowledge. e.g. Might learn in children's church that God loves us all, then experience love when someone at church takes the time to ask how you are, or kick the footy for a while.
- Relationship -
 - this theme came out loud and clear. The vast majority of people I heard from commented on the importance of positive relationships:
 - Helping our young people to feel welcome, loved, accepted, approved of, supported - whether they choose to come or to not come. Having relationships with safe, trusted, authentic adults
 - The good news is...we seem to be doing really well in this regard
 - Lots of young people I spoke to reflected this sentiment as their experience:
 - "I feel comfortable, I can be myself"
 - "I love spending time with this community"
 - "The church did an amazing job of making me feel loved regardless [of what I did]"
 - "I know that I can come and people will be happy to see me."
 - "I feel comfortable to come or to not come"
- Education - responses to this aspect are more difficult to interpret, and perhaps more controversial. I have thought a lot about what I want to say on this topic. What I have decided to do is to try and present the feedback that was reported to me and to pose some questions that it raises. I am someone

who finds it useful to ask questions of myself, particularly when there is no clear right/wrong, or path forward. I encourage you to ponder on the questions raised, search within yourself for whether you agree/disagree. I don't feel in a position to draw conclusions, and want to emphasise that these views may not be representative of the wider church.

- It was quite difficult to gather opinions on this topic. Most of the feedback I received was about relationship. Even when I specifically asked, many people could not/would not comment
- From the people who did comment, here is what emerged:
 - Many of our kids have limited knowledge of the Bible.
 - *What proportion of the children's stories we read are from the Bible?*
 - *Is it important for our kids to learn the Bible? Why?*
 - Some concern about OT teaching - gruesome stories, vengeful God, you will succeed if God is on your side.
 - *What message will our kids take from this?*
 - *Do we want our kids to learn/not learn these stories?*
 - *Is it up to us to select what is "appropriate" Bible material?*
 - Bible stories are taught as events from the past, almost like fairy stories
 - *Can we/should we use the Bible to teach children about our Living God?*
 - What do we want our kids to know about God? Why?
 - *If we want to selectively teach our children about God, what does this say about our own beliefs?*
 - Some young people reflected that they didn't like workbook based Sunday school. Good to have foundations of theology, hated "activities". Adults commented that SS resources were poor
 - *How do we decide what resources to use?*
 - *Are we checking in with our kids on how they respond to lessons?*
 - Our children may not grow into adults who believe, but they maintain morals, spirituality
 - *Does it matter if our children believe in God? Does it matter if WE believe in God? To whom does it matter?*
 - A very "talky" church (children tend to experience through different modes (e.g. hand-on, stories, play, music) more than adults)
 - *How relevant is this format to our children?*
 - *How easy is it to transition from automatically tuning out from the teaching, to then tuning in?*

- A couple of other themes emerged that didn't fit neatly into my categories but warrant a mention nonetheless:
 - Busyness was listed by a number of people as a reason yp do not attend church regularly
 - Some yp were aware of difficulty in establishing an adult identity in the church, having been raised from childhood
 - While the yp sees themselves as an independent adult, they felt that people in the church still related to them as children

Suggestions for Change

A combination of my own ideas, feedback I received, and a meeting organised by Kristy to discuss our young people. The best outcome I could hope for would be that somebody felt inspired to pursue one or more of the ideas. As you hear them, I ask you to think and reflect on how you feel about them, and if perhaps you have the energy to make something happen. Lots of the ideas are quite simple, but I believe it's these little things that have the potential to make a real difference to how we nurture our young people. I don't want this to be an intellectual exercise that changes nothing.

- Less age delineation
 - adults collect offering, kids read kids story, etc
 - Involve every person in Sunday School
- Expanding "us" to include ALL people in church
 - Find age inclusive resources
 - Kids could report back on what they have done in sunday school (because this is church too)
- More thought into making services interesting to kids.
 - Youth representative at organising meetings
 - List of ideas in service leaders box - ways to include young people
 - More young people involvement in services (part 1 & 2)
- Be mindful of ways to enable parents to pass on faith at home
- Evening services – regular or occasional
- Creating common ground
 - Didjano
 - Involvement with services
 - Morning tea fundraiser

- Advocacy role – to facilitate young people to have a voice
- Work on peer to peer relationships
 - Intentional family to family interaction
 - In groups, team building
- Mentoring/buddy system (happens informally but...)
- Community rites of passage (e.g. Mens Weekend)
- Church could fund youth attendance at a conference or event (e.g. to explore spirituality in a different, wider environment).
- A special MHCC email list for teens
- Involvement in the running of the church (rosters, other roles)