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DREAMING OF MORE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Published by David C Cook
4050 Lee Vance View
Colorado Springs, CO 80918 U.S.A.

David C Cook Distribution Canada
55 Woodslee Avenue, Paris, Ontario, Canada N3L 3E5

David C Cook U.K., Kingsway Communications
Eastbourne, East Sussex BN23 6NT, England

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LCCN 2012935341
ISBN 978-1-4347-0016-2
eISBN 978-1-4347-0536-5

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Cover Design: Jonas Barber

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition 2012

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

*To my husband, Michael
Your inspiration and support of
me gave my dream wings!
I'm forever grateful!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To write a book that spans a ministry journey of over twenty-five years entails a great amount of gratitude to so many people. I think back to my formative years at First Baptist Church of San Jose, where I caught a vision for how children's and youth ministry could make a lasting impact on young people, and am thankful for people who invested in me, such as Brad Chinn, Barbara Weber, and Jim Cook. It was Lyle Castellaw who gave me my first opportunity to lead in youth ministry, and Michael Anthony who believed I could teach and who trained and mentored me to do so.

Colleagues such as Cheryl Howard, Cristi Thomas, Charles Molenkamp, KJ Stephens, and Sean Anderson gave wings to the dream that children's and youth ministries could work together for the sake of the family. In God's sovereignty, it was ROCKHARBOR Church, with leaders Todd Proctor, Stacy Scott, and the elder board, who said yes to a dream ... when it was only that. I will be forever indebted to Kit Rae for the partnership that gave me hope for the long road ahead, to the tireless support of Tommy Larson through endless seasons of change, and to Matt Barnes for being willing to stay in the trenches with me at every step.

Thank you to David C Cook, who invested in the dream of family ministry for the sake of spiritual formation—especially to Marlene LeFever for bringing me there in the first place; to my most incredible boss, Dan Rich (you never cease to amaze me with your servant and strong leadership); partners such as Byron, Mike, Jana, Janet, Jenn, and Ruth, who have added their fingerprints along the

way. And to my audaciously creative and hardworking Tru team: Debbie, Cristi, Tori, Leigh, Matt, Patti, Jonas, Joel, Brad, Cory, Jen, and Stephanie, whom I'm so honored to be leading and serving alongside. Each of you inspire me every day! Thank you, Stacy and Angelina, for hanging in there and never giving up, for giving honest feedback, and for sacrificing so much.

Thank you to Don Pape and Terry Behimer for believing in this project and to Karen Lee-Thorp for your insight and encouragement.

I'm grateful to my parents for always praying for me and the ministries I have been called to; my husband, Michael, for being my champion at every turn; and my children, who made me want faith for this generation more than anything else.

I am truly grateful to be a part of such a long legacy of individuals who have also had a dream ... a dream for more!

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A NEW WINESKIN

The Dream of Family Ministry

*You are never too old to set another
goal or to dream a new dream.*

Les Brown, Live Your Dreams

It was a milestone, for sure. I had just completed twelve years in children's ministry. My staff, volunteers, and family showered me with cards and words of affirmation. My boss had even given me a crystal clock. I had arrived. An *entire generation* of children had been born and had grown up—and now those children were in middle school. I had watched it happen. I had led it, for all practical purposes.

Twelve Vacation Bible Schools and twelve summer camps; six hundred and twenty-four weekends with lessons to study, crafts to prep, and volunteers to recruit; twelve fall recruitments; twenty-four

parent meetings; thirty-six all-church announcements; five 9-1-1 calls; hundreds of first-time decisions; countless pagings of parents for crying babies; and dozens of revisions of budgets and ministry plans. You know the drill. It's a lot—but I love it.

So I sat there at my desk, looking at my crystal clock, and a series of haunting thoughts crept over me. An entire generation of kids—were they *different* after this ministry we had created for them? Would their faith last *beyond* their childhood? Would they *change* the world with the love of Christ? Did our programs, sleepless nights, tireless efforts, countless dollars, and careful screening of staff and volunteers pay off?

I Want More

I must confess that deep inside, I wasn't sure of those things. I was sure the kids had had fun. They had been given excellence. They knew songs and Bible stories. They had memorized verses. They had made friends. They had loved our programs, themed rooms, and cool T-shirts.

I feel embarrassed sharing this, but I believe there is someone else out there who may have felt this way too. I simply got caught up in doing a lot of really good things. And by the grace of God, He chose to use those good things. But in the end, I didn't want to sacrifice another twelve years to just have “good.” I drove home that night with tears in my eyes, asking God, “So what do I do now? I want *more!*”

Faith in the Home

There are moments in our lives, both professionally and personally, when we know we are sitting at a crossroads. That night, for me, was

one of them. Would I continue in ministry to children, or would I try something else? If I did the former, I knew that there was something *more*. At the time, I just didn't know what it was. I begged God to show it to me and to my team. Our hearts were right. We wanted to serve Him and invest in this generation, but we weren't seeing the results that we were hoping to see. We were discouraged. We needed divine intervention.

Both of my children were young, and I was intentionally investing in their faith in a multitude of ways in our home: family nights, mission trips, serving opportunities, time in God's Word, prayer, and times for them to gain an authentic glimpse into my own faith journey. One night we had one of my daughter's friends over for dinner, and she participated in our family night. When her mom came to pick her up, our night together opened up a spiritual conversation. This mom was curious and interested. Over the next few months, I had the privilege of leading her to faith in Christ. What followed shaped the answer to my question about my ministry to children.

Spiritual Parents

This woman and her family were now on a spiritual journey—together. The mom barely knew what it meant to have a relationship with God, let alone how to lead her daughter spiritually. It took intentional discipleship for her to understand how God was spiritually parenting her, and how to spiritually parent in the same manner.

This was it! This was what was missing in my children's ministry! An intentional plan to equip parents both in their spiritual lives and in their roles as spiritual parents. God was awakening me and our

ministry to His heart for the family—and our family ministry, in its feeble beginnings, was birthed.

The Doorsteps of Home

The pursuit of forming spiritually minded children who own a vibrant faith drove us to the doorsteps of the home. As leaders, we had to assess the ways in which we had portrayed Christ's call to faith. Most of us know the sobering statistics of the current generation's faith formation and their commitment to it beyond their teenage years. As the church sits in dismay of how this could possibly happen on our watch, parents, too, are shocked that they did "the best they could" and still remain disappointed with their children's faith.

Every day, countless young people leave the church and, worse, abandon their faith for something "more" in North America. What has been our response? More programs? Better curriculum? Stricter accountability to godly behavior? I wanted to understand how we had been led to believe that faith is simply knowing the right information about Christ and acting with good behavior.

Perhaps no one would *actually* say that. Of course we would say that we wanted a faith that impacted all we did and said, faith that would last a lifetime. But think about it: if faith is simply about good teaching and proper behavior, then the church *is* a sufficient place for children to learn that. But if faith is that *plus more*—if it is understanding how to *live out* what we believe in real time, by the power of God's Spirit over a lifetime, then the family (with spiritually minded parents), would be the best place for that!

In chapter 6 we will look deeper into the kind of faith that we are talking about here, but for now, we want to highlight the idea

that faith is established when someone has a *firm conviction* (not just good information) and has chosen to *personally surrender* all rights and privileges of his or her life in submission to God (not just “good behavior”). Both the conviction and the surrender in one’s life involve a supernatural transformation that God does within us (from the inside out) as we choose to obey Him one step at a time. And often along the way, we misstep as well, which is why grace is such an important part of faith. In our children’s ministry, we needed a shift not only in our thinking, but in our ministry applications as well so that this kind of faith formation, accompanied by grace, was being cultivated.

New Wineskins

In many ways, the paradigm shift from “achieving proper behavior” to “a life posture of faith formation from the inside out” in the ministries for our children could be compared to Jesus’s words about embracing a new wineskin:

Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved. (Matt. 9:17)

His original audience would have understood an old wineskin as one that had already expanded during the fermentation process of new wine. This expansion would have taken place when the bladder being used was still fresh and pliable. Once expanded, it had dried

out. To put new wine into an old wineskin would cause it to crack or burst open. Those listening to Jesus would have known that you put new wine in new wineskins for it to be beneficial.

Jesus used this image to compare the religious system prevalent in His society with the “new wine” He was about to pour out. The new wine was an opportunity for people to no longer have to “earn” a relationship with God through observance of the Law but rather to “experience” God in a relationship through the power of His Spirit, who was poured out after Christ’s death satisfied the price of sin.

This paradigm shift in thinking and acting required a new understanding. The old ways of doing things would no longer be useful for what was to come. In fact, those not interested in the new wineskin would lose out on both the new covenant and the relationship with God.

Bag of Tricks

It might be tempting for us to look at this and say, “Who would be foolish enough to do *that*?” Well, in fact, I am. Perhaps you are too. Perhaps you went into ministry with unbridled passion, or maybe you signed up reluctantly and quickly found that nothing else would satisfy what you were created to do. Whether you were mentored or you stumbled upon your niche through trial and error, eventually we all arrive at “what works.” I call it our “ministry bag of tricks.” The longer you have been in ministry, the bigger your bag! In our hearts, we want to see lives changed. We are passionate about it. We want to make sure we’re using the things in our bag that *work*.

Then one day God’s Spirit begins to do a new thing; He wants to pour out a new wine. But we find ourselves skeptical. Why should

we change? It's always worked well in the past, right? The moment we are seduced by the things of old, the new wine is not ours to taste. We get nostalgic. We remember the ways that God used the things in our "bag"—they were the things we prayed for, and He answered. We get very comfortable with our old wineskin. After all, it has seen a lot of miles with us. We are old friends.

The Cost of Laying It Down

There are practical matters, too. How will my church respond to this new wineskin? What if my supervisor or pastor doesn't agree with it? What if I lose my job? Along with fear, insecurity can creep in too. For me, it had been eight years since my awakening to ministry where I was investing in kids and their parents and was intent on faith formation as the goal. Now God was asking me once again to lay down my old wineskin *completely*. I had moved to a new position at a different church. As I arrived, convinced that God wanted to pour out His new wine upon this ministry, equipping parents and the family as primary, I still warred against my raging insecurities.

As I took over the leadership of our children, youth, and families, I was tempted to show up on the first day with my big bag of tricks. Oh, was it ever big! There was hardly room in my office for me or anyone else when this trunk of treasures arrived. History? I've got history—in fact, here's a binder with VBS notes from over a decade ago, just in case. Experience? I've got experience—here are my degrees, books, and events that I planned in the past. Ideas? Plenty of those—let me just find them here in this bag, somewhere. And don't forget how many people have loved my ideas in the past. *Just saying.*

For some reason, my new staff didn't care about my bag. What was worse was that in my heart, I knew that none of it was going to work if God was going to start pouring out that new wine. Thirsty for what was to come, I put the bag aside. At first it was close, "just in case." But over time, it was all but eliminated from view. The old wineskin was finally gone, and now we were ready for what God had in store for us.

Together we watched as the new wineskin took shape, and we waited in anticipation and humility for God to fill us with what we needed. And He did! After over twenty years of ministry to children and their families, everything I was doing was new! What an adventure! We would ask God, and He would respond—and children, leaders, and parents were being *transformed*.

We knew we needed a new standard of measurement, not necessarily at the end of the lesson, weekend, or even quarter, but rather growth markers over the lifetime of a child's faith. How might we perceive faith formation if our view was further out than next weekend? In part, what was needed for such an evaluation required the very thing we wanted to instill in our children in the first place: *faith*! We needed the robust kind of faith with deep roots if we were going to be successful at this. We would not be able to settle for its counterfeit.

Faith's Counterfeit

Many years ago, when my children were little, my husband and I made our way through the local swap meet and its myriad of stalls. On this Saturday morning in December we had one goal in mind: to find stocking stuffers. The objective was simple—lots of stuff,

little money. We were impressed with our bags of what “looked like” designer sunglasses, radios, watches. Our son and daughter were *kids*—they wouldn’t know the difference. Besides, the items would soon break, and this way we wouldn’t have spent a bundle.

What we didn’t anticipate was how quickly those things would break once we gave them to our children. Within the day, most of what we had purchased had cracked, not worked, shrunk, or failed to offer what it promised in some way. The old adage that you get what you pay for was true, but what struck me more was how closely these items had resembled the real thing. And in the end they were counterfeits and couldn’t stand up to the pressure that our children imposed on them.

The same conclusion could be made about good behavior. It often resembles the “real thing”—faith—but it cannot stand up to the pressures that life will certainly impose upon it. Only true faith withstands trial.

So what might God be doing in this generation to germinate faith in the lives of children and their families? How is He calling us to embrace authentic faith rather than its counterfeit, good behavior? I say its counterfeit, because one must look very closely to see the difference sometimes. They manifest themselves in such similar ways. Think about it. We applaud good behavior. We reward it without question of motive or heart. After all, it is God who judges the heart, right? And faith, when mature, produces good behavior, so essentially it’s the same thing, right? Wrong. This is the very point that Jesus was getting to in His example of the new wine and wineskins. Religious behavior is not what He looks for—not then, not now. He is looking for faith!

The Greenhouse

As I took that long, hard look at my ministry to children and their families with these two lenses—a genuine partnership with parents, and authentic faith formation—I knew we had work to do. Well, God had work to do in us, to be more specific. We recognized that faith comes from truth and a vibrant, submissive life in relationship with God Himself. But faith is also designed to grow best (especially in the early years) in the home. Think of a greenhouse. Certainly a plant can grow out in the harsh elements of life and nature, but it grows *best* in a greenhouse, where all the elements are optimum.

God's intent for the family is for each generation to pass on faith to the next. So not only did He say that faith was the primary thing that He would expect from us someday, but He also set up an infrastructure that He envisioned would be best for this type of replication: the family.

Partly out of ignorance, much of my past ministry had eliminated parents from experiencing their God-given role of nurturing faith. There were even times when, out of compassion, I felt that we as the church could *help parents out* by doing what they were struggling with. New-wineskin thinking helped me evaluate my ministry by a different standard. Instead of “rescuing” children from the lack of spiritual parenting they were receiving, I began to think in terms of “raising up” spiritual parents and homes.

Parents Awakened

How does a church come alongside parents to help them in their own faith formation so that the spillover of their faith influences their children in the way God envisions? And what shifts in ministry focus need

to take place in order for us to devote time and attention to a ministry for adults when our infrastructure was designed for children and youth? Such questions are at the core of embracing a new wineskin, and they will be the foundational questions of this book.

Parents and ministry leaders can so quickly succumb to manipulating kids into good behavior and forgetting what really fosters faith: a relationship with God. We must arrange our ministries at the church and at home to teach and model that faith comes from *experiencing* God. It's not formulaic, not packaged and sitting on a shelf somewhere. It's organic and fresh.

Think of Saul, an epic student of God and His Word, a Pharisee among Pharisees. His transformation occurred when he *experienced* God. We have been entrusted with this generation of young people and have the privilege of placing them in the path of the Divine, where His divinity transforms. His holiness changes everything. Even today, we can create environments where we put God on display in all things.

Family Ministry Models for Faith Formation

In chapter 3 we'll look in more detail at what's involved in making parents primary in faith formation, and in chapter 4 we'll unpack the terms *faith formation* and *spiritual formation* to see what they do and do not mean. But even now, begin thinking about a ministry approach that best fits your church. Here are four models of how family ministry can be expressed in a local church.

Family Friendly

In this model, the church's programmatic structures for children and youth are unchanged, but each separate ministry creates opportunities

to draw generations together and encourages parents to participate in their children's discipleship through events and trainings.

Family Sensitive

"Family ministry" is a department in this model, focusing on responding to the urgent needs and issues that today's families are dealing with. It makes the healing of the family primary. Ministries are organized in separate departments with little intergenerational interaction.

Family Empowered

Although age-organized programs and events still exist in this model, the church is completely restructured to draw generations together. The goal is to equip parents and champion their position as primary disciple makers. The church takes a supportive role in this endeavor.

Family Centered

In this final model, the church has eliminated life-stage programs or events. The worship service and other events are multigenerational with a strong emphasis placed on the parents' responsibility to spiritually nurture their own children. The entire community feels a part of the faith development of the next generation whether they have children or not.

Awakened to More

We often hold on to those ratty old wineskins because we think they represent our dreams. But God is offering us *more!* And once we taste the new wine, we always want more. Recently I moved to another

position and left that office where I once showed up with my security blanket of my bag of tricks. As I was packing up, I found that material. And realized that I hadn't used it in six years. I smiled as I threw it all, piece by piece, into the trash. I am now anxiously waiting for God to give me a new wineskin once again.

MINISTRY ASSESSMENT

Take time to reflect, respond, and dream about how God might want to awaken you to *more* in your life personally or in your ministry to children and their families.

Reflect

How would you describe your current wineskin? When did your journey with it begin? How has it shaped you? Borne fruit? How did you see God bless it? In what ways can you see that it might have hindered faith formation in children's or families' lives? Why? What might be disconcerting about laying the old wineskin down to embrace a new one? What might the new one look like? Describe what your ministry could look like if God chose to pour out His new wine upon it? Spend some time writing an account of your thoughts and reflections.

Respond

Take some time to respond to God based on the things that He has revealed to you. Is this a time of confession or celebration? How will your response reveal where your faith is today? Is this a time for quietness and solitude? Or is this a time for you to have a conversation with a member of your team or a family in your ministry for support

or encouragement? However God's Spirit is speaking to you right now, respond to Him in that with a heart of surrender.

Dream

What dreams might God be dreaming for you? Are there dreams you desire that can be put into words? Is there a particular next step that you can begin implementing immediately? A person you could share this dream with? How might the things God has revealed to you serve as a catalyst to make some adjustments in your ministry to children and their families? As you look at the four models of family ministry, which model is God leading you toward in your ministry today? Is there a blend of the models or a new model? Where can your journey be shared or translated into a ministry opportunity?