

Refreshing the Vision for Children and Youth

The Vision for Children and Youth

Building on our vision to be a community of hope and transformation dedicated to following Jesus, the 2008 document *Our "Vision in Progress" for Young People* called for an approach that (i) fostered the integration of children and teenagers into the life of our community, (ii) promoted intergenerational relationships, (iii) supported parents as key influencers in young people's spiritual lives, and (iv) provided discipleship content that was relational, experiential, and allowed young people to discover their place in the story of God's love throughout history.

The Youth and Children Steering Team took this paper and developed seven recommendations: (i) integrate our activity on Sundays, (ii) create all-age community events, (iii) integrate all ages with global engagement, (iv) create opportunities for all ages to farm, (v) integrate children and teenagers into small groups, (vi) support parents, and (vii) develop a new paradigm of relational, integrated leadership.

In line with taking an integrated approach, the opportunities for and limitations of children and youth's engagement with Guatemala, the farm, and small groups will be discussed in the papers relating to those ministry areas.

Current Reality

We will look at current reality in terms of the four overarching philosophical principles, and related to those, the four recommendations of integrated Sundays, all-age community events, parental support, and developing a new leadership paradigm.

1. Integration of children and youth into the life of the community

Most Cedar Ridge activities and events have the option for childcare, and social events are generally family-friendly. Recently, considerable effort has been put into developing an integrated teaching curriculum and a process for content development for all ages. A few young people regularly participate in leading worship, and a deliberate attempt is made to engage young people in all-ages-together services and the first Sundays of the month.

However, additional progress could be made in enabling young people and adults to learn from one another. Young people generally interact with a small number of adults as leaders in their Sunday morning programs, and very few young people are integrated into small groups. This means most adults do not have an opportunity to learn from children and youth. There is minimal interaction between the various children and youth groups (pre-school, elementary, middle school and high school), limiting young people's opportunities to learn from one another, beyond their immediate peers.

In addition, adults continue to define the agenda. Children and youth are not involved in planning content or events. They are not represented in any form of leadership within the

church or consulted on any decisions. This contributes to the failure of youth to take ownership of their own spiritual development, denies them an opportunity to build leadership skills, and contributes to difficulties in transitioning into adult-oriented activities.

Worship is not geared towards young people, nor are young people supported in engaging in worship in the auditorium. Music is not a part of middle school or high school Sunday morning gatherings.

2. Intergenerational relationships

As noted above, community events are typically family-friendly, with activities for all ages; and such events provide a venue for adults who want to make connections with children and youth to do so. Young people are present in the auditorium on first Sundays, and a few participate in leading worship. Service projects—particularly the farm and churchwide days of service—have provided a means for people of all ages to interact outside of family groupings. Each year, a significant number of teenagers travel to Guatemala.

However, we have not been intentional about creating opportunities for intergenerational relationships to form. During social events, young people naturally gravitate to their peers or remain with their families. Given the culture of arriving late on Sundays, the potential for interaction before church is limited, and youth gather in the Barn separately from children and adults. People are not proactively encouraged to linger after the service, but are dismissed through the benediction. The racial reconciliation time of prayer and most after-service meetings are not intergenerational.

3. Support to parents

As part of the content development process, activities for children are integrated into discipleship materials, and occasional workshops for parents have been held after the service as part of discipleship series, but these have typically not been well attended. Children and youth leaders hold semi-regular “open houses” for parents to meet leaders and ask any questions. Parents of Cedar Ridge Kids (preschool and elementary) are emailed a “Family Follow-Up” message briefly explaining the week’s Sunday lesson and suggesting ways to reinforce the main learning points. Advent family reflections have also been developed most years.

More could be done to support parents, and to nurture partnership between parents and leaders of children and youth. Interaction between leaders and parents is very limited. Because leaders and parents don’t know each other, parents do not typically approach children and youth leaders for resources or advice, and conversely children and youth leaders do not know which parents to tap for help.

4. Experiential, relational content

As mentioned above, over the last year, considerable attention has been paid to developing an all-ages core curriculum that reflects the values and vision of Cedar Ridge, and a process to transform content into lesson plans. This process has included a wide range of adults involved in leading children and youth ministry, interested parents, and adults involved in music, prayer

and creative elements. Content has specifically defined head, heart and hands objectives: what do we want young people to know or learn, what do we want them to feel or value, and what do we want them to do or become.

The unavailability of good “off-the-shelf” materials and relevant resources makes the content development process laborious. There is a temptation to fall back on a more traditional teaching model, which is much simpler to prepare. This is exacerbated by a philosophical and practical tension between on the one hand ensuring the main message of a lesson is communicated confidently, clearly and enthusiastically; and on the other hand allowing young people to discuss and explore issues in a less directive manner.

The go-minute classroom setting of children and youth ministries on a Sunday morning also restricts how experiential the content can be, and we do not know how often suggestions in the preschool/elementary “Family Follow-Up” and the exercises in discipleship materials are used.

5. **New leadership paradigm**

Cedar Ridge’s children and youth ministries are run by a small group of faithful and committed people who love and serve on a weekly basis. Additional volunteers can be called upon to lead or assist on a less frequent basis.

However, relationship building with children and youth is a time- and resource-intensive process. Currently, there is an insufficient number of leaders willing to serve every Sunday (particularly since there is only one service). This results in larger group sizes and/or inconsistent leadership—both of which significantly limit the depth of relationships formed among young people, and between them and their leaders. Without adults willing and able to regularly devote time outside of Sunday mornings, youth have limited age-appropriate opportunities for experiencing community.

The busyness and inconsistency of children and youth leaders also restricts opportunities to strengthen relationships among the leaders themselves. This leads to a reduced sense of shared vision, and the underdevelopment of a relational culture.

Adult Bias

Adult bias has been defined as the power and privileging of adulthood over youth. It has both institutional and individual aspects, and can be used in the following ways:

- To silence youth—this is reflected in comments such as, “You’re not old enough.” “You can make decisions for yourself when you’re an adult.” “It’s good for you!”
- To diminish the experiences of youth—heard in remarks such as, “It’s just a stage – you’ll grow out of it.” “Oh, teenage love.” “It’s the hormones.”
- To provide empty leadership experiences—for example, “Come to this youth event – there will be pizza!”
- To hold youth to a different standard—as exemplified in observations like, “You’re so smart for your age!” “But you’re so young!”
- *To stereotype*—for example, “Stop being so childish.” “Teens don’t want to get up early.”

As we seek to foster the integration of children and teenagers into the life of our community, promote intergenerational relationships, support parents, and allow young people to discover their place in the story of God’s love throughout history, we need to proactively identify and challenge adult bias. We need to ensure the experiences and opinions of youth are heard and valued, and their journeys are cherished. Children and youth are integral to the life of our community, and their engagement with all aspects of discipleship should be active and increasingly self-directed. This means that we need to genuinely listen to young people and allow them the space to speak honestly and openly without fear of judgment or criticism. This reinforces the need to have a more relational leadership paradigm.

Main Priorities

The principles articulated in the *Vision in Progress* seem just as relevant today as when they were formulated eight years ago. Given our ongoing commitment to these principles, our understanding of the current reality, and our desire to address adult bias, the following are considered key priorities for moving closer to our vision for children and youth at Cedar Ridge. The thoughts and ideas of young people will be sought and incorporated as specific initiatives are planned and implemented.

1. Mobilize more leaders to work with children and youth

Recruiting sufficient leaders and helpers for children and youth ministries is a perpetual problem. Increasing the number of leaders and helpers would enable smaller groups on Sunday mornings for more in-depth discussion, and would allow for activities at other times in the week. Activities to address this need might include the following:

- Strengthen the understanding of leading as a way of helping to transform young lives—rather than glorified childcare.
- Provide more targeted opportunities for leaders to build a sense of shared vision through their involvement in lesson development, praying together, socializing and training
- Provide greater recognition to the sacrifice made by children and youth leaders in serving others rather than themselves on Sunday mornings
- Establish a library of Cedar Ridge lesson plans for non-discipleship series weeks that can be used on a three-year cycle to reduce the burden on leaders
- Focus on building a churchwide sense of shared responsibility for ministry to children and youth, in part by redefining family in terms of the broader community
- Have people share their stories of making a difference through or learning from their interactions with children and youth
- Inspire those who have stopped leading children’s ministries (as their life stage has changed) to recommit through a greater understanding of the value of their experience
- Continue to challenge the consumer orientation of our culture—including for college-age people who could serve as invaluable resources to youth
- Highlight the need for children and youth leaders during Sunday services, the Journey class, and other venues
- Recruit people who have availability at times other than Sunday mornings to lead formal and informal social activities with youth

2. Increase children and youth engagement in worship

Although young people are present in the auditorium for first Sundays and all-ages-together services, their involvement in worship appears to be minimal. Ideas to address this include the following:

- Develop a Sunday series, addressed in all age groups, about what worship means and why it is important
- Continue to explore ways of worshipping that extend beyond singing out loud
- Provide percussion instruments to younger children on first Sundays
- Designate an area in the auditorium where preschoolers can move around (other than the platform)
- Think through ways for older children and youth to engage through readings, drama, and sharing, as well as serving communion, greeting, making coffee, etc.
- Teach a song in Cedar Ridge Kids that the congregation will be singing on the first Sunday
- Find creative ways to integrate worship in middle school and high school groups on Sundays—using Spotify or possibly drawing on external resources such as the Convergence Music Project

3. Create a clearer path for young people to express commitment

Cedar Ridge membership is oriented towards adults. In some ways, this is to be expected since parents usually decide which church their family will attend, and how involved they will become. However, this is not always the case, with some youth attending independently of their parents, and some children being the ones to ask their adult caregivers if they can go to church. In addition, the decision of parents to be actively involved at Cedar Ridge typically has profound impacts on their children, and this should be acknowledged. A more inclusive approach to membership and member commitment might include some or all of the following:

- A Journey class designed for families
- Greater involvement of children on Commitment Sundays (which could be held on first Sundays)
- Identify some ways for children and youth to express milestones on their journey of following Jesus, including age-appropriate teaching on baptism
- A “Telling our Story” workshop or resource packet to help families articulate and understand their journey together

4. Increase intergenerational learning

The first step in increasing inter-generational learning is to build more of a culture of journeying together, and so create demand for such learning—which is counter to our prevailing culture.

The following could be undertaken to support intergenerational learning:

- Share learning moments from children and youth ministries periodically with the whole church (possibly through The Quarterly newsletter)
- Give more control to young people in defining their own content, even in small ways (e.g., selecting 2 of 3 activities)
- Involve young people more in the planning and delivery of first Sunday services

- Include teenagers in planning churchwide events, and provide volunteer opportunities that promote intergenerational interaction
- Organize activities where older children and youth take responsibility for younger ones
- Encourage ministry teams to consider including young people in an appropriate leadership or consultative capacity
- Have more adults engage in children and youth meetings by leading prayer, sharing about an experience, playing a song, teaching a craft, etc.

5. Promote intergenerational relationships

Encourage organic connection between people of different generations through picnics, coffeehouses, and other events. Strengthen relationships among young people and with their leaders. This could include some or all of the following:

- Strengthen youth relationships at a regular time other than Sunday mornings (e.g., a monthly or quarterly youth group) and have youth join the service in the auditorium on more Sundays so as not to overload youth leaders
- Include more time for discussion and sharing in age-based groups
- Upgrade the playground—remove weeds, add appropriate ground cover, relocate a couple of picnic tables—and encourage families of young children to meet up there after the service some Sundays
- Encourage people of all ages to linger after the service monthly; replace the benediction with an invitation to stay; provide healthy snacks and create a sociable ambience (rearrange the tables, play music, hold it outside in good weather, etc.); use ice-breakers that engage all ages; invite all ages over to the barn
- Look for ways to make children and youth events more inclusive of adults (rather than the reverse, which is our default)
- Include youth and children in the coffeehouse and other events
- Encourage engagement in intergenerational projects on churchwide Days of Service
- Promote the benefits of young people having adult involvement in their lives beyond that of their primary caregivers
- Make children and youth visible through participation in leading services, writing for The Quarterly newsletter, etc., to provide a point of entry for adults to speak to them

6. Provide more support to parents

Create more opportunities for interaction between children and youth leaders and parents, and strengthen connections among parents. This could include some or all of the following:

- Provide something similar to the “Family Follow-Up” email for middle school and high school so parents know what was covered in the lesson and can discuss it with their kids
- Develop a parents’ blog to share relevant articles, thoughts and resources for parents of children and youth, as well as news on upcoming events
- Host occasional social events for age-based groups and/or their parents
- Develop all-ages content on setting family priorities and time-management at different life-stages
- Encourage people to be more inclusive of parents and families they don’t know at potlucks and other events

7. Strengthen the youth-to-adult transition

Proactively invest in high school seniors and collage-age people as they make the transition to adulthood. This may include the following:

- Form or support small groups focused on graduating youth
- Involve older youth in leadership roles
- Provide resources and remote support to graduating youth as they try to find a church home close to college
- Develop outreach initiatives specifically tailored to college-age people
- Include making care packages for distant college students as a project on churchwide days of service
- Invite students who are home for the holidays to share updates and prayer requests