

## Not Just Playtime: Insights from Evangelistic Churches Reaching Children

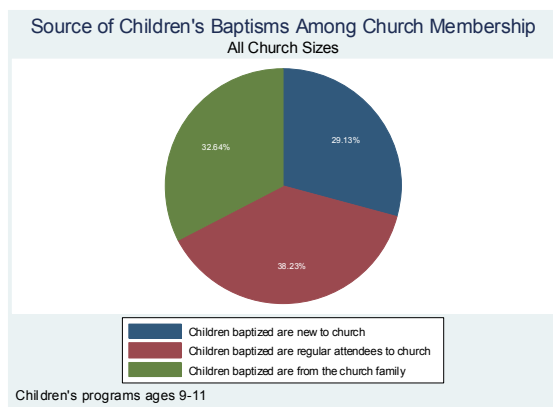
Southern Baptists have long been committed to sharing the gospel. This has often meant sharing with those “out there.” But, the reality is that we need to share the gospel among our own—evangelizing our own children. Two weeks ago I baptized my daughter and have two more who are not yet old enough to understand the nature of the gospel—so this is personal for me and important to all of us. Like most churches, our church is asking, “How can we best present the message of Christ to our children in our home and church?” Our research team tried to find that out by surveying more than 300 churches from across the country with high children’s baptisms rates.

**Our team at the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board (NAMB) discovered that baptisms among children between the ages of 9 and 11 are at a 30-year low and continuing to drop.** Skip Arnhart who serves NAMB as a Children’s Evangelism Associate noted: “long [have] we set our standard of success [to be the] number of people we have coming to church and that has proved to me over the 30-year trends that that’s not working.”<sup>1</sup> To look at “why,” we partnered with our Family Evangelism unit and initiated a research project to explore the effectiveness of churches that were evangelizing children between the ages of 9 and 11 years old. We hoped to discover the principles and methods that today’s Southern Baptist churches were applying in effective children’s evangelism demonstrated by their baptisms.<sup>2</sup>

At NAMB, we have received many questions about what is and what is not working with children’s evangelism. We decided to look at churches that were doing it right. We found 1,000 churches in four categories (small, medium, large, very large)<sup>3</sup> that evidence the highest children’s baptism rates in the Southern Baptist Convention. More than 300 of them responded. The research among churches that are “doing it well” revealed they are doing it with a very different and serious mindset. Instead of child care, playtime, or baby-sitting, these effective churches are making children’s evangelism one of the most vital, exciting, and impacting areas of their ministry.

### Where Are the Children Coming From?

According to our research, the children being baptized are coming from both inside and



outside the church. There is a fairly even distribution among the numbers from those in the church family (33%), regular attendees (38%), and those new to the church (29%). Whether the church is small, medium, large, or very large, there remains an even distribution. **Regardless of the size of the congregation, community context, or type of program used to attract and minister to kids and their parents, effective children’s evangelism almost equally reaches kids from church members, regular attenders, and those whose parents do not come to church services.**

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Rennie, *Research Report: Summary of Children’s Evangelism Study Focus Group* (Alpharetta, Ga.: North American Mission Board, 2004), 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Small (169 members or less), Medium (170–324 members), Large (325–622 members), Very Large (623 members or more).

For many, that is a “dicey” proposition—how do we reach the children of unchurched parents in a way that is sensitive, appropriate, and biblical. Many churches have found ways and many more still need to do so.

### **The Power of Visionary Pastors**

Without question, the senior pastor is indispensable in setting the tone for effective children’s evangelism. From the pulpit to the budget, the senior pastor has considerable influence in the direction a church takes. Philip Connor, Research Missiologist Associate with NAMB, noted from the churches surveyed that, “Of most crucial importance is that churches with successful children’s evangelism describe their senior pastor to be *very supportive* of children’s ministry. **In fact, over 90 percent of churches describe the senior pastor’s support to be at this level, regardless of church size.**”<sup>4</sup> The senior pastor who values children’s evangelism is strategic in guiding important, talented, and passionate leaders in the church to oversee this vital ministry area.

What these pastors understand is that even today with so many ministries and efforts geared to reaching the adults, huge numbers of missionaries are still found among those who became believers at an early age; these missionaries had a lifetime around which to build their relationship with God, allowing Him years to direct and shape their lives.

The research further concluded that strategic senior pastors chose and/or endorsed methods and programs that were altered, expanded, or even non-existent in other churches.<sup>5</sup> What works in one church does not necessarily translate over exactly to a different church setting. Every church body is unique and the strategic pastors who lead them must be men of vision, committed to developing the next generation of believers, tailoring methods specifically for their own church setting.

### **Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is!**

Researching the growing trends between cultural influence and spiritual training in churches today, George Barna noted that “Our children will define the future, which makes children our most significant and enduring legacy.”<sup>6</sup> Where pastors fail to see children’s ministry as something more than child care, money tends to be diverted to more “worthwhile” present-day goals. Where pastors recognize the importance of reaching children and investing in the future, budgets reflect healthy, proportional support. As was pointed out from our Children’s Evangelism Focus Group study, if eight out of ten dollars of a church’s budget go towards adult and youth activities while four out of ten people in attendance on any given Sunday or Wednesday are under the age of 12, then financial support is unbalanced and biased towards some other priority.<sup>7</sup> Mere lip service from the pulpit about the importance of evangelizing children is insufficient for the needs of this ministry.

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Conner, ed. *Children’s Evangelism Survey 2005* (Alpharetta, Ga.: North American Mission Board, 2005), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–6.

<sup>6</sup> George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church’s #1 Priority* (Ventura, Cal.: Regal Books, 2003), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Rennie, 38.

## **Training Up a Child**

The moral and spiritual dimension of life is vital to the quality of children's lives—particularly in their early years. Barna noted that churches “have a vested interest in the spiritual condition of children.” He continued to describe the importance that churches today are placing on children saying,

A compelling sign of the significance assigned to children is the existence of a full-blown children's ministry in virtually every church in the nation, complete with designated facilities and equipment, the purchase of Sunday School curriculum and educational resources, a full complement of teachers assigned to instruct kids each week, special programs administered during the year (e.g., Vacation Bible School, Mothers of Preschoolers, concerts, field trips and summer camps) and a series of safety procedures carried out to protect children from harm.<sup>8</sup>

**In our study of Southern Baptist churches with high children's baptisms, approximately 50 percent of them also train the parents.** While some children are not blessed with parents who attend church services, churches that have been effective in evangelizing children were making a concerted effort to teach parents how to share Christ with their own children; more importantly, **75 percent of these churches also trained their children how to share Christ with their friends.**<sup>9</sup>

Our research also revealed an important correlation between a church's size and who was most instrumental in presenting the gospel to the child. The smaller the church, the more likely it is that a children's worker will lead a child to Christ; the larger the church, the percentage of children led to Christ by their parents increases. Among small churches, 86 percent of children were led to Christ by children's workers and only 14 percent by their parents. Among medium churches, the numbers shifted to 80 percent children's workers and 20 percent parents. Among large churches, there is a significant increase to 29 percent of parents leading their children to Christ while the number of children's workers decreases to 71 percent. Among very large churches, the biggest shift occurs with 43 percent of children being led to Christ by their parents and 57 percent by children's workers. While children's workers certainly retain a dominant influence in being instrumental in a child's profession of faith, as churches grow larger, parents play an ever-increasing role. Partnering with parents for a child's spiritual health is a key element among effective evangelistic churches reaching children.

## **Parents Who Stick Around**

Another creative tool discovered during the research was the use of many volunteers. Effective evangelism and long-term children's ministries do not wear out the few volunteers who are involved in the ministry out of guilt because “the children must have someone.” They do not use the approach of tricking someone into saying “yes, I'll do children's church” and then lock the door and run. A strategic leader breaks the tasks down into smaller, less intimidating tasks. For example, one local church has a place for volunteers who never actually have to work with the children; they stuff backpacks with the activity tools needed on Sunday mornings for the small group leaders to use. This is a simple, easy task that someone can sign-on to do weekly

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<sup>8</sup> Barna, 37–38.

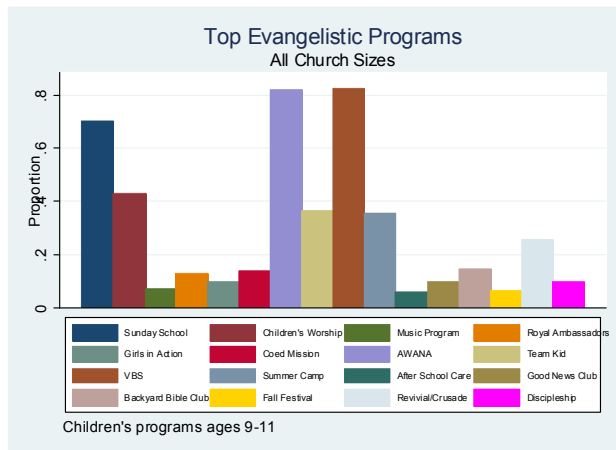
<sup>9</sup> Not measured in the research, yet observed in many of these churches, was the testimony that when these children shared Christ with their friends, those friends attended and had very positive (fun) experiences; in turn, they would often beg their own parents to start bringing them to that church on a regular basis, opening the door to reach lost parents as well.

even if they are intimidated by the idea of working with kids. In fact, these volunteers come during the week instead of meeting at the main children’s ministry meeting time. This task not only gives them a place of service, but it also lightens the workload of the children’s ministry leaders.

### People, Programs, and Effective Tools

Another element discovered among effective churches is high quality programming utilizing creative and dynamic activities; yet as great and essential as these factors are, they never seem to be enough. Churches having a life-changing impact with their children are the ones that connect children to one another and have adult leaders (and/or mature older students) who regularly interact with and care for them. **Despite all the pizzazz and glitz of incredible programs, mentoring seems to be the key to sustained, effective evangelism among children.**

So, what outreach programs do these churches use? Vacation Bible School, AWANA, and Sunday School are rated as the top evangelistic programs among high children’s baptism churches of all sizes. Interestingly, however, some of the churches reporting the most success with children don’t use Vacation Bible School or AWANA at all—they use custom, in-house produced Sunday morning programming that resembles other programs that incorporate the same elements of creativity, group worship, themed programming, and small group interaction common to these other successful programs.



The next grouping of successful programs included children’s worship, Team Kid, and summer camps. As noted above, these successful programs also include the same elements of creativity, high quality, interactive, group interaction, and themed programming. Philip Connor explained, “Surprisingly, there are more similarities for children’s programming among the different sizes of these successful churches than there are differences. Although larger churches typically engage in *more* programs and in programs that require more *infrastructure*

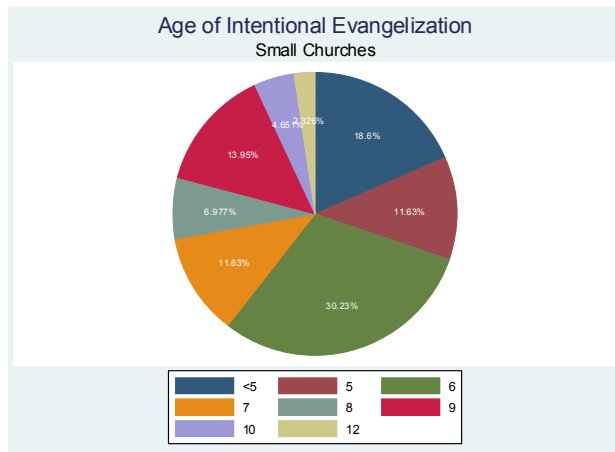
(e.g., AWANA), many of the successful churches rated the evangelistic content of their programs almost equally.”<sup>10</sup> **Thus the key to effective children’s evangelism is not dependent so much on the particular program or number of programs, but on the quality of that program and the trained people behind it.**

### Going to the Byways and Highways

Most effective churches are *intentionally* active in children’s evangelism as described by their aggressive evangelism philosophy. **Approximately 80 percent of small, medium, large, and very large churches present the gospel to all children regardless of age. Furthermore, nearly 95 percent of churches share the gospel with children aged 9 and under.** This evangelism philosophy helps explain why these churches are having a successful children evangelism program demonstrated by their baptism rate among young kids.

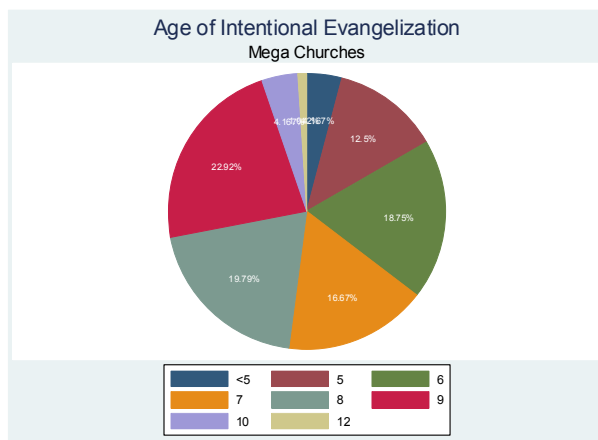
<sup>10</sup> Connor, 4. Evangelistic content or value should not be confused with the top evangelism programs of the churches’ children’s ministry.

In the small churches, over 60 percent of these intentionally evangelized children are ages 6 and younger. Approximately 85 percent of these churches present the gospel on a regular basis to all children regardless of age; 60 percent of those are willing to lead them to Christ when the child shows an interest. **An overwhelming majority (98%) believe that children age 9 and younger do indeed have the capacity to understand and believe the gospel message and commit their lives to Christ.** Thus, smaller churches typically aim to evangelize their children at a young age through more conventional means such as Sunday School teachers and Vacation Bible School workers. Mentoring relationships in the context of a smaller church family are vitally important to the success of this church’s children’s evangelism.



As churches grew in size, they were just as enthusiastic about sharing the gospel with children of all ages, but sought multiple indications of conviction by the Holy Spirit before leading a child to Christ. About 82 percent of both small- and medium-sized churches report that they have trained their workers to share the gospel with children. In both groups, 80 percent of the churches report that more of their children are led to Christ by the children’s workers than by the parents.

Towards the larger-sized churches, the church’s evangelism philosophy is very much built on an intentional step-by-step process designed to spiritually grow children. Not only did 45 percent of these churches include this description in their evangelism philosophy statement, but a further 37 percent describe their philosophy among children to be a set of age-appropriate programs/activities that coincide with pre-planned adult programs. The research among larger churches demonstrates a deliberate approach focused on ages of intentional evangelism increasing with the size of a church. Among the very large churches (623 members or more), even more



skepticism exists when acknowledging a younger child’s decision to follow Christ. Only 35 percent of very large churches begin the intentional evangelization of children at 6 years and under. As the smaller church is classified as being eager to evangelize children at a quite young age, the medium-sized church shows cautious skepticism, while the larger church is even more cautious of a child’s spiritual questioning. However, the most skepticism is found among the very large churches as they take great pains to analyze fully the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the child.

Our team does see and is concerned about the increase of baptisms among the youngest children—but sharing the gospel across all age groups is an important part of the strategy of most churches with high children’s baptisms.

### What’s the Best Strategy?

From our research among Southern Baptist churches, there is no “silver bullet” —no best way that fits all churches. The keys to a successful children’s evangelism strategy are not found

in its programming, but rather in **encouraging pastors with vision; supportive church budgets; solid biblical training in evangelism for workers, parents, and children; and high-quality intentional approaches that do not overburden volunteers, yet include parents in the process.** Churches with high children's baptisms are teaching us a few things—and we ought to listen, for the sake of our churches and for the sake of our children.

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