

Gather the Children

The Prayer Potential of the Next Generation

By Kim Butts



Several years ago, my husband led a concert of prayer in a small church in our city. Children and youth participated with the adults that evening. During one segment, Dave asked attendees to think of someone close to them who didn't yet know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He encouraged them to hold the faces of these friends and family members in their minds and hearts and ask God to draw them to Himself (John 6:44).

A quiet murmur filled the room as lost people were lifted up before the throne of grace. Dave walked around the room, quietly praying over those gathered. As he approached the back pew, he heard weeping—and discovered a young girl, maybe eight years old, lying face down on the pew, crying out to God on behalf of a classmate. Her heart was overcome by the burden that her friend could die without Jesus. In the midst of an intergenerational prayer meeting this young one was given an opportunity to learn how to pray for lost people.

The Prophet Joel once challenged the Israelites to “Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast” (Joel 2:16). As in Joel’s day, today there is a sense of urgency for God’s people to return their hearts to Him and be set apart in prayer and fasting for this crucial moment in history. The nations are raging, and we face grave crises in every corner of the earth. It is time to unleash the power of the Body of Christ—from the oldest saint to youngest believer.

Messy Powerhouse

The Church has a “spiritual powerhouse” within it that has been lying dormant for decades. Unfortunately, corporate expressions of prayer have become the domain of adults. We have failed to recognize and affirm the spiritual capacities of children. Children can be considered “messy,” which may be why we don’t often invite them into partnership for the sake of God’s Kingdom purposes.

Kids need to be trained how to hear and respond to the voice of God. If we do not equip and train our children to pray—trusting the power of God’s Spirit to work in and through them—we are seriously hindering the activity of God.

Satan knows prayer defeats him. Therefore, he has lulled us into thinking that children must be entertained while they are young. Satan knows that grabbing children early and involving them in less spiritually relevant activities is the key to sidelining their prayer potential. How can they know the power of Christ in their lives unless they are taught to pray?

Becky Fischer, founder of Kids in Ministry International, gives a powerful admonition to the Church: “Passion in life begins early. I’m continuously amazed at the unbelievable talent and skills of kids these days. Just do a simple search on YouTube and it’s filled with videos of kids who are supreme

singers, dancers, athletes, and so much more. . . . Why is it in the Church we can't picture them as spiritually gifted and talented?"

She adds, "Let's pass our faith on to the next generation, and seriously coach them for a supernatural walk with God while grounding them deeply in God's Word."

Unreached Opportunity

Fifty-two percent of the world's population is now under the age of 15. Because of this, children have been identified as the largest unreached people group in the world. Studies show that the majority of people who make decisions for Jesus and then stay connected to their faith commitment, do so between the ages of 4 and 14 (Check out 4to14window.com).

Yet studies also show that, on average, much of the Church gives a higher percentage of its spiritual attention, funding, and planning to adults. Imagine what would happen if we were intentionally focused upon mentoring and releasing young prayer warriors into their Kingdom purposes.

Cheri Fuller, in her book *When Children Pray*, writes, "Before we can teach children to pray, we have to change our minds about the children we intend to teach. We must . . . 1) cultivate their relationship with God, 2) partner with them in prayer, and 3) cultivate a world vision in them . . . and in ourselves."

The story of Samuel provides a good backdrop for insights into the privilege of training and partnering with children in prayer.

Samuel: Preschooler to Prophet

"Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod" (1 Sam. 2:18).

One night, when Samuel was just a young boy, the Lord called

to him. Samuel had been ministering to the Lord under the tutelage of Eli the priest, but, as 1 Samuel 3:7 says, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” When Samuel heard a voice three times in the night, he thought Eli was calling him. And three times Samuel went to Eli in obedience.

Finally, Eli recognized that God Himself was calling the young boy (v. 8). The prophet instructed Samuel with these words: “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’” (v. 9). When God called again, Samuel was prepared and ready to respond with obedience—even though he probably didn’t know what to expect or where it would lead.

Several important teachings come through in the story of Samuel as a young child:

1. Children—even very young children—can learn how to minister to and for the Lord, even if they do not yet fully know Him.

Samuel was likely only two or three years old when his mother took him to Eli. She had dedicated him to the Lord before he was born and fulfilled her promise as soon as she weaned him. Samuel was ministering before the Lord, even as a toddler (1 Sam. 2:18).

Similarly, Esther Ilnisky’s first memory of prayer is of crawling on maps of nations whose names she could not yet pronounce. Her parents’ prayer legacy resulted in the establishment of one of the first global children’s prayer networks: The Esther Network International. Because her own spiritual potential had been nurtured from a very young age, she now gives her life to raising up children as prayer warriors and full participants in the Kingdom of God.

2. Children can hear the voice of God. We don’t know if the voice Samuel heard was in his spirit or if it was the audible voice of God, but Samuel “heard” God calling him. He may have

been closer to 12 or 13 years of age at this time.

Angie Clark, author of the book *7 Essentials of Kids Prayer 2.0: Reflecting God's Glory*, relates a story about some young children in Singapore. Angie gave them these instructions: "Get quiet. Then, when I say, 'Go!' draw or write the first thing you see."

The children were separated from one another so they could have their own experiences with God. During sharing time, the children began to notice (with Angie's help) that their papers had some similar themes. As they listened more closely to God, they collectively discerned that they had all drawn something related to a particular preacher who lived "over the seas." Together they prayed for this unknown pastor and asked God if He wanted them to know his name. Soon one boy volunteered a name he had been hearing over and over in his spirit: Pastor Leaman. They gathered once again and prayed for Pastor Leaman's health and protection.

The following day, a missionary friend of Angie's stopped by and heard the story. She knew this pastor, who lived halfway around the world. He had been having serious health problems and needed earnest prayer. These children were excited that God had chosen to speak to them!

3. Children need godly examples and mentors to develop their prayer lives. Eli helped Samuel discern the voice of the Lord. He instructed the child well, showing him how to make himself available to hear the Lord and how to be obedient to Him. Because of Eli's mentoring, "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground" (1 Sam. 3:19).

When my youngest son, David, was two, I began to lay hands on him and pray the blessing from Numbers 6:24–26 over him each night before he went to sleep. The combination of the prayer of blessing and the laying on of hands is especially powerful.

When David was about four, one night he placed his hand on my head and blessed me back, using the same Scripture. It melted my heart and gave me such joy. We continued this mother-son prayer of blessing all through his growing-up years.

The night before his wedding, he came into our room, knelt by the bed and asked me for his blessing. I was, needless to say, undone. He now has a new baby of his own, and I believe this prayer of blessing will become part of that little daughter's experience with God very soon.

4. Very young children can talk to God. Samuel leaned into this experience with God willingly and obediently. He handled the words he heard from God with great integrity even at his young age (See 1 Samuel 3:11–18).

Once, when my husband and I finished teaching kindergartners how to pray for lost people, we asked if one of them would like to pray. Most of the children were very shy. However, one little five-year-old stood on a chair and began to belt out one of the most God-honoring, Kingdom-advancing prayers we have ever heard! It was evident that her parents had been training her little heart to love the lost from early on.

5. Children can only pray what is in their experience, so our job is to stretch them. Eli's training helped Samuel to step into the presence of God. His experience was stretched more as he learned how to minister and become obedient to God's call upon his life. Very young children can only pray about what they have experienced through their senses until they learn how to experience more of the spiritual realm.

Michaela was three, and her bedtime prayer one night was, "God, thank You for my books and My Little Pony and my carpet and my bed and my lamp and my toys and. . . ." On and on it went. In her three-year-old experience, all she could pray about was what she could see and touch.

When the amen finally came, her mother did two wise things.

First, she acknowledged the importance and viability of the prayer her daughter had just prayed. She said, “Oh Michaela, I know God was so pleased with that prayer! He knows what a thankful little girl you are for all He has provided for you!”

Then she did the second wise thing. She stretched her daughter’s prayer experience to a new level. Taking Michaela’s hand, she said, “Let’s add one more prayer tonight before you go to sleep. Let’s pray for the neighbors down the street who don’t know Jesus!”

It is up to us to stretch the boundaries of young spirituality so that it matures and grows. God will begin to speak to children in greater depth, knowing that they already have a huge capacity to pray for His Kingdom purposes.

Stepping into Destiny

What might have happened if Eli had not taught Samuel to hear the voice of God and to step into his destiny—the role he was created to fulfill? One has only to read Scripture to see the tremendous influence of this one life upon the nation of Israel. We need to take children seriously and encourage them to take their places alongside adults as co-laborers with Christ.

How many young “Samuels” are languishing in your church just waiting to be trained, encouraged, and stretched in prayer? Begin seeing these children as God sees them. Include them from time to time in intergenerational prayer experiences that are family friendly (lots of creativity). Children want to hear from God with you! Perhaps you will help one another stretch and grow in prayer as you learn how to trust the movement of God in one another. Who knows what God will do when His power is unleashed through your prayers?

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Sidebar

Seeing Children as God Sees Them

When you look at children, what do you see? Do you see them as secret weapons in God's heavenly arsenal? Do you believe God can use them to impact our world?

Here's how God sees the role of children in praise and spiritual warfare: "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2).

At the World Prayer Assembly in Indonesia in May 2012, 15-year-old Daisey told her story. Daisey is from Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia, and she grew up in a part of the city filled with prostitution, gangs, and drugs.

But local Christians saw the children as part of the answer to the plight of the city. These believers began to train the children in prayer. They taught them how God could give them power to pray and to see their community transformed. What began with ten children meeting once a week to pray for two hours, grew to 20 children meeting two times a week. They prayer walked their community and invited God to come. They prayed over neighborhood maps, praying the Scriptures and agreeing with God's plan.

One by one the brothels began to close. A national newspaper wrote about the transformation of the community. Today it is a safe place for children to play.

Do you believe God can use children? In Indonesia tens of thousands of children have been trained as intercessors. In neighboring Singapore a movement called Arise is raising up children in worship and prayer.

In Chennai, India, God called Anton Cruz to see destitute children with new eyes. Today, as part of the Royal Kids

Ministry, more than 8,000 children are a spiritual force in their community. They even have their own television program watched by two million children each week.

In Bihar, India's poorest state, God is using orphan girls as world-changers, full of joy and love for God. Praying with them has changed the way I see children today. Whole villages have come to Christ through their witness.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14).

The 4 to 14 Window of Opportunity

Researchers tell us that 80 percent of those who come to Christ do so by age 18. It is a time of great openness and responsiveness. So what would happen if we taught children to pray and encounter God? What would happen if we gave them opportunities to serve with us? What would happen if they discovered God could speak to them and use them while they are children, much like Samuel in the Bible? Would it mark them for life?

Some people are investing billions of dollars to target our children through media. They want to brand them, capture them, and exploit them for their agendas. The average child spends more than seven hours a day connecting with this dangerous, digital world.

But we have a mandate from God. He is calling His Church to see children with His eyes. The 4 to 14 Window Movement (targeting children 4 to 14 years of age) is responding to this call. Their goal is to maximize the transformational impact of children while they are young and to equip them for continuing impact for the rest of their lives.

Want to know more about raising up children to be Christ-followers who operate in the power of God? Check out the

videos at 4to14window.com.

TOM VICTOR is the facilitator for the 4/14 Movement for North America.

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