MAKE YOUR CHURCH A PLACE WHERE KIDS & TEENAGERS BELONG



FREE SAMPLE

REGGIE JOINER KRISTEN IVY TOM SHEFCHUNAS When Relationships Matter: Make Your Church A Place Where Kids & Teenagers Belong Published by Orange, a division of The reThink Group, Inc.

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WHEN RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Make Your Church a Place Where Kids & Teenagers Belong

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INTRODUCTION

hese pages explore the values and practices that drive leaders who believe it's important to build a relationally driven model of church. It's specifically designed to help them create a church culture where small groups are a priority.

These leaders share a common conviction that kids and teenagers need other adults besides their parents.

They need other adults . . . who believe in God. who believe in them. and who give them a place to belong.

That's why we wrote this book.

We're not claiming it answers every question or solves every problem.

But it will give you more ideas on how to effectively establish environments where kids can connect relationally.

If you want to influence what kids believe about God, themselves, and the rest of the world, give them somewhere to belong.

That's why we also hope you will join this conversation and champion the belief that relationships with kids and teenagers should be a priority in our churches.

GIVE KIDS SOMEONE AND SOMEWHERE

love nouns. It's probably because nouns were the easiest things for me to identify when I (Reggie) had to diagram sentences for Miss McGuffey's class in high school. Nouns are simple. They're just a person, place, or thing. They're not nearly as confusing as adverbs, participles, or dangling modifiers. (Make sure you don't use that last term in front of middle schoolers.) I'm glad that nouns are clear, tangible, and concrete.

What does that have to do with creating a place for kids to belong? A lot. We think kids and teenagers need two important nouns in their life. They need *someone* and they need *somewhere*.

Before anyone can wrestle with abstract concepts like faith, hope, and the meaning of life, they simply need to know who loves them and where they belong. In my early days, I tried to hand students a list of action verbs before I handed them a few solid nouns. I think I forgot that in the English language, nouns usually come before verbs. Since then, I've learned that before you can expect kids to believe, you usually need to give them someone who believes in them. Before you ask teenagers to "go tell the world," you need to give them a safe place where they know they belong.

Kids need **two** important **nouns** so they can anchor their lives to something solid.

They need a person. They need a place. Research suggests the earlier they identify the "who"s and "where"s of their life, the more solid their faith. That's where you come in as a ministry leader. You can't force or determine the faith or future of anyone, really. The only thing you can actually do is recruit leaders and establish places so kids can know they belong somewhere.

Give Kids Someone.

Let's start with the "who." The premise of this book is that most kids need to belong before they can believe, or keep believing. That's why we think it's important to re-arrange your ministry to make sure kids and teenagers have people who know them and a place where they're known. We actually think a small group is one of the best ways to introduce this generation to the concept of a God who loves them unconditionally.

Think about it.

You can't see God.

I've never seen God, and neither have you.

Okay. Maybe you think you have. But I'm going to bet it wasn't actually God.

More than likely, you were staring too long at a cloud formation, or you drank too much Nyquil. The point is there are no tangible, verifiable images you can hold up and say, "This is God."

It's too bad social media didn't exist thousands of years ago. It would have settled a lot of issues for skeptics.

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Imagine if . . .

Moses sent a pic of God writing the Ten Commandments. Peter uploaded images of Jesus walking on the water. John posted a video of Jesus ascending into heaven on YouTube.

(If social media had been around, it could have settled that whole dinosaur debate, too.)

Your job as a pastor or Christian leader would be a lot easier if those moments had been captured with some actual digital images.

Instead, you probably spend a lot of time trying to convince kids or teenagers to pursue a God they've never seen. It's tricky. God doesn't have an Instagram account or a Facebook page. So, how do you invite people to follow Someone they can't touch or see or hear? And how do you move them toward an authentic and personal faith in a God who may seem distant, vague, and unpredictable?

I (Reggie) have watched hundreds of churches debate which strategy is best for children and teenagers. I've listened to confident leaders promote their interpretation of Biblical truth and advocate their version of church as the solution for the dying faith of a generation. And while we all may not agree on every detail, we are connected by a common mission to help kids and adults grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

So, back to the question.

How do you build authentic faith in kids and teenagers? We think we have finally discovered the answer. And it's really simple.

Just kidding.

The truth is, it will never be simple. That's the nature of faith and pursuing a relationship with a mysterious and majestic Creator. We aren't writing this book because we think we have the answer, but because we've made a number of key observations through the years about kids and faith. Here are a few . . .

You don't shape a kid's faith by teaching them doctrine.
(Whatever you talk them into, someone else can talk them out of.)

You don't shape a kid's faith by persuading them to have better standards.

(They may ultimately give up if they feel like they can't measure up.)

You don't shape a kid's faith by getting them to attend your events.

(At some point, they'll compare the quality of your production to what culture produces, and you'll probably lose.)

But you can shape a kid's faith by connecting them to caring adults who will be present in their life.

Are we saying theology, lifestyle, and church attendance don't matter? Not at all. But we *are* suggesting any of those things, without caring and consistent relationships, will have a limited impact. You don't have to look very far to find sobering stats about the number of teenagers and college students who have walked away from church.

Our experience suggests that most kids who grow up and leave church didn't run away from caring relationships. They ran away from \dots

prejudice judgment irrelevance and religion.

RETHINK DISCIPLESHIP.

For the past twenty years, I (Reggie) have been able to hang out with a distinctive group of college students during the summer. They're the interns who show up to help at summer camps, and they represent a group of college-age individuals who didn't walk away from faith. Instead, they decided to use their summer breaks to invest in the faith of teenagers.

I'm always curious about their stories and what helped shape their faith to this point. At the beginning of the summer, I traditionally take them through an exercise. I ask them to pinpoint a few things in their past that contributed to their spiritual growth. Then, we write those things down on index cards, put them on a creative board, and look for similar patterns in their stories. For nearly two decades the results have been the same. Every defining moment in their stories always comes back to one or more of these five issues.

Life-changing truths – change how they see themselves or God

Spiritual disciplines – help them connect personally to God Ministry opportunities – increase their sense of mission Pivotal circumstances or events – compel them to rethink their priorities

Significant relationships – help them navigate their spiritual journey

One of the most enlightening moments of these sessions with our camp interns is always the point when we scan the board for the names of people who have impacted their lives. In everyone's story of faith, there are people who have shown up and become catalysts for their spiritual growth. Think about it. If you're reading this right now, chances are, you believe what you believe and you do what you do because of the way someone influenced your faith. More than likely, it wasn't just one person, but several. You could probably write down a short list of people who have been strategic influences in your life.

GOD USES PEOPLE.

Just like the people in ancient times developed their view of God as . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, or the God of Moses,

You've developed a sense of who God is because you have met . . . the God of Susan, the God of Carlos, or the God of Jeff.

God uses people. That's the point. He always has. Sometimes we forget the God of the Bible is the God of the people of the Bible. God has always used people to demonstrate His story of redemption.

The essence of our faith is linked to the idea that God actually became human. He became one of us.

So we could touch Him.

Hear Him.

See Him.

God simply decided the most effective way to redeem us was to become one of us.

The narrative of the Bible is anchored to the fact that God became a man so He could prove how much He loves us. And that Jesus literally became human. What happened on the cross and at the resurrection is so significant that sometimes we fail to recognize what God did just by showing up as a person.

He became us.

Not a book.

Not a really cuddly looking animal.

Not a supernatural being from Ezekiel's vision.

But a real, live, breathing human being.

So, what's the point of all of this? As believers, it's possible to get so caught up in our sermons, ordinances, doctrines, spiritual disciplines, and church programs that we forget the character of God was revealed to an ancient culture through an actual Person. Turn that one over in your head when you can't fall asleep at night. Evidently, God saw the need to show who He is to people who couldn't see Him by sending Someone they could see.

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God saw the need to show who He is to people who couldn't see Him by sending Someone they could see. The incarnation is one of the most complicated paradoxical truths of our Christian faith. When Jesus came to Earth, Jesus was as much man as if He were not God at all, and as much God as if He were not man at all. He is God and man at the same time. He stepped onto the planet so we could see God. This is what makes our faith different from most other religions. We follow a Man who said He is God. He actually said things like, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Of course, that statement raised a few eyebrows with the religious leaders. So they charged Him with blasphemy, convicted Him of a capital crime, and executed Him. The only problem: He is God, so He didn't stay dead.

Of course, because He is God, He accurately predicted He would be killed and then come back to life. For some reason, everyone was surprised when He actually did—but don't judge them too quickly. Sometimes it's just easier to understand things when we're looking backward. It kind of makes sense that what Jesus said before He died became a little clearer to the disciples after He came back to life.

When you read what Jesus says and you believe He actually came back to life, it gives His words a little extra punch. So, if you think something He said seems a little unreasonable or impossible, just remember—He was dead and now He's alive!

With that in mind, here's one of His statements that seems a little outlandish: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even **greater** things than these, because I am going to the Father. . . . And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth." ² Sounds a little crazy, doesn't it? When He left, Jesus promised to send His Spirit to be

- 1. John 14:9, NIV
- 2. John 14:12, 16-17a, NIV, emphasis added

here with us. Maybe that explains why He prayed such an unusual prayer, "Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they [those who are followers of Jesus] also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."³

Did you get it? Jesus, the God Man, the Man God, who died and rose again, predicted that one day the world will know He loves them, even though they can't see Him, because they can see the people who are following Him.

Please don't miss this.

People can't see God.

People can't see Jesus.

People can't see the Holy Spirit.

But people can see people who follow God. People can see the Church.

That's why what you do, as a pastor or leader, is so important. The Church has been part of God's strategy for a long time. The best chance someone may have to personally see God is to get a close-up look at the people who follow God.

That's why your mission is simple, but complicated. You're supposed to do what Jesus did. Show up in the lives of others so they can see God. Engage with broken people so they can believe in the Jesus who bled for them. That's why the work of your church is so critical. You are called to do more than simply make a presentation of the Gospel. You are called to engage in the messiness of humanity because of the Gospel. You are compelled by the Spirit of Christ in you to convince your world that God

3. John 17:21b, 23b, NIV, emphasis added

loves them by the way you love them. The fact is, the Church is one of the most divinely strategic organizations that exists. But when or if a church fails to make relationships a priority, it risks becoming irrelevant.

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The most valuable resources you have to help people see God are the people in your church who know God.

So, let's settle it.

God wired your faith to be shaped and influenced by someone else's faith.

And God designed you to love people in such a way they can see Him working in you.

Regardless of the style or size of your church, your greatest asset to building faith in the next generation isn't your Bible study, worship band, facilities, or budget.

The most valuable resources you have to help people see God are the people in your church who know God.

And if you hope to help a generation of kids and teenagers know God, then you have to be strategic about how you connect them to small group leaders who believe in God and who believe in them.

When Fortune magazine named "The World's 50 Greatest Leaders," Geoffrey Canada was number twelve on the list. Canada has been someone we've respected for years because of his work with children and teenagers. A few years ago, we had the privilege of meeting with him. Canada is an education reformer who grew up in the South Bronx, went to Harvard graduate school, and came back to Harlem as the president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone. He has dedicated his life to giving disadvantaged kids a better chance by helping them graduate high school and get into college. In a conversation with Geoffrey, he made an interesting observation about the kids in Harlem. He said the reason so many of these kids don't believe in God is because they've never seen adults who are God-like. What he was saying was simple—in order to believe in a good and creative God who loves them in spite of their mistakes and their mess, kids and teenagers need adults who will do the same.

When relationships matter in your church, recruiting SGLs, or small group leaders, to invest weekly in the lives of kids will become the most important thing you do. We hope you're reading this book because you believe that, too. If you don't, we hope you will by the time you finish.

Our premise is simple.

Leaders who connect with kids in a SMALL group over time have the potential to make a BIG impact on their faith. That's why we use the term lead small.

When you lead small, you simply make a choice to invest strategically in the lives of a few over time so you can help them build authentic faith.

When you lead small, you realize that what you do for a few will always have more potential than what you do for many.

So, if you want kids to know God, maybe one of the most important things you can do is to give them someone who will . . . talk with them,

hang out with them, do life with them.

someone who knows God.

The best way to help kids know God is to connect them with

Give Kids Somewhere.

When relationships matter you tend to spend more time thinking about creating the right place to affect those relationships. Think of some of the best friendships you've observed. There was probably a significant gathering place that became the iconic symbol of the relationship.

Seinfeld had a diner.
Friends had a coffee house.
Cheers had a bar.
How I Met Your Mother had MacLaren's.
Blue Bloods had a big dining table.
Riverdale had Pop's.

Okay. Those may not be the best examples of relationships. But they all speak to the power of having a place "where everybody knows your name." The point is, if you want to get serious about

influencing the hearts of this generation, you have to think about creating an actual, visible, consistent place where they know they belong.

A few years ago during a message, I (Reggie) was teaching at our annual Orange Conference and I had my daughter Hannah come up with me. She's an amazing artist and the fact that she's graduated from painting on our walls to painting on a professional canvas made her the perfect candidate to help me express this idea. As I began teaching this concept to the room, she began painting, and each word created a new brushstroke. By the end she had painted this beautiful table surrounded by every kind of chair you can think of. Across the canvas was painted the phrase, "There is always a place for you."

That's our role. To provide a place where there's always room at the table for a kid or teenager. To create a space where they know they belong.

From that point on we've used a chair to represent the idea of inclusion. The idea that the church should be the safest place. Where every kid or teenager can find their seat at the table.

When it comes to designing environments, no organization has more opportunity than the church. Unfortunately, some of us have insisted for a long time the Church is not a place, but rather it's people. Maybe we've forgotten that people still need a place. And that, realistically, the Church is both.

For nearly two thousand years, the Church has met in homes, catacombs, restaurants, buildings, cathedrals, tents, theatres, town halls, coffeehouses, storefronts, schools, and hotels. What do all these have in common, besides the fact that they're all nouns? They were actual, physical places where groups of people could meet. Regardless of your denomination or worship style, the local

church has always been a place where people can sit down and engage in a learning and worship experience.

The point is, you need a place. Regardless of how you define the Church, you can't ignore that one of its primary functions is to make it easier for people to assemble. The Church has always involved a location. Ideally, the Church may be made up of people, but practically the Church has to assume a responsibility to establish a place where multiple people can actually meet.

Think about it this way:

The Church can't force people to follow Jesus.

The Church can't demand that people embrace the Gospel.

The Church can't dictate that everyone connects relationally.

But the Church *can* create a safe and relevant place for people to engage, learn, and connect. Every church, regardless of its size or budget, can create an environment that makes it easier for kids and teenagers to experience authentic relationships.

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It's difficult to lead kids somewhere if you don't know where you're leading them. One of the most important things your staff should do as a team is prioritize which place is most important in your church. Some churches have so many programs or environments it's easy to have competing systems that confuse people and dilute their potential to influence a kid's faith. That's why we think every church should ask this key question, "Where do you want someone to be?" If we amplified this question, we could say it in a number of ways.

- Where do you want kids to ultimately be so you can influence their faith and character?
- Where is the most optimal environment in your church for kids to have the best potential to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ?
- If every week, kids or teenagers can only show up one time, experience one environment, participate in one activity, where would you tell them to go?

Every church needs to ask and answer questions like these if they hope to lead kids to a more authentic faith. Since you have limited resources, volunteers, and time, it's essential to prioritize which environment in your church is most important. It's difficult to lead kids somewhere if you don't know where you're leading them. So, what's your answer to the question, "Where do you want kids to be?"

Is it Sunday school?
Is it children's church?

Or is it Activate Live? (The weekly program for your teenagers—not the yogurt.)

Go ahead and decide. Until you do, you can't really be strategic in how you organize your ministry. We think the best answer to the question is:

Whichever environment connects a small group of kids with a consistent leader.

(If we were in a restaurant eating lunch, this is when we'd draw a dot and a circle to represent a small group and a leader.)

Generally speaking, we use these terms to clarify two big ideas:

Small group: a consistent gathering of a few for the purpose of growing in their relationship with God and each other.



Small group leader (SGL): someone who chooses to invest in the lives of a few to encourage authentic faith.



So, if you ask us the question, "Where do you want kids or teenagers to be?" Our answer will be, "in a small group." You can pick a different answer, but just remember: everything else in your culture will be affected by how you respond to this question. When you create a relationally driven culture, you establish a priority with everyone in your ministry that everything you do should somehow point to relationships. We think that if relationships really matter, then small groups should become the primary focus of your ministry strategy.

AUTHORS

REGGIE JOINER

Since someone on this writing team needed a little "experience," we thought maybe this was a good selection. Reggie Joiner is the founder and CEO of Orange, a non-profit organization whose purpose is to influence those who influence the next generation. Orange (ThinkOrange.com) provides resources and training for churches and organizations that create environments for parents, kids, and teenagers.

Prior to Orange, Joiner co-founded North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia, with Andy Stanley. During his 11 years as the Executive Director of Family Ministry, he developed a new concept for relevant ministry for children, teenagers, and married adults. If you end up road tripping with him across the country on Orange Tour, be prepared to stop at every antique store along the way. He has found a way to wear orange for 4,773 days and counting.

Reggie has authored and co-authored books including, *Think Orange*, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*, *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity*, *Lead Small*, It's *Just a Phase*, *New Kind of Leader*, and *Don't Miss It*. He and his wife Debbie live north of Atlanta and have four children, four grandchildren, and five granddogs. For more information about Reggie Joiner, visit ReggieJoiner.com or follow him on Instagram @ReggieJoiner.

KRISTEN IVY

It's hard to talk about small groups without getting some input from a small group leader. (Have you ever noticed how some small group leaders have opinions about how small groups should work?) Kristen has 15 years of experience leading small groups of middle school and high school girls. Her opinions about creating a small group culture come from years of reflecting on what ministry leaders can do to help the small group experience win. Ivy is Executive Director of Messaging at Orange. Before beginning her career at the company in 2006, she was a high school biology and English teacher, where she learned first-hand the joy and importance of influencing the next generation. She received her Master of Divinity in 2009. At Orange, Ivy has played an integral role in the evolution of the preschool, elementary, and high school curriculum, and has shared her experiences at speaking events across the country. Ivy is co-author of It's Just a Phase and Don't Miss It. She is a collegiate-cheerleading-captainturned-theologian whose dream is to star in Cirque du Soleil.

Ivy lives in Cumming, Georgia, with her husband Matt, and her three children, Sawyer, Hensley, and Raleigh. For more information about Kristen Ivy, visit Kristen Ivy.com or follow her on Instagram @_Kristen_Ivy.

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TOM SCHEFCHUNAS

Tom (or as most call him, Shef) has worked with students and adult leaders for over 20 years. He has been a teacher, coach, high school principal, student pastor, and father. He has a passion for recruiting and developing small group leaders, which is a big reason why he co-wrote the book *Lead Small* with Reggie Joiner. Shef has a degree in Physics and Education from Grove City College, a Masters in Educational Leadership from Georgia State, and a Masters in Biblical Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Shef was the Multi-Campus Director of Middle School at North Point for 13 years where he poured into hundreds of volunteers and leaders at five campuses. For four years, Shef led the Student Initiatives at Orange, and is now leading Youth Specialties, a 50 year old organization committed to encouraging, equipping, and providing community for youth leaders. His passions involve working with, developing, and consulting volunteer and professional church leaders all over the world.

He and his wife Julie have three kids, and they swim and bike their way all over Georgia. Follow him on Instagram @coachshef.

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LEAD SMALL

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EVERY KID NEEDS TO BE KNOWN BY SOMEONE AND TO BELONG SOMEWHERE.

Think of it this way: connecting kids to a consistent leader who believes in God and believes in them is something the church can do that nothing else in culture does. In When Relationships Matter, Reggie Joiner, Kristen Ivy, and Tom Shefchunas explain a shift that has been happening in the discipleships strategy of effective churches over the past decade. The three values and nine practices in When Relationships Matter will help you rethink and improve your small group strategy, including . . .

How to Improve your small group structure
How to Empower your small group leaders
How to Create engaging experiences for kids and teenagers

With best practices, training tips, and real-life stories from ministry leaders across the country, this book has what you need to create and improve an effective small group culture in your church.

"It's one thing to see the potential in the small groups; it's another to create a church culture in which small groups can thrive. When Relationships Matter is a must read for every senior leader and leadership team."

CAREY NIEUWHOF, Author of Didn't See It Coming, Founding Pastor of Connexus Church Community Church

"This is a smart, sustainable strategy with enormous generational impact."

JEFF HENDERSON, Lead Pastor of Gwinnett Church

"This is a timely work that provides a much needed blueprint for churches everywhere who believe kids and teenagers should be a priority in their ministry." **MARK BATTERSON**, Lead Pastor of National Community Church



