

# Getting Inside Your Pastor's Head

Cross the gulf between the children's ministry and your pastor

BY ALAN NELSON

## I guess I'm a freak of nature.

While many ministry people move from working with children and youth to become senior pastors, I'm sort of the opposite. After twenty years of pastoring, seventeen of those as the lead pastor, I became the executive editor of Rev! Magazine which involved even more work with pastors of the senior sort. My passion was leadership development. Having written several books on leadership and church development, I've had the opportunity to teach and train pastors around the country. But after a decade of this, I began to think there must be a better way to grow leaders.

George Barna told me, "Focus on kids." At first, I blew off his friendly advice since I wasn't much of a children's worker. "After all, I was a leadership development expert," I said to myself. But after some research and God-wrestling, I came to the conclusion that it's true. If you want to raise effective, ethical leaders, you need to get to them while they're moldable. That is why we created LeadNow, the

only concentrated leadership training program designed specifically for 10 to 13-year-olds. Not long ago, after three years of prototyping this executive quality curriculum to identify aptitude and train preteens, I gave up my paycheck and benefits to launch a national non-profit called KidLead. While my former colleagues might suggest I'm de-volving, I beg to differ.

Having seen both sides of the age group fence, I have no doubt there exists a gulf between most senior/lead pastors and children's ministries. Even good pastors providing modest emotional support for children's ministry in their church usually fail to understand how vital it is to the Kingdom. While admitting this would be political suicide, we senior pastors treat children's ministry as if it's just one of several sub-ministry equals. But it shouldn't be. Family and children's ministry is the key to our future.

Partial blame certainly lays on the side of the pastor, who is likely consumed with the overarching church infrastructure and a personal bias for leading his/her fellow adults. Much of this is due to his personal calling and the knowledge that grown-ups give the money to support all the ministries of the church. (I'm using the male pronoun since

over 90% of lead pastors are men. Adjust if appropriate.) But a savvy children's director can do a lot to advance the cause of kids by getting inside the pastor's head. Here are 10 effective ideas to accomplish this.

**1 Get to know thy pastor personally.** Can you name his pet peeves? What's his personality type? What is he passionate about? Can you quickly name his three biggest strengths and weaknesses? What are his hobbies? Do you know his favorite authors and reading topics? What do you know about his childhood and family of origin? Describe a failure in his past. What's his communication preference (verbal, written, face to face, e-mail, formal or informal)? Could you craft your pastor's resume? If you said "no" to more than two of these items, you need to do some homework. If your pastor isn't that open of a person, then do some digging, because the better you know your pastor personally, the more effective you'll be in building a bridge for your ministry.

**2 Provide unsolicited update reports.** Your pastor is likely busy and often not apt to ask you for a regular report, so providing a one-page synopsis once or twice a month is key. Include attendance if it's good. Describe event post-mortems and what's ahead. Tell your people connections and any of potential interest to him. Include potential problems, but also how you're addressing them proactively. Convey the attitude of, "Just keeping you informed, Pastor."

**3 Initiate meetings.** Don't confuse his being preoccupied with disinterest. Any savvy pastor knows the benefit of a healthy children's ministry, but the bottom line is that most pastors are spinning plates in other areas. Yet don't assume that silence is golden. If a problem arises where you've not paved a way to communicate clearly, you'll hamper your reputation and potentially set back the ministry you love.

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Get on his calendar at least 15 minutes bi-monthly, whether you're paid or volunteer, in a mega or micro-church. Make up excuses to meet or provide a verbal update, but one-on-one face time is vital.

**4 Come with an agenda in hand.** Even congenial senior pastors are thinking to themselves, "Please, don't waste my time." For most of them, tasks trump relationships, but realize that you're building a relationship just by getting together to discuss a task, need, agenda item, or vision clarification. If your church does not allow for private male-female time with the senior pastor, don't let that hamper a meeting. Do what it takes to keep protocol, whether it's bringing a team member or whatever.

**5 Bring potential solutions when you raise problems.** If you only meet when you have a problem, you'll be bad news whenever he sees you coming. This is simple stimulus-response conditioning. We don't enjoy being around people associated with negative information. Show that you've given thought to the situation and that he's hired or chosen a leader in children's ministry. Asking for his advice acknowledges that you're open to coaching and respect his wisdom.

**6 Keep the big picture in mind.** One of the biggest frustrations that pastors have with most staff members is the latter's tunnel vision. The pastor, more than anyone else, sees the big view. So be sure to remember the mother ship. Know why you have the opportunity to do your ministry and from where your budget, salary (small as it may be), facilities, and workers come. In your meetings, note how your ministry fits the overall goals of the church. Avoid the danger of silo thinking, where ministries become islands, drift, and eventually atrophy. Use similar words and phrases when describing your work and plans to the pastor.

**7 Educate your leader.** Pass along articles, book summaries, and stats on children and families that he can potentially use in sermons. Keep them brief but do this well and consistently. Pharmaceutical reps provide this as a value-added service to doctors. Although their job is to sell drugs, they also highlight research and recent medical studies for busy physicians who may not have time to read up on what's happening in their field. Plus, doing this allows you to set the agenda in the field.

**8 Arrange for pastor drop-ins.** If the pastor did a great staff devotional or board training session, ask him if he'd be willing to present it to your teaching staff. Invite the pastor to be a special guest at a children's event or family function. Provide an opportunity for him to be the hero and interact with others in your ministry. If possible, ►



keep it brief and avoid adding extra work. If you have to, come up with reasonable excuses for getting him into your area and to interact with your staff and kids. This also affirms your leadership among your staff by demonstrating your influence on the leader.

**9 Vie for “up front” time.** The larger the church becomes, the more difficult it is to get into the worship service announcements, bulletin, and church marketing. Do your best to make your wheel squeak. Do a short video after a VBS or big event. Make your announcements fun and engaging. Ask for the pastor’s voice as an advocate. Because of his rapport with “big church” constituents, nothing beats his voice in raising money, workers, and involvement. The church as a whole doesn’t know you because either they don’t have kids in your program and/or you’re sequestered “in the back” during their service.

**10 Develop advocates who add ballast to your voice.** Who has the pastor’s ear? Who loves what you do? Who can you educate, inform, and inspire and has influence on the pastor? Who’s your ally on the church board? Some churches do this formally, but most do not. Be sure that you’re not the sole voice representing children’s ministry to your pastor. Establish rapport and face time with others to whom your pastor listens. This is important to do before you need help in selling a big idea or putting out a fire.

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The goal is not manipulation, but acceleration. You’re the primary lobbyist for children’s ministry in your church, so staying close to the “power brokers” is vital. Just because we know the importance of children and preteens doesn’t mean everyone else does. You need to be savvy and shrewd in how you gain the influence of others to elevate this value. The process is called “leading up.” Rarely are we ever taught or trained how to influence our superiors. But with intentional, proactive effort, you can elevate the value of children’s ministry so that it takes greater priority in your church as a whole. This means bigger budgets, fewer conflicts, greater emphasis, and, who knows, maybe even a healthy raise for you. One of the most important things you can do for your children has little to do with your children, but rather, gently herding the shepherd of the flock. **K**

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