

# STARTING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING CENTRE IN YOUR CHURCH: WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

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*I'm on vacation. The first substantial vacation I've taken in 5 years. Exhausted and discouraged, I stare; watching waves crash against the shore; feeling the waves wear down solid rock. I fret.*

One day someone walks into the church office and announces they feel called to start one of those most magical of places, Early Childhood Learning Centres, or Daycares, or Preschools; some kind of learning place relevant for children that meets the needs of families today. Not as a business, not as an income generating rental, but as a ministry.

## What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

What could possibly go wrong? Advertise and register a few children. Hire a couple of teachers and use all of that Sunday school space and equipment that sits around all week to run a weekday ministry. Easy. Except it isn't.

When a church decides to start an Early Childhood Learning Centre they might think they know what they were getting into but in reality they likely don't have a clue.

First the centre uses one room, then two, then three, four, five, six and now those six rooms can barely contain them. The centre uses all the bathrooms in the building, all of them. The other ministries complain that the Early Childhood Learning Centre is taking over whole building, "ruining the neighbourhood," so to speak.

It takes a small forest of tissue and toilet paper to keep little noses and bottoms clean every year. The children keep Band-Aid in business. They create a small sheep's worth of dryer lint and a sizable mountain of diapers weekly.

They plug toilets, vomit on the rugs, ruin washing machines, damage the lawn, pick the flowers, break doors, leave tongue marks on windows, and fingerprints everywhere. They set off the alarms, leave the hose running over night, wear out toys, make a mess with art supplies, leave muddy foot prints on the stairs, run dirty hands down banisters, and have tantrums in the halls.

The leadership of a church with an Early Childhood Learning Centre might advise, “Don’t let anyone talk you into doing this! It’s a terrible idea! Your building will never be the same again. It will be one headache after another.” Don’t get members of the congregation started on daycare! Why would the church encourage women to work outside of the home when they should be looking after their own children? Why would a church want a revolving door of people coming and going through the building every day?

The church will have to hire staff and possibly fire some. The staff will love people and they will leave them. Especially the children. They will spend the early years of their life with the staff and then leave them for other teachers.

If the church decides to start an Early Childhood Learning Centre, the staff is going to get their hearts ripped out a few times. And the people who may hurt them most may be members of the Christian community. Not everyone will “get it,” not everyone will agree with this ministry. Some will even vehemently disagree.

If church members think spilled paint is messy wait until the church gets involved in this kind of ministry. It’s messy with a capital M in ways they have not imagined. Imagine the time the staff tells a mother they are concerned about her child’s mental health and she doesn’t take it very well. Or the time the church hosts a funeral for one of the children who dies of cancer. Or what about the time the staff navigates through an affair that occurs between two parents of children at the centre? Fun stuff!

There will be times where the church wonders, “What were we thinking?!” Whose idea was this anyway?!” We can’t do this!” It’s true, the church can’t do this but the church knows Someone who can. In fact, a church should not start an Early Childhood Learning Centre without Him.

The centre leadership is going to have sleepless nights and hectic days. Worry after worry. Will we meet our budget? What’s broken and how will we fix it? How can we help Johnny reach his potential without sacrificing the sanity of his teachers? How can we accept one more child with high needs without sacrificing the peace of the other children? Will Susy’s parents make it through their personal struggles? There is new leadership on the board? Will we have to start all over convincing these new leaders that an Early Childhood Learning Centre is an important ministry? Did the Centre staff clean up well enough on Friday for the Sunday morning children’s ministry? These are some of the real challenges running an Early Childhood Learning Centre as a church ministry.

Before a church starts an Early Childhood Learning Centre there are two questions to explore. The first question is, “Why?” At the end of the day,

week, month, and year, having a Rock Solid “Why” is the only thing that will get the church through the hard stuff.

The second question is, “Who is going to do it?” Can the church hire a ministry staff who are called by God to minister to families at an Early Childhood Learning Centre and who are deeply committed, licensed Early Childhood Educators? Is the church behind them 100 percent?

## The Elephant in the Room

There is an elephant in the room. The dreaded “D” word: Daycare. Why is the church encouraging women to work outside the home and allow someone else to “raise” their children? While daycares serve fathers as well the conservative evangelical argument against daycare for children focuses more often on mothers. Some members of the church community will argue that daycare is the cardinal sin of evangelical motherhood and a terrible thing to do to children and families. This is a pretty big elephant.

In the wake of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation discussion, always in the back of daycare staff minds when working with children is the question: are we causing harm? Child development researcher, Lian Tong, analysed the results from a Haley and Stansbury experiment on the effects of childcare on children:

The amount of time that a parent or teacher is willing to spend teaching, listening to, playing with, and exploring with the child the more socially, emotionally, and educationally developed the child will become. Whether that child receives the majority of his or her care at a centre or at its house, the biggest factor in deciding what will have the best effect on the child will be those willing to put in the time it and effort it takes to properly develop a child’s social, physical, and academic skills.

Whether at an expensive facility or relatively inexpensive, children who attend daycare facilities tend to develop social skills more quickly than children of the same age group that are reared at home. They communicate better with children of the same age and often try harder to communicate with those that are younger than them, by using patience and taking different approaches at presenting data.

“The first few years of a child’s life are important to form a basis for good education, morality, self-discipline and social integration. Consistency of approach, skills and qualifications of caregivers have

been shown in many studies to improve the chances of a child reaching his or her full potential.”<sup>1</sup>

During the family’s social evolution the task of raising children and particularly the role of motherhood has taken many forms. While the topic is too complex to discuss fully in this paper a brief overview may be helpful.

Early in recorded history, tribal cultures cared for children as a community. The family, for much of history, has been a multi-generational economic entity with all members participating in sustaining the family’s productivity. More recently, particularly in the western world, capitalism and the industrial revolution changed the idea of motherhood and gave rise of the nuclear family. The wet nurses of the early nineteenth century gave way to the British Nannies of the late nineteenth century. Families moved to post industrial revolution suburbs and by the 1920s sentimental Victorian maternalism had been demolished and family childcare models were re-shaped in life- altering ways.

In America, the caricature of the Antebellum Mammies and the Jim Crow America black domestics were replaced by the June Cleavers of the 1950’s. Post-World War II women increasingly began taking on careers and by the 1960s “moral motherhood” had been traded for “scientific motherhood.”<sup>2</sup> The role of childcare provider continued to evolve with society looking more and more to experts and trained professionals to provide early childhood care and education.

What the role of motherhood should be continues to be fought over by authors like Amy Chua in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Chua compares the merits of being a strict Asian mother to those of a permissive Western mother.<sup>3</sup> James Dobson’s suggestions for how to live guilt-free in motherhood can leave a mother in 2019 feeling like a failure.

In their book *Passionate Housewives: Desperate for God: Fresh Vision for the Hopeful Homemaker*, Jennie Chancey and Stacy McDonald note that “many times, without a scriptural model, the ‘professional mom’ creates a child-centered home—a fantasy household that is best described as an ultimate playground.”<sup>4</sup> Mothers in the Bible would have largely been

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<sup>1</sup> Tong, Lian, et al. “Early Development of Empathy in Toddlers: Effects of Daily Parent–Child Interaction and Home-Rearing Environment.” *Journal of applied Social Psychology*. 42.10 (2012): 2457-2478. Web. 8 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Plant, Rebecca Jo, “Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America,” University Of Chicago Press, May 21, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Chua, Amy “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” Penguin Books; Reprint edition (Dec 27 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Chancey, Jennie and McDonald, Stacy, “Passionate Housewives: Desperate for God: Fresh Vision for the Hopeful Homemaker,” *Vision Forum* (October 2007), 24-25

members of nomadic tribes (Sarah, Leah, Rachel), servants or slaves (Hagar, Jochebed) or members of agrarian societies (Rebekah.) Probably the most comprehensive role of a mother in the Bible is described in Proverbs 31. This woman seems to have it all, thriving career, global influence, happy children and a satisfied husband. She purchased land, participated in agriculture, managed staff, organized her family, did the shopping, and participated in the local and global economic marketplace. She must have been exhausted. However, she had help. Probably some of the servants she managed were early childhood educators.

In the Bible there are a wide variety of women doing a plethora of different things in God's world. Whether one is a man or a woman Christians will agree that when God calls they need to listen. Jesus commended Mary for sitting at his feet with Lazarus, to listen to him teach. He reprimanded Martha for fussing about the housework. The Old Testament holds Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, in high regard for her political and military role. The text does not state that Deborah was a mother but neither does it state that she was barren. The likelihood that she was a mother is high and yet she was an active religious and political leader in her community. Whether one is a Mary, a Martha, a Deborah or the archetypical Proverbs 31 woman, the church should trust parents to obey to what God is calling them to do. It needs to be okay for Martha to stay at home and do the housework and it needs to be okay for Mary to study scripture and for Deborah to be a leader. The church needs to accept the choices families make for themselves.

Most people would agree that over the last century defining motherhood has been controversial. Agrarian, tribal, and hunter gatherer societies, pre- and post-industrial capitalism, industrialization, and modernization have changed the face of motherhood and childhood. Whether a woman chooses to be a stay-at-home mother or be a career mother, the ideals of motherhood have drastically shifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and there is no turning back the clock.

Currently Western society is experiencing a shift in gender roles that leaves many nostalgic for their mother's home cooking and domesticity. Social norms change as society adapts to the current political and economic climate. More recently, new understanding of women's contribution and the place of children in society has also shifted social norms.

From the world's perspective, in 2019 many churches are still having old discussions about topics that are no longer relevant. Whether all women always should stay at home with their children is not worth arguing about any

more. If churches want to be relevant in their society they have to recognize that the rest of the culture is far past the conversation being about mothers working outside the home and whether or not they should put their children in daycare.

It is important to understand that what is often described as the “traditional” family is actually not so traditional. In reality the nuclear family is a relatively new vignette in the historical family photo album. The truly historic structure of the family actually is closer to the often-used quote “It takes a village to raise a child.”

An equitable society includes the contribution and the participation of all its members. A problem with rigid gender roles promoted by many conservative Christians is that they limit more than half the population’s direct involvement and influence regardless of gifting and ability. Saying women have only one role and only one way to contribute is not only inaccurate, it is also harmful.

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn in their book *Half the Sky* offer statistics and information on gender inequality to argue that “in this century the paramount moral challenge will be the struggle for gender equality around the world.”<sup>5</sup> The issue of gender inequality and poverty is often thought to be a developing world problem but in God’s economy a human problem anywhere in the world is also a problem for Christians. Kristof and WuDunn quote a Chinese proverb: “Women hold up half the sky.” While it would seem that the sky needs both men and women to hold it up, it appears that women hold up their half of the sky in a particular way.

Evidence has mounted that helping women can be a successful poverty-fighting strategy anywhere in the world . . .<sup>6</sup> Women’s empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduces infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chances of education for the next generation.<sup>7</sup>

French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, who founded Doctors Without Borders believes that, “Progress is achieved through women.”<sup>8</sup> Kristof and WuDunn call the reader “to join an incipient movement to emancipate

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<sup>5</sup> Kristof, Nicholas D. Kristof and WuDunn, Sheryl, “WuDunn *Half the Sky*,” Vintage; Reprint edition, June 1, 2010, (introduction xvii).

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn *Half the Sky* Ibid, (introduction p. xix).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, xx, Kristoff and WuDunn also state that many of the problems women and children face in the developing world, are also evident in wealthier countries.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid,, the authors state supporting data cited from World Bank, UNICEF, The United Nations Development Program and other organizations to support this theory,. xx

women and fight global poverty by unlocking women's power as economic catalysts."<sup>9</sup>

It is well known through the work of such organizations as Opportunity International that the most effective way to fight poverty, inequality and the abuse of women worldwide is to give women power in the marketplace.

'Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, or to reduce infant and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health - including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation. And I would also venture that no policy is more important in preventing conflict, or in achieving reconciliation after a conflict has ended.'<sup>10</sup>

When a church invests in a woman, she will invest in her children, their education, and the community. Further, when a church provides a well-thought-out education and care plan for her young children, the impact of that investment is multiplied.

Investing in a woman's understanding of her value, that is, her understanding of her authentic self, frees her to participate in social, political and economic spheres allowing her to have more influence as a culture-shaping member of society. The church has an opportunity to recognize the value of all voices in our society - men, women and children - bringing the family together as a whole unit, all equally involved in the life of the community. Jesus displayed a new and radical attitude toward women and children. In the struggle to end the oppression of women, Jesus' followers have the opportunity to take a leading role in women's rights and empowerment and in the education of the next generation.

## Cultural Relevance

During the years when children's emotional attachments are being formed the church has the opportunity to influence the next generation through early childhood education initiatives. A significant contribution to global equality for women could include providing excellent, well-thought-out early childhood education and childcare so that both men and women can

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid, xxii

<sup>10</sup>Annan, Kofi <https://opportunityinternational.ca/what-we-do/key-focus-areas/global-women>

participate in and have influence in the market place and in local and global conversations.

Further, it can be said that by educating the child, in an environment that recognizes children as a citizens with valid voices of their own, we also equip them to be culture-shapers. When that education stems from an understanding of relationship to God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, the opportunity to raise up the next generation of culture-shapers is powerful. Men, women, and children equally recognized as citizens contributing to society have the power to balance inequality. Together they hold up the sky.

Research by George Barna states that many Millennials (1980 and 1995) find church to be irrelevant.<sup>11</sup> Raised by Generation X (1965-1980) parents who chose to leave their Christian roots,<sup>12</sup> Millennials often express negative feelings toward the church based on either personal experience or family history. Canadian research indicates that the

unaffiliated and a significant portion of Census affiliates have raised their children to have No Religion...looking at those with No Religion not only minimizes the scale of what has taken place; it also fails to capture the extent and depth of a wider cultural change - that Canada has become a post-Christian country.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, children of Millennials have no experience with as well as no emotional attachment to the church. It is not uncommon for Christian early childhood educators to meet young parents today who have never been to a religious service for worship or any other reason. Even weddings and funerals are not held in church buildings any more.<sup>14</sup>

As a result the modern family tree is stunted; it has shallow roots. Many Gen X grandparents were disillusioned and rejected the church, consequently the church is irrelevant to their Millennial children, and their grandchildren's vague notions of the church is gleaned from bad press or TV sitcoms and dramas. It has been argued that for the next generation the church may not be

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.V-hxhLVy6FD>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/economy/issues-by-the-numbers/understanding-millennials-generational-differences.html#endnote-sup-1>

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, Brian and Stuart Macdonald. "Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada Since 1945" Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, 196.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.V-hxhLVy6FD>



on their radar at all.<sup>15</sup> When Christian influence is removed it will be no surprise that moral values shift. John S. Dickerson in his book *Hope of Nations* gives evidence of unrestrained moral deterioration to the point that everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes.<sup>16</sup> History tends to be malleable in the hands of humans. And collective memory is often susceptible to the interpretation of popular culture.

When a church chooses to run an Early Childhood Learning Centre as a ministry, it is an opportunity to influence and shape the culture around the family. The philosophy of some Christian Early Childhood Learning Centres is that parents are the primary care givers of their children and the Centre comes alongside, as early childhood educators to support the family and influence child development and parenting practices. One way a Christian centre might be different from a secular centre is by offering flexible hours and part-time spaces, thereby encouraging parents to arrange their schedules to be with their children as much as possible.

The BC Early Learning Framework states that the early years are a time when attitudes and attachments are forming.<sup>17</sup> Developing early attachment to God is crucial if a child will in the future be open to accepting salvation. The child needs a foundation for the path he or she will later walk. The Prophet Samuel is an excellent example. He was only a preschooler when his mother left him at the temple but she had already instilled in him a heart for God that carried him through his whole life.

An Early Learning Centre gives the church an opportunity to be front and centre with support and care. When the children are young the family is vulnerable. Through the ministry of an Early Learning Centre the church can offer educational resources, pray to strengthen, and encourage the family. Often when crisis hits, people are more open to exploring what a relationship with Jesus might look like. The experience of staff at Christian centres is that families appreciate prayer in times of crisis. One mother introduced herself as an agnostic when enrolling her child. She was told, “At this centre we pray and talk about God’s love for each person. If you are okay with that you are welcome here. We will accept you as you are as long as you can accept us as we are.” The family enrolled and over the course of two years the centre staff walked through some significant challenges with this family. On their last day at the centre the mother told the director, “I never thought I would say this

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<sup>15</sup> Clarke, Brian and Stuart Macdonald. “Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada Since 1945” Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017

<sup>16</sup> Dickerson, John S., “Hope of Nations” Zondervan, June 5 2018, 139-169

<sup>17</sup> BC Early Learning Framework, 2008, 10 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/early-learning/teach/early-learning-framework>

but I believe there is a God and that he hears my prayers.” It is no surprise that when anyone has a need and someone meets that need in a tangible, authentic way hearts are softened. John S. Dickerson, in his book *Hope of Nations*, indicates,

We are now beginning to taste a culture in which a majority of influencers have been taught to reject, mock or disdain the Christian Bible, the Ten Commandments, and the Christ who claims to be the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life.<sup>18</sup>

Further he states “cultural leaders have zero historical understanding of the Christian influence in the land they inherit.”<sup>19</sup>

The church has the opportunity to work with a generation that has no preconceived ideas or excess baggage about faith and what it means to have a relationship with the Saviour. While the parents of this generation may still have a conscious memory of church, if what Dickerson is saying is true, the next generation may have zero prior knowledge of, no memory of engaging with church and therefore could possibly have less negative biases toward Christianity. If the church engages thoughtfully with the next generation they may recognize the glorious gift Christ’s salvation really is. It may in fact be the spirituality this generation is looking for.

Families who have no previous experience with church may be hesitant to engage at first. As families build relationships with staff who care for them, pray for them, and gently introduce them to God’s love, they come to a place of longing for something better. Eventually they attend events or services and staff report them saying with pleased surprise, “It was not what I was expecting.” “It was more relevant and enjoyable than I expected.” Parents have told staff, “I never knew I could experience such peace just by hearing about God.” Or “I see something different in you and I really want the kind of friendship you have with Jesus.”

Based on discussions around the British Columbia government’s Early Years Strategy, Canadians care deeply about children and, at least in theory, want to invest in them.

‘To build a strategy to improve childcare, early childhood development and learning opportunities, we consulted with those who know best: parents and early childhood experts,’ said Premier Christy Clark. ‘Their ideas led directly to our provincial Early Years Strategy. It’s

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<sup>18</sup> Dickerson, John S., “Hope of Nations” Zondervan, June 5 2018, 25

<sup>19</sup> Dickerson, John S., “Hope of Nations” Zondervan, June 5 2018, 64

about helping parents balance the demands of work and raising a family, and setting children up for lifelong success.’

The B.C. Early Years Strategy is an eight-year government commitment to support early childhood development and help families with child care. Government spending on early years services will increase by \$76 million in the first three years of the strategy<sup>20</sup>

In a country where the church may seem to be irrelevant, churches have been invited to join the Early Childhood Education conversation. If one reads the recent documents put out by the BC government on their plans for Childcare in the province it becomes evident that the door is open for churches to engage.

In a province as diverse as B.C., views about childhood and children may differ profoundly, and these differences can both challenge and enrich the dialogue about early childhood. Whatever your own image of the child, the framework provides information and ideas to reflect upon, and to encourage you to take part in the dialogue about children and childhood.<sup>21</sup>

In the BC government’s New Spaces Funding application guidelines it is clear that non-profits are eligible to participate in the resources being made available,

We also know that child care is not a one-size fits all model, and each family has unique needs. That’s why our plan encourages partnerships, not just with school districts, but also with local governments, First Nations, and non-profit organizations.<sup>22</sup>

Church-run childcare centres in BC have already taken advantage of the parent fee reduction, wage enhancement and capital funding monies that are available.

Learning does not take place in isolation. Educators, parents and children are co-learners who have the opportunity to participate in how early childhood learning shapes the future. Many post-secondary schools in BC

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<sup>20</sup> <https://news.gov.bc.ca/stories/premier-unveils-bc-early-years-strategy>

<sup>21</sup> BC Early Learning Framework, 2008, 4. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/early-learning/teach/early-learning-framework>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/caring-for-young-children/running-daycare-preschool/childcare-new-spaces-fund>

have invited church-run centres to join them as co-learners by hosting practicum students. It may be that in some spheres of culture churches have little influence but BC's Early Childhood Educators have recognized the need to for all the voices to be heard in caring for and educating children, participating in the development of teachers, and supporting parents.

Just as the early years are formative for language acquisition, brain development and social development, the early years are also crucial for forming attitudes and values. An Early Childhood Learning Centre has the opportunity to influence the whole family during a particularly vulnerable time in its life cycle and to provide an opportunity for culture-shaping communities to form.

Not only did Jesus portray a new and radical attitude toward women, he also elevated the presence of children. A key component of Early Childhood Education in BC is making children visible in the community. Children are fierce and wild and beautiful and competent and complicated and often forgotten citizens of our society, who have real value to contribute.

Young children's powerful drive to learn is inextricably linked to their emerging identities as members of social, cultural, linguistic, and geographic communities. Children's curiosity inspires them to interact with other people, and with things and places in their environments, virtually from birth. It is in the dance between children and other children and adults that language and culture are created and recreated from generation to generation. In this dance, children are sometimes the leaders, and adults the followers, and vice versa. Adults' responses to children's activities—whether they respond, the appropriateness of their responses, and the creativity of their responses—affect young children's early learning capacities and their growing sense of themselves as members of their communities. These interactions also give adults the opportunity to learn, grow, and change, and to cultivate a disposition that welcome children's contributions.<sup>23</sup>

The BC Early Learning Framework (ELF) is a document that guides the practices of Early Childhood Education centres across the province. The deep valuing of children that is present in the BC Early Learning Framework is compatible with what Jesus modeled the day he reprimanded his disciples for sending the children away. In essence Jesus said, "I see you, children, you matter in my kingdom." He did the same for women. It seems fitting that

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<sup>23</sup> BC Early Learning Framework, 2008, P 10 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/early-learning/teach/early-learning-framework>

Christians should emulate Jesus' radical inclusion of both women and children in the public life of the community.

Using the power, wealth and influence of the church, to lead our communities and our world toward a more equitable future for both women and children is a worthy ministry. Providing exceptional early childhood education and care is one way the church can relevantly participate in community building and a more equitable future.

What if the church reimaged an Early Childhood Learning Center as a community group based on affinity around a group of children and their families? Author Brad House in his book *Community says*,

Think what could happen if we built our community groups with the freedom to contextualize and express community in whatever way best reaches the individual neighbourhood of that group, taking the gospel into 'every sphere and domain of society.' What unique expressions of community could be possible if we entrusted our church with the mission?<sup>24</sup>

Contextualizing our communication of the gospel to a particular group of children and their families has the potential to help the church "think differently about community groups, including their function, rhythms and engagement with culture."<sup>25</sup> House challenges the reader to a bold new paradigm for community groups and a vision for God to work in amazing ways.<sup>26</sup>

In a transient culture people arrange themselves by affinity, House says, for example people often arrange based on life stage. An early learning ministry is a perfect example of people arranging themselves in such a way. Parents in approximately in the same life stage with similar needs join a group that meets that common need: Early Childhood Learning Centre.

All people seek community but often find themselves in isolation searching for belonging in places that don't address the cause of that isolation. They don't recognize that their deepest need is to know their Creator. "Community is for us a declaration of the overwhelming love of God, a tangible proclamation of the reconciling work of the cross."<sup>27</sup> At the core of social justice, equality and growing up in a scary and confusing world is the

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<sup>24</sup> House, Brad, "Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support" Crossway, Sept. 7 2011,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 87-88

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 34

need to know who we are in Christ. This is what sets the Church-run Early Childhood Learning Center apart; it can offer of a safe place to explore knowing the Creator.

It might be argued that an Early Childhood Learning Centre is not a primary ministry of the church. If viewed as an entry level, come-see-what-we-are-about community group it is elevated “above the peripheral ministries and will be key to creating momentum.”<sup>28</sup> The opportunity to have so many non-church families interact with this unique community group on a daily basis is enormous.

Inspired by compassion, an Early Childhood Learning Centre gives children and their families a chance to learn about Christ in a positive, non-threatening atmosphere. A centre has the unique opportunity to offer pastoral care to families who may otherwise never experience a touch from the church. Through the community that is possible at a centre the mission of the church to love people to life may be achieved. “As God’s ambassadors on his mission. We get to share the gospel in every nook and cranny of the city.”<sup>29</sup>

As has been stated, the church has been invited to join the community through Early Childhood Education initiatives. Viewing the Early Childhood Learning Centre as a community group creates potential to leave a legacy in our communities. As House says, “Strive for a legacy of transformation that will recall the life of your church as one that changed the lives of all who came into contact with it. Fight for the legacy of a church that changed the city within which it existed.”<sup>30</sup> House cites studies that show Millennials have a tendency to want “belonging before belief.”<sup>31</sup> An Early Childhood Learning Centre is a great opportunity to belong to a group that has front row seats in observing the church with out actually sitting in the front row of the church. Coming face to face with the community on a daily basis, engaging with and loving our neighbours in authentic rhythms of living makes transformation happen.

House talks about barriers and bridges to creating meaningful life-giving community. Based on his assessment of high and low energy barriers to community it would seem an Early Childhood Learning Centre has a very low energy barrier. Any barriers do not take much effort to overcome because the purpose of caring for and educating children is valued and wanted. As a space

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 64

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 132

for engagement early childhood learning has the capacity to build bridges with related child development organizations in the community. House suggests, “Partnering with organizations that have a common goal will begin to redefine the perception of the church in that neighbourhood.”<sup>32</sup> Over time, being a consistent and reliable part of the community will give the Christian centre natural and organic opportunities to shape culture.

One of the core values of the BC Early Learning Framework (ELF) is telling the learning story in ordinary moments. House’s suggestion of “inviting members of your community into the rhythms of your life” fits well with this value.<sup>33</sup> In the rhythm of ordinary moments the church has the opportunity to provide “gospel centred hospitality” in a safe space that “seeks to love people where they are.”<sup>34</sup>

House’s elements of community are easily established in an Early Childhood Learning Centre that is based on the BC Early Learning Framework As well, the Early Childhood Educators Code of Ethics and education practices being taught to Early Childhood Educators in BC all support the type of environment our churches should value for children.

## Summary

Early childhood education and care is more than a women’s issue. It is a societal issue. Canadian society must be inclusive of all citizens. Through Early Childhood Learning Centres churches have the opportunity to engage in transformative community that removes hierarchy and gives value to all as co-learners.

Churches must build relevant relationships with their communities. An Early Childhood Learning Centre has the potential to create relationships with external early childhood agencies such as child development consultants, social workers and post secondary educators. When churches invite members of the community into its space, they join the dialogue of co-learners considering ways of living in the world.

Canada is moving toward a deeper understanding and valuing of the child. It is in the embryonic stages of reshaping the paradigm of early childhood education. Trends in the Early Childhood Education field in BC, inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy of education, are the Image of the Child and creating authentic communities around Early Childhood Learning

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 130

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 97

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 103

Centres. Establishing authentic community is a truth that originated with our God and welcoming children as equal participants in community is compatible with Jesus' teaching. Churches have been invited to participate with early childhood educators in establishing these communities.

Parents may feel the church is not relevant but they very much want quality childcare. If churches engage in providing exceptional faith-based Early Childhood Learning Centres in Canadian communities they gain a relevance voice in a crucial conversation. Ministry is messy. An Early Childhood Learning Centre will get your hands dirty. It is a five-days-a-week ministry with a very real presence in the church building. How high is your churches mess tolerance? Let's get messy!

*Later, when the water is calmer, I take a rowboat out past the waves and ride the swells, seeing the shore from a different perspective. This side is smooth. Not sure what I was worried about.*

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Kathleen McMillan. "Starting an Early Childhood Learning Centre: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?" Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca) (retrieved [Date Accessed]). Peer reviewed.