



Trends, part 1 of 3—

Trends vs. Fads

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What are the trends in children's ministries today? There are so many different approaches to children's church, Sunday School, and mid-week clubs. I have friends who have swung the pendulum of ministry emphasis from outreach to simple maintenance and back again. Some seem to have trouble finding a place in the center.

A trend can serve to guide your children's ministry or it can drive it into the ground. I like to look at positive trends rather than negative. What trends today are driving the church ahead in a positive way?

I cannot write about trends until I first discuss fads in children's ministries. Let me briefly mention some fads that have come, gone, and come again. Then I will discuss some major trends in children's work today. These hold true in America, but I've also observed them in my recent travels to Canada and Australia.

Fads

Fads come and go. When I was a boy, yo-yos, trolls, and pet rocks were the things to own. Now, skateboards have made a mainstream comeback. Nintendo 64 has become a substitute child-care giver in our society. Once again, my 10-year-old needs a yo-yo.

Fads are as real in church

work as they are in the world. Remember when everyone wanted a Plexiglas pulpit? How about trading in hymnals for the overhead projector?

In 1975, when I became a Christian, bus ministry was the rage. It had worked in a few isolated, yet high profile cases. Suddenly everyone had to have a bus ministry. Reaching lower income children and their families seemed to be the meal ticket for aspiring pastors. Churches that had no direction from God ventured into this labor-intensive ministry.



You couldn't just bring them in on buses and let them run wild in the sanctuary. Now you had to have a "super church" service to keep them occupied. So bus ministries and super church services sprang up around the country. The trouble with fads is this: Without God's direction, they are short lived.

Many churches now own one or more almost useless buses. Also, in closets somewhere are several thousand dollars worth of curriculum, magic tricks, and puppets. The fad arrived and departed, leaving in its wake wondering children with a one-time taste of Christianity.

Over the years, I have watched as children's workers have almost drowned in a sea of fads. These have included Saturday action rallies, puppet teams, spiritual warfare, wacky summer Wednesdays, CM websites, and more. Fads of methodology seem to constantly tug at the budgets of medium to larger churches. What church doesn't have a large flannel graph set, a closet filled with old slide shows, or a complete set of choir bells with accompanying curriculum?

I visited a church which had a closet filled with the most beautiful and expensive puppets. When asked why this equipment was sitting dormant, the current leaders replied, "Years ago our church hosted a puppet training seminar. The church invested in all of these puppets. For about a year we had a great puppet team. Then the director moved to another city. We don't have anyone to direct a team anymore." This story is all too familiar to anyone involved in or paying for children's ministries.

For a time, many of my friends had a children's church bank and variety store. The name and decoration varied, but the idea was the same. Bribe the kids by giving them play money and let them save and spend this in the store. I know of half a dozen churches that still have a treasure chest full of penny toy items sitting in a storeroom or behind a puppet theater.

In the late '80s, I talked to many workers who had begun to fill time in their classrooms with games and snacks. These times

may not have anything to do with God or the lesson of the day; they were simply time fillers. This fad of entertaining the children for the sake of entertainment has quickly declined.

Fads come and go. Are they bad? Not necessarily. Waking a sleeping congregation to the need to reach children is good. Motivating children to bring friends, Bibles, and offerings does have a higher purpose. But we must move beyond fads. Our approach to children's ministry, as the 21st century looms, cannot be

dictated by the latest vegetable video.

Many senior pastors have adopted Rick Warren's battle cry in *The Purpose Driven Church*. I believe this kind of vision-oriented management must also be applied to children's ministries. God-directed trends have purposes that transcend current technology and hype.

Fads might well be referred to as negative trends. In part two you will read of some positive trends I see happening in today's churches.

Questions For Further Study—

1. How can you discern the difference between fads and trends in children's ministry?
2. What current trend in children's ministry can you utilize to enhance the effectiveness of your children's ministry?
3. What is the prerequisite for using any method of church growth?