

Pass The Baton

Several weeks ago we announced that Kevin Evers from Living Waters Bible Camp applied to serve as our Youth and Family Pastor. He and his wife Naomi are coming to Wausau next weekend to explore whether God is indeed calling them to serve with us here at BTC. We all want what God wants.

When you hear the title - Youth and Family Pastor - you may be tempted to think that that's just a fancy name for a youth pastor, but that is not the case. We're not looking for a youth pastor. Regardless of who ends up filling this role their job is much broader than that: it is their task to facilitate the equipping of our congregation with the mindset, skills, and resources needed to train the next generation to carry the Great Commission forward in these Last Days.

I want you to look at that description closely: To equip our congregation with the mindset, skills, and resources needed to train the next generation to carry the Great Commission forward in these Last Days.

Notice the goal: to train the next generation to carry the gospel forward.

Did you notice who is training these young people? The new guy? No...all of us.

As we have indicated, you all will have two opportunities to meet the Evers. On Saturday evening at 6:30 we will host an ice cream social at the chapel during which we will give the Evers the opportunity to introduce themselves, and to answer questions that you have submitted. We have two requests:

First, because there's food involved, we need you to sign-up on the bulletin board in the hallway.

Second, if you have any specific questions you want to pose, there is a box on the counter in the lobby, and you can write your question on the paper provided there and place it in the box by Wednesday.

While everyone is welcome to attend, we strongly encourage parents to attend. Yet we expect that there will be those who are unable to attend that session, so we will also take some time Sunday morning to introduce them to the congregation, but there won't be any questions at that time.

Rest assured that your feedback is a very important part of the process. In the week following the interview we ask that you communicate your perceptions to the elders. This would be the time to raise any questions or concerns you may have, or to affirm your support. This isn't a popularity contest. Among other things we are evaluating his character, how the Lord has prepared him for this role, evidences that God is calling him to this role, and their fit with the culture of BTC.

As we anticipate the weekend, I want to use our time today to make sure we are all on the same page in terms of expectations. I've given you a brief summary of the purpose of the position, but this raises three other important questions

Why do we need this role?

What is involved in this role?

What qualifications are needed to fulfill this role?

I'll address all three, but since this is not an ordinary role, we need some context to put everything into perspective.

Psalm 127:3 SOLOMON Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him. Children born to a young man are like arrows in a warrior's hands.

Such a simple statement, but it has far reaching implications. For example, it implies that...

1. Our children don't belong to us, they belong to God.
2. We don't get to raise our children however we like. God entrusts these children to us to raise for His glory, to fulfill His purpose in and through them. Almost a thousand years later, Paul echoed this refrains when he told the Ephesian believers...

Ephesians 6:4 *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.*

3. Raising children for His glory doesn't happen by accident, we must make a conscious effort to aim them. In order to aim them, we must know what we are aiming for, and even how to aim. Shooting an arrow takes skill and practice. The same is true with raising children.
4. God's Word identifies the target, and even teaches us the skills we need to aim them. When is the last time you faced a challenge with your kids, and you actually consulted God's Word for direction? We talk to friends, we read books, we listen to podcasts, we even draw from our own experience, but how seldom we stop to find out what God has to say.

So what is God's purpose for our children? That's a broad question, but I think that the answer revolves around one simple command the Lord gave us just before He returned to Heaven:

Matthew 28:18-19 *Jesus told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations."*

In short, He commissioned us to carry on the mission He began. *He* came to seek and save the lost, and to this day He is still the only One who can save. Our job is to take Jesus into all the world - to the very places where the lost can be found. But what happens once they are found...once they bow the knee to Christ? At that moment they become something they've never been before, something they don't know how to be: a disciple - a follower of Christ. At that moment, as new as they are,

They too "have been given all authority in heaven and earth" i.e. they have been given authority to oppose Satan. John tells us that...

1 John 3.8 The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

Jesus came to destroy the devil's work, and He does that through us. Every new disciple has the authority to do that in the name of Christ.

They too are called to "go and make disciples of all nations".

The word "disciple" may tempt us to think that we are just students, but that is not the case. A true disciple is a warrior - we are in a war battling for the souls and destinies of people. The problem is no one is born knowing how to do this. They have been given authority to go against Satan, but they don't know how to wield that authority. Their task is to make disciples of all nations, but they don't know how to do that...in fact they're not even sure they *want* to do that. This is why they must be motivated, trained, and prepared to take up the mission.

To put it simply: God's mission requires our involvement. God's mission spans generations - all the way to the end of the age. A critical part of God's strategy is that each generation is responsible for raising up the next generation to embrace the mission, to carry the message...to take their place on the front lines. The fact is that disciples are made, not born: they must be motivated, trained and equipped. This is essential.

Our commission is to go into all the world, but there is a caveat: what was the very last thing Jesus said before He was taken back to Heaven?

Acts 1.8 "And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Notice the last phrase: where does the mission begin? In Jerusalem - which for the disciples was home. The mission begins at home. Did you know that the gospel travels most easily along family lines? The child of a Christian parent is far more likely to become a Christian than the child of a non-Christian. Throughout our lives we are influenced by many relationships, but without question our family relationships exert the most powerful influences to faith...especially the influence of our parents.

In other words, the vast majority of new disciples are going to come from our own family. As parents, your children are your most promising recruits. The farther out you go to the ends of the earth, the more difficult it becomes to make disciples. This is why the mission begins at home. This is where the baton gets passed most frequently as we parents pass our faith and convictions and the mission on to our children.

But from a human point of view, the passing of the baton from one generation to the next is the weak link in the process. Every generation must ask itself one strategic question: Are we passing the baton? Are we handing the mission to our children? But that gives rise to other important questions: How would we know if they are taking up their calling? What does it take to successfully pass the baton?

Understand that when I refer to the passing on of the mission, I'm not talking about a simple transfer of *responsibility*, as in "we older folks have been organizing everything at church for years, now it's your turn." Don't get me wrong, that has to happen, but it is not enough to simply transfer *responsibility*, we are talking about a transfer of *convictions* from one generation to the next. Such a transfer doesn't happen overnight, nor does it happen by accident. It is the result of an intentional, lifelong training process. In other words, if you want to pass on the *responsibility* for carrying on the mission to the next generation, you must first pass on the *convictions* that make it possible.

How do you know whether you have passed these convictions on? There are a number of important tests, but for today let's just look at two:

First, convictions change the way we live our lives. We can believe something, but it doesn't change anything. But a conviction takes root to the very core of our being: once it takes root it changes everything: our perspective, our values, our attitudes, our behaviors, our priorities, our relationships. Maybe not overnight, but change happens.

Second, people who embrace these convictions are actively engaged in the great work of taking Christ and His gospel to the ends of the earth. It's impossible to hold these convictions and not be involved in the mission, because this is what the convictions are about. They are willing to reorganize their lives so that that mission takes priority - even if it requires them to make personal sacrifices.

If that is the measure, how are we doing? Last February George Barna conducted the first ever "worldview survey" of the American population. A worldview is basically how we see life through the lens of our convictions. We interpret life based on what matters most to us. Barna wanted to know which worldviews Americans are relying on to make their decisions in life. He found that just 6% of the American population held to what we would recognize as a truly biblical worldview. Given that between 65-70% of Americans consider themselves to be Christian, 6% is not encouraging.

Whatever else these numbers imply, one thing is clear: the baton is not being passed. No doubt the percentage of professing Christians who hold a biblical worldview is higher than the general population, but even so the numbers are not encouraging.

Let's say that there are 175 people in this room. If Barna's numbers are accurate, that means that roughly 10 of you view the world from a truly biblical perspective.

You realize what this means: if we have a 6% success rate, that means that the enemy who opposes the gospel has a 94% success rate in passing the baton to the next generation.

What are we to do? Can we change this trajectory...if not for the church at large, at least with our own children in our own congregation? The good news is that we can. This is not a new problem - it is as old as humanity itself. God is well aware of the challenge, and so has left us with examples to follow. For example: The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' last words to Israel before he died...just before they made their second attempt to enter the promised land. His message is full of reminders and warnings and encouragements. Look at what he says in Deuteronomy 11.1...

Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always. Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the LORD your God... It was not your children who saw what he did for you in the desert until you arrived at this place...

Those of you who have been doing our Bible reading challenge, you've encountered the amazing things God did on their 40 year journey through the wilderness. But here they are at the end of the quest, and already those encounters were becoming less and less frequent. These experiences were fast becoming nothing more than second-hand stories they told to their children.

Moses knows that if they are to thrive in this next phase of their national experience, this new generation must be able to face enemies that are determined to keep them from the blessing that God has given them. He also knows that such courage cannot be built on second-hand stories. They must experience the power of God for themselves. What happened?

Fast forward several centuries, and we find that Moses' worst fears have come true: Israel split into two rival kingdoms, both of whom were sent into exile. As the prophet Habakkuk reflected on their predicament, he cried out to God...

Habakkuk 3.2 LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known...

In other words, "Lord, our faith is growing weak. I've heard all the stories, but are you still able to deliver your people from situations like this?" They had stopped seeing the Lord work, they stopped seeing His great deeds with their own eyes. Why? Because at some point, one generation failed to pass the baton of faith and obedience on to the next generation. At some point in their history, the children looked at their parents and said, "I hear what you're saying, but I'm not seeing it. You say that God is the only true God, that He is real, that He is near, but you live like He doesn't exist. You say that God is powerful, but you act like He is weak. You say that God is faithful, but you act like He can't be trusted."

Our kids are not dumb: they know the difference between speaking and living. They know whether we truly believe what we say. In the end they will pattern their lives after what we do, not what we say. Don't get me wrong, it's important for them to hear the stories of the great deeds of the Lord throughout history. But those stories only work if they continue right up to the present, if our children see them taking place in our lives as parents. Is God still present? Is He still powerful? Is He still faithful? Our job is not to tell them that He is. Our job is to show them that He is.

Hey kids! Do you remember hearing the true story of how Paul and Silas were in jail – they had been arrested because they refused to stop telling people the great news about Jesus. They were chained, and the door to their dungeon was locked. There they were, praising God in their dungeon when all of a sudden an earthquake shook the ground, breaking their chains, and opening the doors. God did that! As a result a number of people trusted Christ to save them from their sins, including the jailor.

Don't you wish stuff like that would happen today? We have a friend who is serving the Lord on university campuses in Ecuador, in South America. Back in November he and his teammates planned an outreach on a campus in Quito. Their plan was to share the gospel with complete strangers – no event, no relationship building, just walk up and share the gospel cold turkey. Our friend admitted that it was his least favorite activity.

But when they arrived on campus they couldn't find any students. They walked across the campus, and no one was outside. So they prayed, and do you know what happened? There was an earthquake, and in a moment hundreds of students came pouring out of the buildings, and they were able to share the gospel with them. Wow! Isn't that cool? God is still amazing!

We might wonder what was so special about our friend – why did God do that for him, why don't we see this going on in Wausau? I'll tell you what's so special about him: he obeyed. He is from the suburbs of Chicago. He had just graduated from university, he could have started his career already, but here he is in the mountains of South America. Why? Because God told Him to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations". He heard that, and even though it was outside his comfort zone he decided that God meant it, and he obeyed. He uprooted his life, delayed his career, and went.

Where did he get that obedience from? He caught it from his parents. Like the rest of us, his parents aren't perfect, but they love Jesus, and they built their lives around this mission. They raised their children to become a part of that mission. They didn't send them to serve, they took them. In the end, when our friend was having to decide how he would live his life, the work of the gospel mattered to him, because it first mattered to parents.

Is this not what we want for our children...for them to see the great deeds of the Lord, to have *them* want to be a part of this grand adventure? If we want to see that happen in the lives of our children, we must follow God's pattern, which we see demonstrated throughout scripture. For today I want to highlight two critical features of that pattern:

By God's design, parents in general, and fathers in particular, have the primary responsibility for training their children in the faith. Remember what Paul said, "*Fathers...bring them up in the training and discipline of the Lord.*"

It is not the church's job to train and discipline your children, that is your job as parents...and grandparents. Your job is not to raise kids who are well-behaved, or smart, or accomplished, or popular. Your job is to raise kids who love God with all their heart, soul, and strength, who are committed to obeying His commands – not because they must, but because they love Him...because they want to be a part of the grand mission to save the lost.

Having said that, even though parents have the primary responsibility for this, the church still has a role to play in the process...in fact, the church has three tasks:

First, to motivate parents to continue growing in their own faith.

Second, to train and equip parents to pass their faith – their convictions on to their children.

Third, to provide a community that reinforces the values being taught. We accomplish this...

By surrounding our children with other people who walk in obedience to God's Word,
By providing them with peers who are being taught the same values, and
By supplying well thought out traditions that connect children to a calling that is larger and older than they are.

I know that some of you parents are already doing this. This is not new to you. But there are others of you who struggle with this: you never had this growing up, so you don't know how to talk to your kids about life using God's Word as the standard. It's not so much that you don't want to, you just don't know how to. The temptation is strong to just hand your kids off to the "professionals" - let them tackle the tough issues. But that is not God's way.

Of the three responsibilities that are entrusted to us as a church, I would say that we do items one and three - not perfectly, but we do them. But if we are honest, item two is largely missing - and all the research indicates that without item two, the effectiveness of items one and three is seriously compromised. The fact is that at this moment we do not have any ongoing, intentional, coordinated effort to equip parents to train their own children in the Lord. Lord willing, we aim to change that.

Which brings us back to our three key questions regarding the position we are seeking to fill: Why do we need this role? What is involved in this role? What qualifications are needed to fulfill this role?

Why do we need this role? Because, if God expects us as parents and as a church to raise our kids to take their place in His mission, and if we as a church are not equipping parents to do that in any intentional way, then that needs to change. But here's the thing: Training parents to raise godly children who are equipped to serve the cause of the gospel in these last days is not a program. It's not an elective. It's not a curriculum. It is a mindset, a value system, a culture that must permeate everything we do. Creating that takes a lot of dedicated effort by someone who has the time and the commitment to pursue it. It is important enough that we have asked God to send us someone who can lead the charge. Whoever we end up calling to serve in that role, it will be their task to help us cultivate this mindset.

What is involved in this role? First, it would help to know what this individual will not be doing: He is not going to come into your home and tell you how to raise your kids. He is not doing all the training. He is not going to raise your kids for you.

So what *does* the role involve? Recall the description I gave at the beginning: To equip our congregation with the mindset, skills, and resources needed to train the next generation to carry the Great Commission forward in these Last Days.

Because this is a mindset that must permeate everything we do, he will collaborate with the church leadership, parents, and other ministry leaders to ensure that we are providing parents with the training they need. It will be his job...

- To find and deploy resources to help parents learn how train their children.
- To create opportunities for parents to encourage one another and learn from one another as they progress through the seasons of parenthood.
- To organize activities and opportunities for families to serve together in gospel focused adventures.
- To ensure that there is a family equipping component woven into all that we do.
- Even though parents are the primary trainers of their children, he will support parents by supplementing their efforts in mentoring youth. This will involve meeting with youth for personal training, incorporating parents in the planning and running of youth activities, and ensuring that those without parental support are being mentored.

It is important to understand that this is a major undertaking. This will not all happen overnight, nor do we expect this individual to do everything. Their job is more to facilitate than to do it all.

What qualifications are needed to fulfill this role? The ideal would be to have someone who has been through the parenting journey, whose kids are grown and engaged in the work of the gospel, and who has experience in leading this type of ministry. There's only one problem: finding the ideal is almost impossible. This model of ministry is exceedingly rare. So what do you do if you can't find the ideal? First off, we don't despair. I can't help but notice a pattern throughout the scriptures: that in almost every case where God called someone to serve Him, the person He called had no experience, in fact no ability to do the thing God was calling him to do. Had Noah ever built a ship? Had Moses ever led 2+ million people through the wilderness for 40 years? What experience did David have that qualified him to be king?

God equips those He calls. What we looking for? We are looking for the person that God has been preparing. How will we know?

Is he excited about raising the next generation for the glory of God?

Even if he doesn't experience organizing a group effort to do this, is there evidence that he has been doing this with his own kids?

Is he teachable? Is he willing to be a co-learner with other parents rather than "The Expert".

Is he approachable, personable across a span of ages?

Can he see a goal, and prayerfully execute a plan to move in that direction?

Are his wife and children an asset to his calling and reputation?