

**10 FRESH KidMin  
RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**THE  
GOSPEL  
TRUTH**

**ABOUT  
CHILDREN'S  
MINISTRY**

**MATT MARKINS & DAN LOVAGLIA  
WITH MARK McPEAK**



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## Matt and Dan would like to thank:

Our wives Katie and Kate for their faithfulness to Christ, His Church and to us.

Our CEO, Jack Eggar, and the Global Leadership Team for your vision and wisdom.

Mark McPeak for leading our research efforts and seeking to understand the challenges that KidMin Leaders face as they minister in today's culture.

The KidMin Community who participated in the research: your voice was listened to and understood.

Senior pastors who recognize, understand, and prioritize the value of children's ministry within the mission of the church.

Mike Handler for helping us shape our thoughts and connect all the dots.

Karen Kauffman for the compelling and commanding cover design.

Nicole Bunger for the smart interior design. You made our work easy to read and understand as well as visually engaging.

The production group at Awana® for your special care and attention to detail.

And our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the gift of grace through You alone, and Your community, the Church.



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1 2 3 4 5 6 20 19 18 17 16 15

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# WE HUNDREDS

ASKED

OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRY LEADERS AND DECISION MAKERS...

*"So, why did you become involved in ministering to kids?"*

*"How about impact ... are you seeing the results you hoped to see?"*

*"How's it going ... ministering to the kids?"*

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# INTRODUCTION

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# We Listened to Children's Ministry Leaders and What They Said May Change Everything.

We asked hundreds of children's ministry leaders and decision makers ...

- "So, why did you become involved in ministering to kids?"
- "How about impact ... are you seeing the results you hoped to see?"
- "How's it going ... ministering to the kids?"

These seemingly simple questions, ordinary conversation-starters really, have arisen as a vitally important catalyst. Sometimes it's timing that turns something ordinary into something powerful. Asking these and other questions revealed that now is a critical and even pivotal time in children's ministry. We feel as though we're at a crossroads on the journey of

ministering to children and teens and we'll need to make some critical decisions. The responses to these questions and what we all choose to do with them, might ultimately change **the entire children's ministry landscape.**

This is a bold assertion, but one made with confidence. It's reasonable, first of all, because we asked these questions (and many more related ones) in a careful and complex way through extensive research. The research was conducted with decision makers and ministers in the evangelical children's ministry community. And, even more importantly, we make this declaration with confidence because of the responses these leaders gave.

Overall, an unsettling reality was expressed by many leaders who hinted at a major disconnect between what's happening on their watch and the reasons they became involved in the first place. It's as though many people started out with a great passion to reach kids – to change the world through discipling children and teens. But now, as they look honestly at what's happening, they're disillusioned. This is seen as they talk about:

- The **priorities** in children's ministry programming.
- The **impact** of ministry efforts and activities.
- And, most importantly, the **outcomes** they're seeing in the kids and their homes.

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**Overall, an unsettling reality was expressed by many leaders who hinted at a major disconnect between what's happening and the reasons they became involved in the first place.**

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We asked these influencers to take a step back and look at the effectiveness of their church programming, the vitality of partnership with those in the home, and above all the hearts and minds of the kids they're intending to reach.

## Jesus Started the Children's Ministry Movement.

Good news: there's still great passion out there among the special people who minister with children and teens. Adults who avoid ministering to younger people often do so because they find it frustrating. But people with a calling and passion for children's ministry see it as an eternal investment. They believe they are serving God, desiring to build the next generation of believers who will be Christ to the world and continue the process of spreading His

Gospel. Perhaps it goes without saying, but they are passionate about the future of our faith and they see that the evangelism and discipleship of children and youth is of vital importance. They know a certain amount of patience is involved and that they must be willing to wait for the ultimate fruit of their efforts. The frustration of those who don't have the patience for children's ministry or who don't "get it," goes back to the beginning.

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**Jesus elevated the status of children. He changed everything.**

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*Now they were bringing even infants to Him that He might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him, saying, "Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Luke 18:15-17)*

Many people who love children's ministry have been moved by this scene so intentionally included in the story of Jesus. The Gospel writers were impacted by this moment and the Holy Spirit brought it back to their memories as they wrote their accounts of our Lord's life. Jesus taught so much by what He did (and said) in this encounter. In a cultural context where children were not welcome in the seriousness of adult moments – Jesus elevated the status of children. He changed everything.



The frustrated people who didn't get it, were trying their best to keep the kids away from Jesus. After all, He was doing really "important work" (from their perspective) ministering to adults. But Jesus saw things differently. We know Jesus did not waste any opportunities to instruct and share truth as He was doing the will of His Father. This occasion was no different. Jesus clearly meant to make a bold statement in this scene under the tree (or wherever it was). He welcomed these children, blessing them in that moment and by doing so, He placed children and ministry to them into an eternal perspective.

We can rightly say that Jesus was the founder of children's ministry. He is the one who gave children their standing in the kingdom, and from a practical standpoint, in the church. He said *"let the children come to Me."* He used them as the example of faith calling us to receive His message like a child, with the faith of a child. Faithful workers worldwide have been bringing children to Jesus ever since that moment.

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**We can rightly say that Jesus was the founder of children's ministry.**

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## We've Come a Long Way Since Jesus Blessed Kids Ministry.

We're in agreement that there is a strong biblical foundation found in this small incident in the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures for what children's ministry leaders and workers do. We're long past arguments over the value of ministering to our children – in our homes and in our churches. Obviously there are questions and differences of opinion about exactly *how* to go about it. However, among Bible-believing Christians the question of reaching children and bringing them to Jesus has definitely been settled. There is a growing awareness that people between the ages of 4-14 are most open to the Gospel. This is good news!

Not only has this question of ministering to children been resolved, but this category of ministry has grown immensely. The commitment to reach kids has expanded exponentially, and it is exceedingly difficult to find a church in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world, without some type of children's ministry.

Many churches have invested significantly in resources like buildings and dedicated physical spaces (some as impressive as theme parks) to reach families and kids. There are ministry professionals in this category, well-trained in higher educational contexts like seminaries, leading many trained and equipped volunteers. An entire children's ministry "industry" has arisen to help provide what churches need in terms of materials and curriculum, training and support, and many other resources.

## Are We Accomplishing His Calling and Purpose in Children's Ministry?

So, with all this development and specialty, things ought to be great in children's ministry. With all the dedicated resources, all the available training, all the ministry organizations and companies offering their services, we ought to be seeing unprecedented success. At this moment in the history of the church, we ought to be fulfilling the purpose of children's ministry as never before. Right?

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**The desire to lead kids to Christ and disciple them is still the purpose that burns in the hearts of those who love the Lord and who want to bring children to Him.**

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As part of examining the question – **Are we accomplishing what we're called to do in children's ministry?** – we must think a little more deeply about that scene with Jesus and the little children. We must ask ourselves what was Jesus really instructing us to do. After all, we believe in children's ministry and have invested heavily in carrying it out. We have complex spaces, programs, and ongoing activities. Many have dedicated their lives to this purpose.

Thinking carefully we realize these instructions are not unlike those Jesus gave at the end of His ministry in what we call the Great Commission. He commanded us to take His message to the ends of the earth and in doing so He asked us to bring everyone to Him – not just children. So Jesus is asking us to fulfill the Great Commission (*"Go therefore and make disciples ..."*) with people of all ages – adult and child alike.

*"Let the children come to Me ..."* To be consistent with what Jesus clearly instructed us to do,

He must be challenging us to go and make disciples of children. And this is the reason so many people chose children's ministry in the first place. As you'll see in the pages that follow, the desire to lead kids to Christ and disciple them is still the purpose that burns in the hearts of those who love the Lord and who want to bring children to Him. Two of the hundreds of children's ministry leaders we interviewed expressed it in their own words, this way:

*"The objective of any children's ministry should be to equip children with the tools they will need for life to grow as a disciple, defend their faith effectively, and make other disciples along their journey."*

*"... Christ commanded us to go and make disciples. Kids are our disciples, and our goal is to make them into future disciple makers."*

(Both comments are word-for-word responses of children's ministry decision makers to the question: "Thinking about what children's ministry in a church should accomplish, what would you say is the most important purpose or objective of children's ministry in a church?")

## Maybe It's Time for Some Changes.

Despite our compelling calling in children's ministry, there is widespread concern that we've moved away from this ultimate purpose and missed the point. In the current context of unprecedented cultural change and technological advancement and in all the sophistication that has developed in the children's ministry marketplace, some important questions must be answered:

- Has the culture overwhelmed us?
- Have all the changes, innovations, and new resources made us more effective?
- Are we producing the product (kids who are committed disciples) Jesus called us to produce?

**... the sum of what we heard, there is a concern that we may have drifted from our purpose.**

We listened. We wanted to hear what our brothers and sisters in children's ministry had to say about these questions. And we heard a lot! Some of what we heard will not be surprising to those who love children's ministry. Some things may be new. But the sum of what we heard, there is a concern that we may have drifted from our purpose. There is a renewed desire to realign ourselves and our priorities to get back to the real reason we started ministering to kids in the first place.

**Many fear that in the overwhelming busyness of running a children's ministry program, we may have lost sight of the priority – making disciples of kids, parents, and leaders.**

As you read the feedback from the children's ministry community, you are likely to sense (even resonate with) what we heard. There is a willingness to change as never before. Because churches tend to be later adapters and we like to keep things the way they are, we are often slow to make changes – especially major ones. Yet, in the context of asking these core questions about

the purpose of children's ministry, the current challenges churches are facing, and the results they're producing; we found an unprecedented willingness to make changes.

As we've listened we hear one sentiment expressed again and again. Many fear that in the overwhelming busyness of running a children's ministry program, we may have lost sight of the priority – making disciples of kids, parents, and leaders. And, maybe it's time we rethink and make some big decisions to get back to what we're really supposed to be all about. The words of another children's ministry leader we interviewed represent the hearts of many:

*"Helping workers understand that the goal is evangelism and discipleship and relationships with families – that we aren't just running programs so kids will be busy at church."*

(Word-for-word response of a children's ministry decision maker to the question: "What would you say is/are the greatest challenge(s) you face as you and your team work to successfully fulfill the purpose of your children's ministry?")

## We Prepared This Work to Help

The purpose of this work *The Gospel Truth About Children's Ministry* is to give a voice to the children's ministry community. We went to great efforts to ask the questions and then to listen (through carefully planned and statistically-valid research). By listening, we learned some important things about where we are and the ways we may have gotten off track. For those who love kids and want to see them come to know, love, and serve the Savior, this content

can be very helpful. In these pages, we take an honest look at where these leaders and workers say we are. We propose some timely and responsive solutions to help get us on an effective and proven trajectory to reach more kids with the Gospel and engage them in lifelong discipleship.



**The purpose of this work *The Gospel Truth About Children's Ministry* is to give a voice to the children's ministry community.**

# THE PROBLEM

## Help ... I'm Overwhelmed!

*"Things are changing so fast, no one seems able to keep up!" Amy, a seasoned children's ministry leader and mother of three continued, "It reminds me of days at the beach when our kids were small. They loved the ocean but sometimes the waves came in so fast they'd be upended by one and they couldn't get back on their feet quickly enough to resist the next one. They loved the ocean and even the waves. But the relentlessness – not just the power – of the swells was just too much. A single wave – even a powerful one – would have been survivable; but they just kept coming and coming."*

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**We all feel the pressure to keep up for the sake of kids and families.**

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Without a rescue from Mom and Dad, the small child would be overcome by such surf. This picture resonates with Amy and with many who are ministering to and leading kids and teens.

*"That's kind of how many of us feel these days. Workers, parents, and even professional children's staff all need help. We're just*

*overwhelmed. We need something; maybe something new and innovative, something custom-made for this current craziness."*

It's clear to all of us that things are rapidly changing in our churches and culture. We all feel the pressure to keep up for the sake of kids and families. **But a closer look is showing us that our programming and discipleship models might not be effective enough to stem the tides.**

## At Awana We're Listening and We Want to Help.

At Awana we've worked at keeping our finger on the pulse of the church, especially in the areas of children's and youth ministries. Our calling to help churches and families develop lifelong disciples of Christ through the power of the Gospel drives us to listen. We're continually investigating and exploring to discover the truth of what's happening in the world around us. We're constantly asking God to help us discover new ideas and innovations. All of this effort is so that we can provide the help that people like Amy, and the families being served, really need.

In 2013 and again in 2014, Awana commissioned extensive primary research projects in the children's ministry world and marketplace. Why? Was it just marketing activity? Were we just looking for ways to respond and react to changes and shifts? While it's true that we wanted to keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in ministry, our deepest desire was (and is) to serve churches so kids will come to know, love, and serve Christ for life.

The truth is our culture is changing – rapidly. Families are changing – dramatically. The kids and teens in our churches are so different; their worlds and worldviews are changing faster than ever. In response, children's ministry leaders and workers are scrambling to be effective. So, to better serve those on the frontlines, we want to understand what's going on – from all perspectives. For the sake of the Gospel, we've become students of our culture and stewards of the ministry that Christ has entrusted to us. That's why we commissioned these two recent research projects.

We never want to become complacent. **We know things change and we know organizations (even ministries) have life cycles.** We understand the bell curve of growth, plateau, and decline. But what we do in ministry partnership together is too important to stop growing and improving. We believe God has worked throughout these years to raise up, equip, and bless the ministry effectiveness and reach of Awana in local churches. To our surprise and God's glory, the results have been amazing – world changing.

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**The truth is  
our culture is changing – rapidly.  
Families are changing – dramatically.**

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For the faith of this and future generations, we are holding fast to our commitment to be excellent, to honor God, and to impact as many young lives and families as we can!

## Comprehensive Research – What's Happening Out There?

In 2013, Awana conducted a comprehensive online survey among children's ministry leaders from across the U.S.A. Our purpose was to listen so we could really understand the issues below the waterline. We believe the people who serve children and families in and through the church day in and day out are our best source of intelligence. And we see it as our calling to do all we can to respond to what is needed with timely support and relevant resources.

Because the issues we sought to research were complex, so was our approach. We questioned multiple audiences and used a variety of methodologies. Where it was important to answer questions pertaining to the broader field of children’s ministry, we used quantitative research to yield statistically reliable results. We wanted to know the numbers behind how the spectrum of children’s ministry leaders describe, think, and feel about our current situation.

Where we needed deeper and more detailed insights, we conducted qualitative studies using in-depth interviews and dynamic online focus groups. The results from these activities often helped us better understand the phenomena we had quantified – answering the question “Why?” And sometimes these approaches caused us to ask follow-up questions that prompted further investigation.

We intentionally talked with children’s ministry leaders who use Awana programs and those who do not use curriculum or programs offered by Awana. We surveyed across the nation and across the spectrum of region, denomination, church size, ministry approach, and so on. Our desire was to learn all we could from as many people engaged in children’s ministry who were willing to share their experience and current realities with us. We wanted to be as clear as possible about what these respondents are facing as they work toward seeing the next generation transformed by the Gospel.

## New Ideas and a Renewed Approach to Discipling Children – Informed by What We Learned.

We took all the ideas we gathered in the first phase of the research (2013 study) and prayerfully went to work asking God to provide us with direction, creativity, and fresh perspective. The Awana team worked with some of the most creative minds we could find to develop new ways to address the problems and challenges we discovered in our investigations. Our prayer was that a new and groundbreaking way forward would emerge through this process.

The results are inspiring! At Awana, we were thrilled with the insights and ideas resulting from the concentrated and collective efforts. With our heart still focused where it has always been – fixed on shaping disciples who can impact their generation and change the world for Christ – we developed an innovative and forward-looking approach to do exactly this.

## Follow-up Research to Validate Our Ideas – Were We on Point?

In the spring of 2014, we went back to children’s ministry leaders to test the concepts in another

major research project. This time we tested and scrutinized the concepts and basic components of a renewed approach to discipling children (based on but not limited to the ideas learned from our initial research). For this project, we chose a combined methodology that began with a quantitative online survey that generated an impressive response – more than 850 completed surveys. This highly statistically-valid assessment (see sample validity table) of the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of these leaders was followed by three (3) online focus groups.

### Sample Validity for Quantitative Research with Children’s Ministry Leaders

Records from national database and Awana database of children’s ministry decision makers make up the population representing the children’s ministry leaders’ universe.\*



COMPLETED SURVEYS (SAMPLE SIZE)



MARGIN OF ERROR



CONFIDENCE LEVEL



ASSUMED RESPONSE DISTRIBUTION

\* Estimated to be 300,000 evangelical churches in the United States.

The dual methodology was used because it was important to fully vet the ideas that would serve as the basis for altering our approach to discipling children. The quantitative survey would provide statistically reliable ratings of the basic ideas and strategies that are foundational to pursuing development of a new ministry model. We can say with confidence how a representative sample of children's ministry leaders across the country feel about these ideas. We can answer the questions: Do respondents confirm or disconfirm our direction? Do they agree or disagree that we're on the right track with the solutions we're in the process of developing?

The value of following the quantification with a qualitative study is that we can begin to develop more insight about these ideas and why leaders feel as they do. Over a three-day period, the online focus group participants wrestled with the concepts in much more depth. Facilitating an environment of more open discussion, probing, and follow-up adds so much insight to the raw numbers. It enabled us to walk away with a better understanding of the why behind the ratings.

When establishing the validity of the research (margin of error, etc.), the reported number includes only "completed" interviews:

- Children's Ministry Marketplace Survey (2013) – 376 completes
- Children's Ministry Marketplace Survey #2 (2014) – 858 completes

For both projects, some respondents who began the survey did not complete it. The decision was made to include the responses of these "incompletes" (for the questions they answered) in the reporting. Because of this, for some questions, there are more responses than the total number of "completes" reported for the research.

The following sections stood out to us as **the top 10 most remarkable and revealing findings** from our research. More than a thousand children's ministry leaders and decision makers have spoken: let's explore the findings.

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# 10 FRESH KidMIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

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**YOU GOT INTO MINISTRY  
BECAUSE YOU WANTED  
TO REACH KIDS WITH THE GOSPEL  
AND ENGAGE THEM  
AS GROWING DISCIPLES.**

**1**

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**Whatever You Do, Remember It's Still  
All About the Word of God.**

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## Whatever You Do, Remember It's Still All About the Word of God.

At a time when it feels like the ground is shifting beneath us, some things never change. The Bible continues to be the foundation children's ministry leaders want to build on.

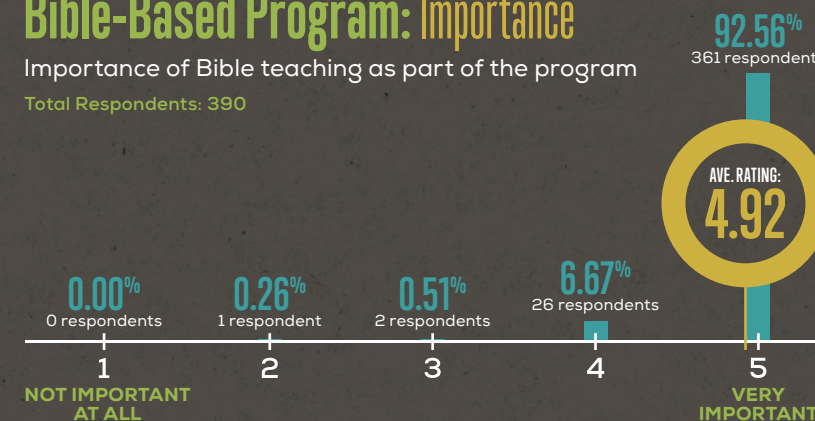


It's clear that children's ministry leaders believe helping kids understand and know the Bible is the primary way of introducing kids to Jesus and helping them walk in relationship with Him for a lifetime.

### Bible-Based Program: Importance

Importance of Bible teaching as part of the program

Total Respondents: 390



In our initial investigation, we presented a list of 16 components that might be part of a children's ministry program or curriculum. When respondents were asked to rate the importance of each, Bible teaching was the most highly rated. In fact, on a 5-point importance scale, the average (mean) score was 4.92; this

indicates nearly every respondent rated Bible teaching as a 5 (very important)! It's clear that children's ministry leaders believe helping kids understand and know the Bible is the primary way of introducing kids to Jesus and helping them walk in relationship with Him for a lifetime.

As further validation of this idea, we also asked an open-ended question on the first quantitative survey (2013): What is the single most important decision-making factor when you are considering using a children's program or materials for your church? Respondents could openly say whatever came to mind. It was

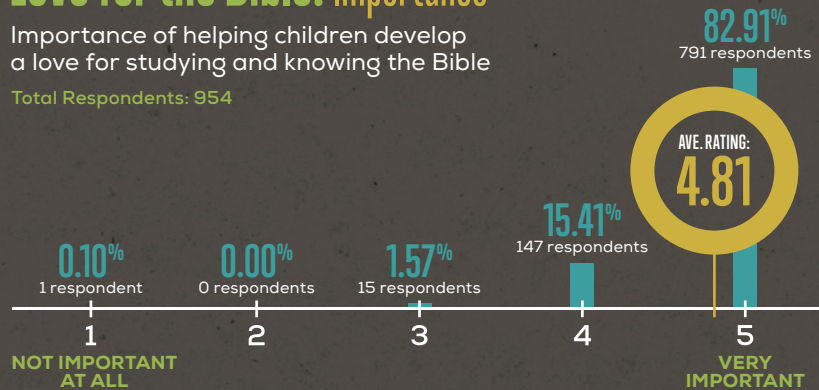
an opportunity for venting or for complaining or proposing the latest trend or method. **Poised with permission to share from the heart, the most mentioned purpose for children's ministry (by 40% of respondents) was "make sure the program/materials/ministry are Bible-based."**



## Love for the Bible: Importance

Importance of helping children develop a love for studying and knowing the Bible

Total Respondents: 954



In a different way, the 2014 research project also validated this same concept. An important focus for the quantitative study was the concept of ministry purpose – we wanted to understand what success looked like for children’s ministry activities. So respondents were asked to rate 10 distinct potential ministry purposes – they were asked, “How important do you think each of these ministry purposes

is?” Once again, they value the Bible above and beyond every other purpose for children’s ministry. The statement “Helping children develop a love for studying and knowing the Bible” was the most highly-rated purpose (4.81 average score on a 5-point scale), 98.32% rated this purpose as important or very important (4+5 on a 5-point scale).

## In Summary

First and foremost, the Bible must be the foundation of children’s ministry. If our children

are going to be able to withstand the surges and waves of cultural change, they must be grounded in God’s Word so they can walk in a relationship with Christ as Savior, Lord, and King!

## Questions for Children’s Ministry Leaders and Volunteers:

1. How satisfied are you with your current ministry trajectory as it relates to developing a solid biblical foundation in the lives of kids?
2. Does your current curriculum simply leverage the Bible to teach virtues and good values? OR, does your curriculum (i.e., ministry programs) lay a strong biblical foundation that captures the redemptive story of Christ from Genesis to Revelation?
3. In your program or curriculum which comes as a first priority, Scripture/substance or subject/style?