



BLENDED

A CALL TO REIMAGINE

OUR CHURCH FAMILY

Rethinking how we can
be church together

Inspiration
for church
leaders

ELEANOR BIRD

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Contents

A love letter..... 9

The heart

Chapter 1: Loving church 13

The vision

Chapter 2: A Blended Church..... 23

Chapter 3: The opportunities in a Blended Church..... 41

Chapter 4: Training a Blended Church 53

Chapter 5: Growing a Blended Church..... 63

Chapter 6: Developing a Blended Church 77

The equipment

Chapter 7: The building blocks of Blended Church 83

Chapter 8: Cultivating Blended worship..... 99

Chapter 9: Teaching a Blended Church 111

Chapter 10: Encountering the Holy Spirit 129

Chapter 11: Encountering the Holy Spirit with others.. 139

Chapter 12: Two disasters and one success 149

Chapter 13: Beginning to build..... 157

The call

Chapter 14: Being more than the sum of our parts.....167

Appendices

An extra note to those writing teaching plans.....172

Thinking differently: questions to consider.....183

[A love letter]

Dear Church

You are amazing. There is something about you that means you are so much more than the sum of the human parts that make you. There is this heavenly invasion into the very fabric of who you are that makes you completely attractive to me. I can't get enough! I can't stop dreaming about all that you are and all that you can become.

You have so much more to give.

So many people spend their energy organising you, timetabling you, and getting you to fit with their plans, when, at your best, you are a living, breathing mechanism from God that brings out the best in his children.

You amaze me! You point me to the greatness of God and enable me to discover the greatness of me (the greatness God put in me). The more I work with you, Church, the more I get to know you, the more I want to understand what makes you so like God. You're creative, powerful and strong. You're misunderstood, misrepresented and misused. So many people throughout history have used you to bring control; they have used you to gain power for themselves, not release power from heaven. How can that be? How can humanity's free will change such a beautiful gift from their loving father?!

I love you, Church, and I want to be with you. I want to use you to your full potential, as a tool not only for change but also for freedom. I want to experience you in all of God's glory—

seeing you so expansive with energy that all people are released into their full potential too.

If you reach your full potential, Church, then I think God's people will too. And that's worth aiming for. Isn't it?

Love
Kleaner xx

This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

MATTHEW 16:18, *THE MESSAGE*



Blended Church is about investigating a new way of being God's family. It's about us, as church leaders and as ministry leaders: letting God challenge us, opening up our processes and programmes again to him, and dreaming afresh about the future. For all of that, we need to align our heart with our Father, making sure his love is entwined with ours.

Chapter 1

Loving church

The first thing we are called to do is love. God loved and that meant we lived. Jesus continued that message on the day

We love each other because he loved us first.
1 JOHN 4:19, NLT

he rose to heaven. He gave us one job to do before he left to be at his father's side: love people enough to share his good news with them.

As church leaders and ministry leaders, our role to love God's people has to start with loving his whole church. This book is intended to be the beginning of a new journey for us. It's the journey of asking the questions that God has for us today and following where those answers lead. God wants to lead us to love his whole church, as much as his individual children. He wants his body of Christ to be an accurate reflection of his son Jesus. He wants to empower us as his leaders, to be agents of change, and open to him as he expands the capacity of our hearts and our ministries to fit the fullness of his love inside them.

We can do that in many different ways. We're all designed differently, called to different things, purposed for different parts of God's glory, but we

Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.
PROVERBS 4:23, NLT

all have something in common—the way our humanity works. We are heart people. Jesus told us that words from our heart can get us into trouble; that's why we're told to guard them. When we set out on the journey to build God's

church, we need to make sure our heart is lined up with his. That way, our actions will be an accurate reflection of our Father, and in line with his life-giving love. If the words we speak from our heart define us and set the course of our life, then the church we build, powered by our heart for God's people, will do the same.

Loving church

Church is alive and well, living and breathing, and it's here to stay, in all its multi-ethnic, multifaceted, multiformatted glory. Over the span of my life I have fallen in love with church. When I was little, I was taught the classic Sunday school phrase: 'Church isn't the building; it's the people,' and of course that is true, but, like each one of us, there is always more to uncover and more God-given potential than we first see. Falling in love with church has been an intriguing process—first, working out exactly what it is that has captured my heart and second, discovering why God designed my heart to be right for this process in the first place.

I grew up in a mixed faith family. What I mean is that when I was young, my mum was a Christian and my dad wasn't, and the tension between those two camps has shaped my entire life. My mum made sure that God, church and faith were natural to me; God's presence was understood and invited into our home and therefore my life. My dad taught me something very different. He taught me that a relationship with God isn't something you inherit or 'fall into'; he taught me that if I wanted what my mum had, I'd need to choose it for myself.

By the time I was six I had worked out that I had

a choice: go to church with mum, or stay at home with dad. Church meant friends and fun, and I chose it a lot of the time, but home with dad meant having his attention 100 per cent, no getting dressed, films and chocolate, and sometimes I would choose that instead.

It was actually my dad who made the change. He didn't want me to choose home over church, to choose him over God, I guess, and so he decided to go with my mum and my sister and me to church.

By the time I was ten I had decided for myself that Jesus' being my mum's best friend wasn't good enough for me, so I chose him for myself, and accepted all he had to offer. Our free will and choice is often edited out of the way we communicate the gospel to each other, especially for those of us brought up with the reality of God's existence in their day-to-day lives from an early age. Without a deep-rooted and empowered understanding of the choice we have in the matter of our salvation, we are missing out on the security and certainty that deciding to follow Jesus gives us. Without knowing I had to choose Jesus for myself, and continually choose him, I wouldn't have developed a faith of my own. I wouldn't have been able to watch as

God dug my own foundations and I wouldn't have learnt to let God alone define who I was. My story became whole when I mixed for myself choice and God's existence as my daily reality.

If anyone belongs to Christ,
there is a new creation.
The old things have gone;
everything is made new!
2 CORINTHIANS 5:17, NCV

When the reality of God's existence inspired in me the transformational choice of choosing him, I became a new creation, in my own right.

What we discover as we unpack the knowledge of our choice in the matter of our salvation is God's choice too. He

chose us, he sent his son to choose us, and he chooses to empower us to be the fullness of his design for us, as we walk out in faith, with him.

Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

EPHESIANS 1:11–12,
THE MESSAGE

I now choose daily to be my mix of God as reality and choice, and one of the many things God has blessed my eyes with seeing is my dad making the same choice as I did a year later. He is now, in his own unique way, whole in that world-changing mix of God and choice.

What we're building

There is the same choice for the church. In its mix of God as a daily reality and humanity's own individual and corporate choices, it is pursuing and discovering its full potential. The church I want to be a part of is one that doesn't just live in the reality of God, but with every breath and moment chooses him and his ways. God says, in his word, 'Love me, and walk in my ways.' When we, as individuals or as the

I command you today: Love God, your God. Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, regulations, and rules so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly, blessed by God, your God, in the land you are about to enter and possess.

DEUTERONOMY 30:16,
THE MESSAGE

church, have those two things on our 'to do list', then we are on our journey into the fullness and glory of our godly potential. If that's not our aim, if we are serving other goals, then are we really sure the direction we're headed in is the right one? God makes it really simple. Do things his way and the life we'll get in return won't just bless us, but the land, the people and locations he's calling us to as well.

How often do we substitute individual and corporate

choice for format and formula? How often do we, as leaders, feel the pressure of bringing in new and funky ways of doing things, just because they're different? Format and formula burnout is real! And it's not just for the leaders—all of our church family members suffer from it too.

Getting your 'own ministry' is a landmark many of us are aiming for. For me this was my first full-time children's ministry position. When I got there, I arrived with so many ideas and expectations that I confused myself. Before I'd even started I was lost, especially as I found that my new leaders, children, congregation and bosses had ideas and expectations too. Discovering, with God, his way for me to run, create and develop ministry has been my key to avoiding format burnout. All the good ideas in the world are worth nothing if we don't get them from God. All the changes in the world won't impact on people if they are not instigated by him. Paul tells us that we are the body of Christ. Over time the importance of the body of Christ hasn't changed—scholars don't tell us that we should aim to be the slingshot of David or the staff of Moses. We are still called to be the body of Christ along with the rest of God's people. What does change is what the body, or parts of the body, are directed to do.

My body and my DNA will never fundamentally change; I will, however, do many different things throughout my life. In the same way, my ministry, the church I am a part of building (whether for one age bracket or all of them) should never fundamentally change. It should, however, be intrinsically linked to the brain (God)

I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the similar parts arranged and functioning together... As it is we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:18–20,
THE MESSAGE

and move forward as he directs. We are all called into the building industry by our Father; we are all called to be active members of his body—building his church, for his people and constructed together with his people.

What we're all called to

Several years ago I was at a Christian conference. It was the beginning of another week in a tent, with mud and no proper showers. I was prepared for a week of getting closer to God and getting closer to nature. It was the first night, so I was all excited about what God would do with the week I'd set aside, and I was expecting some big changes. For me, this type of conference hasn't always been a 'mountain top' experience but has always been a time where I have experienced change and refining. So, I was standing near the front on the end of a row (my seat of choice at events like this), quickly getting lost in the atmosphere, the worship and God. All of a sudden someone came up to me and said, 'God says, "You are called to something beautiful." I don't know what that means but I hope you do.' Stunned, I only nodded as she ran off but in that minute or so of exchange God tugged at my heartstrings and puzzled my brain. I had no idea what she meant, or more importantly, what God meant. There was only one thing certain in my mind—he definitely wasn't referring to what I'd look like after a week of camping!

It was a month before the full revelation of those six words hit my heart. God's church is designed to be *beautiful* and, as a lover of it and a member of it, my calling is to be part of the process of making it, keeping it, and encouraging it to be *beautiful*. For me the definition of that

is simple—when God’s people gather together, understanding who he is, and are committed to doing what he wants in his power, then they, his church, are truly beautiful in heaven’s eyes. Or, as Ephesians 2:10 says, ‘For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared for us in advance’ (NIV).

For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus.

2 TIMOTHY 1:9, NLT

I guess the reason I am writing this all down is simply because I want to share the blessings I have received and say to you: ‘You are called to something beautiful too.’

This book is about exploring how we do that together, how we build our church as a beautiful family. There may not be all the answers you’re looking for in this book, but God first wants us to align our hearts and minds, our thought processes and the perspectives that lead us to make decisions, before getting down to the specific details of what his church, in our individual lives and contexts, looks like.

A prayer

Dad, you are the best planner I know. You set every star in the sky, manage every change of season and orchestrate every beat of every heart you placed so gently in your children’s bodies. You blow my mind with how complex your creation is, and yet you comfort my heart with how simply you explain things to me.

We love your church. We are so grateful for the people you have surrounded us with and places you have asked us to live. We want to be a part of your plans for our church family. We want to follow your lead and bring beauty to every aspect of your creation.

As we set aside this time and turn our thoughts to you, would you grow in us the capacity to do your work in your strength, to lead in your ways and follow in your Son's journey. Would you empower us to love your church to the point where each one of its members actively loves and follows you. Amen



The vision

Blended Church is church in a new way, with a new set of values and ideas. This section is designed to share the vision of what these values and ideas are, and how we, as leaders, can adopt them, grow and develop our churches through our own unique way of pursuing God's vision for his people.

Chapter 2

A Blended Church

As you now know, choice was a massive part of my childhood. God used it to shape me and my faith, and, through those experiences, he taught me the reality and joy of choice and free will. Through his grace, he has given me the passion to share with others the knowledge that they too have choices. Not all children will have the joy of seeing their dad choosing God, but if they are equipped with this knowledge they can see the transformation in the many other people around them.

The second defining gift God gave me as I grew up was a large family. I had four generations of my family around for much of my early life and, from the time I was ten years old, we have been meeting once a year for the mother of all picnics. I have continuously witnessed the joy and tension of family dynamics through mini golf, sharing food, playing boules, cricket and conversation. In my home church I saw many of the same values established and never really realised how precious they were until I encountered churches that didn't feel the same.

Through the ministries God has called me to and the places he has taken me, I have visited and been a part of several different churches and noticed that many fit into one of two camps.

‘Camp one’: The church that sees being all together as a sacrifice, one they are sometimes not willing to make. They have all-age activities as little as possible because they want their adult time with God when he can really move, their youth time with God when he is more relevant and their kid time with God when he can make most sense.

‘Camp two’: The church that doesn’t mind not meeting with God as much if it means being all together, that loves the opportunity to do activities at a different level or pitch, if it means everyone is included and doesn’t expect God to move in power or be transformational in that setting.

For a while I was left with one question. Why do our expectations of church, and of our time corporately with God, have to change because other people are in the room? For example, why is a family service ever seen as a sacrifice, even if we are happy and willing to make that sacrifice?

My family, especially the men, take boules very seriously at our family picnics. When my soon-to-be-husband came on the scene at the family picnic there was definitely a moment of thinking, ‘Hey, newcomer, do you understand the gravity of joining us?’ (and by that they meant the game, not the family). The irony was that, however seriously my family took the game, everyone was allowed to play. There was no training round, no standard to achieve, no age you had to be before you could join in the ‘proper event’. The youngest cousins played, the talented members and the not so talented. There was a genuine fight to win but a joy in playing too. Just because smaller children were playing didn’t mean the adults didn’t try their best. Just because there was a newcomer didn’t mean

they stopped using our own unique brand of family banter. They simply included each new person and explained the jokes as they went along.

Why can't church be like that? Why can't we expect to have the best morning of our life, achieve the deepest depths of revelation and understanding, while including newcomers and all ages? Jesus didn't give the Sermon on the Mount one day and the newcomers' version the next morning, followed by a kids' tea and talk in the afternoon. He spoke to everyone together and that didn't mean that everyone got it straight away. It meant everyone shared in the experience of receiving, investigating and living out his revelation as they lived alongside each other. Jesus operated out of the distinct conviction that it is entirely possible to have a deep encounter with God with all ages in the room, in the congregation, or in this case on the mountain side. So, if Jesus operated out of that belief, why shouldn't his body? Why shouldn't our church family?

The Greek word for 'church' means 'called-out ones'. Matthew shows us there are four clear characteristics to Jesus' priorities, for us as his body, to be God's called-out people.

- Direct revelation from God of who he is ('Bless you, you didn't get the answer out of books')
- Openness to accept who God says we are ('I'm going to tell you who you are')
- A commitment to following his Father's plan ('I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will stand')

The Greek word *ekklesia* is translated in most places as 'church'. The word *ekklesia* is found 115 times in the New Testament. In Greek the word *ekklesia* originally meant 'a called-out assembly of citizens summoned by the crier'.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance & Dictionary, number: G1577,
www.blueletterbible.org

- An acceptance of the gifts of his kingdom that he offers to equip us ('You will have complete and free access to all of God's kingdom').

Jesus came back, 'God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock.

This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven.'

MATTHEW 16:17-19,
THE MESSAGE

We are a family and, for me, part of the journey we are on is learning how to be a Blended one. All four of these priorities can be achieved in our separate age groups, and should be in many different situations, but we should also expect to achieve them together. As God's chosen people, we need to choose not only him but each other too. Blended Church is about being a church that functions as a family first, that chooses to be the whole body before a specific mission arm or age group.

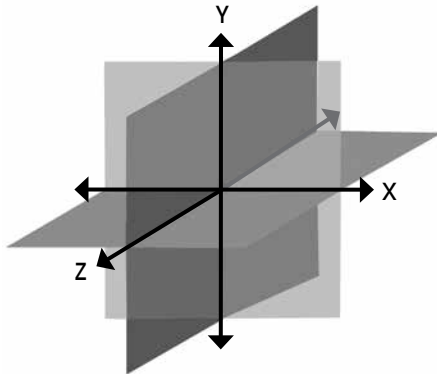
For years, many of us have been stuck in the expectation of adding 'all age' to the existing framework of our churches. It's a frustrating and often thankless task that can regularly result in people being either unhappy about what currently exists, or dissatisfied because of what doesn't. Having church groups that are segregated by age has been a choice many churches have made in order to speed up the process of discipleship. The hope was that if the adults did 'their thing' in isolation they would see more fruit much more quickly, and the same went for meeting as kids' groups and youth groups. Splitting up held the promise of 'getting where we're going' faster. These choices have meant we have stopped aiming

to function as a family above all else, and instead have prioritised specific or segregated ministries, or, even worse, the ‘results’ of our ministries. The problem is that in trying to get ‘there’ faster, we’ve forgotten that the point was to get there together.

We need to shift the dynamics and change our perspective on being a church. Instead of occasionally investing in the together part of our journey, we need to start from the perspective of being a family, blended into one team, before starting off on the journey together; and for that, we need to leave segregation behind.

The following looks at being Jesus’ body in two different ways: a beautiful family, and a prism.

A beautiful family: being God’s church is aiming to be a beautiful family in three different directions



- Direction one (side-to-side—think timeline): including all ages, loving being together and loving being apart too.

The point is that we want to love people at the age they are now, not what they will be in future.

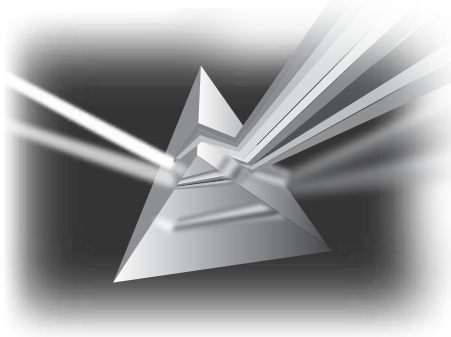
- Direction two (front to back, running from the outside to the inside of our churches): never feeling in or out, but being together on the journey of getting closer to Jesus. Putting a value on being on the journey, not on how far along each person is.
- Direction three (vertical, heaven to earth and back again): actively blending heaven and earth. Expecting God to move, expecting to see the effects of his power on earth, and expecting that we have a part to play in his plans for the world and our community.

When you take a step back and put all the three directions together, the lines our beautiful family draws create something earth-shattering. You see that from every angle our ‘blended lines’ mark out the cross, the ultimate sign of Jesus, and now the ultimate sign of our family. Let’s face it, looking like Jesus from every angle has to be the most beautiful thing there is.

I explained this to my church using ribbons. As people held out the two horizontal lines and a helium balloon carried the third one up to the roof of our church there was a tangible joy as we saw for ourselves how many different angles you can see the cross from. That’s what church should be to our communities—a source of joy as they see the many different angles of Jesus’ cross.

A prism: being God's church is letting God release his full spectrum of colour in our family

ONE GOD
shining
his light



To create
ALL THE
COLOURS
of his
children

Through his
ONE SON

Before a guy called Isaac Newton was around, everyone thought light was colourless. He thought differently and, with perseverance and science, he managed to prove it. He found that when white light passes through a prism, it is refracted into its component colours—all the colours of the rainbow. God's design for us is to be his body (and by that I mean his hands and feet, eyes and ears, on earth) and this is like the process of refracting light. The way I see it is: our ONE GOD shines his light (his power, anointing, love, plans) through his ONE SON, which produces ALL THE COLOURS of his children. We've spent too long seeing church as one colour, when really we were a rainbow all along.

In our aim to be that one colour, we split up so that we don't contaminate each other, but actually our beauty is in being different together. In us, God creates distinctive people, different and unique but from the same place, his heart. As God's family, our job is to be as much like

Jesus as we can be, together and separately. Loving all the differences we exhibit, not minding how close people are to Jesus and deliberately looking for heaven on earth.

A new word for a new hope

I prayed for over three years for what to call the family services at the church where I worked first. ‘Family service’ had a bad reputation all over our area, ‘all age’ seemed dull, and every acronym I came up with seemed weird and forgettable. ‘Am I meant to claim an old misused title or start something new?’ was the question I circled around for years. That’s when God gave me ‘Blended’.

It wasn’t a word that was commonly used or associated with church, and the secular, social-work world was starting to use it for the new ‘format’ of family that society was creating. No more was a nuclear family the standard; we were moving to a new ‘norm’ of family and that was being described as ‘blended’. What a great meaning to claim for God! And so Blended was born, at least in my own heart—and from there I have been developing the thinking, vision and language that goes with it, and the programme, format and ideas that are informed by it.

The blender effect

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them... Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear.

1 JOHN 4:11, 16, 18, NLT

Before we get on to what being Blended looks like and the building it takes, it’s worth quickly acknowledging the fear that many face when Blended comes on the horizon. It’s called the ‘blender effect’! Most of us have lots of different

favourite foods. I myself love roast dinners, ice cream and red wine but if I put all of them in a blender, I wouldn't be multiplying the joy; I'd be destroying it. When we talk about blending our family together, often people are scared that the joy will be destroyed in that too. Sure, we're all God's favourite, but if we all mix together, won't we all be lost?

This anxiety can be in individuals as well as in congregations. We may be concerned because we come to church to meet with God without distraction and have him deal with issues in us, or because the service is the way we like church services to be. It highlights the difference between being a consumer of church and a contributor to church. The blender effect is about having a fear in us that sees being Blended as not giving us the opportunities we need or want. The result is that often people end up wanting a segregated church. Church becomes more about what I can get and therefore how I get it, rather than who we are and how we can grow together.

The skill of a chef is in their ability to make many different flavours sing, all at once; the skill of an artist is to use many colours to make one beautiful thing. God is more skilled than these and though our fear of being Blended is real and important to voice, it's founded on the lie that God would let us get lost in his crowd; that he meets our needs on our terms, individually and corporately; that church is about what we can get from it, not give to it; that God would let our joy in him be taken by another. Spoken out like that, our fear of the blender effect starts to look a lot less important than before.

The way to conquer this fear is simple. Confess it to God every time it rises up in you, in your family, or your church, and let God's strength enable you to press on into

him regardless—trusting that being a Blended body is what you are called to be, and is better than a separate, segregated one.

How to start building in the beauty

It's all very well believing in this stuff, agreeing with the idea of one Blended family, one church, but it's natural to feel that we need to know what this vision might taste like before going and changing the recipe for how we fundamentally function. Before going further and looking at several of the big areas of being Blended, we first need to understand that our thinking needs to shift. There are four key values to Blended Church that challenge most of us and examine the current ways we think about church. Before moving forward, we need to accept and have come to our own conclusions on these four values.

Stop calling it work: We readily speak of children's work and children's workers. Yet if we started calling our morning service, or our small/mid-week/cluster/cell groups the 'adult work' in the church, then I'm guessing the adults would start to be offended. If, instead of pastors and vicars, we called our church leaders 'adult workers', I think the tone would change in the adults around us. Language is incredibly important, and although none of us wants to put labels on people, our words do end up labelling them. So we need to think through what we say, how we say it, and to ensure that it is equal on all counts and intentionally part of the overall design for our family.

We need to shift the culture of our churches to see that everything we do is connected and is ministry. After my

first two years as a kids' worker I got my title changed to children's pastor. This was simply because I believed the children deserved a pastor. In that church all 'adult workers' were pastors and so it fitted with our church family's language, and accurately expressed my role and the value it had in the overall community. If we are going to blend together, we need to start by sharing the same language. We need to understand that language is one of the biggest pillars we have for upholding and communicating value. We need to root out the things that show evidence of where larger value has been placed on one demographic of our family over another. Of course, it is not just the language we need to change but the opinions or beliefs that created the inequality of value in the first place. However, language is a good place to start, and changing it in our churches will often stimulate the conversations we need to have with its people.

Another example of this is in the language we use to describe our activities. On a Sunday morning the usual title for what the adults are doing is church, but we can call what the children and youth are doing anything from an abstract word or acronym, for which potentially no one can remember the reason, to things like 'club' or 'group'. That difference in language points to an inequality in how each programme is viewed. We don't call our adult church service a club, because it's not one. We use the word church because it communicates more fully the opportunity for discipleship, encounter with God and worship. All of God's children deserve opportunities for that and so along with changing my job title, I changed our Sunday morning kids' groups to tots' church, mini church and kids' church (in my current job I also changed the youth name to youth church). It best illustrated that on a Sunday morning each

age group was seeking the same God, the same experiences and focusing on the same vision. It gave language to the fact that on our mornings when we all met separately, we were in fact a church of churches; a church family, expressed over several programmes, and it brought a linguistic equality to the Sunday morning structure that would develop into an equality in the vision and value of each group, age range and programme.

Cohesion is vital to blending. We have one God and his three expressions (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) work seamlessly, both together and apart. They blend because they are from the same source, and the language we use to explain and surround them is equal. People are not work. The ways in which we reach out to them, disciple them and love them should not be communicated in such a way that it sounds task-driven and effortful. Ministry is more than a job, and for many it's outside of their work-life anyway. It's the lifestyle that God has called us to. Let's communicate that instead, and let's show our equal value of people in the way we communicate the ministries, programmes and leaders they have.

Welcome influence: As leaders, it's a painful thing to admit, but we need to surrender our kingdoms and share them with others. Blended Church means giving others a voice in your land. Those of us who have clear boundaries (like 'children', 'youth', 'students', 'adults', 'families') need to be actively seeking and accepting the influence of other ways of doing things that represent our family as a whole. We need to be giving others a voice in our groups and 'kingdoms' because they are part of our family, not because they attend most regularly or shout the loudest.

I know being a family and being a church is more than this, but for a minute let's separate out the way we spend our Sunday mornings from the rest. If we want to have the option of meaningful, spirit-filled Sunday mornings together, we need to find ways of merging, and the way to do this is to share. The ways that help our adults engage with God should be seen and used in the children's programme—partly because they'll be adults soon, but mainly because it means they'll understand better the adult service when they find themselves in it. It also starts to create the ground for respect and shows how we can empower our children to uphold the adults in their church family. The music the youth love should be used by the adults; the teaching programme the children are following should be covered by the teenagers and adults too, and vice versa. The adult sermon series should be taught in the youth discipleship programme and kids' church. Cross-pollination, rooted in sharing the journey, is vital; it builds a common language, a shared joy and a basis for deep-rooted respect.

Why? Because being together on the journey is more important than how fast we get to the finish line. Using a previously labelled 'adult' song with children takes longer because we have to spend time learning it first, but the joy of singing one song across all the ages is worth it. Jesus told us adults to become like small children, and that can include learning alongside them. Not all adults in our churches have been coming along since they were children. Sharing

For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, 'I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me.'

MATTHEW 18:3, *THE MESSAGE*

the simple truths, going through the stories ‘the adults will already know’ might just bring joy, truth and understanding in ways we had forgotten adults can access. Who better to teach us how to be like children than children?

We need to dig out the competitive spirit from between our different generations and start them working together, and apart, for the same goals.

When we’re apart: Train for when we’re together—not necessarily overtly, but in the culture of your groups, the way the leaders interact and the way people are listened to and guided. We need to be training all our people in how to seek God together.

We need to change our perspective on what we feel when we split into our different (age, preference, timetabled) groups. Right now, often we are relieved to be doing things in our group, loving the opportunity to do things ‘our way’ and not having to compromise; we may be thinking of these times as bliss, easy and achievable. I heard a children’s leader once say: ‘Give me your children from 0 to 11 and I’ll get them to be where they [spiritually] need to be.’ Haven’t we all felt like that at times?

I’m not saying that feeling like that is bad. It’s understandable, but if we live for the times when we’re apart how will we ever be happy together? Instead, we need to see our times apart as joyful, wonderful experiences and expressions of part of our family and use them to work together to be one cohesive and loving Blended team.

As an example, in worship we need to train each other how to worship for different lengths of time so that adults don’t feel they’ve missed out if there are only a couple of songs when they are used to many songs normally, and we

need to ensure the children don't get bored in extended times, and equip them with strategies to help themselves in these times too. We need to train each other to worship to songs we don't like, when words we don't understand are being used or when the music isn't our 'style'. Why? So that when we're all together, our worship is still authentic and pleasing to God!

This understanding needs to start with the mindset of the leaders, and not of the congregation. If we lead with this heart and develop our individual groups and ministries from this perspective, then the format will follow and ultimately be blendable.

When we're together: We need to experiment and create signposts that include everyone. We're going to look at worship, teaching and ministry in more detail later, which will explain this idea more practically, but we need to find ways of explaining what we're doing as we go along that includes all.

On any given morning with our church family, it's not just the children who don't know 'everything' (if knowing it all is ever actually possible); there will be plenty of adults, visitors and others who don't know the jargon and what's next on the running order, and that can be alienating. Explaining what we're doing, why we're doing it, and how God fits into it as we go along, through simple verbal, visual and kinaesthetic signposts helps everyone, even the most initiated of our family members.

Signposting is taking everything you have considered, all the little decisions you made, and the questions you pondered beforehand, and making them public for all to see and understand. When it comes to the different

elements of your programme, displaying an image that is recognisable, a Bible verse or definition that gives a bit of insight while you chat through the session and the sections helps everyone. For adults and those whose minds might wander from the audio explanation, there is something to read, something that gets their mind working. For those who prefer the visual or can't yet read, the picture is something they'll learn to associate with what is going on—even just the colour can become your signpost. By being consistent with these signposts, you can build up a visual, audio and literary language that doesn't just keep everyone on track, but enables them to join in more fully with their family around them.

It costs us nothing to change our language from jargon to signposts. It takes thinking through and planning, but what we lose in extra preparation time we gain in family time. Instead of 'The reading is taken from Ephesians 6', why can't we say: 'There was this guy called Paul and he wrote letters to churches all over the place. One letter was to Ephesus and in it he wanted to share with them how God can protect us. This is what he wrote...'? That would take only 15 seconds more and communicate to everyone in a way that didn't baby them or insult them but, instead, grouped them together through understanding and knowledge.

The risk is that we can end up creating a whole new jargon for our family, which is why all we do needs to be informed and rooted in our Blended heart and vision. When consistently done, signposting takes our way of normally doing things and makes it inclusive and missional. It means no one is left behind, and everyone can keep up. It doesn't add hours on to a programme or cause us more

work; it simply utilises what we already know as leaders and equips our family with truth and understanding. Being together isn't about making wise compromises; it's about cultivating good communication.

The purpose of church

Throughout the next five chapters of this book we are going to look at the purpose and values of being God's called-out people: why he chose to design us to be in relationship with him and with each other, and how we can build and grow our church families in response to that. The original title for this book was 'The Building Blocks of Church' and, although this title doesn't really fit anymore, there is still part of this idea in play.

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

EPHESIANS 1:11, *THE MESSAGE*

What is key, however, is not that we seek to find the format that works best, or the material we can quickly adapt, but that we all take the time to let God shape our questions and our dreams, and ultimately our entire way of thinking. As we hear about the different areas, ideas and aspects of church in its widest context, we need to keep our own context in mind: the people we are called to and the locations we have been placed in.

Our purpose comes from whose body we are. We can share our ideas, stories and dreams as much as we like but if we don't allow Jesus to determine who we are individually and corporately, then we've missed the point. This book was originally going to be about a practical equipping, but God changed that and reminded me that we are to

do things his way from a place of seeking him and relying on our daily bread. It will look a lot like doing things ‘our way’, as long as we do them with him.

Let’s remember our four key values as we move from this place to consider again all the ‘blocks’ God is giving us to build with, as we set out to discover his design for us.

1. Church isn’t work, so don’t call it that.
2. Let’s give everyone an equal influence over how things fit in our family because we really do value each of our members.
3. When we’re apart, we can be training for when we’re together.
4. When we’re together, we can make the most of the opportunity to keep experimenting and explaining.

Are you ready to take the next step?

Church as we know it is changing... with conversations and initiatives bubbling up around how our churches can be truly intergenerational, functioning in close and loving community as the body of Christ. Eleanor Bird speaks into the debate with a challenge to rethink our work with all ages from the ground up, offering practical observations drawn from her experience of developing children's and youth ministry in a local church context, together with a biblically based framework for how this thinking can be taken forward in your church.

*In order for us to see nations changed, we need to see the full body of Christ rise up together across all ages, to walk and minister shoulder to shoulder. **Blended** invites us to see that it is not only necessary, but possible. No matter what size community or denomination we belong to, this book gives us ways of seeing and doing church together with a new heart that will reap great rewards for the kingdom.*

Rachel Turner, author and speaker



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