

**Rachel Turner**

# **Parenting as a Church Leader**

**Helping your family thrive**



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# Introduction

Parenting as a church leader brings extraordinary complexity to the very tough job of parenting. We are trying to raise our children in what feels like a goldfish bowl, with an expectant congregation watching how we lead, how we parent and how our children feel and behave. We feel intensely the contrasting pulls of the church's needs on one side and our family's needs on the other, like the rope in a tug of war. The boundary between work and home blends together, as our families are present in our workplace and our workplace spills over into our homes. And, as hard as it is for us, we are aware that it may be even more difficult for our children.

As church leaders we know that our connection with God, our individual life choices, our purpose and our personal relationships all get mashed together. We have a hard time separating where one begins and another ends. Our children run into the same problem, because so much of their life exists in relation to the church: their friendships, their time requirements and their family dynamics. For them, church, faith and how they feel about God get mashed together into one big experience.

We are so aware that our children's feelings about God can get messily entwined with how they feel about church and our job. We can see the stresses our leadership puts on us and the stresses it puts on our children. We can easily become afraid when we hear stories of other church leaders' children going off the rails and wonder what impact having a church leader as a parent is going to have on our children's futures. At the bottom of it all, the question of 'How will my church leadership affect my children's relationship with God and the church?' can niggle at our hearts.

It is commonly believed that there is an inevitable cost to our children when we choose to be in church leadership, that a negative emotional or spiritual impact is a natural and unavoidable part of being church leaders' children.

I disagree. We as parents have great power to shape *how* our children will experience the complex situations they live in. It is how we parent through those situations that makes all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

There are no guarantees for how our children's futures will turn out. They are on their own paths with God and will make their own choices. But while being raised in a church leader's home has its difficulties, it is also a fantastic place to be. Our children have access to boundless opportunities spiritually and emotionally because of their proximity to the church. If we can learn to parent our children through the complexities of church leadership, then we can position them as best we can to thrive now and in the future. When we do this well, our children can:

- know that we trust them to go on their own adventure with God and that we will cheer them on as they do
- be empowered and encouraged to discover daily what life with God looks like for them
- spread their wings to play the part they feel called to in the body of Christ
- feel the strength and joy of being an ordinary member of a congregation, able to make mistakes and be lifted up by others.

## Four constants our children need from us

When I set out to write this book, I read every denominational report, every book I could get my hands on and every research paper and PhD dissertation I could find.<sup>2</sup> I conducted interviews and focus groups and ran pilot training days around the country. What

I discovered was this: there are four main constants our children need to feel in order to thrive as children of church leaders. If we can focus as parents on helping our children feel these four constants, then we can position them to thrive spiritually, mentally and emotionally now and in the future. Our children need to feel:

- 1 connected to us
- 2 prioritised by us
- 3 covered by us
- 4 empowered in their own faith journeys by us.

When our children feel *connected* to us, we are well set to proactively and powerfully encourage their faith. The more connected our children feel to us, the more likely they are to embrace what we embrace, including who God is and who he can be in their lives. Through connection flow our honest stories and authentic windows into our lives, which our children need to hear and see so they can begin to build their own path with God.

When our children feel *prioritised* by us, they can feel free to be themselves and feel valued within their family. We can ensure that they feel rooted in family first and therefore able to connect into the church because they see the church as a blessing rather than as the competition.

When our children feel *covered* by us, they feel free and able to build healthy relationships and connections with others, which will enable them to access the love, support and friendship of our congregations.

When our children feel *empowered* by us to go on their own faith journeys, they can be free to make their own faith choices. This empowerment enables them to own their personal connection with God, not for the sake of us as their parents, or as a performance for the congregation, but for themselves.

## About this book

Parenting as a church leader can be isolating. It can be hard for us to find wisdom and people to parent alongside who understand the unique context we live in. This book exists to give you encouragement, hope and access to the wisdom and voices of other families who have walked, and are walking, the same path.

All the stories in this book are real, taken from interviews with church-leader families and stories told by participants in training days. The book is organised in four sections, covering the four constants our children need to experience to thrive in our ministry context. Each section starts with a description of the specific constant and then expands into ways you can apply it to your family and work life. Each section ends with a 'Tricky bits' chapter, which applies the constant to a specific scenario of ministry life.

For the sake of brevity, I often use the term 'our children' in the book. By this I mean children of all ages. The principles in this book are just as applicable to 20-year-olds as they are to three-year-olds; the difference is in how we implement the principles. It is never too early to begin implementing these ideas and, as we have seen over and over, it is never too late.

Before we begin, I want to thank you for your ministry. Church leadership is a wonderful, tough, joyous and exhausting call, and you have boldly stepped into it with your family. Your family *can* thrive in the middle of it all. Helping our children meet and know God is one of the greatest joys of parenting, and this book will help you find what it looks like for you.

There is no single right way for you to do this. Within this book, you will find information to help you think through the issues you face in your particular family scenarios and help you apply the concepts to your needs. We will cover all the quandaries of ministry life: parent vs leader tension, living in a goldfish bowl, the congregation's



expectations and much more. God called you into ministry and life to the full, and he wants you and your children to flourish, not for an easy life but for a powerful, loved, effective life full of faith.

May God give you much peace and joy as you dive into exploring how you can help your family thrive as you lead.

I

**Connected**

# 1

## **The importance of connection**

I've always wanted to go skydiving. I think it's about the adventure of leaping from the relative safety of a plane and out into the unknown, becoming completely helpless, and then falling, zooming, down through the rushing air. Oh, the thrill! My plan is to go tandem the first time, attached to an experienced skydiver, like one of those babies in a front-facing baby carrier. The skydiver would be the one responsible for knowing how high we were, for checking all the equipment, for deploying the chute at the right time and for getting us safely down to our landing site. I'd have total trust in the experienced skydiver. My only worry, though, would be about the strength of the equipment that would attach me to her! What if our chute deployed and I kept falling? Before I'd jump, I'd want to know that my skydiver made sure our connection together would be 100% safe and secure. This connection would be the best safety feature I'd have.

It's the same for our children.

For us, ministry life can feel like a wonderful adventure, full of incredible moments, hard work, great thrills and tough seasons. As we go along, we bring our ability to deal with the emotions of leadership and ministry life to bear on our situations. Ministry life has a steep learning curve, but it's the job we signed up for and we can navigate it well, given all our life experience and training.

But we didn't just jump out into our ministry skydive alone, leaving our families behind. Our children are on this adventure with us. They don't have the experience and skills to navigate ministry life, but we do. It's our job to pull them close, to coach them through it and to pay attention to our connection to them. We need this important connection to be solid, in order to coach our children and to keep them safe so that they can enjoy the ride.

Many parents deeply love their children, but they don't know how to build a deep connection with them. Connection is more than love and affection. It's about relationality. It's about feeling seen, loved and understood. It's about feeling unconditionally loved, heard and valued. This sense of connection is what makes us feel safe in our relationships with our friends and family. Connection is what enables us to feel loved, to be willing to change, to be encouraged, to be corrected and to receive wisdom and ministry. Connection is the essence of relationship. If we are going to go ministry skydiving with our children, we must pay attention to developing this connection. Because without it, our children are untethered and skydiving alone.

Research repeatedly shows how important this connection is. Care for the Family did a study on parents helping their children find faith,<sup>3</sup> and they found that one of the significant factors for children finding their own faith was the strength of their connection to their Christian parents. Martin Weber, in his PhD research on clergy children's attrition from faith,<sup>4</sup> noted that a lack of relational connection was one of the main factors behind clergy children rejecting faith.

## The disconnection of swapping hats

One of the main factors that leads to our lack of connection with our children is our sense of being torn between two roles – our church leader role and our parent role – as if we are endlessly swapping hats.

We wear our church leader hat when we are required to focus on the needs and discipling of our congregants, the development of our teams, the shaping of our next sermon, the rolling out of the church strategy, and all the events and little bits we catch. We can be in the flow, leading the church with full focus. Our congregants assume we wear this hat most of the time, so when they see us out and about, they assume we are 'on duty', ready to respond to them.

We wear our parent hat when we put our family at the centre of our focus. We come home from work, mentally take off our ministry hat and put on our parent hat, and sit down and play with the kids. When our children see us, they assume we are wearing our parent hat and are 'on duty' as their parent, ready to respond to them.

Unfortunately, ministry life isn't just 9-to-5. While other people get to go home and firmly put on their parent hat, we can't. Our home time looks a bit different. For example, you may be relaxing at home after work, listening to your child talk about 'Roman day' at school, when the phone rings. It's the church administrator. You think, 'No, I'm wearing my parent hat,' and you ignore the call, patting yourself on the back. Then the phone rings again, and it's the same number. 'Argh,' you think. 'It may be important.' With an apologetic look at your child, you say, 'Hang on a minute. I'll be right back.' You swap your parent hat for your church leader hat and take the phone call, which leads to a quick set of emails. You finish your work and then swap back to your parent hat for tea, and then whack on that church leader hat once again to quickly prep for the evening's budget meeting, before you throw the parent hat back on for bedtime kisses, and finally place the church leader hat on for the last time as you head out the door.

And that's not even talking about a Sunday morning or a meeting at your house when your children *and* the congregation are present together – in the same place at the same time – and *each* group expects you to be continually wearing the hat that signals to them that you are 'on duty' and ready to respond.

Whether you're trying to remove a child who has attached herself to you when you're leading the service, or you're struggling with your teenager slumped in the front row rolling his eyes at you, the stress can be enormous. You may try to look at your children and signal, 'Can't you see my hat? I have my church leader hat on right now. This is not parent hat time!' But it appears that your children *cannot* see your invisible church leader hat.

This pattern of swapping hats can be a source of enormous confusion for our children, and it can create a disconnection in our relationship with them. Whether or not we are in a church leader situation, our children are communicating to us, 'I love you and I need you to love me, care for me, make me safe and encourage me. I need you to parent me.' When we swap into our church leader hat, we are effectively telling our children, 'I am *not* your parent right now. I'm here for the congregation. I'm here for everyone else in this room *but* you.' Our children can feel the force of that rejection and can react to that message. For them, church events can become a process of managing how much disconnection they can handle before they think, 'Wait a minute. I can make you put your parent hat back on. Watch this!' And then they demonstrate with their behaviour how quickly they can force us to be a parent again. Behaviour often becomes a way for children to force us to put the parent hat back on. Ever wonder why it feels like sometimes our children's behaviour gets worse at the most inopportune times – before meetings, during sermons, after church services? Sometimes it's about our children fighting to get their parent back.

But we don't have to live in that struggle. We can have an integrated life, holding close our ministry and our family, honouring them both at the same time. I believe that when God calls us to be church leaders *and* parents, it is one call, not two. It is one hat, not two. At the heart of living with one call, of wearing one hat, is how we develop and maintain connection with our children so that we can say, 'I'm your parent all the time, and this is what it looks like for us to stay connected right now as I lead.'

So what *does* that look like? When we are connected to our children, and our children feel connected to us, then the following can happen:

- We will be positioned to influence and help them in their journey with God.
- We can have the heart-to-heart conversations that enable us to coach them through the complexities resulting from the ministry context in which they live.
- We can provide insight into the beauty of the church. We can explain and help our children see where God is in a community of broken, messy and wonderful people. We can help them see life through our eyes and God's eyes.
- We can help our children make sense of the nature of God's calling and how we are trying to be faithful to it.
- We will be laying a foundation for a relationship with them now, as well as for one in the future.

It can be so easy to lose sight of this concept of connection, particularly with the schedule of ministry life. Our days can be unpredictable and packed with activities and the responsibility of meeting a variety of needs. Emails, meetings, one last phone call or last-minute prep can mean that family connection gets robbed, replaced with merely being together in the same room and getting through the activities of the day.

The solution to this difficulty isn't to simply 'be home more'; it is to create a pattern and habit of connecting with each other in our time together. Connection, then, is the glue that keeps families close and communication flowing. If we don't proactively build and maintain connection, we will begin to lose our ability to help our children flourish.

If ministry life isn't about frantically switching hats, we can find a way to hold and honour both our ministry and our family. Connection with our children becomes something vital that we can build, maintain and grow in the midst of still doing our job well.

## How do we build connection?

The good news is that we already know how to build and maintain connection with our friends and family. All we need to do is proactively apply those concepts to our children.

Take a moment to think about the people in your life with whom you feel connected. Consider your relationships with your friends, siblings or even parents. In your experience with relationships, what are the ways in which you feel connected to your friends? To your family? How do you build and sustain those connections?

It may be that you:

- laugh together
- invest in time together: scheduled time and bored-togetherness time
- share interests and memories
- share important things of the heart back and forth
- are able to be open and honest
- encourage and support and see your words make a difference
- feel listened to and love listening to them
- access their understanding and empathy
- feel they are not judging you
- depend on their faithfulness and know they will show up or answer the phone when you need them
- walk together through good times and bad times
- share a mutual trust built on years of faithfulness and work.

Building connection happens in the everyday moments of faithfulness, expressions of love, listening, laughing, honesty, mutual joy and memories.

This type of connection is the essence of family life. It can happen in times of boredom or incredible significance, in sharing hearts and laughter, through little things and big things. These opportunities



to build connection are everywhere, at home and at church. Some opportunities require time, but others just require a choice.

The unique situation we find ourselves in as church leaders is that we are around our children while we are both at home and at work. If we want our children to flourish, then we need to find a way to create a thread of connection throughout all the time we are around them, not just during our time at home. Don't worry – it's easier than you think; the opportunities are all around if we look for them.

## Create a language

There was a time in my life when I was very ill and my brain wouldn't work properly. I couldn't remember the words for what I wanted to communicate. I'd be thirsty and would ask my husband to please get me a... *what was it called?* I was desperate to be understood. I'd act it out. I'd describe it as a 'make-my-mouth-stop-being-sticky thing'. I'd point repeatedly. I would try so hard to communicate my one deep desire to have a drink. Without specific words to rely on, I felt powerless to communicate my needs.

In our relationship with our children, they can find it hard to communicate with us about connection, primarily because they don't have a language for it. They can feel connected or disconnected, but their feeling is simply a sense or fleeting emotion that they cannot articulate. If they don't have the vocabulary and experience, they couldn't say, for instance, 'When you have four evening meetings in your week, I begin to feel a bit disconnected from you because we don't have our before-bed giggle time, so I feel like I never laugh with you.' Instead, all they have to use are a lot of desperate behaviours to express the sense of what they may be feeling. They may act out, using poor choices so that you have to spend time with them to discipline them. They may pretend not to want to be around you and punish you by shutting you out. They may be very positive on the outside, but just feel an internal sense of grief or of floating away, so they share less with you or expect less support. Their behaviour

becomes their communication method, which makes it hard for us to understand them and reconnect.

If our children don't have a language for what they are feeling, they won't know how to communicate that feeling to us and they won't have a pathway towards understanding that feeling for themselves. A recent study showed not only the power of connection between parents and children, and all the good it brings, but also that it's in the power of connection that the child feels rather than the parent.<sup>5</sup> In other words, whether or not we feel connected to our children seems to be much less important than how connected our children feel to us. If we are going to help our children grow this connection with us and flourish in it, then we must first give them a language to use to describe and process their feelings and to help them understand and know that we are on their side.

I would suggest that you talk with your children about connection in ways that flow from your everyday life with them. Through whatever language you choose to use – 'feeling like a together family', 'velcroed together', 'hearts like Lego bricks locked in', 'arm in arm vs floating down the river alone' or simply 'having our hearts connected' – children and teens need to learn what the goals of connection are all about.

## **Help children and teens identify when they are and aren't feeling connected by naming it**

One of our jobs with children is to help them name their emotions and experiences. When we have toddlers and we see them experiencing emotions, it's our job to explain to them what is happening: 'It looks like you are feeling angry' or 'What a happy time we are having!' By naming their emotional experiences, our children can begin to understand and cope with them.

But what if we never had a word for anger or regret, sadness or happiness? We'd be experiencing something without being able to

talk about it. It would be incredibly frustrating for our children and for us. If our children are on a journey of connection with us, they need a language they can use to discuss their connection with us and to reflect upon this connection themselves, using specific words to describe when it's not working and when it is. One way to start is to name the emotional experience when it is happening: for example, 'I love hugs. I feel like my heart and your heart are connected when we hug'; or, after a tickle fest, finish by saying, 'Laughing together is one of the best things in my life. Our hearts feel locked together in joy when we laugh.' I know others who name an experience by saying:

Is there anything that you are worried about that may mean your heart is hiding from me a bit? I feel like a bit of you isn't letting me come close, like a piece of Velcro that can't quite get a grip because it's covered with carpet fluff. I feel our hearts are missing connecting with each other. How can I help with that?

For teenagers and older children, you might want to start by saying:

It is so important to me that you feel seen, heard and loved, that you feel that you can say anything to me and that we feel that nothing is building up between us. I want us to feel connected, in whatever way that looks right for us. I may start asking about how our connection is doing and if you ever feel disconnected from me. That's just me asking if there is anything we could do better to make sure that our relationship is the best it can be, because I love you so much.

## **Use the language to monitor how everyone is feeling and work as a team to problem-solve**

Mutual problem-solving means that everyone in the family is working towards staying connected as a team. By giving a language in which to discuss the problem, the whole family then can work to solve it. For instance, a goal might be to say, 'I know it's Christmas, and that means my work schedule gets crazy. I want to make sure

that we don't just get time together, but that we stay heart-to-heart connected. So let's make a plan for our busy weeks. What patterns do we need to put in place to help us stay connected?' Or you could say, 'Hey, I've felt like we've had a bit of a bump in our connection. What can I do differently to help us reconnect better?'

You might also say, 'Sometimes I don't see you at all and I think we are missing out on some really peaceful times together before you go to school. Will you experiment with me to see if I can help make our connection better? I thought this week I will try to sit down at the breakfast table for 20 minutes every morning, no phone, ready to laugh and talk with everyone.' Or you might say, 'Okay, last week it looked like you struggled with me when I was not able to give you my time and my face. What can we try this week that might work for you and for me?'

This language helps children and teens identify what they are feeling, which then allows each family member to proactively work on building and maintaining connection together, and it also allows the entire family, as a team, to problem solve for ways to stay connected.

We are on a grand adventure of ministry. Let's make sure that our children are connected into us so that they can flourish while on this adventure. In the next chapter we will be talking about how we can practically build connection with our children and teens in the midst of ministry.



*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
Barnabas in Schools  
Holy Habits  
Living Faith  
Messy Church  
Parenting for Faith

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**The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF)** is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches and provides a professional education service to primary schools.

Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

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When spiritual leadership is our job, how does it affect family dynamics? How do we spiritually parent our children while also needing to lead the church? How do we balance the many hats we wear? How do we live in a goldfish bowl and yet enable our children to flourish? How do we parent for faith without giving in to the pressure to perform for our congregations?

Drawing on extensive research, Rachel Turner explores these issues and builds a set of simple tools and approaches to help church leaders and their families to flourish together.

**'If the first church that we lead is the one at home, most of us in full-time paid ministry need a lot more training. I am grateful to Rachel Turner for helping us parent well when it often feels that we face unique pressures as families in the context of church leadership.'**

**PAUL HARCOURT, NATIONAL LEADER, NEW WINE ENGLAND**



Rachel Turner is an author, a speaker and BRF's Parenting for Faith Pioneer. She presents the Parenting for Faith course, a video-based resource for church groups and individuals.



## parenting for faith

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