



VALERIE BELL  
 CHRIS MARCHAND  
 MATT MARKINS  
 MIKE HANDLER



# RESILIENT



## CHILD DISCIPLESHIP PHILOSOPHY GUIDE

The following Philosophy Guide is taken from Chapter 10 of the book *RESILIENT: Child Discipleship and the Fearless Future of the Church*. The Resilient Child Discipleship Philosophy (3B) is validated by research, countless real-life stories, and the way Jesus made disciples in the Gospels.

In our pursuit to understand, "What few factors most contribute to effective long-term discipleship in children and youth?" our ministry conducted four research projects (between 2013 - 2019) with children's ministry leaders and over 1,000 in-person conversations with church leaders and local practitioners like you. In addition, we studied existing research from other ministries. Lastly, we even studied our 70-year history as a global children and youth ministry—evaluating effectiveness among the 65,000 churches we work with—discovering all we learned throughout the years. This level of sustained rigor led us to this conclusion: Resilient Child Discipleship is made up of three components working together: *Belong, Believe, Become*.

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*Resilient Child Discipleship:*  
***IT'S ALL ABOUT  
 BELONG, BELIEVE  
 AND BECOME***

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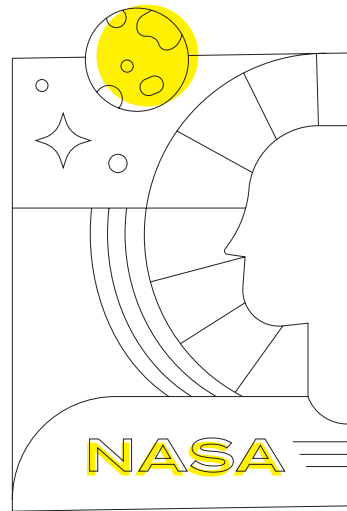
**CHAPTER 10**

**NASA was founded in 1958 and like many organizations in their early days, it was struggling to find its way.**

By the early 1960s, NASA was simply floundering. In spite of their significant expectations and an approximate budget of \$80 billion a year, NASA lacked focus.<sup>1</sup> Their culture was laden with bureaucracy and too many competing priorities. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was making swift progress and was beginning to win the “space race” of the 1960s.

With the eyes of the American public looking to them with great imagination and anticipation, NASA set out with high hopes and big dreams. Their objectives were outstanding:

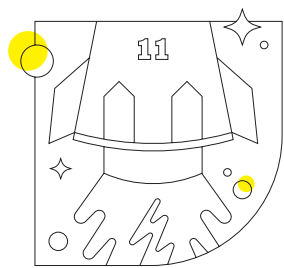
- *The expansion of human knowledge of phenomena in the atmosphere and space.*
- *The preservation of the role of the United States as the leader in aeronautical and space science and technology and in the application thereof to the conduct of peaceful activities within and outside the atmosphere.*
- *The preservation of the United States preeminent position in aeronautics and space through research and technology development related to associated manufacturing processes.*<sup>2</sup>



But wait, there's more: the objectives listed above are just three of NASA's eight main objectives. See the problem? Their systemic problem was what all too many organizations struggle with—lack of focus. Don't get me wrong, these are noble objectives. Yet, the eight objectives were dividing the organization's capacity. Too many objectives made it nearly impossible to focus and make progress toward a clearly defined goal. All of that began to change though in 1961.

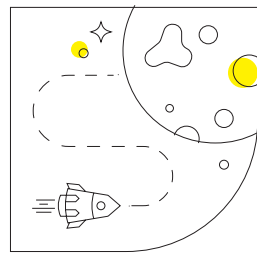
In 1961, President John F. Kennedy made the pronouncement to NASA, "Land a man on the moon and return him safely to the earth before this decade is out." With this clear and specific objective by our nation's president, NASA's strategy went from that of diversified energies, to a singular focus of energy with the aim of significant impact. Suddenly, NASA's strategy went from broad to narrow. Get to the moon. Land a man on the moon. Get him home safely. Do this by the end of 1969. Check.

But what was it going to take to do this? In order to accomplish this very focused mission, NASA leaders had to solve three problems: propulsion, navigation and human life support.



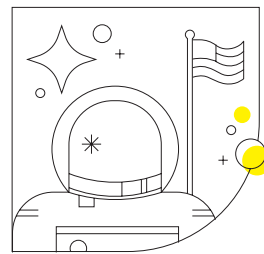
**PROPULSION**

*Get the Apollo out of the earth's atmosphere and back to earth.*



**NAVIGATION**

*Help the Apollo steer in the right direction when needed.*



**LIFE SUPPORT**

*Maintain the health and safety of the astronauts with the resources available on the spacecraft.*

Suddenly, everything changed! NASA rallied around these three core problems with remarkable focus. Teams were formed. Objectives were clarified. Problems were identified. Processes and systems were put in place. New technologies were innovated and BAM! On July 20, 1969, the nation watched in awe as Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon's surface and spoke these unforgettable words:

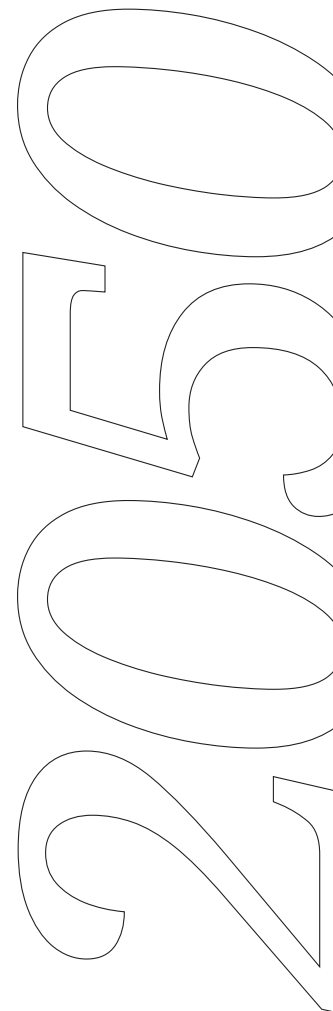
***"That's one small step for man. And one giant leap for mankind."***

That's poetry spoken in the theater of our universe.

What seemed nearly unattainable...what seemed so far off and distant...almost impossible, it happened!

But it happened because one leader not only had a vision, but declared a specific goal: a goal that was clear, focused and measurable. And the entire organization got behind it and delivered on execution.

In children's ministry, the year 2050 almost feels as distant as the moon. But the culture race is on—big time. Secular culture is designed to distract our kids into corrupt ideology or to lull our children into consumer complacency. What must we do to win in this race and prepare today's kids to engage the culture and lead the church of the future with a fearless, resilient faith? As we discussed in Chapter 8, a clarified goal of Resilient Child Discipleship comes alive through a philosophy known to influence long-term discipleship fruit into adulthood: *Belong, Believe and Become.*



## Defining Resilient Child Discipleship

Having served in local churches (children’s ministry, youth ministry) and having led in nonprofit ministries, our leadership can relate to the plight faced by NASA. Specifically within children and youth ministry we can become overwhelmed with a multiplicity of priorities like VBS, Sunday school, youth group, large group, small group, community groups, midweek, staff management, volunteer management, volunteer recruitment, staff and volunteer training, key church relationships, budgeting and planning, business meetings, and the seemingly endless number of special events. Whew! And we were just getting started!

NASA came to the place as an organization where it reevaluated its strategy and chose to stop or pause some activities in order to focus on three specific components to win in the space race. In the same way, as child disciple-makers, we need to step back and ask ourselves, “Is our current strategy and philosophy going to nurture and influence resilient disciples who will lead the church in 2050?” If the answer to that question is “yes,” then you have likely already worked through a process of evaluating your philosophy and identifying the key markers that influence long-term fruit. But if the answer is “no,” then consider Resilient Child Discipleship based on three focused components that we referenced earlier in the book:

**Resilient Child Discipleship**

The process of a Christ-follower committing meaningful, intentional, and consistent time and space to a child or a group of children so that they may know who Jesus is and are known by a body of believers **(Belong)**, to place their faith in Jesus and apply the Word of God **(Believe)** and to reproduce their own discipleship **(Become)** so that a third spiritual generation can lead and love like Jesus Christ.

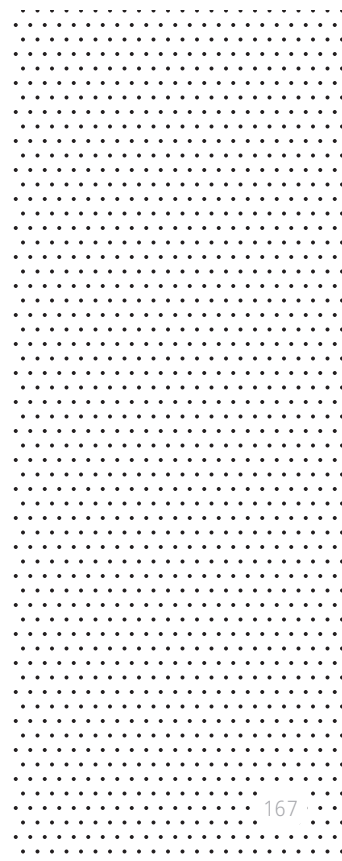
Resilient Child Discipleship doesn’t start with programs. It doesn’t start with our existing 21st century systems. It starts with a universal curiosity around, what makes child discipleship effective, long-term and fruitful? As church leaders and kid-influencers, we have the unique opportunity to let this curiosity inform our programs and our systems, ultimately resulting in more effective local church, gospel-based ministry.

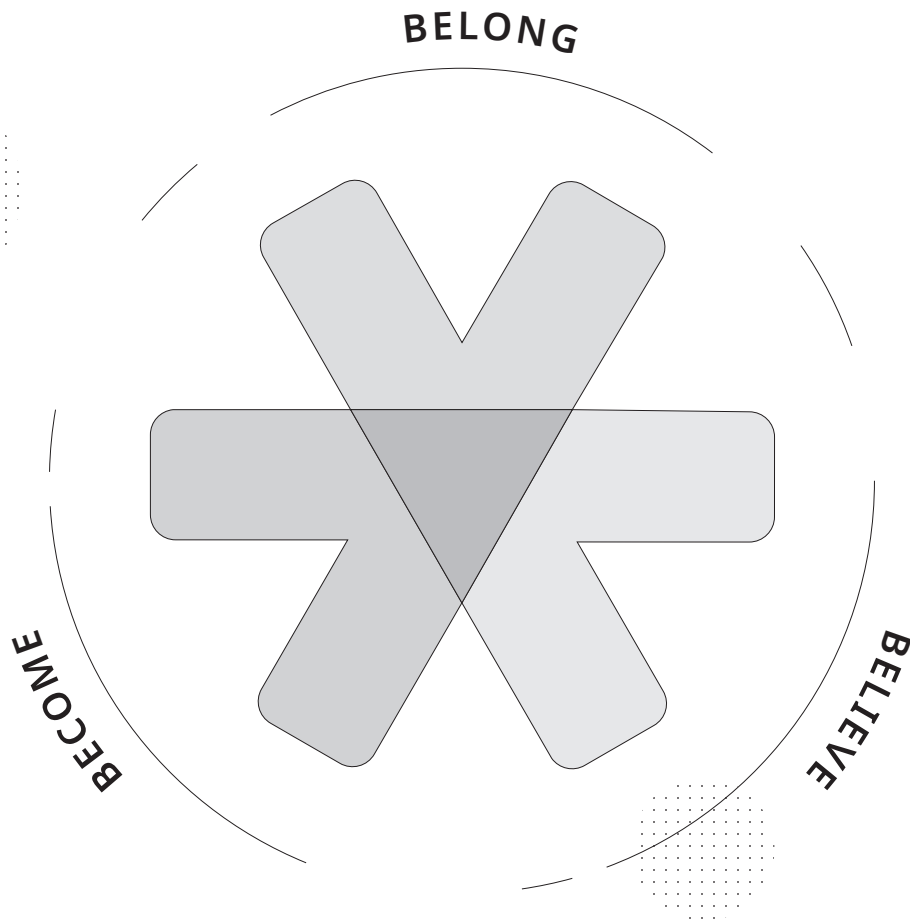
### Three Components of Resilient Child Discipleship: **Belong, Believe and Become**

Belong, Believe and Become is the foundation for spiritual resilience. From child to child the environments and the variables change, but when these components are present, the probability for long-term discipleship fruit goes up—even in the face of adverse conditions.

As an organization, we got really curious about, “What makes child discipleship effective, long-term and fruitful?” in 2014. At that point, we began studying the Scriptures with specific interest in the life and ministry of Jesus. We also studied existing and accessible data as well as conducted our own research. Our leadership team has facilitated over 1,000 in-person conversations with church leaders gaining their insight and feedback. We even studied our 70-year history as a global children and youth ministry—looking at both the ups and downs of our own successes and failures. We simply wanted to know, what is it that produces long-term discipleship fruit in the lives of kids into their adulthood?

**RESILIENT CHILD DISCIPLESHIP STARTS WITH A UNIVERSAL CURIOSITY AROUND WHAT MAKES CHILD DISCIPLESHIP EFFECTIVE, LONG-TERM AND FRUITFUL.**





*Belong, Believe and Become is the foundation for spiritual resilience.*

All of our learning continued to point to three effective components that make up the Resilient Child Discipleship philosophy: Belong, Believe and Become. Let's define the terms:

- ▽ **BELONG**  
 Highly relational ministry led by loving and caring adults
- ▽ **BELIEVE**  
 Deeply Scriptural ministry rooted in the truth of God's Word and the power of the gospel
- ▽ **BECOME**  
 Truly experiential ministry, designed to move kids from simulation to real-world application of faith-based living

Time and time again, these components show up as the central factors to Resilient Child Discipleship that lead to transformation in the lives of children. Our ministry partnerships engage 4.8 million kids in 124 countries. Not a week goes by that we don't receive reports or personal stories of belong, believe and become from our ministry partners like Compassion International, World Vision, missionaries, church planters or pastors from one of our 61,000 global church partners. Even as I have reflected back on my (Matt) own story, I don't have to look too far before I begin to see these same themes emerge.

My parents divorced when I was a young child. My dad was an abusive man and lived a lifetime of hurting those around him, resulting in a wake of damaged relationships. Although my mom had primary custody of my brother and me (which was the best choice), my dad began pushing for joint custody when I was 15. After much consideration as a young man, I ended up deciding that joint custody was not the wisest decision. This decision not to go through with joint child custody made my dad very angry and he told me he didn't want to see me any more.

**THEY SIMPLY  
LOVED ME  
THROUGH  
THEIR  
CONSISTENT  
PRESENCE.**

Wow! Talk about pain and confusion. It was during this season of my life when loving, caring adults like Kimbol and Nancy D., Mike H. and Larry D. stepped in relationally and invested in me. They taught me the Scriptures. They encouraged me. They hung out with me. They identified and named strengths and gifts I didn't even know that I had. They simply loved me through their consistent presence. Throughout this season, they walked beside me at church, in youth group, at community gatherings, in mentoring sessions and even just going out for ice cream. They pointed me in the direction of my life calling and they gave me opportunities to grow, gain experience and lead.

Did you see it? It's right there: *Belong, Believe and Become*. It's all over my story. I was at a vulnerable spot when my dad walked out and left me emotionally abandoned, wounded and confused. I could have gone a lot of different directions—certainly anywhere, but the church. But there was a church...These men and women communicated to me with every fiber of their being that I **belonged**. I knew that they loved me. I could see it in their eyes, feel it in the handwritten cards, in their consistent, relational pursuit and presence. Pastor Kimbol and youth pastor Mike taught me the Scriptures in both formal church opportunities and in informal mentoring times. Deacon Larry would bring Scripture into the conversation as he encouraged me to stay focused on my faith in Jesus and to be careful not to stray toward the broad path that leads to destruction. They were mine and I was theirs. And because of these loving, caring adults, my faith in Jesus was cemented—I **believed**! I saw Christ in them and they helped me see the miracle of the gospel through their teaching of the Word. In addition, they gave me opportunity upon opportunity to serve, volunteer, lead and create. They showed me how to **become** like Jesus and gave me the tools I still carry with me to this very day as I lead and disciple the upcoming generations.

Can you see the components of Resilient Child Discipleship in your story? Can you see where these three components have shaped the children and students in your church community? How about your kids or your grandkids?

**But why is it that *Belong, Believe and Become*—out of all of the possible factors—have so much influence in lifelong discipleship?**

In the remaining pages of this chapter, we are going to explore responses to that question. We will dig more deeply into why *Belong, Believe and Become* are the key contributing factors to Resilient Child Discipleship by looking through the lens of: 1. Biblical Basis, and 2. Noteworthy Research.

1

**A BIBLICAL BASIS:  
*BELONG, BELIEVE, BECOME***

The Resilient Child Discipleship philosophy of *Belong, Believe and Become* is deeply rooted in the Scriptures. These words and the intentionality behind them frequently appear throughout the Bible, but often not grouped together as written above. *Belong, believe and become* is expressed in the books, letters and countless encounters between God and humanity. This discipleship philosophy serves as a biblical and theological roadmap for many to understand the motives, desires and expectations of our Savior and the corresponding and complementary behaviors of humanity. In that, humankind can understand true belonging because Jesus came looking for us (Luke 19:10, John 1:14). That God's desire is for each of us to believe in Him for salvation (2 Peter 3:9, John 20:30-31). Finally, that He desires for each of us to become who we are created to be and fulfill our purpose in carrying out His will for our lives (1 Peter 2:2, Romans 8:28-29, 1 John 3:2).

### Belong: A Biblical Basis

In Romans 1:6, Paul greets the church in Rome by saying, *“including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”* The entirety of the Scriptures shouts to the world that we belong to God. In the beginning, humanity was created to be in perfect union with God and belong to Him, for we are His creation (Genesis 1:26). There is an intimacy that was always part of His original design for our relationship with Him. We are His masterpiece and reflect the image of God in this world (Ephesians 2:10). Christ's motivation to bring us back to Himself is the very premise of the incarnation. God came down and entered into the muck and mire of this world. Why? Because we belong to Him.

Humanity was always created to be in intimate proximity to God. It's in that relationship that we know how to love one another (1 John 4:19). As the world will know that we are His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35). This attitude of love is the essence of true belonging. Jesus desires to make a space at the table for everyone. Men, women and especially children from all walks of life and context have a space to find true belonging in Jesus. Jesus said in Matthew 19, *“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”* From children, which at this point in history, many thought to be the lowest of culture and society, to the woman at the well (John 4) an outcast, to Nicodemus (John 3) the academic and spiritual elite of his time, and Zacchaeus (Luke 19) a conformist unwanted nobody. Each of them finds belonging in Christ.

The biblical account of Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) provides the essential framework of how Christ did ministry relationally. Jesus was passing through Jericho and there was a tiny, little man hanging out in a sycamore tree. You see Zacchaeus fit the mold of a conformist unwanted nobody. He was a tax collector. Like most tax collectors at the time, he took advantage of his position to profit from adding fees beyond the tax desired to be collected. This didn't make him anyone's friend or favorite person. Scripture even captures the consternation of the people. It says, *“and when they saw it, they all grumbled, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’”* We all have a great hope to belong because of Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus. Notice what Jesus does in this story. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. There's a personal connection that drives the rest of the story. Jesus

closed the proximity between Him and Zacchaeus. Jesus says, *“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”* Think of all the invites and gatherings that Zacchaeus must have missed because of who he was known to be. Finally, Jesus wants entry into his daily life. There's something very personal about inviting someone into your home. Everything is on display. The good, bad and ugly. It's all there in living color and that's where Jesus wants to be. In the life of Zacchaeus or in our own lives, Jesus knows our name. Jesus wants to close the gap between us and Him, and He wants to gain access to our most intimate spaces. And the beauty of this story is that Zacchaeus was forever changed.

### Believe: A Biblical Basis

In John's Gospel, he says, *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name”* (John 20:30-31). For every man, woman, and child, the primary role of the Gospels is to present the person of Christ with the most considerable amount of evidence possible. No message or movement in all history has had an impact like the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans 1:16, Paul says, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* For Christ alone is the only perfectly qualified individual in all of history that can forgive sin and meet all the requirements of His divine standard.

This is also the essence of John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life* (NIV).

***GOD CAME  
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WHY?  
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We are reminded of this in many passages of Scripture. The impact of God's Word on those who believe in Him. Acts 6:7 says, *"...and the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."* This is the power and impact of the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 reminds us of its power. The writer of Hebrews says, *"For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

In Matthew 16, Jesus asks two essential questions of His disciples. Jesus asks, *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* They replied, *"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

*"But what about you?"* He asked. *"Who do you say I am?"*

Simon Peter answered, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* When it comes to belief, there's the opinion of the crowd that will no doubt influence the perspective of many. However, Jesus makes a beeline to the crux of the issue, for each person must decide on their own if they believe Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. As it was with the disciples, so it is for every person. The core outcome of belief is to align and identify oneself with Christ. Belief is all about deeply scriptural ministry rooted in the truth of God's word and in the power of the gospel.

### **Become: A Biblical Basis**

Finally, Paul expresses the idea of becoming to the believers in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* Paul also expresses a similar idea to the church in Rome. Paul says, *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2, NIV)."* In the Scriptures, there is an expectation that every believer is in the process of becoming. There is a divine metamorphosis and a transformation that occurs as each experiential moment of our sanctification helps to refine us into a perfect image of Jesus.

That's why Jesus sent His disciples out of the classroom and into the world. The Christian life and every believer's becoming is more than the culmination of countless hours of theory and simulation. It must be balanced by daily practice in the context of reality. The disciples needed to experience it. They needed to see, first hand the power of Christ. Luke 10:1-23 shows us an example of the methodology of Christ. Jesus believed in getting outside of a simulation environment. Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples in pairs of two to each of the places that He was about to go. He gives them specific instructions to guide their habits and behavior. When they returned, they were filled with joy and said, *"Lord, even the demons submit to us in Your name."* But, Jesus corrected their observation and amplified their thinking by saying, *"He replied, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven (NIV).'"* This experience is a valuable teachable moment between the disciples and Jesus. That's how God does some of His best and most memorable work in the lives of people. From the belly of a great fish (Jonah 1:17), to a burning bush (Exodus 3), to the seventy-two disciples being sent out.

Each one of us is in the process of becoming and is the result of countless divine appointments and experiences carefully and masterfully crafted by our Lord (Philippians 2:13).

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What happens when a person or group of people belong to Jesus, believe in Him, and desire to become all that God has created them to be? You get a church! In Acts 2:42-47, Luke describes the early church and gives us a short but powerful description of the fellowship of believers. He says, *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*



**WE TAKE GREAT COMFORT IN THE UNCHANGING RELIABILITY AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE.**

This passage of Scripture echoes each piece of belong, believe, and become. The early church found belonging in their common bond of Jesus Christ and with each other. They “*were together and had all things in common.*” Their identities were in Christ and with each other. They found the essence of true belonging as they lived out Paul’s similar encouragement to the Philippians in “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves*” (Philippians 2:3, NIV). They gathered together under the banner of common belief in the apostle’s teaching, the words and instructions passed down to them by Jesus Christ. Finally, they became the Church as God added to their number many individuals who were saved and started their own journey of becoming. In this, they fulfilled the purpose that Christ gave to the disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, “*Go therefore and make disciples [Become] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you [Believe] And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” [Belong].

Cover to cover, the Bible gives examples of these three components (Belong, Believe and Become) appearing over and over again. From creation to the incarnation and Jesus calling His disciples these themes are evident. From doubting Thomas finding belief only after he had first belonged (relational proximity to Jesus), to Peter having been reinstated after the grievous sin of denying Christ three times so that he could become the leader of the Church—we can see the foundation of spiritual resilience being formed.

We take great comfort in the unchanging reliability and authority of Scripture. Now let’s also take a look at the data and analysis of modern research and how these practical findings can shape our child discipleship philosophy today.

## 2

## NOTEWORTHY RESEARCH: BELONG, BELIEVE, BECOME

Like you, we are lifetime learners. We love to learn in a variety of ways and one of those ways is research. For pastors and church leaders, research continues to be a key way to learn, gain wisdom and inform the way we navigate in an ever changing culture. We also look to research because it helps us to discern the times. Yet, as important as research is, nothing is more important than our faith, dependency upon Christ, prayer to God and reliance upon the Holy Spirit. So as we approach this next section together, we do so with this clear understanding: we value research because we can learn to gain and apply wisdom to the glory of God.

In his book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna penned these words in 2003, “Most families do not have a genuine spiritual life together...first, they are merely following the precedent that was set for them...second, most church going parents are neither spiritually mature nor spiritually inclined and, therefore, they do not have a sense of urgency or necessity about raising their kids to be spiritual champions...”<sup>3</sup> The research behind this project and numerous projects that would follow helped ignite what we now call the modern “family ministry” or “NextGen ministry” movement. Within this overall movement the common message was “Parents are the primary spiritual leaders in the lives of their children. It’s the church’s job to partner with and equip parents.” This is a true message straight from the pages of Deuteronomy 6! Yet, In Dr. Kara Powell and Dr. Chap Clark’s research behind their book *StickyFaith* we are reminded that, “Most parents don’t talk faith with their kids. 12% of youth have a regular dialogue with their mom or dad on faith issues.”<sup>4</sup> Not only are parents struggling at home, they are attending church inconsistently. In a study Awana commissioned in 2019, we discovered that “inconsistent attendance of Kids/Families” is the second most adversely impacted area of local church children’s ministry.<sup>5</sup>

So are we making progress? Has the family ministry movement moved the needle? Due to the seismic shifts Valerie discussed in Chapter 2 of this book, no one seems to be quite sure. As church leaders, we all feel a deep frustration by asking spiritually anemic adults who are barely surviving to lead their kids spiritually. Although it’s happening in some of our church families, the “at home” discipleship experience is a small percentage.

So what are we to do? Abandon family ministry? Absolutely not! Abandon church ministry? Never! Resilient discipleship is about changing the way we look at children's, youth and family ministry. The reality is that many parents will never go along on the discipleship journey. These parents are spiritually anemic, distracted, wounded or perhaps not even a Christ-follower. So what are we supposed to do as church leaders and child-influencers? We must have a “belong, believe, become” strategy for *every* child...the child with healthy, thriving Christ-following parents, and the child with little to no parental, spiritual engagement.

Christian Smith and Patricia Snell zero in on this idea when they say, “...no single factor can produce high levels of emerging adult religiousness. Instead, multiple combinations of factors working together are necessary to more likely than not produce that outcome. When teenagers' lives reflect only one strong factor, their chances of becoming highly religious emerging adults are lower than average.” They continue, “...every most-likely path to highly religious emerging adulthood must include combinations of distinctly different kinds of causal factors, almost always including groupings of relational, personal subjective, and devotional practice factors. In almost all cases, necessary among these variables are:

- *Strong, personal **relationships** with adults who bond teenagers to faith communities (either parents or supportive non-parents),*
- *Strong expressions of subjective teen personal faith commitment and **experience** (high importance of faith, few doubts, many religious experiences), and*
- *High frequencies of religious practice: prayer and **Scripture reading.**”<sup>6</sup>*

Smith and Snell are hitting on the resilient discipleship core thesis. Resilient Child Discipleship is not about a single factor. Resilient Child Discipleship is about a combination of factors working together as they reference above, “relationships” (belong), “experience” (become) and “Scripture reading” (believe). For the church kids, for the non-church kids, for the kids with highly engaged parents and for the kids who live in parental neglected

homes, as KidMin and youth leaders, we need a combination of distinctly different factors that work together to forge effective discipleship.

We are hopeful about children's, youth and family ministry, because **research supports that resilient child disciple making is possible**. The church can do this! The combination of factors are doable and achievable. Let's take a brief look at the supporting research.

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***Note:** We are only publishing a fraction of the research we collected for the sake of brevity. Please visit [ResilientDisciples.com](http://ResilientDisciples.com) for additional free resources and information.*

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### **Belong Research**

In her book, *Daring Greatly*, Dr. Brené Brown speaks of the importance of belonging. “I define belonging as the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing. In fact, fitting in is one of the greatest barriers to belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be in order to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are.” She goes on to say, “When I asked a large group of eighth-graders to break into small teams and come up with the differences between fitting in and belonging, their answers floored me: Belonging is being somewhere you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere you really want to be, but they don't care one way or the other. Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else. I get to be me if I belong. I have to be like you to fit in.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the deepest longings of the human heart is to know, “Where do I belong? Who are my people?” As God's people, we know that the central story of the Bible is of His love for us. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who came to redeem us and bring us into His kingdom to find true belonging. This is the mission of the church. This is you!

As local church leaders and child and student-influencers, check out some of these findings on the power of belonging:

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### The Belonging Church:

- **Being the Church Makes a Difference**

*“By far, the number one way that churches made the teens in our survey feel welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed an interest in them.”<sup>8</sup>*

- **Church Attendance Matters**

*“The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: for high school and college students, there is a relationship between attendance at church wide worship services and Sticky Faith.”<sup>9</sup>*

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### Loving, Caring Adults Exude Belonging:

- **Even Just One Caring Adult Can Make an Impact**

*“Developmental research shows that having one or more caring adults in a child’s life increases the likelihood that they will flourish, and become productive adults themselves. Children and adolescents who have a formal or informal “mentor-like” relationship with someone outside their home are less likely to have externalizing behavior problems (bullying) and internalizing problems (depression).”<sup>10</sup>*

- **Non-Parental Adults Can Make an Impact**

*“Research has demonstrated that significant non-parental adults play a very important role in the lives of children and adolescents. This has been shown both through studies that utilize youth self-report (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982; Galbo & Demetrulias, 2001; Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992; Munsch & Blyth, 1993) and by more rigorous outcome studies (Werner, 1992, 1995; Zimmerman & Bingenheimer, 2002).”<sup>11</sup>*

- **Trusting Relationships Can Help High-Risk Kids**

*“Further evidence of the protective impact of relationships with non-parental adults is found in the results from a 32 year longitudinal resiliency study of*

*children born in Kauai in the year 1955, conducted by Werner and colleagues. This study identified the existence of supportive, non-parental adults who developed trusting relationships with youth as one of five clusters of protective factors that were present in the lives of high-risk children who successfully adapted to adult life. These non-parental adults included grandparents, elder mentors, teachers, youth leaders and members of church groups (Werner, 1992, 1995).”<sup>12</sup>*

### Believe Research

So we’ve shown the importance of belonging through research and now we are going to take a look at believing.

Imagine going into a major surgery at your local hospital only to find out that your surgeon had not read or studied any of her textbooks in medical school. “Stop! Do not wheel me into the back room!” you’d exclaim. As her patient, you would assume that she was mentored by more experienced surgeons (highly relational), that she participated in her practicum (truly experiential), and that she had a working knowledge of her field of practice (deeply Scriptural or in this case, deeply medical). Just as you would want your surgeon to have a working knowledge of human anatomy, how much more we want the kids in our ministry to have the knowledge, message and wisdom of the Bible that leads them to salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the power of believe.

The need for “biblical literacy” among children may not be the most highly attended workshop at a conference, yet it is one of our most foundational and significant needs for the church in North America. Since 2014, our leadership team has conducted over 1,000 conversations with those who work with children and students in the local church. One of the emerging themes has been a disappointment—we would even say a lamenting—that their children and youth ministry has adopted a “Bible-lite” strategy that is characterized by morality-based teaching or virtues-based teaching. This strategy is a major contributor to what Christian Smith has termed “moralistic therapeutic deism” and has been quite harmful to the long-term vitality of the church and in the lives of disciples in much the same way as the metaphorical surgeon above who does not know her “source” information through her textbooks.

**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT KIDS WHO HAVE A HIGHER ENGAGEMENT IN THE BIBLE ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO LOVE AND FOLLOW JESUS INTO ADULTHOOD.**

The Bible is our “source” information and research shows that kids who have a higher engagement in the Bible are far more likely to love and follow Jesus into adulthood. Even as some churches have gravitated to a Bible-lite strategy, many are not going that direction. Churches that elevate a highly scriptural model of discipleship tend to teach the gospel story as the thread of redemption from Genesis to Revelation, teach the Bible as a central part of their ministry, present the gospel to kids and students, value Scripture memory as a methodology and create a system to encourage Bible engagement as a consistent spiritual discipline.

**Here’s some research pertaining to believing:**

● **Higher Spiritual Health**

*LifeWay Research wanted to know the “best predictors of spiritual health among young adults” and the number one finding was that the “child regularly read the Bible while growing up.”*<sup>13</sup>

● **Childhood Bible Reading**

*“Twenty-nine percent of the young adults regularly read the Bible while growing up, according to their parents. On average, that group has 12.5% higher spiritual health than otherwise comparable individuals who didn’t, LifeWay Research found.”*<sup>14</sup>

● **Children Are Open to the Gospel**

*The Barna group has found that, “nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday.”*<sup>15</sup>

● **Bible Engagement Benefit**

*In David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock’s Faith for Exiles, they found that 87% of those defined as “resilient disciples” feel closer to God when they read the Bible (compared to 44% habitual churchgoers, 21% unchurched, and 10% prodigals).*<sup>16</sup>

● **The Bible’s Power to Transform**

*“Overall, almost six in 10 U.S. adults (58%) believe that the message of the Bible has transformed their life, including three in 10 (28%) who agree strongly with this statement...Married adults and those with children under 18 are both more likely to indicate that the Bible has been life-changing”*<sup>17</sup>

We were curious about what children’s ministry leaders thought, so we have conducted four research projects (from 2013 - 2019) to discover what those in children’s ministry find to be most important. When respondents were asked to rate the importance of 16 components, they rated Bible teaching as the most highly rated component as a 4.9 on a 5 point scale. This indicates nearly every respondent rated Bible teaching as a 5 (very important)!<sup>18</sup> In our 2014 research project, 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 (4.8 average on a 5 point scale), 98.3% rated this purpose as important or very important.<sup>19</sup>

In Matthew 28, Jesus commands His followers to go and **make disciples**. This is our calling and our commission: to teach kids the commandments and the ways of Jesus and to help them know how to call on the name of the Lord and be saved. Churches that are highly scriptural are far better stewards of helping children and students believe.

## Become Research

Now let's take a look at the research on the third component of resilient child discipleship on becoming.

A few years ago I (Matt) was sensing the need for adventure so I decided to lead a 5th grade boys small group. What could be more adventurous than that?! I could sense there was a restlessness with these emerging young men. Something was just not quite right. I began to sense that these guys were ready to explore new conversations. After some think-time and prayer, I asked our kids pastor for special permission to set aside the curriculum for a while and chart some new territory. My express intent was to help these guys navigate the world they were emerging into as 11-year-old boys. The months that followed delivered on pure adventure! We focused on their questions, key topics to navigate life and culture, the Bible and lots and lots of conversation. The nagging feeling God placed in my spirit was right. They certainly needed relationship. They absolutely needed Bible teaching. But they also needed more—they needed navigational help—they needed someone to walk beside them and help them **become**.

Parents, church leaders and child disciple-makers, we must practice navigating real life conversations with kids and students. Whether it's science, the Bible, the sexual revolution, gender identity, the cultural divide, whatever—navigation simply means we will walk alongside, guide them, be co-learners with them and faithfully point them to Christ and His Word. Children and students do not expect us to be experts who have all of the answers, but they do expect us to engage. Engaging means asking questions. Engaging means we sometimes respond by saying, “I don't know, but maybe we should explore that together.” Engaging means having compassion and empathy. And engaging also means we share the knowledge and wisdom we do have or even searching the Scriptures and praying together. The important part is this continual collision of belong (relationship), believe (the Bible, faith in Jesus) and become (help them navigate and experience life with them). Although conversation is foundational, it's just one way we express becoming (truly experiential).

Here's some research pertaining to becoming:

- **Conversation Is Critical**  
*In Kara Powell and Chap Clark's Sticky Faith research, they asked graduating high school seniors what they wished they had more of in youth group. Of the thirteen options we provided, their number one answer was time for deep conversation.<sup>20</sup>*
- **We Need to Be Prepared for the Hard Conversations**  
*Unfortunately, many adults are fearful of this type of experience with children and youth. In the Barna Group's research on Gen Z, they say, “It's important for pastors, leaders and parents to be prepared to discuss the real issues of the Christian faith, historical evidence, origins of the Bible, science, and inter-faith dialogue. This is the “acid-test” for real belief in the next generation.<sup>21</sup>*
- **We Need to Engage, Not Avoid**  
*A Barna group study in 2018 showed that only 68% of protestant youth pastors were comfortable talking about the origins of the Bible and historical evidence. Only 48% felt comfortable talking about science and the Bible and only 44% felt they could talk about inter-faith dialogues. The majority of teens (over 59% in all categories) felt uncomfortable talking about these things.<sup>22</sup>*
- **Students Who Mentor Children Remain in the Faith**  
*Students who serve and build relationships with younger children also tend to have stickier faith.<sup>23</sup>*
- **Serving Cultivates Caring and Faith**  
*Faith becomes more long-term when we take the time to find out what causes our kids are concerned about and we help them invest in those causes. We can cultivate caring, compassion and living on-mission when we serve together as a small group or as families.<sup>24</sup>*

**CHILDREN AND STUDENTS DO NOT EXPECT US TO BE EXPERTS WHO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, BUT THEY DO EXPECT US TO ENGAGE.**

Chris Marchand has been known to say, “We have to get kids outside of the simulation of the local church.” Meaning, **faith is forged in the real experiences of life.** Faith can be cemented when we are doing real, practical hands-on engagement. When we give children and youth “truly experiential” ministry, we are more likely to help them become like Jesus.

Resilient disciples do not simply engage in a simulation (learning about faith), but they bump up against the culture and they engage the world around them on mission for Christ. This very idea of getting kids active and engaged can be influenced and cultivated from a young age.

Well-known researcher and sociologist Christian Smith’s words at the beginning of this section tend to echo in our hearts and minds when he says, “...no single factor can produce high levels of emerging adult religiousness. Instead, multiple combinations of factors working together are necessary to more likely than not produce that outcome.” Time and time again, the factors that are known to produce long-term fruit in the lives of children and youth are the three critical components of Resilient Child Discipleship.

### What keeps you up at night?

One of the most challenging conversations we hear from local church leaders is the fast pace and the sheer volume of tasks and projects you lead and steward in local church ministry. We hurt for you. You have a big job, and there is no more important mission than the church. As you captivate our mind space, we wonder about your sleepless nights...what must keep you up as you bravely face unprecedented cultural upheaval? We share these sleepless nights with you. One of the things that keeps us up at night is our worry for all that you carry. Our prayer for you in this season is that you are able to find the space to have the critical conversation that NASA must have had. If propulsion, navigation and human life support are what has to be solved to achieve our mission, what must be stopped, paused or changed? What will it take to place increased focus on the essentials...the few, key contributing factors that are known to influence mission impact?

We can only imagine the challenges you must weigh as you think about how to design and implement a child discipleship system (team, program,

methods, communication, volunteers, etc.) that’s an integration of highly relational ministry (Belong), deeply scriptural ministry (Believe) and truly experiential ministry (Become). These are the few, key contributing factors that lead to long-term discipleship.

**Belong, Believe and Become are the foundation for spiritual resilience. And the church of 2050 will require just that.**

In the next chapter, we will discuss the essential challenges we must face as we implement effective child discipleship and shape the fearless future of the church. Let’s stick together!

### Q

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- *As you think about your children’s ministry, what are you doing that’s having the most positive impact on making disciples? Can you measure, track or evaluate this impact? If so, how?*
- *Within your children’s ministry, what are you doing that’s having the least impact? Have you considered pausing or stopping this particular methodology or activity? Would it be possible to repurpose this energy, capacity or resource more effectively?*
- *As you think about the challenge within the NASA metaphor, what else could your team pause or stop in order to focus on fewer factors with higher impact?*
- *Do you see “belong, believe, become” reflected in your story or others around you? What would it look like to build your children’s ministry around belonging, believing and becoming with the aim of maximizing lifelong impact, cultural engagement and the church of 2050?*