

Monitoring the “Indicators” of Children’s Ministry Health

By Steve Alley

The medical world uses your body’s “indicators” to determine its health. By simply monitoring these indicators, a doctor or nurse can get an accurate sense of what is going on inside your body. These indicators are: your heart rate, your blood pressure, your temperature, the levels white and red cells in your blood, the sounds our lungs make, and even the sounds your intestines make. Those who are trained to recognize the “signs” that these indicators present, can prescribe medications or other solutions to solve minor problems of your body before they develop into major complications.

We, in children’s ministry, can learn some great lessons from the medical field. There are “indicators” within our ministry that, if observed carefully, can help us deal with “minor” challenges before they become major issues. Jesus talked about farmers “watching the signs” of the weather or seasons to determine their planting or harvesting schedules (Luke 21: 25-36), as well as looking for the signs of His return. Jesus encourages using “indicators”! What are the indicators of the health of a children’s ministry?

Even the best children’s pastor may not be able to see everything that goes on in the ministry. Even the most gifted children’s pastor may not know everything about every volunteer or staff person in the ministry! No matter how long you’ve been in the ministry, you may not be able to fully monitor every lesson, or understand every parent. We need to use the indicators available to us all. Here is a list of some basic, key indicators of the health of a children’s ministry along with a few thoughts for each.



The Ministry’s Volunteer Level

Just like a “blood level” can indicate many things within the body, the ministry’s “volunteer level” is a critical indicator of some vital “health conditions” of the ministry. If the level of volunteers slows to a trickle, it may indicate any of the following “complications.” You must seek the Lord for wisdom and discernment in determining, or prescribing, what treatment the ministry needs.

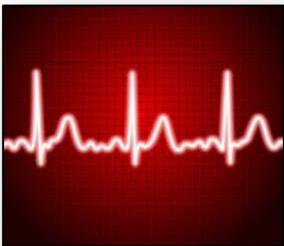
1. Problems in the leadership – Throughout scripture, God blesses, or withdraws His blessings based on the leader’s worship, reliance, or obedience to Him. Are you, and your leaders spiritually healthy?
2. Problems in the team – Whether it is your paid staff or volunteer staff, the “health” of these people effects your whole ministry. Unhappy, mistreated, untrained, unsupported people can “spread” their feelings to others. Does the children’s ministry have a bad reputation?
3. Problems in your communication – Even the most anointed, vibrant, fruitful ministry needs to be “displayed” to the rest of the church body! Does the rest of the church know what God is doing in the children’s ministry? Do you have “clogged communication arteries”?
4. Problems with the parents – Parents talk to other parents! If parents feel unsupported, or think their children are not being nurtured spiritually, they will spread their views to others. Are the parents of the children in the ministry happy?



The Ministry's Output

Many things can be learned from measuring the body's output. Too little output may indicate either dehydration or constipation. Too much output may indicate other problems. If the children's ministry's "volunteer level" is high, but there is a high level of team members leaving the ministry, this could indicate any of the following "complications" in the ministry. You must seek the Lord for wisdom and discernment in determining, or prescribing, what treatment the ministry needs.

1. Problems in team development – If people are "attracted" to the ministry, but leave within a few weeks or months, this could indicate a lack of adequate training, placement, or utilization. People stay when they feel valued, prepared, and essential. Are the team members developed, and are their gifts used fully?
2. Problems within the team – One or two negative or divisive team members can literally repel others from the team. The leadership's ability to recognize, challenge, then, if necessary, remove offensive team members produces a secure team. Are their offensive team members on the team?
3. Problems in team structure – No matter how confident or prepared people may be, if they are placed in an impossible environment, they will leave. Bulging class sizes, teaching alone, poor, or no curriculum, or undisciplined kids can drive team members away. Is the ministry environment designed for both the children's and team members' success?



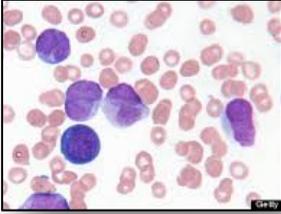
The Ministry Leadership's "Heart Rate"

A low heart rate can indicate low blood pressure, or other more serious problems. The ministry's leadership team (even if it is just you) carries the "heart," or vision of the ministry. An elevated "heart rate" may indicate passion, vision, and an excited anticipation of what God will do next. This is a good condition.

As the years progress, and the ministry develops, the "heart rate" of the leadership team may drop. The leadership team isn't as excited about the ministry. There is a tendency to fall back to "safe" ministry efforts. There just isn't the same passion as before. A low "heart rate" may indicate any of the following "complications." You must seek the Lord for wisdom and discernment in determining, or prescribing, what treatment the ministry needs.

1. Loss of vision – Instead of seeing God, and His vision for the ministry, the leadership begins to focus on the politics or problems of the church or ministry. Discouragement sets in, and the heart rate drops. On what are your eyes focused?
2. A "bigger and better" infection – When a ministry grows, there is a temptation to focus on the growth instead of the individual children. The drive to improve and develop may actually produce discouragement and exhaustion. Is your trust in your own efforts, or God's blessings? (Deut. 8; I Peter 5: 6)
3. Complacency – When a congregation or ministry gets "comfortable" with the "status quo," it loses its passion to build, change or challenge. How long has it been since you tried something new? How long has it been since you evaluated or ended an established program? Take risks, "raise the bar," and get out of your comfort zone.

The Ministry's "White Blood Cell" Count



A high white blood cell count indicates the strong possibility of an infection within the body. If you are devoting a large amount of time and attention to solving problems or “putting out fires,” your ministry “body” may have an “infection.” To find the “infection,” do some “probing” into the health of the ministry body. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Are there consistent issues related to classroom or ministry discipline that distract your attention from the ministry vision or Great Commission work?
2. Are there consistent issues related to safety policies or procedures that distract you?
3. Are there members of your ministry team who are consistently “in the middle” of problems or issues that distract you?

If you answered “Yes” to any of the above questions, take action to treat the “infection.” Just as doctors do, you must treat the “infection” with large doses of antibiotics. Here are some “antibiotic treatments” that may be applied:

1. **Clarification of ministry procedures or policies** – During regular all-team meetings, or “emergency sessions,” review and reinforce the policies and procedures. Let the team members understand the results of these policies/procedures not being supported (your time, hurt feelings, possible threat to children or team members). Then, inform the team that anyone who willfully fails to follow one of these policies or procedures will meet with you for an official warning, then, if repeated, will be removed from the ministry. **Remember to DOCUMENT every confrontation and inform your senior pastor.**
2. **Confrontation of problem team members** – Confront any team member who causes “discord among the brethren.” This “discord” may include any of the following: back-biting, spreading rumors, negativity, abusive or demeaning comments, unwillingness to serve among the team, questioning your authority in the presence of other team members, etc. In your confrontation, warn the team member about his/her conduct and remove him/her from ministry if it is repeated. **Remember to DOCUMENT every confrontation and inform your senior pastor.**
3. **Publicly affirm and compliment “star” team members** – This is the old, tried-and-true method of highlighting the positive, rather than focusing on the negative. You don’t ignore the negative (see above suggestions), but you combine the confrontations with public affirmation of those who “do it right.” If done correctly, this affirmation will cause a reproduction of these “good” people among your team.



There’s no proven way to verify your ministry’s “health” other than monitoring the “indicators.” As you continually pray for wisdom, guidance, and discernment, God will lead you to a more healthy ministry “body.”

Remember to enjoy a balanced diet of fun and learning, drink plenty of “Living Water,” and exercise your mind and body by reading His Word and serving others actively!