**YOUTH MINISTRIES MUST VIEW CHILDREN AS “PARTICIPANTS” AND NOT “CONSUMERS”**

By Michael Gryboski

Youth ministries in American churches must shift their efforts away from molding children to be "consumers" to involving them as "participants" in the "Gospel mission," the head of the Barna Group has advised.

David Kinnaman, who leads the prominent faith-based polling firm founded by Evangelical pollster George Barna, gave a video presentation Thursday at the [Awana Child Discipleship Forum](https://childdiscipleship.com/child-discipleship-forum/" \t "_blank) about the five shifts he believes are needed to renew children's ministries.

His talk comes as [polling over the years](https://www.christianpost.com/news/how-innovative-ministries-are-bringing-millennials-back-to-church.html?page=1) has found that large percentages of students who attend church growing up leave the church once they go to college, and many don't return.

According to Kinnaman, one necessary shift for renewal is that children's ministries "should shift from making consumers of Christian content to participants in Gospel mission."

He considers it a "major challenge for adult discipleship," explaining that "we really condition people to just be consumers of Christian content" like podcasts, books, radio, music and preaching.

"None of that is bad in and of itself, but it has to go deeper," he said. "We're seeing in our research across a wide range of different studies that people want to be participants in the Gospel mission.

"That is, in fact, the kind of full life in Christ, the kind of life on mission that all of us aspire to," he added. "It's not easy. People sometimes would rather hang back and just sit and soak, but I believe that God is calling us now more than ever to equip people to live lives on mission."

To help with the shift in children's ministry, Kinnaman advised ministry leaders to ask how they can "help young people understand" their gifts, motivations and skills.

"How has God uniquely wired me? [Psalm 139](https://bibleportal.com/passage?search=+Psalm+139+&version=NIV) says that God has made us intricately in the womb," he continued, adding that the New Testament says, "we're a masterpiece created in Christ Jesus, created to do good works that He has appointed for us."

"[It's] such a critical shift for us to make and how we think about preparing young people, even as children, especially as children."

He felt that there are threads that we can follow that might help us as the Christian community show that we're interested in who [young people] are and who they are becoming."

Kinnaman said it's important to show children and adults that they are "participants in God's big story" rather than "just sitting back, waiting for the Church to do this."

The other shifts Kinnaman felt are needed to renew kids' ministry included having "honest and objective evaluations of the impact we are making," "being in tune with the flourishing of those we serve and disciple," relying "more on the Lord's power than merely on our own smarts" and "focusing on open hearts before the Lord — our own and the children and households we serve."

Regarding the focus on open hearts, Kinnaman said this means that churches need to "concern ourselves with heart health," which includes replacing a "stony heart" with a "heart of tenderness and responsiveness to God."

"I believe in an era of anxiety and mental health challenges and after the pandemic, such as it is, and all the things that we are dealing with, helping this generation pay attention to their hearts before the Lord is one of the most important things we can do," Kinnaman said.

"God cares about your heart."

The second annual Awana Child Discipleship Forum was held Sept. 22-23, 2022 in Nashville, Tennessee. The conference is centered on research findings from Barna and Awana.

In an earlier interview with [The Christian Post](https://www.christianpost.com/news/awana-ceo-churches-must-invest-more-in-discipling-children.html), Awana CEO Matt Markins said he believes churches need to invest more in child discipleship, as research indicates that worldview formation is "largely fixed" by age 13.

"If we're looking at age 18 as the deadline, we're actually looking at the wrong deadline," Markins said. "It's not 18. It's 13 because the Barna Group said worldview formation is set by then."

"Churches really need to be investing in children because it's what we're doing with the 8-year-olds that is forming what's going to become the 13-year-olds."