

**Brian's introduction – 10 pillars – slide 1**

Current research is shouting to us that our contemporary 'GIFT generation' of young people (Google, iDevice, FaceBook, Twitter), who are more connected and more isolated than generations before them, are walking away from church and/or faith in their early adolescent years. This is happening in most, if not all, western countries

We are losing young people not only from our churches and but also the Christian faith. Why and can we do something about it?

Last year Jan went on a conference in Auzzie and one of the main presenters was talking about this issue. He said 'There is no short term solution, there is no quick fix, a long term commitment to an intentional discipling strategy is required.'

What is required is some urgent rethinking of what it takes to grow lifelong, active followers of Jesus. This has been happening and after a few years of conversations with representatives from major Christian organisations and denominations, along with reports, research and literature from across the Western world, this group, Here2stay.org.au, has come up with 10 formational 'pillars' which they believe will help provide faith communities with some focussed direction for reversing this trend.

When Jan came back from the conference and talked about this stuff around Children ministry I remember thinking this is not just for youth and children, this is for everyone. And this is not just for churches, this is for families, this is for individuals.

Show 10 formational pillars,

As we go through these I want you to be asking yourself,

- I am responsible for my own spiritual growth and development, so in My life what pillars are strong and what needs work -
- I am responsible for my families spiritual growth and development, so in my family what pillars are strong and what needs work
- I am play a part for my church families spiritual growth and development, so in my church family, what pillars are strong and what need work

Jan is going to talk to us about 4 of the pillars today, the rest we will cover next week and then a couple of weeks after that.

**Slide 2**

I would like to start with the story of Nehemiah. The people of God had been exiled and the city of Jerusalem destroyed. When the exiles return they find it in ruins – imagine piles of rubble and the gates burned down. This saddens Nehemiah, who is still in Persia, so he is given permission from the king to return to Jerusalem to help rebuild the walls, in the face of opposition and ridicule from the enemies that surround them. The walls reach half their height and Nehemiah writes that this is because the people worked with all their heart. Their enemies become angry and they plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble.

### Slides 3-4

I'm going to read from Nehemiah 4:8 the Israelites' response; 'But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

<sup>11</sup> Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

<sup>12</sup> Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." [So you can sense the fear and the frustration...]

<sup>13</sup> Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. <sup>14</sup> After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah <sup>17</sup> who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, <sup>18</sup> and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.

<sup>19</sup> Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. <sup>20</sup> Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

And after working almost 24/7 the wall was completed in just 52 days.

So what does this story tell us about God?

He is great and awesome;

in the face of overwhelming challenges, he can be trusted;

he works with us and fights for us;

he had a strategy to help his people in times of trouble.

And whether you are aware of it or not, the western Christian church is facing a challenge which can seem overwhelming... we are losing our young people. **Slide 5** - The Australians have actually tracked this a bit more than we have, and their research is telling them that they are losing 50 000 young people a year. And its happening in NZ too.

But the people at here2stay have not lost hope and given in to despair. They have seen this as a trumpet call and they have trusted God, our God who is great and awesome, and they have worked hard and they have worked together, across denominations and Christian organisations, to put together an intentional discipleship strategy. And this strategy is based on some of the lessons from Nehemiah. So that was a strategy which involved everyone, the whole people of God – the people were posted on the walls in families – the people were instructed to fight for their families, sons, daughters, spouses, and homes – and when trouble came along, there was a trumpet call and the whole community rallied together and they worked at it side-by-side.

**Slide 6** -This strategy is reflected in the 10 pillars... it involves all of us, not just those with children, because spiritually healthy children are more likely to come from spiritually healthy families, who are part of spiritually healthy churches; and it involves us working hard, it requires effort on our part; it requires working with God, individually but also together so we are all being transformed into the image of Christ, into lifelong, active followers of Jesus.

I am going to talk a little more about four of the pillars which are interconnected and I am focussing on four that are essentially about relationships. The first one is:

**Families/Households** – **Slide 7** - we all come from a family and we all live in a household.

The Here2stay information says: *Families and households are the “primary faith communities” for all ages, (I wonder...Do you consider your household to be your primary faith community?) especially children in their formative years and the household needs to be supported strongly in this role.*

God’s plan in the faith formation process includes family – God commands us, for example in Deut 6 and Psalms 78, to teach our children and to be talking about our faith, living out our faith in a home setting, bringing God into our living rooms and around our dining room tables.

It is undeniable that the home and the people we live with influence us.... massively, especially our spouses, our parents and our children and potentially our flatmates. Is God a part of those relationships? Are we living out our faith in front of those people we share a house with? Compare how much time you spend with your household, compared with church? If we rely on 90 minutes once a week to be our sole spiritual input, then can we really expect to be transformed and to have a lifelong, strong and active faith? And if we have children, can we really expect that we are going to pass on a lifelong, active faith to them? We are more likely to pass on our Sunday morning only faith.

Lots of research has been done about the influence of parents on children, both within the church and in the secular world. I can not stress enough how important it is for our young families to be intentional about including God as a member of the family. Talking to him and about him, listening to him, asking for his guidance, showing his love to each other and our neighbours, making Him a part of our decisions... and as we practise these things together, as we share our faith with one another... guess what? Our faith grows stronger, and not just our faith but the faith of our whole family and household.

There is another aspect of this, we as a secondary faith community, need to be supporting our families... strongly supporting our families. We as a church are doing this pretty well, if I do say so myself. I hope, parents, that you do feel supported and resourced... that is definitely our intention and aim... and if you don't, please come and talk to me. But I will ask all of you as individuals who make up this church, how are you supporting our young families?

Some of you do not have young people as part of your household, but you do still have a household. Is Christ at the centre of it? Many of you have family made up of adult children or grandchildren... how are you continuing to invest in their lives?

For those of you who do have young children, how are things going?

**Slide 8** Brian introduced this by encouraging you to consider these questions: Is this a strong pillar in your life? Is this a strong pillar in the life of your household or family? Is this a strong pillar in the life of this church?

While our families are a huge factor in our spiritual transformation, church community is important too. The next 3 pillars I am going to talk about are ways that we as the church can help each other to grow and they are ways that we can support young families too.

**Generational Connections** –slide 9 - here's what here2stay says... *Discipleship is about being intentional, relational and holistic in creating a culture of lifelong formation across the ages.*

We live in such a 'me' focused and segregated world. And church is often no different from out there... we have age segregated ministries so things can be catered more to the individual, which is a good thing, but that can lead us into thinking that we should be separate all the time, and lets be honest, some people don't like all-age services because they don't like doing things differently to cater for different ages. (I'm not talking about OBC of course... )

But the church is called to be counter cultural – the church is not about 'me' or the needs of the individual but the needs of the community – across the ages. It is one of the few places where an intergenerational community can be experienced – where else do you experience this spread of ages under one roof? Let's embrace this and make the most of opportunities to be together. We need to be tolerant of a variety of styles and have an understanding that not everything, every week is going to be for you or be what you enjoy... it is important for our kids to learn this because we role model it. And we come, even when we know its one of those services, and we listen to one another, and we learn from one another and we get to know one another... and we expect God will speak to us. And I thank those of you who do that because our Children and our youth need to know this is their church too... they are not waiting to become the church when they grow up, they are the church now. They need to know they are welcome in this space, that we actually want them here, we want to see them, we want to hear from them, just as they need to know that they need to be respectful of others and they can learn from those older than them. They need us as an intergenerational community to welcome them and to love them. If we don't include them, they will walk away... and they are... and in the future they won't be here, and we will be the poorer for it.

Of course generational connections is about more than just services – it is about relationships. Let's socialise together, let's go on church picnics, let's get to know and develop genuine friendships with people of different ages. Invite someone new over for lunch, join the praying for families group, serve on the crèche roster or come to Wednesday communion or BMF or somewhere where you will rub shoulders with a different age group.... But let's be intentional and relational and holistic so this does become a part of our culture.

**Slide 10** Is this a strong pillar in your life? in the life of your household or family? in the life of this church?

**Mentors and life coaches** – **Slide 11** *We all need other people in our lives who take the time to listen, to be encouraging, to be available, to be accepting.*

This can be an intergenerational experience, an older person mentoring a younger person and this does happen in the way we structure our children's and youth ministry. But we can all benefit from having mentors, and people to walk through life with. Joining a small group can provide this but this is having a one-on-one relationship, with someone who is more than just a friend, that can be there to talk to, to be honest with, a shoulder to cry on or to laugh with and maybe hold us accountable.

This is important for our young people as they negotiate our complicated world, a world increasingly hostile to organised religion and especially Christianity. Unanswered questions are one of the factors that is behind the departures from church... but sometimes its more the unasked questions... and by that I mean the questions people feel they can't ask, they may feel embarrassed or stupid or sometimes its because we never have any space to ask them... and nobody ever asks us if we have anything to ask!! And its not that a mentor has to have all the answers, because sometimes just listening is enough. This sort of relationship takes time to build because there has to be trust before people will open up and be honest, you can't be someone's mentor for a week... it's a long term commitment.

The Bible makes it pretty clear that parents are not meant to parent alone, so this is also one way the church can support strong families. One mother said that the greatest gift the church can give to her, is other adults to walk alongside her teens and now that I have 3 daughters at college, I totally get that. We so appreciate Matt and Lee and Karl and Luke and Ruby and the other youth leaders and the way you are coaching and mentoring our girls. Thank you Ruby for taking Rebecca shopping with you yesterday, it means a lot. My greatest need in children's ministry at the moment is small group leaders for our older boys group... we need men who are willing to mentor our 8 to 10 year old boys.

Because if the church isn't doing this, someone else will be. Someone else will be giving your children advice, role modelling how to live... whether its online, peers at school, music videos, films and other media... Do you have a mentor or do your children have a mentor or are you the mentor for someone else, or a group of someone elses? Because the support and growth can actually go both ways in a mentoring relationship, in that the mentor can gain a lot too.

**Slide 12** So is this a strong pillar in your life? in the life of your household/family? in the life of this church? And finally for today,

**Positive peer community – Slide 13** -We are not meant to travel alone in this life ... true friends are important!

We all need friends and having Christian friends, helps us to be stronger in our faith. I am not saying we need only Christian friends, because we need to be developing friendships with people in our community too, but it is good to have friends who share our love of Christ.

I have been reading a book recently which emphasised the importance of positive peer community for our children. It is important for our children to have friends at church, in order to make coming here a great experience for them – so they look forward to coming to church because they are going to see their friends, people they like hanging out with. As they get older its important for our youth to know they are not the only person they know who believes in God or goes to church. And having mates who are Christians helps them to stand up against peer pressure and be open with their friends about what they believe and why (of course, we also need to be giving them the skills to do that, but that's another issue).

We have children in our children's ministry who come from all over Tauranga and in several of our small groups, every child goes to a different primary school. This can be a good thing, because if things go wrong socially at school, they have a place to come where they have a different set of friends, but it can be challenging to help these friendships develop when they see each other once a week for 90 minutes. This year in Family ministry we are going to be exploring this a bit more, with our small group leaders and parents. How can we foster these friendships? For example, encouraging parents to get to know the other children who are in their small group and maybe inviting them around for a play date... or the whole family around, because the parents need friends too – which is why we have our Parent conversation meetings, to give parents an opportunity to connect with each other. Or maybe there are some families willing to host a small group social event, to help our children build these positive peer relationships within this faith community....

**Slide 14** Is this a strong pillar for us?

**Slide 15** - My son William loves coming to church, and I bet most of you have noticed! Why? Because he gets to see Noah and Riley and Josh and Asa and Matthew... they all go to different schools but they love seeing each other. And while they are here enjoying these peer connections, they are also getting mentored by their school groups leaders, they are experiencing intergenerational connections with all of you – which is all making church and their experience of Christian community a positive one - and they return home to families who hopefully and ideally, feel equipped and supported by that Christian community to share Christ's love with them. I have huge hope, that with God's grace, these kids are going to have a fantastic foundation for a lifelong and active faith – and that is only four of the ten pillars.

**Slide 16** - So to return to Nehemiah are you willing to build, not walls but pillars? Are you willing to fight for your families, sons, daughters, spouses and homes? Are you willing to heed the trumpet call, and work hard and together for the good of the next generation and our whole Christian community, always remembering that our awesome God fights for us? I leave you with that challenge.

**Farewell**