Interview:

Mark Burrows: Children and Worship

The Worship Design Studio

with Dr. Marcia McFee
Mark Burrows Interview

In this podcast, I talk with the multi-talented Mark Burrows, about his experience with children and worship. So many people ask me about my thoughts on the “Children’s Sermon.” What an important topic! In this interview Mark shares with us so much wisdom about engaging children (and I throw in a couple of ideas as well).

I always recommend that you listen to the podcast because of the greater meaning derived from tone of voice and music (especially Mark’s energy!). But you can follow along with (or opt to read instead) the transcript and use the questions on the following page as jumpstarts for a discussion with your team.

* My recommendation is to watch these videos of Mark in action before listening to the podcast: Children’s Moment #1; Children’s Moment #2
Discussion Questions

• Did you have any “aha” moments from my interview with Mark (for instance, the reality of how metaphors in “object lessons” are difficult for young minds)?

• Are we engaging children in worship beyond the “Children’s Moment?” What is the role of children in worship?

• How can we enhance what we already do? Or what changes can we make that will enliven our experience with children?
Marcia (M): Greetings, friends. Mark Burrows is a musician, composer, author, choir director and a children’s song personality. Known to little listeners as “Mr. Mark,” he tours the country performing concerts for children and families. His three children’s albums; “You’ve Got a Song;” “Go Ape;” and “Go, Go Galileo” have won a total of nine national wards. His songs can be heard on XM radio and one song, “Amazon Rock,” was recently recorded by Nick Records for Dora the Explorer.

Besides all that he is the most effective leader of children’s time in worship that I have ever seen. Mark is currently the director of Children’s Ministries at First United Methodist Church in Ft. Worth, TX, where he leads the weekly the children’s message, a monthly worship service for families called Children First, and directs the 65-voice youth choir. Ever since I encountered Mark’s ministry at FUMC Ft. Worth, when I was there doing a consultation, I have wanted to do an interview with him. I learned so much from him and you will too, but I would also recommend that the whole team listen as a prelude to a discussion about how children are engaged in worship at your church.

In the Worship Design Studio today I have Mark Burrows and I am so excited to have Mark with me. I’ve been spreading Mark’s name around ever since I encountered him the first time as someone who can really teach us a lot about children and worship. So, welcome to the Worship Design Studio, Mark.

Mark Burrows (MB): Thanks, Marcia. Thanks for having me.

M: You have one of the most engaging styles with children I have ever seen in Worship. So, if you could, please tell us a little bit about how you got into this ministry, Mark.
MB: Yeah. You’ve heard of the intentional state development, sharing is very unintentional state development. I think if I ever write an autobiography, which there would be very little market for that, but if I ever did it would be, Oops, the Mark Burrows Story. I think just about everything I’ve done has been – I mean I don’t know how it’s happened. I was going to be the next great opera singer, that’s what my training was going to me, then when the Metropolitan Opera called me up – they did not – I got into education and loved teaching but then got into conducting a lot with music. My main training is in music and music education and I got the job here at First Methodist in Ft. Worth doing the youth choir and little by little just kind of had more things added until about 8-9 ago I was the director of music. I never envisioned myself being the director of music at a church, never conducting, not conducting volunteers, not working with teenagers; I never envisioned that happening it just kinda did.

M: Isn’t it amazing how the Holy has a sense of humor?

MB: Yes, very much, yes. You know, while I was starting here at the church doing part time work with the youth choir I had been a full time music teacher in elementary school in inner-city Dallas and absolutely adored that. I think that really spoke to me in a real way. Just working with kids. Whatever the gene is that allows people to grow up I don’t have it. For whatever reason I just find myself – I can talk to kids and they get it – they get me, I get them, and so even when I started working here at the church and became the full time director of music, working with a lot of adults on very dignified music, which I also love, I just kept feeling like there was a part missing. I just wanted to do something to work with kids and luckily I was able to do some writing work at Abington Press, worked with some great people there on music and curriculum, so that kind of allowed me to have some connection with kids but it was never quite complete. So our church started doing a children’s moment about five years ago, finally. You know, people were doing it and they tried and there was a lot of kind of concern as to how is this going to go, are people going to like it, are people going to not like it?

So I think that was a bit hesitation. People just didn’t want to do it because they didn’t want to upset the applecart. I think of our church as fairly traditional and so there’s always a lot of concern whenever you change anything in worship. How are people going to react? And people certainly did not react poorly but we weren’t exactly having the kids come down in throngs that maybe we would have hoped for. So, I was the music director at the time and I was there every Sunday to watch it and loved seeing the kids and thought – you know, let me give it a shot. So I asked the senior minister if it was OK if I gave the children’s moment a try and it went really well. I had a great time, kids had a great time, I think the
congregation had a great time, I don’t know, my back was turned to them, but it just – From there I kept doing it more and more and before I knew it was pretty much doing the children’s moment every Sunday and having a leadership team in place that was gracious enough to let the music director, who did not have that in his job description at all, to get to do what he loves doing and that was – I don’t know, I guess working with the kids is close to – I’m hesitant with the word ‘call’, because I think a lot of people use that as a way to kind of wrap in sort of a holy cloth, as something they want to do. And I think certainly there are times where our calling is something we want to do, but I think in my case I think it really was not. I didn’t actively seek it out, it just kind of grabbed me. I feel pretty lucky that to have that kind of leadership in places, you know, you’re the music director but go ahead, if this is what you’re feeling motivated to do go for it That’s kind of how I got started with that. Boy – that was a very long answer to a very short question.

M: That’s alright. It’s really important I think because I think a lot of people find themselves offering children in worship but maybe never imaging that they would ever do that. And in my experience they’re really looking for help, looking for – you know, why do we do this and what are the best practices for it to really make it an integral part of the service and yet not something extra, you know. Something that will really fit. So, tell us a little bit about your sort of philosophy, theology, or whatever you might call it about children in worship and what do you think these times of drawing the children forward; what does that do for them and for us as a congregation in the worship as a whole?

MB: Well, that’s a really juicy one. **For me, my personal philosophy on that is the children’s moment is just that, it’s a children’s moment.** Whenever I get to go to other churches, and years ago before we even started one here, I just kind of had the nagging suspicion that the children’s moment was really, while they weren’t saying it in words, it was really entertainment for the grownups. A lot of people approached it as kind of ‘kids say the darnest things’ segment. I think a lot of the adults in the congregation are almost spring-loaded to laugh when the kids up there. That’s a good thing in itself, there’s nothing wrong with that, but if a kid would say anything that would be off topic and then of course the congregation just goes nuts over that, and I think it all has to do with the approach. If the whole idea is to march the kids up there so we can entertain the grownups or so we can have a “change of pace” or humor, I think it’s kind of missing the point. So, there was even debate about how should the person presenting the children’s moment sit; should they sit face when we bring the kids up shall we have the kids face the congregation, do we have the person sit in the center kind of like the portraits we see of Jesus with ‘let the children come to me’ and how beautiful that looks. I really kind of shied away from that because first of all, I’m not – when I’m up there with the kids I want to be able to turn and
look the kids right in the eye and be able at any moment to be flexible and walk around, and that means I’ve got my back to the congregation – well the grownups in the congregation, the kids are the congregation – the wigglier version that’s in front of me. So there’s just a whole lot of intent about making that time specifically for them so there is not a lot of – you had asked about practices and I could go on for hours on this. But, one of the things I think is really important is, you know object lessons I think had some popularity there for a while and I think I’m glad to see that they have kind of, I think in a lot of places that popularity has waned a little bit because mostly kids I work with are concrete thinkers. And when you say the kingdom of God is like – or we start using simile and metaphor with kids, man that’s really abstract for them. And even if you’re using the coolest objects if you’re using it metaphorically it’s going to be hard. The problem there is, it’s great for adults, adults love that, so you get really good feedback from the grownups after a children’s moment; oh, that was great, I really understood it. And that’s kind of the danger with the children’s moment because typically your kindergarten kid isn’t come up to you afterwards and say, Pastor, what you said in the children’s moment really touched my heart, I just come from a different place now. I mean – their feedback is are they on task or off task during the children’s moment. If they’re wiggling and coughing and elbowing their neighbors then you’re probably not reaching them. So when the grownups talk about how great the object lessons are and all that, you gotta take a little bit of that with a grain of salt. While it’s nice to get their affirmation that’s not why you’re doing it.

M: This is a really important point you’re making, Mark, because I think most people think that metaphor and simile are bedrock of the children’s moment, and I think it’s a really, really important point that you’re making, that metaphor is an abstract way of thinking that is not necessarily where children’s brains are.

MB: I love to use objects in the lesson but I use them for themselves and not to represent something else. You know, last spring our senior minister was getting – like you say with the metaphor – I think a lot of people get bogged down in that – and he was getting ready to a sermon series in the ‘I am” saying and, of course, my head started swimming, that’s nothing but metaphors you know. Between the I am the vine, I am the shepherd, I am the bread, and I’m thinking oh, no. But then when you start boiling it down to its action what does Jesus mean when he said I am the bread. Because, you know, a lot of well intentioned people say oh, we can do all kinds of things with bread but that’s not really the point. It’s not about bread per se; it’s about these feelings of emptiness and going to other places besides God’s love for that fulfillment. And OK, so what do kids relate to, what do kids do, where do kids go to try and fill up and find that they’re kind of empty, and you know, watching TV can be I’ve got an hour time to fill so I’m going to sit there and watch some TV. Well, an hour later you don’t feel
full. Or candy, I can eat candy but then I don’t really feel full or feel full with something good. So trying to get away from the metaphor. The other one, I saw that in the story of Jesus calling the disciples and I’m going to make you fishers of men. Man, I’ve seen so many well intentioned not only children’s sermons people but just Christian educators spend tons of time doing fishing activities but that’s not really what it’s about. It’s about inviting, it’s about reaching out. Fish has very little to do with it.

M: In that case give us an example. So we’re doing the fishers of people scripture and you’re about to do the children’s time so it’s about invitation. Where do you go with that, Mark, concretely? Where do you go?

MB: Well there’s lots of ways to go with that one. You know that scripture has come up in worship a couple times recently. One of the things we did was we talked about a party; we set the scene for a party and had the kids act out all the aspects of preparing a party. OK, let’s blow up balloons, so we all blew up balloons, well, we pretended to blow up balloons together and we hung up streamers and we even made a cake, and there was almost a fight because one kid really want pink sprinkles on the cake and the other one didn’t so we made individual cupcakes so that everybody could decorate. Everything was ready, oh no, we forgot to send out the invitations! We can plan this awesome party, we can put all this work into it and be so excited but if we don’t send out the invitations nobody is going to come to this awesome party. So we gotta do that. I don’t do give-aways – I used to do a little bit more of that, you know, take home things, but we have a lot of kids come up and that gets kind of expensive. But for this one we did. I did postcards, postage included, so that they could invite a friend to church. And then of course after that a lot of the kids go and sit with their families but others go to the children’s wing where we have some programming still and we had a surprise party. I said, guess what, we have a party in the children’s wing right now so we all left and had a party and that just - . I did it a couple times where I did a give-away like two weeks in a row and then the third week I didn’t do that and ...

M: And they’re like – where’s the giveaway?

MB: There’s my point. I better do that less frequently so I don’t send a message that going to church means getting stuff. So now it’s a surprise.

M: So one of the best practices I’m hearing from you is that we might think automatically metaphorically but as we’re preparing what we’re going to do for children’s time to really think what is the heart of the message, what is the essence of the message, and how can that be actively engaged. I hear you say over and over again, and I see you in your videos and when I saw you at the
church; really engaging the children in very active participation even if they’re sitting they’re actively participating and I think that’s just a great message. Both of those, what’s the essence of the message and how will that relate to children, not a metaphor necessarily, and then active engagement. Tell me a little bit about that.

MB: Well I think that’s crucial. You know, I’ve seen a lot of people do kind of the sit down/talky talk children’s messages and depending on where the children’s message is at any given service in any given church, it’s usually 10-15 maybe evening 20 minutes into a worship service in some places and you would expect it may a hymn or something. They’ve basically been sitting there, and depending on the child either they’re sitting there self guided, maybe they’re doodling in the bulletin, or they’re climbing all over and so they’re hearing 15 minutes of Shh, shh, shh, and sit still, and that’s sad. Because they go to worship and what word do they hear the most, not Hallelujah, not Hosanna, but shhh. What kind of message are we sending them about this place? Why would you want to choose to go there when you’re old enough when your memory of it is your parents with knit brows looking at you and speaking to you with clenched teeth about sitting still? So when they finally get to come up the last thing I want them to do is to sit still and be quiet for the next five minutes in front of everybody. Let’s get moving! We don’t move every single time but if I’m telling a story then they’re part of the story telling process. Maybe they make the sound effects for the story, or they help act out the parts of the story. I like to utilize the space so sometimes we’ll do something in the sanctuary where I’ll pop up in the balcony or – I love doing this – I love involving members of the congregation. I’m going to knock on wood right now but I’ve got a perfect track record of - we have early arrivers that come for the 11 o’clock service, and saying, Hey, I need some help with the children’s moment today, will you do something for me. I’ve had unanimous yes ‘cuz they are gung ho about doing anything for the kids, they love that. And I assure them I ‘m not going to put you on the spot, it can be something as simple as; we did one where we’re responding to the call and talking about what a call is, and so we decided well, let’s call some animals. So we did a duck call, went out and got the duck in the middle of the congregation somewhere, and we called a wolf and a wolf popped up near the back because some kids are scared of wolves, even little puppets. Always engaging and I try if I use the same technique to do a children’s moment two weeks in a row then I switch it up. Like if we’ve done a Bible story where they’re part of telling the story for a couple weeks then I’ll mix it up and I’ll involve a song, or have the choir do a surprise something that we’re all involved. We did Zaccheus with puppets and we have a minister who is 6’5” where he was the sycamore tree and you know, just mix it up so they don’t know from one week to the next what it’s going to be and that’s part of the allure.
M: That’s right, and it creates the anticipation. That’s wonderful. You know of the things that you do that very few, at least I don’t think the majority of folks do, and you already mentioned it; you are facing the children and you’re often standing. I think the only time I’ve seen you sit in any of your videos is when you were playing a drum, - it was a water bottle – but only when you have to sit. Often times people have heard me teach song leaders and I say the number one purpose of a song leader is to model the energy and walk back from the congregation. And in some ways I see that in you that you are actively, even though it may be sitting you are engaging them on an energy level that is active. Simply because you are active. So I think that is something that’s really important in the choice of where to sit or whether or sit or stand. I think that’s a really important piece of what you do is that you are engaging them visually and energetically simply by your own energy as well.

MB: Gosh, I hadn’t even thought about it that way. I guess I just kind of did it. Huh. You’re right, though.

M: Yes. It’s natural to you but as we translate to people who are just learning how to do this and getting comfortable, I think that’s one of the things we can analyze about what you’re doing that really is quite effective. So any other best practices that come to your mind in terms of what happens? What’s your strategy if there are children who become sort of trying to be the focus of attention?

MB: Honestly, that’s the question people ask me the most. When I was doing the choirs and the children’s moment and I had to be out of town for the weekend like on vacation or something, the line would form to the left with people who would be delighted to conduct the choir in my absence. But sometimes it’s like pulling teeth getting someone to cover to do the children’s moment. I think that’s one of the reasons that people are terrified how to handle kind of the rogue kid, because you’re not just handling a kid, you’re handling a kid in front of everybody. If someone is just being wiggly and it’s kind of a minor distraction I really just let it go. I’ve got a pretty high threshold for that. I really want to avoid the shushing if it’s at all possible because I do want them to have a positive mind set about what the sanctuary is and what being among the congregation is. If someone is wiggly and it’s coming to the point where they’re really distracting the people around them – and here’s one of the benefits of standing facing them – I’ll just kind of walk over to the general vicinity of where they are and if I can get eye contact - I think kids do that because they think they’re invisible, especially in a big crowd it’s easy to feel invisible; so if I can walk over and if I can just get a little bit of eye contact it says I see you and you see me seeing you, and that works a good deal of the time.
We really don’t want to embarrass a child or make a child feel ashamed in front of other people, that’s a real strong impulse and we’re willing to almost have an entire children’s moment pay for the sake of not making a child feel ashamed or embarrassed because they were disciplined in front of everybody. I kind of handle it as gently as possible and say, you know, I think what I have to say is really, really important and you’re really, really important to me so I want to make sure that you get to hear this and that the people around you get to hear that, can you do that for me? More often than not that works and then it’s important afterwards to affirm that child. If they were able to sit that’s really important to let them know that hey, you did a good job.

Then there’s a last resort and this happened one time. I had two kids, brothers actually, who were getting into an elbow fight – it was physical, they were really – and it was getting out of hand. I think they had brought some stuff with them that morning and it was pouring over into the children’s moment. You know what, there’s nothing you can do about that. The kids come from everywhere and they’ve got stuff, so I just had to completely stop the children’s moment and I said, you know what, this is not going how I would like it. And I don’t do this very often but we have a little dance that we do called the Etch-a-Sketch. Have you every played with an Etch-a-Sketch, it’s that little think with the knobs you can draw pictures. If you’re anything like me I can’t draw at all and so I would always mess up the picture and well, when you mess up the picture and you don’t like it what do you do? You just shake the Etch-a-Sketch and start over, clean slate. So we all get up and we all shake, shake, shake do the Etch-A-Sketch, shake, shake to the left, shake, shake, shake to the right, shake, shake, shake freeze, take in a deep breath and take in a deep breath and all right – can we start that over now? Yeah? OK. We start over. I pull it out very sparingly ‘cuz it is kinda fun so I don’t want people to take it on purpose just so we can Etch-A-Sketch.

M: That’s great. And it’s sort of refocusing the whole group. That’s great wisdom. So, tell us just a little bit about Children’s First Service. I have, interestingly enough, yesterday I was teaching at a pastor’s school and they had brought team members from their church as well, mostly music directors, but there was a children’s education director there, and she came up to me and said; you know, I really want to learn more about engaging children in worship but also specifically, we create worship for children where children are the focus. And I said, “interestingly enough I’ll be talking to Mark Burrows tomorrow and I’ll ask him.” One of her questions I thought was interesting: “It’s how do we, as someone who has been facilitating in children’s church, albeit with a cool name (they call it something different) begin to facilitate a rich authentic spiritual journey in children?” I don’t know whether that question has to do with what you might tell
us about children’s first service, but in terms of not just children’s moments but worship that might specifically be geared towards children or family friendly.

MB: I think for us children’s first kind of came out of that, too, that the children’s moment wasn’t quite enough – it’s a good start. But I think in a lot of churches the children’s moment is kind of the flip side where people who criticize the children’s moment is it almost gives tacit permission for the other 55 minutes of a worship service to be completely above the heads of kids. Like, we gave you your part, now sit quietly and color in the margins of the bulletin while we have grownup talk now, and everything is geared towards the adult. The idea for this once again, I was still the music director and doing some work with worship and someone had just been to a conference and said hey, have you ever thought about families in worship. And it’s like everything else that I’d been talking about in worship just completely went out of my head and family worship just captured my imagination and it hasn’t let go since. I mean as a person who has worked in the church for most of my adult life, the kind of pattern is, OK, I’ve got a wife and two kids, we go to church, the kids go to Sunday School, they’re parceled out by age groups at their Sunday School, my wife goes to her Sunday School class, and I direct the choir, so we leave the church a couple hours later but we haven’t spent much time together. So the idea of a family walking into a church for what we always say is the most important hour of the week, well, if it’s so important why aren’t we spending it together as a family? That was really important.

So we tried a service, kind of an experiment, and there was really a practical reason for it too. We’re one of those churches, I think there’s probably a lot in the country, that you know we have two services, fairly traditional, identical mostly, one of them is doing a little better than the other, we’re seeing numbers slip off in one so what can we do to get those numbers up? So, we decided alright, why don’t we just try one Sunday a family style service and see what people think. We gave people a survey and boy did they tell us what they thought. You know, some good, some very good, some really positive stuff, some really negative stuff, and it hurt. I took those surveys and just went over them and over them and it was one of the most important things I think we did for worship because we really got a sense of what people were thinking and where they were, but a lot of the stuff really kinda hurt. Cuz you know, when you your time and your best in it and you’re passionate about it and you’re in love with the concept and then some people just say, no, no, no, no no – Oh man, you try not to take it personal but the information was really really helpful.

Two of the most important pieces of information; one was hey-we really like this. We’re not sure if we could commit to this every Sunday, at least not yet, but you know if it were once a month or even once a quarter we’d probably give it a try.
And the other thing was, you know, it looks like we’re trying to do too many things for too many people. You’re trying to be an adult worship service and a kid worship service and traditional and cutting edge and it didn’t really have an “it-ness” to it. It wasn’t itself. It was so obviously trying to please everybody. So those were some very valuable comments. And I love the ones where they would say you know, this really wasn’t our cup of tea per se but we appreciate what you’re doing and would certainly support your efforts going forward. Alright, so we took all that information and we decided alright, let’s really focus our efforts here and let’s try to do worship for kids first; not kids only – not children only, but children first because we have a lot of other worship services in our church alone that are really geared for adults first, second, third and fourth. Why not have a service for children if we do it once a month, we can get some of the grownups, some of the parents who really love going to their Sunday School classes, you know, I bet once a month they might be willing to come and sit in the pews with their kids for worship service that is really geared towards that. So that’s the approach we took and we started in our little chapel with about 70 people, mostly children, Sunday School teachers, and a few really brave parents who thought they would give it a try and this was three years ago, November 2008, and we really focused everything on, OK, how is this going to engage the kids? Every element of worship we really wanted to think how can we make this engaging so that the kids can latch onto it.

One of the things that really grabbed the parents is because, I think, we’re a “traditional,” I’m using finger quotes now which listeners aren’t going to be able to see, so I’m going to narrate: I’m using finger quotes to say traditional because I think that varies from place to place whatever your traditions are, it’s kind of what you know. We have our traditions and so something that really grabbed a lot of our parents was that we have incorporated some of those traditions into children first so it’s not simply engaging the kids in what our message is for that Sunday, but also it can help to be sort of a transitional service so that when they go into – and I’m going to use finger quotes again – “big church,” that the kids will feel a little bit more comfortable. Part of going into the sanctuary is that if they haven’t heard the Lord’s Prayer before and then they go into big church and, what is this, or a tradition based on children’s songs or contemporary bible songs and they go into a worship setting where it has “How Great Thou Art” and “Holy, Holy, Holy,” it’s going to feel unfamiliar to them. So this service was also a way to sort of bridge that.

M: What pops up into my head and I don’t know how you all do it, but I was just thinking “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and how great it would be if you invited the children every time the words “Holy, Holy, Holy” came up in that hymn that they would be the ones that would sing it, and you practice that with them and then you do the hymn but every time “Holy, Holy, Holy” happens and maybe you’d sing the
verses that have Holy, Holy, Holy in them the most and the adults sing that and the kids sing that.

**MB:** Ooooo- I like that. I’m going to write that down, I like that a lot.

**M:** It’s giving the children not just “OK we’re going to sing Holy, Holy, Holy” so that they can hear it and be familiar with it but give them a part in it that engages them in the listening to it and the participation in it, but it’s doable, right.

**MB:** Right. And even where they sing it by themselves so they have a leadership responsibility -

**M:** That’s exactly it.

**MB:** That’s a really cool idea ‘cuz that is something where we like introducing them to the hymns, but as you know we have a lot of preliterate kids and pre-readers so they can have the hymnal, they can even have simply the words printed in their bulletin where it’s something where they can respond or something with a repetitive refrain they’re going to struggle with it and every element we don’t want to feel like we’re leaving them behind.

**M:** Exactly. I do that a lot of with litanies and any kind of worship, Children First or not, is if you have a litany that’s leader-people-leader-people-leader-people, etc. that the people’s part is repetitive and it’s a short phrase and you sort of teach it to the congregation before so that children, no matter how literate they are, can engage in that.

**MB:** We actually experimented. It’s trial and error for us. After we do our song time we always have an opening prayer and a lot of those were based on our traditions in big church and were kind of a unison spoken prayer and we thought we had made it kid friendly by making it a rhyming prayer. Well that didn’t really solve anything because we were leaving a lot of people out. So we have a few different ways that we do it, and the call and response is certainly one of those, echo prayers, sung prayers where there is a simple sung response, and then body prayers are huge – in fact we do those more often than anything else. So even if it is a spoken test there’s usually two of up there, one does the spoken part for people who want to speak along with the speaker can do that but there’s always a way to respond physically to illustrate the prayer and always you see that the younger ones, the kindergarten and younger in particular, but even a lot of the adults, you know, some of them are simply physical learners and that’s how they respond.
M: One of reasons why I love talking to people in the Worship Design Studio and people who are listening know this about me, that anytime I get to talk to fabulous people like you it just sparks all kinds of ideas in me that I’ve never thought of before and one of the things that just came up for me when you talk about body prayer or gesture is that—what if we, during a season, and I like I’m a big, big advocate of threads that we teach during a season, but what if in the lighting of the candle at the beginning, and too often we forget that that’s about the symbol of the light of Christ among us, with us; we just sort of think that’s just the lighting of the candle. But what if we had the signs for lighting a candle – you can hold your index finger and you can touch somebody else’s index finger and then all five fingers come out and wiggle like a flame, and you know, what if we attach that gesture with the moment that we light the candle and so we get the idea that the light is not just that light but it’s the light that all of us have. The light of Christ within each of us. How about we bring meaning to that very ancient liturgical symbol that we have and yet bring another layer of meaning and activity through the gesture.

MB: Oh, I like that! I like that they get to respond and they get to be a part of it and also that there is no fire. Those are good things that work together! [laughter]

M: Well, Mark, the last thing I want to do and we’ve already started to do this, I mean this is theory to Worship Design Studio is the theory of brainstorming and creativity and what happens when we come together and dream about enhancing our worship. I’ve got a season coming up and it’s called “Bread, Bath, and Beyond...”

MB: Where’s the rim shot, we need that!

M: You already mentioned to us dealing with bread, what fills us up or what doesn’t fill us up. But in terms of water; water is something that comes up frequently in the scriptures. Can you tell us a story about something you have done or that you could think of doing that would have to do with some sort of connection with the refreshing water that might tangentially allude to baptism that wouldn’t be so heady and theological in terms of baptism, but still be with the water aspect?

MB: Right. I tell you, we do a sacrament school in the summer, and especially with archaeology with what the bread is and what the water is, it’s incredibly abstract and then we say phrases like remember your baptism, but you know, so many of our kids were baptized when they were literally months old, they’re barely going to remember what I’m telling them at that moment when they’re five. So one of the things we did, one of the ideas that had been suggested was kind of a remembering your baptism service and there are so many manifestations of
that with reaching in the water and grabbing a shell and you know once again use a lot of symbols. What we did was we had the kids bring a lovey from home; something that they care for deeply, something that they nurture at home – it can be a blanket, a doll, a teddy bear, a fire truck, something that – because they understand that. Most of the kids that I work with they can tell you where in their house their lovey is at any given moment ‘cuz it’s important to them and they know where it is. So we had them bring their loveys and they all came to the front and one of our ministers where we baptized their loveys. It was so tender- it was just amazing. Sometimes I wondered just exactly what was going on – ‘cuz you can’t always know for sure if they’re just doing it because they’re mimicking what they think we want to see them do, but you could tell with a lot of them that they were just watching so carefully as that water was placed. They weren’t sure what the symbolism meant – they just knew that someone in the church was doing something special for their lovey and that kind of all that combined energy was focused on their lovey that they love very much and at some point in their lives that that had been done for them.

M: That’s so terrific, Mark. You know, the profound is often in the simple for adults and for children. But this is a profound example of that.

Thank you so much for being with us. Parting words, what you said at the beginning of the podcast I vowed to ask you this at the end, you talked about that you don’t have the all grownup genes, and so, parting advice; what would you say to people who have too much of the all grown up genes and they distance themselves a little bit from their child like spirit. I think that’s one of the most important things I have seen was your permission to embrace that child-like spirit. **How do you reclaim a spirit that really connects with children?**

**MB:** Well, you know, being around them helps a lot, I mean that’s the number one thing, so you know, if you have the availability to either volunteer in a Sunday School Class or volunteer for a vacation bible school, or just any opportunity like that just to really see how they relate with one another and how they relate with adults and what they care about. We’re lucky enough we have a preschool here in the church and sometimes I like to go downstairs, especially at lunch time, ‘cuz that’s where you really get kids unfiltered, you know the conversations are just rolling and the belly laughs are over PB&J, they’ll tell the same knock-knock joke 20 times and it’s just as funny the 20th time. So observing that. I love – I’m lucky; I’ve got an 11-year old and a 9-year old, so we can see all the Pixar movies and it doesn’t look too strange me being a grown man going in a movie by myself like that, which is very helpful. ‘Cuz I want to see them as much as they do. I can’t wait to go see Hugo – I cannot wait to see that. Children’s books, children’s literature, some people just really captured that Road Doll, I think does such a great job of capturing the humor of kids but also their very real fears. You know,
Todd Parr, I love his books – they’re so simple and wonderful. Chris Van Alsburg for the wonder that kids have so naturally, I think that’s one thing that kids to great, they really kind of our bearers of wonder. They’re so important for that. You know, one of the things I always battle is how people say that children are our future and they look at kids at what their value will be when they’re grown up and I think, man, look at them for their values now.

M: Indeed! Indeed!

MB: Do you remember what it was like to go “wow” at something – to look at a shooting star the first time and go “wow” or a skyscraper and go “wow” or the first time you had chocolate ice cream and went “wow” and kids are so wonderful about that. They remind us of what awe is like and when we get older and been there-done that, jaded, and you know they help us recapture that and so oh, my goodness, anything you can do to recapture that “wow” and just watching kids interact with the world in a very natural real way, it’s awesome.

M: It is awesome. Mark Burrows, thank you so much for reminding us how awesome it is and what a gift children are as the church, as an integral part of the church and thank you for your ministry and everything that you model for us. Mark has wonderful resources and I’ve put that on the web page, links to where you can get more of Mark’s resources and continue to learn from Mark. Thank you, so much, Mark Burrows, for being in the studio with us.

MB: My pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me.

M: You bet, I’m going to go out and get some chocolate ice cream right now!

MB: With a sense of wonder!! [laughter]
Check out these 14 songs with simple melodies for Sunday School.

This is a Bible skills curriculum that is very physical and fun. Mark says “despite the cover, this is a NON-violent book. In fact, the Bible Black Belts pledge is ‘The Bible is not a weapon. I will not throw it at anyone. And I will not use its words to hurt others so I can feel better about myself.’” Rock on, Mark!

In the podcast, I talked with Mark about starting the “Children First” Sunday at FUMC Fort Worth. In this book, you can see outlines for these 45-minute services that are geared to families with elementary-age children.
These are Mark’s collections of “Engaging Children’s Moments.” I know these will be great additions to your team’s library of resources!

Find Mark’s resources online at Amazon.com!

Thanks, Mister Mark!
Thanks for being part of
the Worship Design Studio!