THINK ORANGE: IMAGINE THE IMPACT WHEN CHURCH AND FAMILY COLLIDE

Summary of the book by Reggie Joiner

Introduction

The premise of ‘Think Orange’ is that when church and home work in partnership to disciple young people, the impact is much greater than if either of them worked alone. Historically, there has been a polarisation between these two influences on children’s lives. For example, the huge surge in the numbers of churches hiring dedicated youth and children’s workers is often predicated on the idea that ‘if they’re not getting it in the home, then they need to be getting it in the church’. The church clearly has an important role to play in discipling the younger generation, but in practice this is often carried out with little or no interaction with parents.

On the other hand, there are those who rightly champion the home and the crucial role played by parents in their children’s faith journeys. Again, it would be impossible to argue against this, but the disjunction between home and church is often felt by parents who want to be doing a better job at discipling the next generation but feel that the church is not giving them the tools to do it.

‘Think Orange’ is about blending two influences to get a better result. The polarisation of church and home is presented in terms of isolating ‘red’ and ‘yellow’ thinking. The consequences of this kind of binary thinking include the following:

- The church forfeits its potential to have a greater influence on kids’ and students’ lives.
- Churches miss critical opportunities to meet the needs of unchurched parents in their communities.
- Communities continue to perceive the church as institutional, isolated, and irrelevant.
- The church is characterised by superficial relationships.
- Productions or programmes are positioned as the answer.
- Parents and leaders fail to teach the same truths in a synchronised effort.
- Parents avoid or abdicate to the church the responsibility to be spiritual leaders (p. 26).

Reggie Joiner presents a powerful call for church and home to synchronise their efforts. Not red or yellow alone, but the two together. This is what it means to ‘think orange.’

Understanding God’s purposes in the world: What are the church and family for?

The partnership that Reggie Joiner is calling for only makes sense if church and home are fundamentally called to achieve the same thing. He argues that this is in fact the case. Both entities have been instituted by God to demonstrate who he is to the world:

What if ... it’s God’s plan to do an amazing work within the church and the home in order to put his grace on display? Imagine the Supreme Creator visibly and actively involved in both entities – healing, loving, restoring, and re-creating a broken people in order to demonstrate his glory and plan of redemption (p. 47).

Reggie Joiner then spells out the implication of this vision:

If this is true, then every parent and leader should work to combine the influences of church and home with a very strategic mindset (pp. 47-48).
Basic principles

The primary purpose of Think Orange is to explore core, philosophical principles of ministry rather than sharing models of effective children’s and youth ministry. This is just as well, as it is highly unlikely that a well-resourced, American mega-church’s model for doing youth ministry church is going to be directly applicable to our UK context.

Reggie Joiner summarises his basic principles of ministry as follow:

- Nothing is more important than someone’s relationship with God.
- No one has more potential to influence a child’s relationship with God than a parent.
- No one has more potential to influence the parent than the church.
- The church’s potential to influence a child dramatically increases when it partners with a parent.
- The parent’s potential to influence a child dramatically increases when that parent partners with the church. (p. 82)

It is important to note ‘there is a difference between doing something for the family and doing something with the family’ (p. 83). Plenty of churches have a dedicated ministry to families and/or children. The Think Orange approach is not to treat family ministry as another programme to add to a church’s already-burgeoning list of programmes. Rather, ‘it should be the filter you use to create and evaluate what you do to influence children and teenagers’ (p. 83).

Recognising the limitations of the church and family

One of the basic principles listed above states that ‘no one has more potential to influence a child’s relationship with God than a parent.’ That influence will be for good or bad, but it is practically inescapable. The reason is simple – time.

Think Orange uses the following illustration to show how limited a church’s influence will be on a child’s life relative to a parent. A church only has about forty hours in a given year to directly influence a child. An average parent has closer to 3,000 hours in the same year. This is the 3,000/40 principle.

But the home also has important limitations when it comes to influencing children for God. Reggie Joiner remarks that ‘a time comes in all children’s lives when they seem to care more about what another adult says than they care what their own parents say’ (p. 186). This is not to minimise the
important role played by parents in the lives of their children. But children also need relationships with adults other than their parents if they are to grow as followers of Jesus.

This is supported by research carried out by Mark Kelly. He observes, ‘Teens who had at least one adult from church make a significant time investment in their lives ... were more likely to keep attending church. More of those who stayed in church – by a margin of 46 percent to 28 percent – said five or more adults at church had invested time with them personally and spiritually’ (Lifeway Research: Parents, Churches Can Help Teens Stay in Church, quoted in Joiner, p. 187).

It’s not either/or; it’s both/and

In light of these limitations, many parents do not truly trust the church to have primary responsibility for their children’s spiritual growth. But many church leaders do not truly trust the average family to have primary responsibility either. The result is that church and home frequently function as competing systems. Yet both are equally important and can complement each other. Put together, church and family can make up where the other lacks. It’s not either church or home; it’s both and.

Reggie Joiner summaries this both/and thinking in this way:

- Many churches invest most of their time and resources creating programmes for children.
- Thinking orange means investing quality time and resources creating programmes for parents and children.

- Many churches are consumed with the question, ‘What are we going to teach our children?’
- Thinking orange means being consumed with the question, ‘How can we get parents to also teach what we are teaching their children?’

- Many churches promote what they want parents to know about their programmes.
- Thinking orange means focusing on what we want parents to do at home.

- Many churches think that what happens at church is more important than what happens at home.
- Thinking orange means believing that what happens at home is as important as what happens at church (pp. 93-94).

Keeping things simple

Converging discipleship in the church and home can come at a cost. In some cases, it may mean that a church stops doing something, like a flagship youth outreach or student ministry. Reggie Joiner is unapologetic about this. He writes, ‘One or your greatest enemies is complexity’ (p. 92). He advocates a narrow, focused approach rather than a programme-heavy, complex approach.

He cites the 3,000/40 principle. If a typical church reduces the amount of time and resources it spends on the forty hours for the sake of investing only a little bit more in the three thousand hours, then the potential impact on young people’s lives is greatly increased. Joiner concludes, ‘Do the math; partnering with parents is one of the best ways to have greater influence with students’ (p. 92).

There is a further reason why it is sensible to have a simple, focused approach. One day, most of our young people will move on. It becomes difficult, impossible or even undesirable for church leaders in a given local context to maintain contact with them. However, parents have a lifelong influence: ‘so when you influence parents, when you merge with them, you influence the relationships that will impact the child the most’ (p. 93). This is why churches need leaders who do ‘less for kids and more for families’ (p. 91).
An orange strategy

Regardless of model or style of church, there are five key principles that are critical to instilling a Think Orange church culture. These are the 'Five Orange Essentials':

- **Integrate strategy** to create synergy.
- **Refine the message** to amplify what's important.
- **Reactivate the family** to build an everyday faith.
- **Elevate community** to increase the odds.
- **Leverage influence** to mobilise generations (p. 109).

i) Integrate strategy

Reggie Joiner defines strategy as 'a plan of action with an end in mind'. In Think Orange terms, an integrated strategy means that '[church] leaders and parents are leading with the same end in mind' (p. 113, italics mine).

The absence of an integrated strategy results in: parents struggling to know how to partner with the church; church programmes remaining limited in impact; the non-existence of a forum to evaluate and improve practice; volunteers becoming disillusioned with the lack of direction and influence being diluted through over-programming; and systems competing with one another (p. 113).

On the other hand, the existence of an integrated strategy creates synergy. Everyone is helped to stay on the same page because 'what really matters' is brought into sharp clarity (p. 121). Now everyone's efforts can be effectively synchronised. The result is people 'playing well together' and everyone's capacity being expanded.

The 'integrated model' of family ministry used by North Point Community Church is illustrated below:

ii) Refine the message

This is an outworking the principle that 'How you say what you say is as important as what you say' (Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change*). Refining the message means reflecting on how we can make what we teach our children more memorable and influential.

Reggie Joiner invites us to imagine parents and leaders in the church communicating the same messages to our children. The messages received from these two sources would amplify one another,
‘driving home the message and allowing it to take root’ (p. 140). He suggests that it’s important for leaders and parents to understand the following principle for effective communication (pp. 138-48):

- **Say less.** What are you going to say? Simplify what you need to communicate to the biggest concept.
- **Say what matters.** Why are you going to say it? Pre-decide your content on the basis of relevance.
- **Say it clearer.** How are you going to say it? Craft words that capture the power of the principle.
- **Don’t say it.** What is the best way to *not* say it? Create an experience so the message can be processed.
- **Say it louder.** Where else can you say it? Leverage every possible environment to reinforce each concept.

### iii) Reactivate the family

Think Orange is a call to ‘act like every parent is your partner’ (p. 161). Every church leader would say they believe in family. But do we really believe in parents? Reggie Joiner remarks, ‘Your attitude toward parents will determine your approach to the family as a whole. ... If you really believe in the prospect of partnering with the family, you have to choose to act on the potential that every parent has’ (pp. 160-1).

Essentially, every parent we meet falls into one of these categories. These relate to different levels of partnership with parents:

- **Aware:** Parents are concerned about a particular situation or development. These parents are outside the church but open to it, and they're interested in becoming better parents.
- **Involved:** Parents have a basic or entry-level relationship with the church. Even if it’s just bringing their kids to church, these parents are taking steps to influence kids spiritually.
- **Engaged:** Parents are committed to partnering with the church. They are growing in their relationships with God and assume some responsibility for spiritual leadership in the home.
- **Invested:** Parents proactively devote time and energy to partnering with the church. They understand the strategy of your ministry and are in community with Christian parent groups (p. 163).

The important points are these. Firstly, there is a potential for any parent to engage at some level with an integrated plan. Secondly, partnering with parents often shifts them to a different level of partnership. Thirdly, progress is not measured by getting parents to do everything, but helping them to do something more. Reggie Joiner explains:

> It is important as you attempt to engage parents that you don’t create an unrealistic expectation. Instead, become a partner with all parents just where they are. Help them take the next step, no matter how small, in their potential to encourage an everyday faith. Most parents cannot do everything, but they can do something more. That ‘something’ can make a huge difference in the life of the family and in the spiritual growth of a child (p. 168).

### iv) Elevate community

This is a direct response to the limitation faced by every family unit (see above). Children need adult voices other than their parents for their spiritual development. This is why it is important to be rooted in community.
Reggie Joiner explains: ‘You provide community when everyone is connected to a caring leader and a consistent group of peers’. Elevating community means ‘strategically placing coaches in the lives of our children and teenagers’ so they have ‘the right voices to give wise direction’ (p. 186). It truly does take a whole community to raise a child and the people with the most strategic influence are two people in particular: a small-group leader and a parent (p. 188).

The positive effects of elevating community are enormous:

- Parents feel supported, not alone, in trying to have moral and spiritual influence with their children.
- The church is characterised by meaningful and significant relationships, not superficial ones.
- We reproduce a generation of Christians who are able to develop authentic relationships easily.
- Students will pursue counsel from Christian mentors rather than from unhealthy relationships.
- Productions or programmes are positioned as a step in the process rather than the whole answer.
- Leaders discover their potential to make a lasting investment in someone’s life (p. 187).

When a church works at elevating community, it does something that culture cannot match (pp. 196-7). The church receives a new lease of life as:

- Leaders assume a high level of responsibility for the spiritual formation of children and students.
- Small groups are valued and championed at every age level.
- An effective group or community experience is a primary goal of every ministry, and programmes are viewed as steps toward that goal.
- Staff and volunteer positions are organised to ensure the effectiveness of a small-group strategy.
- Parents value small-group leaders as partners in teaching and modelling truths to their children, and small-group leaders see their roles as assisting and supporting parents.
- Small-group leaders are encouraged to graduate into older age groups with the same kids and students (p. 199).

v) **Leverage influence**

Spiritual formation is inextricably connected to the act of serving. This is why focusing on ‘refining the message’ is not enough:

Beyond that, there comes a time when a child or a student needs to begin experiencing certain things if those things are going to stick, especially as they move toward their teenage years. When student ministries or churches buy into a classroom mentality ... they set themselves up for failure. ... [T]he children or students are going to walk away thinking what we’re teaching is irrelevant to their everyday lives if they are never given the opportunity to experience it (p. 206).

The fact is that ‘the heart will gravitate towards whatever offers adventure and significance’ (p. 208). We need to be prepared to take risks with our young people, giving them opportunities to lead, grow and have their faith stretched. The curriculum we offer our young people must therefore not merely be about classroom learning; it must also be experiential and relational (p. 213).

Church leaders and parents need to be aware of their instinctive tendency to overprotect their young people. ‘Many modern models of family and church lean heavily toward creating an insulated protective bubble around both’ (p. 217). But the role of the family and church is ultimately ‘not to protect children, but to set them free to demonstrate God’s love to a broken world’ (p. 216).
**Missional implications of ‘thinking orange’**

Most parents – Christian or non-Christian – intuitively believe they are responsible for the moral and spiritual development of their own children. They are looking for help to be the spiritual leaders that they want to be. Reggie Joiner quotes statistics that show how parents of children under the age of eighteen attend church at a far higher rate than other adults (p. 86). It is uncertain how this relates to the UK context, but it seems reasonable to assume that parents of young children in our society are also more likely to be open to involvement with the church because they feel responsible for the moral and spiritual development of their children.

But when parents look at the church, what do they see? Some churches do little or nothing to help parents be spiritual leaders. Other churches build all their programming and resources around the forty hours they have with the children. When the church tries to become a parent substitute, the unintentional result is that parents are actively discouraged from becoming the spiritual leaders they want to be (p. 89).

Reggie Joiner invites us to imagine that every time a parent comes long to church, they are asking for three things:

- **Give me a plan.** Most parents are parenting reactively, yet many of them desire to be proactive. They want a plan that will give them a system of support, consistent influence, and a steady flow of relevant information. Many parents need a vision which will help them engage with their children (pp. 171-2).

- **Show me how it works.** Parents need influence as much as children do, and they desire to be engaged in the process in a way that prompts them to take the best next step. One of the best ways to serve parents in serving their children is to create frequent shared experiences for the family. Whatever a church does to teach, share and model good practice, the influences need to be regular and repeated (pp. 172ff.). It is important to remember that ‘it’s not what happens during the family experiences that is most important, but what happens between them’ (p. 175).

- **Tell me what to do today.** If we are going to truly partner with parents, we have to give them specific instructions (p. 90). For example, at North Point Community Church, the children’s curriculums include initiatives for the families to complete at home (p. 176).

Reggie Joiner issues this challenge:

> What if the parents you met last week at the ball game [insert appropriate cultural reference here!] showed up at your church this Sunday? What next step would you give them to connect them to a better strategy? Would you be ready to help them engage? Would they see your church as a source of energy for their families? ... Not only should you think Orange, you should start acting Orange (p. 179).

God has given to parents the responsibility of moulding the hearts and minds of a new generation. It is a huge and frequently anxiety-ridden task. Whether they realise it or not, every parent needs the church as a partner (p. 183). The question is, will the church be there for them?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of Think Orange is to seek to convince leaders to do five things:

i) Synchronise leaders and parents to build an authentic faith in children and teenagers;

ii) Refine your message so it clearly communicates God’s story of restoration;
iii) Help parents be more intentional about nurturing an everyday faith in their kids’ lives;
iv) Give every child and teenager a spiritual coach or leader who can reinforce what a Christian parent would say;
v) Fuel passion in the hearts of this next generation to be a demonstration of God’s love to a broken world (p. 228).

In the final section of the book, Reggie Joiner quotes Ivy Beckwith:

The church’s ministry to children is broken. ... It’s broken when church leaders and senior pastors see children’s ministry primarily as a marketing tool. ... Something’s broken when we trivialise God to our children. ... It’s broken when we depend on our programmes and our curriculum to introduce our children to God – not our families and communities. ... And perhaps most importantly, it’s broken when the church tells parents that its programmes can spiritually nurture their children better than they can’ (Postmodern Children’s Ministry, quoted in Joiner, p. 230).

In the final analysis, all that really matters is that every church asks itself two questions:

Do you believe your church can do a better job at partnering with the family?

And:

What are you going to do about it?

Andrew Sampson, May 2014