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Book Review: Sustainable Children's Ministry: From Last-Minute Scrambling to Long-Term Solutions

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Sustainable Children's Ministry: From Last-Minute Scrambling to Long-Term Solutions, by Mark DeVries and Annette Safstrom. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018. 234 pages, \$16.99.

Reviewer: Ron Bruner

Over the last few decades, children's ministry literature has grown into a body of work broadening across numerous practices and deepening in its theological awareness. However, publishers and authors have not paid much attention to the reality that the actual practice of children's ministry also involves a potentially overwhelming amount of administration.

Mark DeVries, former youth minister and now youth ministry consultant, teamed up with Annette Safstrom, an experienced children's ministry practitioner and consultant, to address this gap in the literature. After DeVries published *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, he and Safstrom recognized the need for a different book to meet the unique requirements of children's ministry. Although many of the principles in *Sustainable Children's Ministry* derive from *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, the new work focuses on children's ministry and, intentionally, is in Safstrom's voice. This book expands the influence of DeVries and Safstrom beyond their consulting work to hundreds of congregations needing guidance with systematic planning, policy, recruitment, and procedures for children's ministry. It delivers those well.

The first chapter describes Safstrom's personal experience as a rookie children's minister in terms that may well resonate with many of her peers. The challenges she experienced (and eventually overcame) become a framework of four simple diagnostics prompting the leadership of a children's ministry to create a more sustainable ministry (16-18). Most children's ministries will find at least some issues needing attention. The following two chapters serve to deflect ministers (or their leadership) from believing that they can solve negative issues in a children's ministry merely

by working harder or longer. The authors assert that only a sustainable minister can lead a sustainable ministry, thus requiring every minister to learn how to manage themselves, create sustainable systems, delegate, and oversee their ministry well.

Chapter four presents information not common in books on children's ministry: numerical standards for effective ministry with children. The authors assert that leaders should plan on spending so many dollars per child and have a children's ministry staff member for every so many children. The numbers given are not random but are based on DeVries and Safstrom's years of experience consulting in this field.

Chapters five through nine describe the necessary machines, or systems, to keep a children's ministry running smoothly. Attention is given to policy, procedure, recruiting of volunteers, and calendaring but—most importantly—to developing machines that help the children's minister get this work done well and on time. Building these systems is the difference between sustainable ministry and stress-inducing chaos. This is the core of the book where ministers will need to invest the bulk of their time and attention.

Chapters ten and eleven deal with the political realities of being a part of a church system. Instead of focusing on the negatives, DeVries and Safstrom focus on the power of positive relationships in the midst of political systems. Their suggestions are helpful guides to the day-to-day realities of serving as a part of a ministry team. Their advice about developing parents as partners in ministry is key ministry practice to keep church politics at bay.

Importantly, the authors deal with the necessity of self-management for the minister. Careful planning, smoothly functioning systems, and well-trained volunteers are important but much less likely to happen if ministers do not deal with their own humanity, specifically their need for emotional, relational, and spiritual balance. To keep perspective, one must occasionally step out of the fray and get "balcony time" (161). Chapters twelve through fourteen deliver wise advice intended to prevent the kind of personal chaos that Safstrom—and many other children's ministers—have experienced as a result of being overwhelmed by their ministry.

This work should be one of the half-dozen must-have books on the bookshelf of a children's minister. Ministers who implement the various systems described by this book will have shaped a program that meets a solid standard of excellence.

For church leaders who are seeking to begin a children's ministry, hire a children's minister, or help existing staff build an existing children's

ministry, *Sustainable Children's Ministry* serves as a practical checklist of the essentials for a safe, sane, and sustainable ministry with children. Such leaders should invest their time contextualizing the guidance in this carefully thought-out work to wisely engage this crucial ministry.

Those ministers and leaders should recognize several realities, though. The book best serves large congregations and must be recalibrated to help the small to medium-sized churches that constitute the bulk of the church in the United States. Smaller churches will benefit from this work when they can adapt it to their context and not try to be what they are not. This book best describes children's ministry as it might be practiced in the United States and was not designed to deal with the cultural and financial realities of the church on other continents. That job remains for those more familiar with those unique contexts. For some years, the numbers in this book will remain helpful; future editions of the book might present updated information that keeps this work current.

Ultimately, reaching sustainability in any ministry requires change. Some of those changes are technical, easy fixes that few will dispute. Other changes are adaptive and will require carefully, patiently built consensus among the children's ministry team, leadership, and the families involved in this ministry to flourish. Those who implement the changes necessitated by this book should remember that, without such consensus, neither the ministry nor its leadership will be sustainable.

Having considered those caveats, the usefulness, breadth, attention to detail, and uniqueness of this work give it worth that far exceeds any of its limitations.

Ron Bruner (DMin, Abilene Christian University) is the executive director of Westview Boys' Home in Hollis, Oklahoma. His areas of interest and specialization include intergenerational ministry, theology of children, children's spirituality, at-risk youth.