

DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN SMALLER CHURCHES

The following are notes to guide discussion about the future of children's ministry in churches that have struggled and do struggle to attract and retain them. The content is *not* aimed at churches with thriving children's and young person's work.

It is common to hear older members sigh and refer to a time when the Church had a thriving Sunday School and Bible Class; today, every person attending is an adult—in many cases, older rather than younger. So much has changed in a generation.

Frankly, it might not be appropriate for very small churches or those in isolated positions to spend time and resources on building a children and younger people's work, when more obvious targets are available and realisable. For instance, some churches have excellent relations with older members of the community or perhaps with college students or with a specific adult 'target' audience. These groups might well be priorities for evangelism ahead of children.

In addition, any Church that contemplates starting or expanding their work among children must recognise that it is costly, both financially and in terms of compromises that older members might have to make. Are you *certain* that this is the right direction to take?

The notes below were originally formulated as the basis for a training session. They are, therefore, somewhat lacking in detail. Nevertheless, I hope and pray that they will provide some starting points for a serious debate about the way forward.

One thing is certain, if we don't influence children for the Gospel, others will certainly do so for reasons that are almost certainly less desirable. As we do so, let's remember Jesus' warning that unless we become as little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

NATIONAL PICTURE

1. Few children come to church, but if they do, it is almost always **with a relative?**
2. An increasingly large percentage of many churches are relatives and friends of existing members, or Christians who have moved into the area, rather than new converts
3. While the average age of regular church-goers is rising, the average age of church-going children is **falling**... so a gap is opening up in the 'middle years'
4. **Girls** and women are much more likely to attend church than boys and men.
5. Unless there's a separate youth group, nearly **all children leave church** by the time they reach the top of primary school
6. Most **teenagers** would rather emigrate than admit they attend church!
7. Church is seen by most young people as a place for **inadequate** people, who don't have anything better to do, or for the elderly, or those who are a bit dim ... or possibly both!
8. Paradoxically, a large percentage of Christians **first commit themselves to Christ** in their teens, often during camp.

SCENARIOS... Things people have said (Is this you?)

1. We used to have lots of children in the Church but they drifted away as they got older and now we haven't got any/hardly any at all.
2. We haven't had children in this Church for as long as I can remember.
3. We had a couple running the children's work but after they left there was no one to do it, so it lapsed and then collapsed.
4. We get a fair number of youngsters to the weekday fun activities but none of them come to church on Sunday.
5. We've got a few children of members that usually come along on Sundays, but no others.
6. We've got some very young children but nothing for older ones, so I'm not sure what we will do as they grow up.
7. We're fortunate to have a decent children's work but we lose most of them when they reach 10 or 11 years of age.
8. We've got a reasonable work among toddlers and primary age... but nothing for teens and twenties.
9. We have a strong children's work and teenage group but we'd like to see more of them committing themselves to Christ.
10. We have a strong children's work and a decent work among teens & 20s... now we want to bring them into mainstream Church life.

SITUATIONS VARY SO MUCH

- a) We have good facilities but no one to lead the work.
- b) We have leaders but poor facilities.
- c) We have very few children in the locality to attend in the first place!
- d) We are mainly 65-plus years old and don't feel able or confident to proceed.
- e) We lack musicians and have little musical talent between us.
- f) We only have one service on Sunday, so leaders miss the ministry if they go out with the children.

POSSIBLE WAYS AHEAD

- a) **Identify and train potential teachers ... this is a medium-term solution**
- b) **Visit and liaise with other churches** to get ideas...
- c) **Explore the possibility of transporting children...** Or, better still, make the meeting so attractive that parents bring them!
- d) Start with what you've got and **work "down"** in age...
- e) Explore ways of working with **young parents and their small children**
- f) **Use technology** to compensate for lack of musicians and, perhaps, for use in story time...

NOTE: People going out of the service with the children can be a serious problem... So distribute notes from sermons to them... Put the sermon on Youtube... Follow-up the Bible teaching in home groups...

One way and another don't allow our teachers to be the least well informed members of the Church because they work with the children!

It's not all bad news!

How to Explain God was written by Danny Dutton, age 8, from Chula Vista, California, for his third grade homework assignment: "Explain God" The following piece was published in *Christianity Today*:

"One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grown-ups, just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

"God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times besides bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because He hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in His ears, unless He has thought of a way to turn it off.

"God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere which keeps Him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting His time by going over your mum and dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have.

"Atheists are people who don't believe in God. I don't think there are any in Chula Vista. At least there aren't any who come to our church.

"Jesus is God's Son. He used to do all the hard work like walking on water and performing miracles and trying to teach the people who didn't want to learn about God. They finally got tired of Him preaching to them and they crucified Him. But He was good and kind, like His Father and He told His Father that they didn't know what they were doing and to forgive them and God said okay. His Dad (God) appreciated everything that He had done and all His hard work on earth so He told Him He didn't have to go out on the road anymore. He could stay in heaven. So He did. And now He helps His Dad out by listening to prayers and seeing things which are important for God to take care of and which ones

He can take care of Himself without having to bother God. Like a secretary, only more important.

"You can pray anytime you want and they are sure to help you because they got it worked out so one of them is on duty all the time.

"You should always go to Church on Sunday because it makes God happy, and if there's anybody you want to make happy, it's God. Don't skip church to do something you think will be more fun like going to the beach. This is wrong. And besides the sun doesn't come out at the beach until noon anyway.

"If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know He's around you when you're scared in the dark or when you can't swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids. But you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and He can take me back anytime He pleases. And that's why I believe in God."

Points to consider:

1. Do we underestimate children's grasp of spiritual things? Or do we assume too much?
2. What should we/ can we do about children and young people in the church today... or lack of them!
3. What impression does my church give to the under 16s?

GENERAL ISSUES (there are exceptions, of course)

1. The majority of churches concentrate most of their resources and effort on adults rather than on children.

- **The reasons** are obvious... Churches have to be maintained and managed... Adults are needed to keep things going, make decisions, etc... A church cannot function without adults
- But what if your church became, first and foremost, orientated towards children and young people... **What changes would have to be made by the adults involved?**

We need to recognise that every decision reflects our **priorities**... **NO** decision is value-free

~ Allocation of funds...

- **Buildings**... Whether to buy new chairs for the main church... or transform the back hall into a Parents & Toddlers area
- **Type of equipment**... repair the organ... or invest in guitars
- **Special events**... organise a Sankey evening for the over 60s... or finance a youth event with a visiting speaker

~ Style of Sunday service...

- **Degree of structure**... hymn/prayer sandwich **or** ministry followed by prayer & praise **or** 'open' times for spontaneous contributions
- **Types of songs**... old or new or a blend of both or no songs at all!
- **Teaching and preaching**... in a single block or several short inputs
- **Interactive or didactic**... visual, responsive or 'sit still and listen'

~ Target audience for meetings...

- Mature Christians or seekers after the truth or the local community or young people and children?

- And how will this affect how the meeting is led... and by whom!

In other words, **strategic decisions need to be made...**

- Perhaps some of us need to be **more strategic** and less influenced by what we have done or we do presently
- **For example**, to move the “teaching of mature Christians” service to a mid-week afternoon and make the Sunday service “family friendly”

2. In the minority of churches that have more than a handful of children, most of them separate them from the adults for a large percentage of the Sunday service.

- The children normally leave after (say) 15 minutes...
- If they stay, they might be given ‘activity packs’ to keep them occupied while the adults do spiritual things!
- The thinking is that the “adult service” is unsuitable for youngsters... so a targeted session in another room is more appropriate

But is this practice more for the adults’ benefit than for the children’s?

~ A lot depends on the quality of the provision for children in their classes... If it’s poor, perhaps they would do better to stay in the main service!

~ Sometimes, wide age-ranges of children have to be taught together, which makes the teacher’s job almost impossible

~ Sometimes, different ages are taught in separate classes, with the result that classes are tiny and a relatively large number of adults is required to staff them... Is this sensible or right?

~ It is **not uncommon for a large proportion of the congregation to disappear** with the children when they 'go out'... so where is the continuity of ministry for those folk?

3. Hardly any churches run a Sunday School at a different time from the main Sunday service.

- It is argued that children should attend church with parents/relatives
- That we can't expect people to attend church twice on Sunday
- That children have more tempting things to do with their time
- That the logistics of getting children to SS at a separate time are too complicated

~ Unfortunately, the result of pursuing this policy is that generally only children of attendees come to church

~ Children of non-churchgoing parents generally don't come at all.

~ The decision to relegate SS to a half-hour "babysitting" session during the main morning service can have some dire consequences... one of which is a freefall in numbers

IF THEY WON'T COME TO US... PERHAPS WE SHOULD "GO TO" THEM!

Distribution of Christian **children's comics/DVDs**... use of the **Internet** etc

4. Some churches run a mid-week meeting for children...but in nearly every case it is strongly games-orientated.

- These meetings are usually well-attended and meet a social need

- They keep children 'in touch' with church and allow for a good relationship to develop with leaders
- The hope is that children will see church as unthreatening and look upon it favourably when they have to make decisions about attendance later in life

In practice, the link between the informal mid-week meeting and church attendance is weak...

- Other than children of churchgoers, young people stay away permanently once they reach the 'end' of the meetings appropriate to their age-group
- ~ Finding a balance between having fun and teaching about Jesus is far from easy
- ~ Leaders are afraid of losing the children unless everything is fun-orientated... or perhaps fearful of being accused of indoctrination
- ~ Yet unless we keep our eye on the principal reason for existing as a church, we might end up with lots of children (great!) who have no understanding of what being a follower of Christ means (not great!)

HERE'S THE CHALLENGE... Most children's experience of church is sitting through an opening hymn, a prayer, a short talk (perhaps) and a song broadly suitable for them, followed by time away from the main service with their 'teachers'... Then a cup of orange and chasing their friends around while adults talk...Then a week's break before the process is repeated.

- Where do they get opportunity to **truly worship God**...to marvel at His works...to see answers to prayer... to get excited about the whole Bible (not just a small number of favourite stories)?

- How are they encouraged to **spend time seeking God during the week**?
- Is a short story and colouring in a picture/making a visual aid in Sunday School enough to stimulate their desire for God?

~ **Leaders have to set the example** through their own walk with the Lord... not only being nice but 'marvelling' and 'seeing answers to prayer' and 'getting excited' about the things of God

~ The **Bible is a rich and bottomless resource**... yet how often we merely scratch the surface and justify doing so by saying, "They are only children..."

~ Is it any wonder that smarter children and older children don't take church seriously if they associate it with 'childish' things?

~ Is the **shortage of boys** (especially older ones) attributable in part to what they perceive to be 'girly' things... songs about love... sitting still and writing... making cut-outs of angels... reading

Perhaps an emphasis on '**mastery**' is worth resurrecting... learning Bible verses off-by-heart... singing hymns/songs without use of words ... acting out Bible events without a formal script

The fundamental challenge is this:

Have we made the 'non-spiritual' aspects of church exciting...
and the spiritual aspects mundane?

YET MORE QUESTIONS!

- (a) What environment are we trying to create... both physical AND emotional?
- (b) Can we make Church a little more boy-friendly without losing the girls?
- (c) Be aware that the type of **background music** makes a difference
- (d) SINGING can be done *a cappella* / responsive chanting...
 - **Simple** and repetitive tends to be better...
 - **More advanced vocabulary** and **spiritual concepts** need to be introduced **over a period of time**

Contrast these songs and their relative difficulty...

- “Roll, roll your burdens away”
- “My God is so big, so strong and so mighty”
- “If I were a butterfly”
- “All things bright and beautiful”

There is also the key issue of **reading** ability... Are certain children disadvantaged because we make the ability to read such an essential factor?

BIBLE EVENTS/STORIES

1. What should we definitely include?
2. What should we omit?
3. How should we present the event/story?
4. What next? Do we just give them a picture to colour in?

HOW DO WE TEACH CHILDREN TO PRAY? (Give them sample prayers? Avoid merely reading it out...give the words expression)

HOW DO WE HELP CHILDREN TO GROW SPIRITUALLY? (Is it the same for adults?)

CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN...

(a) Using **visual aids**...example of using balloons/other items to illustrate principles

(b) **QUIZZES:** WHY HAVE THEM?

1. To test factual knowledge
2. To enliven proceedings
3. To probe spiritual discernment
4. To satisfy children's competitive spirit

PRINCIPLES GOVERNING QUIZ COMPETITIONS

1. Never humiliate a child
2. Never allow a child's poor choice to incur the wrath of others
3. Reward, reward, reward (e.g. give ten points for a correct answer rather than one)
4. Make questions fairly simple and gain bonus points randomly
5. In the event of an incorrect answer, allow another child in the same team to answer... and reduce the points gained slightly
6. Commend genuine effort... follow up misunderstandings later

WHAT STYLES OF QUIZ CAN WE USE?

1. Yes/ no... right/ wrong... true/ false
2. Choose correctly from options (A, B or C etc)
3. Dependent on memory. For example, complete this Bible verse; select the missing word; spot the deliberate mistake
4. Miming Bible events (e.g. parables) and guessing which one

WHAT CAN WE DO TO BOOST INTEREST & INVOLVEMENT?

1. Team competitions (e.g. snakes and ladders)
2. Rolling sponge dice
3. Spinning wheel to score points
4. Giving bonus points for sitting up straight etc
5. Lucky dip to gain points, prizes
6. Choosing a number linked to a question worth "x" number of points
7. Answering in unison (all the team together 'after three!')
8. Thumbs up; thumbs down

PUPPETS... The use of puppets in storytelling is easy and engages children (and adults) of every age.