

Jesus said “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14



It has once again been my privilege to walk alongside and assist churches in the Synod area as they respond to this mission challenge of Jesus in faithful and innovative ways.

Ministry with children comes in many shapes and sizes (one size or programme does not fit all) and it would be true to say children's ministry today is vastly different from the Sunday schools of 30-40 years ago. In most of our churches, children are no longer being brought (and therefore 'coming') to church on Sundays in any great numbers and I have heard the sadness and grief of this from older members. However many churches are addressing the missionary situation they find themselves in, by going out and serving children and families in the community.

In our region it is looking like:

- A variety of ministries in local primary schools like Christian Religious Education (Bible in Schools), SUPAkidz, chaplaincy, tutor reading, nit busting, staff morning teas, and more.
- Preschool music, craft and play groups with an emphasis on intentional relationship building and parent support.
- After school clubs, ICONZ and holiday programmes to address child care and activity needs in local communities.
- Organising BIG child-focused events like Children's Day galas, Light party alternatives to Halloween and Christmas extravaganzas that attract a lot of community families.
- A growing number of alternative style services that are attracting community families. Churches are adapting ideas such as the UK model of 'Messy Church' for their local context. Usually a monthly service which includes unpacking a Bible story or theme in creative interactive ways using crafts, drama, games, music, often incorporating a meal.
- In the past year I have offered Kids Friendly resources and training to a number of churches wanting to establish and run these kinds of community serving initiatives.

'Let the children come' also challenges our more traditional understanding and ways of welcoming children on Sundays. It is now understood that for children to grow into a living faith in Jesus Christ, they need to belong to a community of faith of all ages that creates opportunities for them to experience and practice living, learning, worshipping and serving as followers of Jesus.

Recent research (Barna Group, Think Orange, and Faith at Home) urges the re-establishment of the home as the primary place for Christian nurture. Often parents will need help from the church in the role of nurturing Christian faith in their children. This may take a variety of shapes and forms depending on the location and situation of the congregation, as well as the skills and resources of the people.

These issues challenge me as I suspect that some current Sunday church practices hinder rather than help children to grow in faith. We in the Kids Friendly team do not have all the answers but we are wrestling with the questions and providing some resources to help churches to discuss and develop “a way of thinking that intentionally includes, celebrates and serves children as an important part of the faith community.”

In the Synod area 37 churches have joined the Kids Friendly network, including 13 who have completed at least one Self Review in order to become recognised as a “Kids Friendly Church”. This process is a journey and no church can ever sit back and think ‘We have arrived!’ Families come and go, children keep growing up, and leaders can become tired or disillusioned.

Encouraging and equipping children’s ministry leaders is a key part of my role and it is a pleasure to do this jointly with Anglican and Scripture Union staff in the Otago Southland region. In 2012 the Children’s Ministry Network ran morning or afternoon events in Dunedin and Invercargill in February, May, June and August. A well-attended whole day training was held in Cromwell in November. Way2Go in March and Faith at Home in September were also advertised through the network.

Much of my time in December and January was spent producing the latest Kids Friendly resource ‘Choosing a Curriculum’. This resource guides leaders in choosing from the vast array of material that is available when planning and preparing Sunday programmes. The comments from a number of children’s workers in this region adds practical and helpful advice about using the resources (from online to printed materials) in different sized churches.

I acknowledge the faithful work of SO MANY who give their time and passion and energy to children’s ministries. In the last year I have met many of them as I have travelled around the region from Oamaru to Stewart Island, Te Anau to Balclutha.

Thank you for the hospitality, stimulating conversations and stories. Keep sharing your stories with me (with photos!) Others will be encouraged by your journey as you ‘let the children come.’

Thanks to Synod for the generous funding that enables me to offer this level of support to ANY church in the region who requests advice or a visit.

Lastly, thanks to my local church family where I toss around and sometimes ‘practice’ ideas! And especially to Ken and family for their constant encouragement and prayers.

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