

God, Growth and Grandparents!

It has been a privilege and joy to work with churches around the Synod area in the past year. My report is really YOUR report as it is **God at work** in your churches and communities that will form the basis of the content. Some say our churches are in decline but all around the region I see fresh shoots of **growth** and committed church members who have a heart for children to be brought into the Kingdom of God. Many of these people are **grandparents!**

God at work

At last year's AGM Roger Harrington shared 'the St Andrew's Invercargill' story – a story of hope and rebirth as God led them into new ministries with children and youth. He described a prayerfulness and willingness to step out of the comfort zone, to look and listen to 'what God was already doing and join in.' The good news is that they are not an isolated case. Many other churches in our region are also exploring new ways of reaching out to children and families and discovering that there is a hunger for relationships, authentic community and openness to the gospel. Every church needs to consider its own community, resources and strengths, look for the doors that are opening for them... then have the courage to walk through! In my Kids Friendly presentations I often quote Bill Hybels who has said that "the single remaining common interest or entrance point for non-churched people in the life of the church is children..... We have a wide open door to almost every family in every community worldwide when we love and serve their kids." God is at work, opening doors, in our communities.

Growth

Kids Friendly is about encouraging churches to offer 'best practice ministry to children and families of their churches and communities. This is based on the belief that healthy, growing churches will include ministry to these groups too. Growth can be hard to measure but good news stories cannot be denied:

- Last year 10 churches joined the Kids Friendly network to make a total of 33 in the Synod area. About 6 other churches have accessed resources, training and encouragement in a significant way. There are more than 24 Kids Friendly resources available on the website or through me.
- Many churches are finding the Kids Friendly self review process helpful as they consider how to intentionally welcome, include and celebrate children on Sundays and in outreach opportunities. 12 churches have completed this review process and proudly display Kids Friendly signs for church and community to see.
- Churches are building relationships with their local schools. Wakatipu provided morning tea to the staff at the new Remarkables primary school and now provides reading tutors 3 days a week for up to 18 children. (That's remarkable!)
- Alexandra provides an after school homework club 3 days a week.
- 3 churches have begun lunchtime or afterschool clubs using the Scripture Union SUPAkidz programme. Many church members lead weekly Bible in Schools classes.
- Several kids clubs in Oamaru continue strongly with churches sharing resources and personnel.

- Rural churches run lunchtime, after school, Sunday programmes that have become part of the rhythm and life of these communities. Parents who remember coming themselves now bring their children!
- Music and movement clubs for parents and preschoolers flourish all around the region providing inviting environments for relationship building. Many teams are asking "What might church look like for these families?" 'Sprouts' on Sunday morning, Family t on Sunday night, breakfast church, messy church....
- Holiday programmes have full enrolments and provide well needed child care in a fun, safe environment and an opportunity to share the good news.
- Churches are organising BIG child-focused events like Children's Day, Light Parties and Christmas gatherings working alongside other community organisations. Families are attending in large numbers, enjoying the activities and noticing the contribution of the local church.
- And let's not forget the children who do come on Sunday mornings and their leaders who are learning new ways of welcoming, nurturing and leading creative sessions that engage these 21st century children with the Good News.

Grandparents

All ministries require people power and many of the growing ministries I have mentioned are outside Sunday morning and highly relational. These require more volunteers than ever. It is my observation that many of the people 'doing' children's ministry in our churches today are over 60 or even 70 with grandchildren or even great grandchildren! Some comment that they have 'done their turn' and it is time for others to lead the Sunday school, run the Kids Club or mainly music group. But who is there? In the past the main ministry with children was Sunday School and it was shared amongst a larger group of church going parents. The reality today is that in a lot of our churches, this parent age group is small, working long hours or entirely missing. BUT if the church IS reaching out to its community in new ways and children and families are coming (as they are) then we need people who will continue to volunteer, to welcome children, to encourage and listen to parents for whom church as we know it is an unfamiliar place. Some churches are courageously asking the question 'What would church look like for them?' and then take the risk of trying new patterns of worship. It is not easy but I am meeting 'grandparent' leaders and helpers who are rising to this challenge, and along the way discovering a 2nd childhood and fresh enthusiasm as they get to know children and parents in their community. Let's continue to welcome children and whole families AGAIN into the life and worship of our churches in the Synod area. I look forward to hearing from you and offering the support of resources, advice and training for your specific mission challenges.

'We will tell the next generation about the Lord's power and His great deeds and the wonderful things that He has done.' Psalm 78:4

Cheryl Harray
Kids Friendly Advisor