

Starting children's work

On your marks:

Many churches have very few or no children in their regular Sunday congregations. This does not however mean that there are not plenty of children out there somewhere! The children - all the children - in your parish or district should be in your prayers and on your hearts. So where do we start if you want to pass on the good news of Jesus to these children? Here are a few ideas.

Get set:

You will need first to talk with your Church leader or minister and share your concerns with her/ him. It may be that there are already initiatives in place in your area of which you do not know. It is vital that we work together in matters concerning children - we need to support each other if nothing else!

Also, it would be good to share your vision and concerns with a few other like-minded friends, so you can pray together to find out what God would have you do in response to your concerns. You cannot do everything and so it is vital that you find out what is the one particular, contribution in this area you are called and able to make.

At some stage your minister will probably want you to talk to the PCC or church governing body so they are behind you too.

Go:

1. Think through where the children are in your part of the world. Where do the young mums gather, for example? Which schools are nearby? Are there already any existing clubs for children? What sort of local events attract the children? Where do children gather to relax and play? Work out if your Church building or hall is the most obvious place to meet with the children or whether somewhere else would be more attractive and better suited. Think through how you can go to where the children already are.
2. If you decide on a Sunday or midweek club, you will also need to work out at what time and where this can best be held. Think through what is possible in a missionary spirit, namely seeing new possibilities and be prepared to take risks in order to take the story of Jesus to children rather than sitting around waiting for them to come to us. If at all possible, talk to the children themselves. When would they like to meet? How often? What sort of club or group would they bring their friends to? What would their parents be most happy with? If you are thinking of a

midweek club, or starting something with a pre-school group, be aware that there is money available to help with this. Your local authority Early Years Officer or your local Children's Work Adviser can give you advice here.

3. For adults Churches are special places to meet and worship. In the same way children need to have their own special place too - somewhere comfortable, attractive and safe. If this involves some financial outlay, then talk this through with your Church leaders and ask them to see this as part of their local mission and their giving.
4. You will need helpers. Don't try and do it on your own! Of course children most appreciate continuity and the possibility of growing to trust and relate to regular leaders. But this does not however mean that it must be you up front every week. Take it in turns to be the one who leads different parts of what is done. Of course legally you will need an appropriate number of adults for the size and age range of your group. Your church should have details in their Child Protection Policy about all this. Also, because working with children is both a privilege and a responsibility, it is down to us to prove to those who trust us with their children that we are safe and reliable people. It does not take long to fill out a form from the Criminal Records Bureau and become registered under the umbrella of the local diocese or district. Again your Church should have details about this. We owe it to the children and their parents, as well as the wider community, to be honest and open in this way.
5. So what will we do with the children in our group? Whatever programme or materials you choose to use, the most important thing is to create a clear and regular pattern for what you do. Take time to help them feel safe in whatever "sacred space" you have created for them; use music to introduce the children to the experience of being in God's presence; share stories from the Bible - not randomly but thoughtfully week-by-week, building them into a pattern; give them space to respond both in their own words and questions as well in creative craft ways; model the habit of prayer both for each other and the world outside; listen to what the children say and always be ready to learn as much from them as you try to teach!
6. If the children come to you after school, straight from home or rushing out of the service, it may be appropriate to have some sort of ice-breaker game before you settle down, both to run off excess energy as well as to set something of the theme before them for the session ahead. It is often appropriate to build in a space for a drink and a biscuit too; this can help keep tempers calm.
7. Don't feel you have to think up loads of new ideas for yourself. There's a wealth of resource material available, as well as support from the diocese or district children's advisers. There are also courses on which you could go - maybe only one or two evenings initially - but which will develop your own skills and arm you with a load of inspiring ideas. Beware however trying to be like someone else and imitating how he or she does children's work, however admirable they may be! Children quite quickly see through this. Find your own way of using the materials and the way of leading that most suits you, so that you can be relaxed and natural with the children.
8. It may be that you and your team simply cannot manage a weekly commitment. Don't give up because of this. Instead go for a special occasion once a month or even just a special event linked to the Church festivals. Better to do less well than become burnt-out trying to keep up with a punishing schedule of frequent meetings.
9. Children's leaders have unfortunately not always been the most valued members of the church's family, even though the work is given such a high priority biblically - 'pass these things on to the next generation' - and this work too is clearly most dear

to the heart of Jesus himself, who gave such an amazingly high status and position to children. You will need to learn how to affirm and support each other often! If you have children or grandchildren of your own - or maybe you are an aunt or uncle - then you may well be to some extent aware of the cultural influences on children. But even so it is very easy to lose touch. Aim as far as possible to keep up with the sort of television, films, books and toys that children are in to. It gives a way into conversations and there is very often a connection to our gospel story. Most importantly listen to the children. They will keep you 'in touch', if you let them!

10. Lastly, but most importantly, pray regularly for the children in your group. There is so much that is crowding into their lives, it is not easy for them to hear and receive the stories of Jesus, which are surely the most valuable things we can give them. Pray that the seeds you sow will take root and grow. According to the Bible we are promised that the word that goes forth faithfully will not return in vain.

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