

Growing Kids-Friendly Churches

By Marie Anticich



Kids Friendly is a Presbyterian Church initiative aimed at helping churches minister more intentionally to children and families.

The initiative was the result of a Presbyterian-commissioned A.C. Nielsen survey called *Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life*. This survey revealed that young secular Kiwi families expected churches to run programmes in local communities, and if they "needed" a church they would choose one which was community-minded.

Jill Kayser, who since 2004 has been the *Kids Friendly* coach for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, believes children are a wide open door to almost every family in the community. But she said many churches didn't know local children and families, or their needs. They needed courage to find refreshing new ways to bring the gospel back into their communities, and children were the most common entry point into the church for unchurched families. Thus much of Jill's time is spent introducing the *Kids Friendly* approach to local congregations. She trialled the project in eight Auckland churches before taking it around the country.

"The churches which are succeeding are those where ministers and workers are connecting with local children," she says.

Jill is concerned at the overall decline in children's ministry. Some churches are ministering effectively, but others have lost touch with too many children and families in their

communities by adopting a "come-to-us" attitude.

"Jesus didn't sit back and wait for people to come to church," says Jill. "He modelled a go-and-find-them mentality."

Aging congregations were another concern.

"Many of our churches could cease to exist within a few decades if they don't attract more children and families," she comments.

During her visits Jill helps churches review their children's ministry and develop a strategic plan. She offers coaching sessions, training workshops and resources.

"I'm passionate," she says, "about reaching, including and celebrating children in the community of faith."

Background

South-African born Jill has had a lifelong involvement in children's work, first as a consumer and as then a teacher from age twelve.

Early influences came from her mother and a Catholic school teacher.

"Sister Judith told me Jesus would be my friend for life, that he would never leave me, and that I could talk to him about anything anytime," says Jill. "This has sustained me."

With her mother she attended a combined Anglican/Presbyterian/Methodist church and became a Baptist for a while "because they had a cool Kids Club."

In 1987 she and her designer husband Paul emigrated to New Zealand with six-month-old Jessica.

"Our churchgoing lapsed when our second daughter Pip was born because we thought churches didn't 'do' babies," says Jill. "But a minister urged us to bring them to church so they would feel at home and loved there from an early age. It was great advice."

They joined St Heliers Presbyterian and a year later the minister asked Jill to become the Child and Family Worker.

"I told him no," said Jill, "as I was doing a psychology degree. Then God said to me at the clothesline: 'I thought you were open to possibilities!'"

"No," I said, "I'm going to be a psychologist."

She told her husband she'd turned down the minister's job offer.

"I thought you were open to possibilities," he said.

"So I saw the minister and he talked me into the job," says Jill. "I agreed to do it for two years and then I'd do my masters degree in psychology."

But a third child, Blake, helped keep her in children's ministry.

"God had to push me over the edge," says Jill, who still works from St Heliers Presbyterian. She describes it as "a large, community-minded church which connects with local families of all faiths and cultures." The church involves Sunday School children in worship, and encourages them to minister at local rest homes and community events. For the community they run midweek playgroups, music and movement groups, holiday programmes, kids' clubs and special family events at Christmas and Easter.

Challenges

Jill's biggest challenge is to remain hopeful and positive so she can inspire ministers and children's workers.

"I have to remind myself that God is in the driver's seat,"

she says, "and a having good sense of humour is essential."

She said children's workers often became disillusioned by the difficulty in attracting children to church on Sundays. Those who remained most hopeful were those who were willing to connect with children on any day of the week.

Because of the post-Christian nature of New Zealand society, fewer children were choosing, or able, to attend church on Sundays. Many had to spend time between two households, and parents often worked weekends. Children also had a wider range of weekend activities available.

Jill's son Blake (10) was constantly tempted to miss church on

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Sundays by sporting events and sleepovers which ended with a slap-up Sunday brunch. He wished more boys his age would come to church and struggled to maintain Christian values in a "me-oriented" society.

"More than ever," says Jill, "we need to model the unconditional love of Jesus and seek new ways to transform children's lives."

She is encouraged by seeing churches come back to life as they intentionally minister to children. Uplifting stories include:

- * The Papatoetoe church which grew from three to fifteen children in three months and was overrun with children within two years.

- * The twelve-member Foxton church which prayed for more children and now ministers to 50 of them.

- * The Beachlands church which served a candle-lit dinner to local single parents, while entertaining their children with hot dogs, games and DVDs.

- * The Taranaki church which ministered weekly to more than 100 youth and children from families affected by broken relationships, gangs and poverty.

- * The Dunedin church which ran a "NitBusters" programme in a low decile school to help control head-lice.

"I'm also inspired," says Jill, "when churches engage children in mission projects which move them from a stereotypical western 'it's all about me' mentality to a genuine concern for others. I'm inspired by church leaders who value their children's workers and ensure they are represented in the church leadership and strategic planning processes – and churches who intentionally give children a voice and listen to what they say." ❖

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