

Kids Friendly churches open arms to families

By Cory Miller
Making churches friendly and inviting for children is one of the initiatives the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is using to reverse the country's rapid decline in church attendance.

In 2004 eight Auckland churches worked under the guidance of Kids Friendly coach Jill Kayser to develop the 'Kids Friendly' best practice standard. "Together we explored what it meant to be Kids Friendly, why and how it should be," says Jill Kayser.

The pilot project was a success and now 39 Presbyterian and United congregations across the country bear the Kids Friendly label. Another 47 are working towards Kids Friendly status.

The initiative was the direct response to research that found New Zealanders respond positively to churches who intentionally connect with and serve their communities. The Presbyterian Church felt that a focus on children was something missing from many of its churches.

"The 2006 census found that 50 percent of the population identifies as Christian, yet Church statistics have found that only five percent of the population attends church. This suggests that a potential 45 percent of our population is interested in the Christian message but are disillusioned with the institutional church," says Jill.

Kids Friendly provides resources so churches can minister effectively to children and families, and thereby increase their exposure

and participation in the Christian faith.

Jill says there are many reasons to provide a Kids Friendly environment. God's Kingdom of heaven belongs to the young children and Jesus commands us to let the children come to him and be taught about God's love. Children can also be amongst our greatest teachers. They have honesty and love for life that brings freshness to our lives and congregations.

"It is vital to intentionally minister to children and teach them through example because without them there will be no future church. Research shows that people are most likely to come to faith between the ages of five and 13. Therefore the earlier an investment is made in children's ministry the greater will be the rewards. Children must be empowered to make a difference in the world by letting them have a voice.

"Everyday, not just Sundays, offers opportunities to share faith and create a sense of belonging where young and old alike are valued.

"Churches committed to children's ministry and community outreach will discover continual growth, as they dream new dreams enabling them to reach out to secular New Zealand."

The process of becoming Kids Friendly starts with a contract, although there is no single way of being a Kids Friendly church. The initiative is not prescriptive. Rather

it is a guide to equip churches to connect with and respond to their community's needs.

Jill says churches working towards Kids Friendly ideals, have the freedom to choose how they can best provide opportunities for children to experience God's love. To succeed there must be a whole church approach where responsibility is shared by all.

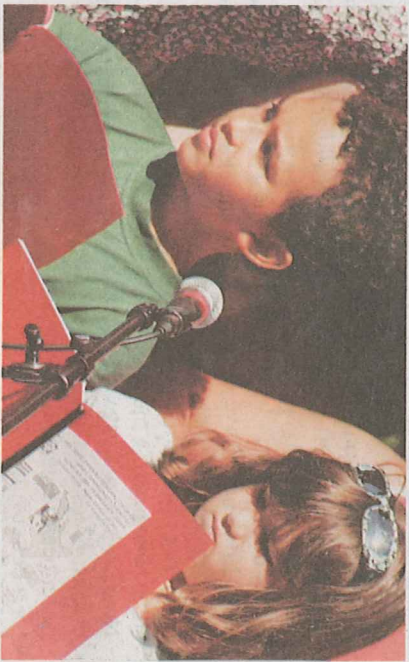
All that is required to become Kids Friendly is to have a heart for children, create culture that values children, and subscribe to the Kids Friendly ideals. A sense of belonging must be encouraged above the insistence that children believe as we do.

Jill believes that every child wants to belong. "Believing will come as children experience for themselves the love of Jesus through the church," she says.

Christ's love can be shared through created opportunities, such as holiday programmes, kids club, and music groups. Children and adults must be enabled to mutually participate in an environment of learning where all can appreciate each others' contributions.

Churches open to loving and serving their communities' children, and encouraging children's participation are active, growing churches. The Kids Friendly initiative has many stories of churches that have engaged with their communities by seeking them out, and getting to know and be known by them.

But, Jill says, Kids Friendly is not a final destination. It is part of a continual journey of faith,



Top: Pip Kayser (left) breaks bread at a St Heliers service. With her are Alison Bliss, Euan Sawtell, and Rev Pauline Stewart.