

CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

Number 8, September 2008

Children's ministry

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Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

About Candour

Candour is a monthly magazine about ministry and leadership. For more information, contact:

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The articles in *Candour* reflect the views of individual ministers or contributors writing in a personal capacity. They are not representative of the Church's official position. Please approach the author for permission if you wish to copy an article.

Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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Advertising

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22 September 2008.

Glen Innis Vacancies

September 29 - October 6	Cottage
October 6 - 13	Cottage
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October 20 - 27	Cottage
October 27 - November 3	Cottage

To enquire about vacancies, please email glen.innis@xtra.co.nz or telephone 06 855-4889.

Ministers are welcome to inquire regarding vacancies due to cancellations.

The Church Property Trustees have reluctantly decided to introduce a **refundable \$50 booking fee** for Glen Innis. This fee is payable to Margaret Black and refunded on arrival at Glen Innis. Changing your booking will require payment of another booking fee.

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We are currently calling for ministers interested in Transitional Ministry training.

The training conducted in three phases – an introductory residential course, a period of supervised field work followed by a second residential course.

The next intake will begin in November this year.

If you are interested in becoming a Transitional Minister please contact Juliette Bowater at juliette@presbyterian.org.nz to discuss further.

Ministers' Information Forms

Ministers' Information Forms are an essential tool for ministry settlement boards looking to make a call. They are also an effective way for ministers to record their achievements throughout their career – including any additional training they undertake.

Ministers are strongly encouraged to update their Ministers' Information Form every three years so that the information remains current. If you would like to update your Form please email Juliette on juliette@presbyterian.org.nz for a template. Alternatively, you are welcome to send additional information to PO Box 9049, Wellington.

Putting children first

Amanda Wells

This month's *Candour* features a bumper crop of articles about all facets of children's ministry. It's great to have such a positive response to a topic, and indicative of the Church's strength in this area.

So many churches round the country run Mainly Music programmes – last week I happened across one at Clevedon Presbyterian in South Auckland that was full of happy-looking toddlers bouncing around (and the parents looked pretty happy too). As well as doing some reporting for *Spanz*, I'd come to Auckland to provide a media training seminar for Presbyterian Support Northern, as part of the closer relationship the Church is developing with Presbyterian Support. Most of the media training participants worked with children and families in difficult situations. It was really interesting to listen to their perceptions and to see the passion with which they approached their work, as I put them through mock interviews. When asked to respond to hypothetical examples citing increased rates of child and family violence, every participant confirmed they are seeing more and more people in trouble.

Many thought this was related to increased awareness of the problem. The Government's "It's not OK" campaign appears to have struck the right chord, achieving widespread recognition and reaching those who most need to hear it. So just because more incidents of abuse are being reported, we can't assume that the level of family violence is increasing.

But the increased pressure placed on those working in this field is real. Imagine that you felt concern about promoting your organisation publicly because you were concerned of the pressure this would put on your already heavy caseload. But publicity is a double-edged sword; greater recognition can mean more lobbying power and also more attention from funders.

One thing we all have in common is that we once were children. No matter how long ago that might have been, we've all experienced the wonder, fear and general powerlessness of those early years. As adults, providing a safe environment for our society's children should be an unspoken priority. We like to think of our churches as welcoming, family-friendly places where children are safe from the outside world. We shouldn't have to make up rules to protect our children. But we must. One of

the most disturbing things about my role is awareness of cases where the church has failed to be a safe environment (I'm not implying that we are overwhelmed with these type of cases; but even one is too many).

Call it political correctness if you like, but our secular society has made it increasingly difficult for people to have easy access to children. An unintended consequence of educational and childcare institutions introducing stringent child-safety policies is that the church remains one of the few places preferring assumptions of trust and goodwill. According to United States magazine *Christianity Today*, "the church and its children are increasingly endangered by sexual predators whose opportunity to ensnare children elsewhere is growing smaller, while the church opens its doors to anyone".¹

Why? Because we want to assume the best of people's motives, and because we assume it won't happen in our church. But it's not impossible to maintain boundaries that protect children yet don't undermine assumptions of trust in your children's ministry. Last month AES Martin Baker wrote a letter to all parishes asking that they look again at these boundaries and ensure that their children's ministries and any other groups operating out of their premises are putting them into practice (you can find this safety and protection information at www.presbyterian.org.nz/fileadmin/a_resources_for_parishes/Safety_and_Protection_policy.pdf)

Perhaps it seems negative to talk about child abuse issues when this issue of *Candour* celebrates the strength and potential of our children's ministries. But we all have the power to provide the best possible protection for the children in our care, and that's something worth affirming and repeating.

The next issue of *Candour* will have the theme "Forming partnerships" and a deadline of 22 September. At the moment I am very short of confirmed contributions so if you feel inspired to write about the work you're doing with another community group or church, I encourage you to put pen to paper. The back page of this issue features some information about GA08 news – feel free to reproduce it in your church newsletter or weekly email, or to use it as a poster for your noticeboard.

1 www.christianitytoday.com/childrensministry/articles/sexualabuseinthechurch.html

Children's ministry dreams

Jill Kayser, Kids Friendly Coach

I recently witnessed the most amazing example of children's ministry. There was a lot of hype at our church about a forthcoming children's musical. Hundreds of children from the church and community were invited to participate. Sixty children signed up to come to the church hall every Sunday afternoon for 10 weeks to prepare.

I couldn't resist the effective marketing campaign. Eight-year-old Ben phoned me to tell me what a good show it was and asked me to buy lots of tickets. I had no idea that my \$10 was buying a life-changing experience. "We are all one" was not only an outstanding performance of 10 songs, poetry and video clips promoting unity, but a deeply moving experience. Written and directed by 21-year-old Amy Gulvin, "We are all one" invited children to reflect on some big issues while showcasing their talent. But what really excited me was the process that Amy followed. The creation and presentation of "We are all one" epitomised everything children's ministry could and should be.

Let the children come: All children were invited to participate regardless of race, creed or religious affiliation.

Do not hinder them: The adults and teenagers who worked with the children loved them and sought to share the love of God through their interactions.

Teach them (your faith). **Talk to them** (about your faith). Relationships were deepened and faith introduced and shared as children broke into small groups with their leaders to explore some big questions like: consumerism (how we can make a difference); the most influential people in our lives; prejudice; God; miracles and more.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these: Children's insights were valued and shared with us, their audience, on video and in their journals displayed during supper after the performance.

Unless you change and become like this: Children ministered as they shared their God-given talents. And their

full and joyful presence in the experience reflected (for me anyhow) a slice of the "*kingdom of heaven*".

Before presenting to a group of ministers and church leaders last year, I asked them "what is children's ministry?" Their answers were mostly limited to what we do with children on Sunday morning while adults worship. In suggesting that children's ministry is so much more than this, I do not negate the importance of what we do on Sunday mornings. What we do with and teach our "captured" audience on Sundays must be of the highest quality. It should aim to effectively share our faith and create a sense of belonging and a place of value for all children.

In my resource and workshop "**A Kids Friendly Sunday**", I explore ways that we can better welcome, engage, involve and teach children on Sundays. But in today's post-modern, post-Christendom New Zealand, children's ministry has to be so much more.

The 2006 census tells us that 50 percent of New Zealanders call themselves Christian, while our Church statistics suggest that 5 percent attend church. This means we have a potential 45 percent of our population interested in the Christian message but perhaps disenfranchised, disenchanted or disappointed with the institutional church. Our research (Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life, 2002) tells us that New Zealanders are not only open to their children attending church-run programmes but that they have an expectation that churches should be places of networking and care for children and families. American theologian Bill Hybels says, "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."

What I loved about "We are all one" is that it intentionally connected with children who were not associated with the church (80 percent did not attend church), introduced them to faith through discussion, modeled the love of Jesus through interactions with Christian leaders, inspired

them to share their God-given gifts and encouraged them to practice Christian principles with each other. It encompassed everything children's ministry should be. Whether we are running a holiday programme, Sunday school or after-school club, we are ministering to children and everything we do is a witness to Christ's love.

Children's ministry is about knowing our community and responding to their needs. On speaking to their local headmaster about serving their community, Pohutukawa Coast Presbyterian discovered that their community had a disproportionately high number of single parents. They responded with love by organising a candle-lit dinner for single parents while children were entertained in the hall with hot food, games and DVDs.

Children's ministry is about building relationships with children and modelling Christ's love. Knox Church in Waitara involves older male mentors in a weekly boys club where together they do "bloke's stuff" like woodwork, games, and activities. Says children's ministry coordinator Jennie McCullough, "we aim to provide the boys, many of whom come from single-parent families, with good male role models. Young people learn from copying adults. We set a good example for them in the way we live life and treat the kids. We also give them lots of good experiences and teach them skills to equip them to be a positive influence in their homes and communities."

Children's ministry is about empowering children to make a difference to the world. St John's in the City encouraged their "St J's kids" group to design, plan, promote and execute initiatives to raise funds for the Christian World Service Christmas Appeal. Parishioners were invited to purchase lemonade and handmade Christmas wrapping paper and pay to play games, which raised \$540 while valuing the children and making new friends across generations.

Children's ministry is about giving children a voice and valuing their opinions. Balclutha Presbyterian leaders surveyed seven-year-old Michelle to find out how "Kids Friendly" they and the parishioners are, and implemented her many wonderful suggestions on how they could do better.

Children's ministry is about celebrating children's milestones and achievements. St Heliers Presbyterian celebrates important transitions in children's lives. Children starting school are blessed and presented with their first Bible. Children going to intermediate school are blessed and presented with an adult bible. Teenagers

going to University or commencing other post-school adventures, are invited to a celebratory communion service where elders lay hands on them and present them with a hand-crafted cross to accompany them on their journey.

Children's ministry is about parents sharing their faith with their children.

The Kids Friendly churches of Dunedin recognized the important role that parents play in faith development and invited me to lead a "Faith@Home" workshop. Fifty parents came to reflect on their role as spiritual nurturer and learn some skills to equip them to intentionally share their faith with their children every day.

Children's ministry is about serving children and families with unconditional love. Carolyn Sims, community worker for Flagstaff Union Church, serves the local community by running "NitBusters" – a programme to help control headlice. Says Carolyn: "We asked the school what were some of the challenges they were facing and how we could help. We discovered that persistent headlice was a problem affecting children and dragging parents and teachers down too. So it was "sleeves up" for our team, who committed to visiting the local school every Monday to check for nits, shampoo and comb children's hair. After two years of Nitbusting we are making a difference in the headlice problem and have built a great relationship with our local school children, parents and teachers".

Children's ministry is ministry with, to and by children. It happens in our churches, communities, schools and homes and is the awesome responsibility and privilege of every Christian.



What we've learnt along the way

Phil King, St Margaret's Bishopdale, Christchurch

The following is a summary of some of the work we do with children and families in our church and community. We are still on a learning curve and have a long way to go. But I hope these thoughts may prove helpful for some readers. The first and most obvious thing that comes to mind is that it is hard to do children's ministry well. Several years ago, we were finding it increasingly difficult to find volunteers with the time and energy to commit to this work, so we decided to raise money and pay someone to do it. But the transition from volunteer to paid is not a simple case of finding the money. We have been through a number of part-time employees already.

The most critical factor is having a person with passion; the passion needs to be matched with skill – leadership and ministry skills, and - I don't think there's another word to describe it – nous, which means having the x factor to know what the job requires. But they also need the right kind of support structures and we are still learning about how to do that well. Still, for a comparatively small church, I think there are some things we have managed to do reasonably well, and most of them tend to be in community ministries rather than Sunday stuff. I will outline these before finishing with some reflections on what happens on Sundays.

Bible in Schools

We have always supported Bible in Schools teaching – we have several teachers who volunteer in this ministry in two local primary schools and it has kept us in touch with the school community. It has flow-on effects in various ways as children and their parents make contact with us through other programmes and events.

Intermediate school programme

Several years ago we set up a programme in partnership with a local intermediate school. We did this after learning from another group who had done a similar thing in another part of the city. We used their example as a reference and the school saw the value of it. Over the years, despite the change of personnel in our youth ministry, and some loss of momentum due to staff changes at the school, we have maintained this programme, and are now developing it. Our youth leaders have input into the school at different times during the week; they attend assemblies, visit at lunchtimes, and also run a structured programme. They have good working relationships with the principal and staff. A high proportion of the students

attend our Friday night youth programme and this regular contact at the school has helped to build this ministry.

Intermediate youth centre

Flame is the name given to this programme. It is a two-hour recreational programme aimed at years seven and eight. It is led by a team of young adult youth leaders who give up their Friday nights to make it happen. Over the years, Flame has connected with hundreds of youth in our community, and although the majority of them move on when they begin high school, some of them have since come through to youth group (which meets on a different night and has a different emphasis) and made Christian commitments. We are trying to improve our strike rate in this area and there is always something to work on – but Flame has been a high impact youth ministry for over six years now and is still going well.

Mainly Music

At the younger level, Mainly Music has been a hit all over the country so this is nothing new. As with many churches, its impact is felt more midweek than on Sundays because the flow-on to worship has been minimal. But our leaders believe in it and I think it is an important community ministry. We have added one extra programme in the past couple of years, targeting new immigrants. After some research, it was decided to set up a Mainly Music programme on a Saturday directly targeting the immigrant community. This has proved successful, with significant numbers of the Japanese community from all over Christchurch taking part. Again, we are still working on the transition from this ministry to the next step, but it is a vibrant and effective community outreach.

Boys Brigade

Our church has hosted a Boys Brigade company for years and it is one of the strongest ones around, due to the consistency of its committed leadership. New families to the church have often found this to be an added bonus when they check us out, as they appreciate the good balance of male role modelling and Christian values that their sons learn at Brigade. It is another effective way to engage with the local community because the younger boys tend to invite their friends and classmates to join up, so it brings parents in the door to see what is going on. This is one example where the flow-on from Bible in Schools teaching has an impact. A number of boys in my Bible in Schools class attend our Boys Brigade com-

pany, none of whom come from church families. The captain and some of the officers are committed members of our church and we have always tried to support them as much as possible because of the excellent work they do in our community.

Light Party

Along with many other churches, we have cashed in on the Light Party craze as an alternative to the growing popularity of Halloween. The first time we held it, we couldn't believe the size of the crowd that turned up. It shows that parents are looking for that positive alternative. While it is just a one-off event that does require a lot of work, I think that if it is part of a wider vision, it has a place within our overall strategy. When people know us as the church that does Mainly Music and Boys Brigade and Flame and the Light Party, they get a picture of a church that is there for them and their kids (we hope).

OSCAR Holiday Programme

This is the sad story of the past year, as we had to close our OSCAR programme after putting in a huge effort to establish it. When our supervisor left, we were faced with a lack of suitable applicants to replace her. We decided it was impossible to run the programme without the right leader, and so agreed the time was right to close the door on this for now. It was very popular, mainly with working parents, some of whom we were getting to know really well. It was also a great training ground for young leaders, but we had to read the writing on the wall. We may pick it up again in the future but there are times and seasons for things and it was obviously time to make this decision for now.

Sundays

Despite all these community programmes, our Sunday children's attendance has not climbed particularly high. However, we are now focusing on trying to do the little things well, and will soon formally link in with the Kids Friendly network. We have already adopted some Kids Friendly ideas, such as the welcome table, and this made a significant difference to the way children and families are greeted as they enter the door on a Sunday. I think it is a great idea and has really helped us to be more intentional and welcoming of children. One Sunday I just happened to be at the door as a new family arrived, with two children. I was able to greet them myself, and immediately turn to our children's worker who was right there, introduce him, and give them and their boys information about the programmes we were running for their age group that day. It felt so good to have a structure in place that easily allowed us to create an affirming and welcoming environment. They stayed, and have

since commented about how welcomed they felt when they came. Yay! Now we are looking at how to include children more effectively in worship, and know that we have a journey in front of us. At the time of writing, we have just experimented with an all-age service based on the theme of the Olympics. It was a great success with all ages mixing together, which will give us encouragement to keep trying new things like this.

We can only afford to pay a children's worker for a few hours a week, so we have to be careful about what we expect. We tried to be realistic with the job description, and have continued to develop support structures as time goes by. We need to keep working on building a team of volunteers to help grow this ministry.

One thing I have begun to do recently is lead a children's lesson every so often, when someone else is preaching. I do this to support our leaders and to give recognition to the fact that this is a really important ministry. It also helps to build relationships with the kids, which is important in its own right. An interesting discovery I have learnt about myself is that I am more comfortable preaching to a congregation of adults than teaching a small group of 10-12 year olds, especially when I don't know them very well, and they have different learning styles and needs. It's a reminder that only certain people are suited to this ministry, and that we need to provide the right environment, training and resources.

Special needs support

I think one key area that needs professional support these days is dealing with the special needs of children in our programmes. We have children coming who have all sorts of behavioural issues. At school they are given teacher aides to help them with their learning, alongside their professionally trained teachers. These same children turn up at church where our enthusiastic but untrained leaders are expected to deal with them, with no training and no support. We're finally beginning to realise that this is not on. It's not fair on the kids and it's not fair on the leaders. We are fortunate to have a special needs teacher in our congregation who has begun to provide backup and support to our children's worker and volunteer leaders in this area. I am sure it is an issue many churches need help with. Casting a vision and providing our leaders with the training, support and resources to achieve it will be the key to sustaining and developing our ministry with children and families in the future.

Little kids and big ideas

Silvia Purdie, *ordinand*, Palmerston North*

If you're lucky, you'll have some "littlies" in your church. Though, sometimes you might not feel so lucky ... when you're trying to stop them pulling the communion cloth onto the floor, or screaming down the Call to Worship because mum won't give them a biccie yet! Preschoolers are wonderful but also a handful. Lots of parents wouldn't dream of taking their preschooler to church because it's not worth the hassle. Not worth risking disapproving looks. And who can concentrate on worship with a three-year-old wriggling under your seat?!

I survived (just!) the experience of taking three lively preschool boys to church. I love to see little kids in church, but they do take some effort. We've got to do it well, and that means thinking through what we are doing with our preschoolers, and why.

The thing is, they spend much of their lives in wonderfully stimulating, caring environments purpose-built to be just right just for them. Every early childhood centre has to meet high standards, with lots of highly trained adults around, with individual learning plans, heaps of fabulous equipment (all safety checked), loads of space to run around in and options for what to do when. Then they come to church and we expect them to play quietly in a corner with a few tatty books and an old basket of broken toys? Come off it!

So what can the Church offer families with preschoolers? And how might we start to frame up a theology for ministry with littlies? One place to start is with spirituality. The good thing about this is that we can talk the same language as the secular education system, which (in theory at least) tries to nurture children's spiritual well-being (though most educators are still quite uncomfortable with the idea!). Broadly speaking, spirituality is our understanding of ourselves in relation to the rest of reality.¹ Barbara Myers defines it "as the way we ascribe meaning to the deeper level of existence that surrounds us and is in us and our relationships".² It is integral to the process of forming identity. We make the unpopular claim that Christian faith is the fulfilment of humanity's spiritual longings. As Christians, we see humans as firstly

spiritual beings, made by God for relationship with God, other people, and with creation.

Spirituality for young children is, at its most basic level, about being alive. This is largely non-verbal and sensate, communicated "with their whole body and person".³ It is about "who I am", and how children experience themselves, both in relation to others, and in time and space. Spirituality is also about choice; who I chose to be. We see this operating in the children as they move towards or away from situations and people. They live on a see-saw between security and anxiety, between engaging with something or withdrawing from it. As they grow in confidence they grow in mastery and identity.

What is a young child's faith? According to James Fowler's stages of faith, three- and four-year-olds have a "Intuitive-Projective" faith, in which they are learning language and symbols, and developing their imagination.⁴ They are able to grapple with abstract ideas, such as "God", but in concrete ways, that relate directly to their own life experience.⁵

Our theology for ministry with little children needs to recognise that they are spiritual beings, and their faith is as valid as anyone else's. A danger with schemes such as Fowler's theory of faith development is that they imply

3 Elaine Champagne, "Being a Child, a Spiritual Child", *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol.8, No.1, 2003, 43-52, 46.

4 Fowler describes this stage as "fantasy-filled" and "imitative". "The gift of this stage is the birth of imagination, the ability to unify and grasp the experience-world in powerful images and as presented in stories that register the child's intuitive understandings and feelings toward the ultimate conditions of existence."; quoted by John Sutcliffe, *Tuesday's Child: A Reader for Christian Educationalists*, (Birmingham: Christian Education Publications, 2001), 144.

5 J Hull presents a fascinating discussion of 'God talk with young children', in Sutcliffe, *Tuesday's Child*, 179-190. Another excellent article is Karen Yust, "Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community", *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol.8, No.2, August 2003, 133-150.

1 D. Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, London: Fount, 1998.

2 Quoted by Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 174.

a hierarchy in the progression from stage to stage.⁶ Faith is a gift from God. Thomas Droege writes, “faith is fundamentally a gift, and the workings of the Spirit of God in the lives of people is a mystery that we shall never be able to comprehend fully, much less control ... However [there is] a pattern in the process of faith formation. And we can observe the conditions that seem to be necessary for the development and growth of faith.”⁷

This has implications for how we teach, specifically how we value children’s own ideas and ways of making sense of things. I agree with J G Priestley: “all teaching must be open-ended in that the spiritual dimension is never totally contained or finally expressed.”⁸ This involves respecting children, honouring their questions, and being real as people ourselves. “What our children are really asking is for us to reveal and share ourselves and our faith, not to provide dogmatic answers.”⁹

Faith is directly related to the foundational dynamic of small children’s lives; the need for trust.¹⁰ As Stanley Graven puts it, “spiritual life and faith begins at birth with the development of trust and attachment”. He argues for the importance of caring adults and a nurturing environment for young children. “The loving, caring adult holds the key to a child’s ability to develop a rich,

strong spiritual life.”¹¹ What this means for our ministry with preschoolers is that the relational context is far more significant than the programme content. Theologically, this emphasises how God has chosen to work through human beings. The people closest to the young child hold an awesome responsibility to “be” God for that child. Touch, cuddles, discipline, jokes, affection; these are not just pre-cursors for, or metaphors for, the love of God. They are actually the love of God in action (whether or not we are aware of it as that).

The people closest to the young child hold an awesome responsibility to “be” God for that child

All we do with young children, therefore, is essentially relational. Our faith is in a God who is in relationship with all of creation, including the natural and human/social

worlds. This is not just something God does, but who God is; “For, while God is one, he is also a fellowship or community of Father, Son and Spirit, and hence personal relationships are built into basic reality, and find expression in the created world.”¹²

Here are a few more thoughts on theology that inform my own faith and work with children:

God is. This links with understanding spirituality as a way of being, the fact of ‘I’, of life itself.

God is present. Young children highlight the need in all of us for security, for belonging, and the “here-ness” of God speaks to this.

God is known through the senses, was made incarnate (ref. John 1:13-14), and we share in Christ’s life through eating and drinking.

God acts in the world. We are like God in

6 Gary Bertels, ‘Lutheran Perspectives on Research in Children’s Spirituality’, in *Exploring Children’s Spiritual Formation: Foundational Issues*, edited by Shirley Mongenthaler (River Forest, IL: Pillars Press, 1999), 113-122.

7 Quoted in Berthels, ‘Lutheran Perspectives’, 118.

8 J G Priestley, “Towards finding the Hidden Curriculum: A Consideration of the Spiritual Dimension of Experience in Curriculum Planning,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, (Summer 1985, 112-19, 99.

9 John Westerhoff, quoted in Sutcliff, *Tuesday’s Child*, 140.

10 Trust vs. mistrust is the first stage in Erik Erikson’s theory of human development.

11 Stanley Graven, ‘Things that Matter in the Lives of Children: Looking at Children’s Spiritual Development from a Developmentalist Perspective’, in *Exploring Children’s Spiritual Formation: Foundational Issues*, edited by Shirley Mongenthaler (River Forest, IL: Pillars Press, 1999), 67.

12 William Andersen, “A Biblical View of Education”, *Journal of Christian Education*, Vol.42, No.3, December 1999, 37-52, 38.

that we act, we create. God is at work in the world and in our lives – hopefully even in our churches!

God is playful; “there is a dynamic of delight and play at the very heart of creation.”¹³

God is generous, giving gifts and offering joy and new life to all.

And, of course, Jesus just adored little children, and left us with one of the hardest challenges in the Gospels when he said that “unless you change and become like children,

13 Chuck Melchert and Anabel Proffitt, “Playing in the Presence of God: Wonder, Wisdom and Education,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, vol.3, no.1, 1998: 21-34, 27.

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”, Matthew 18:3.

A new family visiting your church will know within 60 seconds whether or not their preschooler is welcome. Can we (perhaps literally?) see things from a three-year-old’s point of view? Certainly, toys and toddler-friendly spaces are helpful, but it’s much more about relationships. Our churches have an enormous amount to offer. We can be a safe space, with warm, loving relationships, where littlies (and their families) feel right at home. But it takes a bit of thought and planning, even spending some money. It also takes theology, which calls the church to play and laugh and hug and love, love, love!

**Silvia is in the final stages of ordination training, based in Palmerston North. Her husband, Chris, is an army chaplain, and they have three boys aged six, eight and 11*

Summer School: Christianity & Science

In January of each year, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Otago and the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership offer a week-long block course. We want to let you know what we have planned for January 2009.

From Monday 16 of January (starting at 1pm) to Friday 20 January (ending at 1pm) at St Columba, Botany Downs, Auckland, Professor Ted Davis will teach a paper entitled, “**Christianity and Science: Historical and Contemporary Interactions**”.

As in previous years, the paper is available as a University paper (visit the University of Otago website), or for “audit” through the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. The fee for auditing the paper is \$600. Presbyterian ministers and ordinands may apply to the Knox Centre for a \$300 study grant.

Enquiries about auditing the paper, including applications for study grants, should be directed to the Registrar at the Knox Centre: registrar@knoxcentre.ac.nz; phone (03) 473-0783.

Professor Davis describes the course as surveying the history of Christianity and science, examining a wide range of interactions from the early church until today. Specific examples of interaction will include religion and the rise of modern science, the trial of Galileo, evolution and religious responses to it, and contemporary theology of nature. History of science is the core discipline for lectures, readings, and discussions, but some attention is given to theology and biblical interpretation, especially in the modern period.

Prof Ted Davis is the Professor of the History of Science at Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania, USA. Further information about him is available at <http://home.messiah.edu/~tdavis/>.

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Preschoolers and their parents

Reuben Hardie, Somervell Memorial Presbyterian, Auckland

I don't believe in purgatory. It is not a part of my religious tradition. However, if I did, then one of the images of purgatory for me would be spending a prolonged amount of time locked in a crèche – otherwise known as the “crying room” of a church. The church crèche in my mind is typically a little, claustrophobic room, with dirty old toys, minimal light, providing a partial view of the main service – and it is the place where during the service, you are often forced to endure a solo of the minister singing as a result of the large brown speaker in the top corner of the crèche connected to his or her microphone. I am not suggesting your crèche is like this – but I expect you know what I am talking about.

The idea of a crèche has never struck me as a particularly good one. I can understand the logic behind wanting to minimise the noise little toddlers and infants make. I

can understand the desire to want to allow them the opportunity to roam around, and yet still include them and their parents. What I can't understand is that the crèche was the best idea we could come up with. Fortunately, it seems to me, in the past 10 years or so many churches have changed the way they do worship to allow for more child participation. The crèche has, at the very least, been repainted and remodelled. Churches are demonstrating a desire to do more justice to preschoolers and their families. Things are changing.

What has struck me, having resumed parish ministry after taking a couple of years out to study overseas, is how vital this area of ministry to preschoolers is, in the life of any church. It provides an amazing opportunity for ministry and evangelism. This newly discovered awareness has nothing to do with what I studied. It results largely from the fact that I now have three children, all of whom are in their crèche years, and a fourth due at the beginning of next year. I have very personal reasons for wanting to get this right. I still recall my wife, Lucy, saying to me after a Sunday service near the beginning of this year, “I have had an awful morning.” At the time I couldn't understand – everyone else was telling me how good the service had been – until I saw the morning through her eyes.

At the time I couldn't understand – everyone else was telling me how good the service had been – until I saw the morning through her eyes

As a result, at the beginning of this year we began a programme at Somervell we call KidzSong. KidzSong is a music programme for preschoolers – in some ways similar to the mid-week programmes many churches run such as Music and Movement or Mainly Music or whatever. It is held on a Sunday at the same time as the morning service and Sunday School but at KidzSong the focus is a Christian programme that is specifically designed for preschoolers. We intersperse some of the great preschool children's songs and nursery rhymes with some of the wonderful Christian preschool songs that are available. We have a craft activity and we have a short story from the Bible.

This has proved to be a great success. Our role for this programme has increased to over 25 preschoolers. We average about 16 a week. Their parents

or caregivers are welcome to be there with them for the morning. We have found that some members of the youth group are very keen to help out at KidzSong. In other words, it has given them an opportunity to serve. We have had at least seven new families with preschoolers begin to regularly attend Somervell. The parents seem happier. The children seem happier. Lucy is happier and we have even found that parents have started coming who don't normally set foot in a Church. We have a lot of work to do to make it better – but we have noticed a significant improvement.

Other churches have sat down and talked with us about how we do this, taken away a CD or two and begun similar programmes at their church. What we are hearing is that this works even in churches that do not have a Sunday school but do have a mid-week preschool music group. It is an effective way of building bridges.

Preschoolers and their parents offer an amazing opportunity for ministry and evangelism. I believe it is crucial that as a national Church we find ways of putting more energy and resources into this area of our life. Here are some of the reasons that have become clearer to me in the last nine months or so ... First, I discovered that parents

of preschoolers have a unique openness to God at this stage of life. When you spend time with preschoolers, their wonder rubs off on you. Wonderment, I believe, is very close to the heart of God.

Secondly, this is a really tough time in a parent's life - nappies, sleep-deprived nights, more nappies – you can feel very isolated. During the preschool years, support, friendship and community are of huge importance and significance to parents. Thirdly, I believe that it is a time that as a parent you want, more than anything else, the very best for your children. You want them to grow up

with the values that were instilled in you. You want the God who blesses and protects – to bless and protect them as they grow.

Finally, there is a clear mandate in the Gospels given by Jesus when he said: "Let the children come to me, do not stop them for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." I suspect there are many more reasons I am yet to discover. The future of the Presbyterian Church rests, perhaps more than we realise, with the success of our ministry with children – and the wise old ones tell me it always has.

No more "small corners"

Cheryl Harray, Kids Friendly regional coach, Dunedin and North Otago

Who remembers the children's hymn "Jesus Bids Us Shine", which ends with the line "You in your small corner and I in mine"? (The fact that I can quote it gives away my age!)

For many years, like many other dedicated leaders and helpers, I have been involved in children's ministry in my small corner of the Presbyterian Church - planning and preparing, creating and making resources for weekly Sunday School lessons, children's talks and seasonal all age events. I have taken the opportunity where possible to meet up with others at children's ministry training events and have come back fired up to try out new programmes and ideas. Even so, it is easy to feel isolated.

We began a Mainly Music outreach to preschool children and parents that, nine years later, continues strongly but has little crossover to attendance on Sunday mornings. Is that a realistic expectation anyway? Is Sunday morning worship, as we know it, the only, or best, place for non-churched families to explore and discover Christian faith? What does the Church need to do to reverse the trends of decline and reach out in relevant ways to the children and families in our society in the 21st century?

While pondering questions like this in 2004, I read an article in *Candour* (yes, people do read this magazine!) about the Kids Friendly pilot project in Auckland. I was interested to find out more. So when Dunedin presbytery's education committee invited Jill Kayser and Emily Wotton down to share at a children's ministry training day in 2005, I eagerly registered. I can remember sitting there that day and thinking "YES! This all makes sense".

A vision was shared about *why* our churches should intentionally minister to children and families. It was followed up with a description of *how* this could happen with the help of coaching and written resources, including the Kids Friendly self review. Using this resource, a church works through the creation and setting of goals for all areas of its ministry to children and families.

A lot of us became enthused and joined the Kids Friendly network that day. Soon afterwards, Dunedin Presbytery took the bold step of allocating funds to ensure that the Kids Friendly coach could come down and work with churches that wanted to participate in the "Becoming Kids Friendly" process. Eleven churches, including Mosgiel-North Taieri, applied but as Jill could only coach six churches in a year, we sadly missed out on being in the first group. However, we were still able to receive advice and all the written resources and they proved very useful, especially in working through the process of employing a children's ministry worker. The regular "Hands On" newsletter was also full of encouraging stories and ideas. We were beginning to experience some of the advantages of belonging to the Kids Friendly network.

In 2007, we worked through the process of becoming Kids Friendly with coaching from Jill and were delighted to be able to brand ourselves Kids Friendly in November. But as Jill says, "Kids Friendly is not a destination, it's a journey." We continue to face challenges as we seek to be Kids Friendly as a "way of being" within our church and in the community. Even so, some of the things I really appreciate are the resources, coaching and advice that help keep us thinking in Kids Friendly ways. New resources

Essays

are being developed all the time and it is fantastic to have up-to-date safety policies, funding advice and lots of ideas for establishing children's ministries in the community right at our fingertips. There are also many practical ideas for developing Kids Friendly Sundays.

Jill Kayser works tirelessly (thanks Jill!) and shares the vision passionately of a Presbyterian Church that is known for the way it serves and embraces children and families: "We dream of our churches being places where children are welcomed, celebrated and nurtured, where children belong and participate in the life and worship of the faith community, where they can explore, learn and experience the love of Christ, where they are valued for the immense love and life they bring to the whole church family and where children create opportunity for people of all ages to learn from, respect and appreciate each other."

To keep the momentum going, Dunedin and North Otago Presbyteries took another bold step in April this year and employed a regional Kids Friendly coach for 10 hours a week. Me! In the two presbyteries, we now have seven churches branded Kids Friendly, another six actively working towards it and others exploring the possibility and using some of the resources. We are estab-

lishing a network for those who work with children, to receive support and encouragement, so they no longer feel in "small corners". I am excited about the effect of what will happen in the communities around Dunedin as more churches display their Kids Friendly banners and promote their programmes and activities for children and families. There are already some really good news stories as churches engage with their communities, seeking to know them and be known. There are holiday programmes and midweek clubs, preschool music groups, playgroups, volunteers doing reading and road patrol and "nit busting" in local schools. There are active happy children arriving at church on Sunday mornings, wanting to be involved in church in a variety of ways.

Each church works through the Kids Friendly ideals and decides how "to intentionally provide opportunities for all children to experience the love of God through worship, social events, pastoral care, service and community outreach." Every church is different in the way this is expressed in practice. Has your church joined the Kids Friendly network yet? Why don't you? Let's come out of our small corners and join together as a church shining the light and love of Jesus in every community for every child.

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Ministry vacancy

St Andrew's, Hastings

The minister of St Andrew's, Hastings is retiring at the end of November, 2008. In light of the pending vacancy the parish would welcome expressions of interest from Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

St. Andrews is looking for a person who would enjoy working in a diverse, bi-cultural congregation (Cook Island and European), helping the parish to continue building upon its existing strengths, whilst also encouraging a focus on ministry with children and their families.

The Parish has as part of its Mission Statement: "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." The bi-cultural partnership is important to the parish as are the ecumenical relationships it enjoys.

For expressions of interest or further information, please contact:

Colin English,
45 Richmond Street,
Napier
Phone: (06) 843-8432
E-mail: colbarb@xtra.co.nz

Children and our Church's future

Kevin Ward, Knox Centre of Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin

There is much being said and written about future scenarios for the Church, and particularly for us in the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand, as vital statistics in just about every area that matters continue to head in the wrong direction. Many suggestions are made, often with an evangelical fervour, outlining what needs to be done to “stop the rot”. I have even suggested some myself. But as with most major challenges, there is no magic bullet and turning things around takes long-term work, often with no immediate results, rather than deceptive quick fixes that promise much but deliver little, other than making us feel good that something is being done.

The more I have researched our own context, while at the same time studying findings from other Western societies almost universally facing the same situation, the more I am becoming convinced that of all the critical factors, perhaps the most significant is that of “children”. This also significantly flows over and is related to that of “youth”. Like building, or re-building, anything to last, you need to start from the ground up.

Of course, children have always been the key to the future of the church, just as it is with any organisation that wants to have an ongoing vitality. This is true from the smallest of units; the family, to the broadest; the nation. It is why we invest so much in education. I guess what I wish to raise in this article is the question of how much (or in many cases how little) of our resources are invested in children and youth.

The data that began to lead me down this line of thinking was from my research on growing evangelical and charismatic churches in the 1970s through to the early 2000s, which showed that very few people (less than 4 percent) who came into those churches had not been socialised in the faith in Sunday School or youth group. The majority came directly from other churches, but even those who had not previously been involved as adults in church life were nearly all raised in the Christian faith as children. My ongoing research indicates this pattern continues into the next generations. Research on Student Soul in Dunedin shows similarly that only 5 percent of those who attend were not raised in Sunday school or youth group. In a similar vein, John Finney's research in Britain, published in *Finding Faith Today*, found that over 90 percent of those who came to faith as adults were actually coming back to something they had experienced previously in

childhood. In the United States, George Barna concluded as a result of his research that “if people do not make a commitment to Christ by the age of fourteen, the likelihood of ever doing so is slim.” I would add, looking at the data used, that if commitment is not made by 21, it is “rare”.

This is a further problem for the Church as a whole in NZ; not only for Presbyterians. In 1950, 50 percent of New Zealand's primary school children were enrolled in Sunday schools in Protestant churches. In 1960, it was still as much as 40 percent (over 50 percent if Roman Catholics are included) but by 1975 had fallen to 15 percent and by 1985 to 11 percent. Unfortunately, most of the data available on church involvement in NZ at the moment has nothing on those aged under 15 (perhaps that says something in itself) but I would be surprised if it is any more than 6 or 7 percent. Peter Brierley in his analysis of the English church census reports that over recent years, children are leaving church faster than adults. A recent report found 75 percent had never ever been inside a church. We have been concerned about the dropping out of youth from churches, as we should be, but many of the few children we do have contact with do not even get to youth group.

Callum Brown in his book *The Death of Christian Britain* shows that until the 1960s, people in Britain still constructed “their identities and their sense of self” from a broader culture that was fundamentally Christian. After the 1960s this rapidly broke down and so churches find it more and more difficult to connect with people raised in an increasingly diverse cultural milieu. Consequently Brown claims that “missions of the new millennium will fail amongst the young because of their unfamiliarity with discursive Christianity due to its disappearance from the family and youth media, and the young's absence from Sunday schools”.

In a previous edition of *Candour* (September 2007), I pointed out the critical issue of our aging demographic. The issue of decline in the Presbyterian Church is rooted in the fact that, during the 1960s and 1970s, baby boomers in late teens and early adulthood left the church and never returned. This meant adult numbers began to decline in the late 1960s and, as a direct consequence, in the 1970s Sunday school numbers did likewise. Parish churches have always relied on the repetitive cycle of reproduction

in their families. Children are baptised, proceed through Sunday school and youth group, are confirmed and eventually become adult members who, when married, have their own children; and so the cycle continues. This cycle, which had been perpetuated for centuries, was broken in the 1960s as the baby boomers left. The difficulty now is that many of these congregations are beyond the reproductive cycle. Anecdotal evidence suggests that perhaps up to half of our churches do not have any real ministry with children. However, many of these churches still try and operate fundamentally as they did back then, as if not much has changed, perhaps somehow hoping that children and young people might come. If there are not young adults in the church, where will they come from?

More sectarian churches, such as the Baptists and Pentecostals, have never just relied on this process.

In sociological terms, they have seen themselves as communities of choice rather than birth. They have realised in order to continue, they have had to attract people who are outsiders to join and thus have put a greater emphasis on evangelism. In particular, they have realised the most significant group to attract are children and young people, and so have always put a high priority on running programmes for these people that are attractive to others in the community apart from their own members. In addition, they have put greater emphasis on socialising their children and youth in the Christian faith. The Church Life Survey data shows that young people in Baptist and Brethren churches are more satisfied with what the church offers for them than are those in mainline churches. I believe this focus on children and youth is perhaps the major reason why they have shown considerably greater resiliency and vitality in the challenging culture of recent decades than have the mainline churches.

Much has recently been written on the importance of young adult ministry, and I would be fully supportive of that. However, the evidence indicates that if you want to attract young adults who are married and with children (and I acknowledge that is a smaller sector of that age group than in previous generations but this is a separate issue), then perhaps the most critical issues is what the church offers for children. The research done for the Presbyterian Church by AC Neilson entitled *Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life* (out of which “Kids Friendly” developed) indicated this. This raises questions about where our priorities in church life lie. There are three questions we need to consider.

(1) How much of our financial resources are spent in this area. One principle I remember hearing decades ago from

veteran church consultant Lyle Schaller is that if you want to find out what a church’s priorities really are (as opposed to what they say they are), then look at the budget. This would be alarmingly revealing in terms of the priority we place on children or youth in many of our churches. Part of this is of course to do with payments made to those who work in the area, but also to the provision of quality facilities and resources. What kind of rooms do children come into and what message do they give? Do we have a budget to provide good materials or are those involved always having to fork out of their own pockets?

(2) How much our “quality” people resources are encouraged to work in this area. I remember when I first became involved significantly in church life as a young adult and offered myself to be involved in one of the children’s ministries. I was encouraged by the minister, because I had something really worthwhile to offer, to work in a more adult ministry. There were plenty of others who could work with children. The message often given is that children’s work is for beginners. Quality ministry requires quality leadership, and if it is a priority then we should be focussing some of our best into it. Important in giving priority and attracting other leaders can be the real and physical interest the minister shows, through being present at times, and the place that children’s ministry is given in the life of the church together.

(3) Valuing children as people who count in the life of the church. “Kids Friendly” addresses this in so many great ways that I do not want to dwell on it. But how does our church welcome children who come, allow for them to contribute to the life of the whole church together and seek to do things in ways that are empathetic and understandable to them when they are in church, rather than being just passive observers of an adult world? A number of larger churches now do not have children present in the worship service at all, rather sending them straight into a children’s programme. While I have no doubt about the quality of what is offered, I do wonder what implicit message it sends about the place of children in the life of the church.

One final point we need to consider is that our children’s ministries need to focus outward rather than just look inward. Much of what has been considered relates to the need to work with children who are already in church life. We need to do this well. However, as pointed out, many of our churches have no children. In addition, if the vast majority of those who come to church as adults were at some point in church as children, then the very small percentage of the total number of children involved (less than 10 percent, compared with 50 percent in 1960)

means that unless we seek to work with and create connection with those outside our churches, the future is still rather grim. This is of course true for every area of life in a missional church. As in all areas, we need to shape our activities not just around those we already have but around those who we hope to have. One practical suggestion for a church with no children: perhaps the first thing to do is begin channelling some resources into employing somebody to begin working with children in the community; and to take advantage of our Church's own resource, Kids Friendly, in helping with this.

I conclude with a quote from a report from the Church of England, which could have been written for the church in our country. "During the last generation there has been a tragic collapse in the involvement of British churches with children. Yet the door is still open. The exact way it is open may have changed... but there are still clear and welcoming ways in. 'Mission' with children gives them the opportunity to be the people they were created to be, the people that many already sense they are... Getting stuck back into children's ministry may be the most important gift the Church can give to the next generation."

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Bringing children to your church

Margaret Anne Low, St John's Papatoetoe, Auckland

"Well if you want it quiet you could go to that church down the road. They don't have any children."

Our baggage

Pictures of the 1960s and 70s have a permanence in the memories of most parishes. Lovingly honed stories of Sunday school and Bible Class being always full and overflowing; a hierarchy of faithful superintendents and teachers, leaders and helpers; building projects for classrooms to teach them in [which followed suspiciously the pattern of the local school]; and a raft of social events with annual picnics, games and dances [for the daring-to-be-relevant parishes] - all are brought out as the definitive look of a real church by the generation that experienced them.

A big number in the children and youth area of the church was a symbol of the parish working well, or to use our present term, a "healthy congregation". To be without a children's/youth ministry was to be a "failure"

[In fact, with some exceptions, it was more likely to be the expectations of the community, and its demography, that had one of the greatest influences on the numbers of children].

A place of belonging

So if we had overflowing Sunday schools then, do we just repeat that model? Are numbers any indication of "success"? How do we measure "success" anyway? If the purpose of good children's ministry was to make disciples and build the Church, where are those children (now in their 50s and 60s) who filled the church halls? We know that some are in our church and in other denominations but the majority are not. Therefore, a children's ministry cannot blindly repeat that model without critique.

Stan Stewart, when he was a minister in the Uniting church in Australia, produced a hard-hitting DVD called the "Greening of the Church", which asked that very question and set out to find why most had dropped out

of faith and church. More importantly, he sought out the clues as to why others had remained. Although Stan's video was made in the late 1980s, it is still relevant and worth a look by church councils and congregations who want to reach out to children and families.

A striking point that Stan illustrated was that many of those who had stayed had known they belonged in the church. But for others who had not stayed, their memories were of an adult church to which children came as silent, still visitors; like visiting the great aunt's where you sat you in your best clothes and were not allowed to touch anything, or you were

banished to another room to be picked up later. Often that there even was a connection between Sunday school and church was simply missed altogether. Sunday school did not connect with the church, and church was something adults did. Your family dropped you off at Sunday school on Sunday mornings, perhaps attending church occasionally. They drifted away from their church contact when the children stopped going to Sunday school.

But by the grace of God, others did hear and respond to the Gospel, through teachers and leaders whose faith shone through in their relationship with their charges. When children had known they were valued and loved as part of the community, their faith had had room to grow and they caught, rather than were taught, the faith of their community.

That makes sense. Studies on our faith development tell us that the first step, no matter what age we are, is knowing that we are welcome and belong. The church is the environment where we experience the belonging as a community and grow to know that we belong to Christ who is the head of the church. When we become older, we claim that belonging for ourselves; no longer reliant on those who brought us. As we journey and grow in faith, we need to return to or find a community where we belong to live out that faith.

Motivation

An important factor in children's ministry is "what is our motivation for having a children's ministry?" How we answer this question will determine the way we go about it. Our overall mission and purpose as a congregation (what is God calling us to do in this place and time with these people?) must recognise that children, youth and adults

(of all ages) are all invited by Christ to be part of the household of God, and that each person/family has their unique gifts to contribute. Then, what we do will flow naturally into including families and children in all our plans. Otherwise, we end up tacking children's ministry onto what we do anyway as an afterthought. Along with youth ministry, it can develop its own life and even separate off in a destructive way because it was never properly integrated and given responsibility as part of the body

of the church in the first place. Children, youth, in fact any part of the church, cannot be looked on as being "other" and useful for our purposes. If we are welcoming people, we

assume that children and families, along with everyone else, will come and prepare to make them welcome in the name of Jesus.

One story

An Iona communion prayer says

*Then just when we've got it right
As to where we should go and what we should
do;*

*Just when we're ready to take on the world,
You come, like a beggar, to our back door,
Saying, "This is the way, I am the Way."
And offering us bread and wine.*

All ministry is a dynamic process. Change is continuous, and with young people and families, you set it all up and even just three years later you find it all needs to change because we are once again in a different culture.

And that is what we had in St John's, Papatoetoe. A church that knew about children. In 154 years, as the second Presbyterian church in Auckland, St John's had grown with the area. They had energetically planted just about every Presbyterian church for miles around, had had efficient structures for running Sunday school and Bible class, had pioneered community-centre outreach, and virtually everyone in the present congregation who was able had done their bit in teaching or leading young people. In 2003 there were Boys' and Girls' Brigades, but the congregation no longer supplied the leadership for the Boys' Brigade. For the last 17 years it had run children's holiday programmes for the community and in 2003 about 70 children attended each programme in the

church centre and the number of programmes increased each year as MSD funding came available. The co-ordinator of the holiday programmes also ran Brigade, and the leaders and helpers channelled their energy into these. Big changes in the demographics and ethnicity of the area were taking place, and those who had stayed in the area found themselves now living in a multifaith, multiethnic community with mosques and temples of all faiths springing up in familiar places.

In the St John's services of worship in 2003, there was only one family with two small children in church. While we were serving the needs of the wider community, we were not connecting with our own families as a worshipping community. Were we making them welcome?

What comes first? To some suggestions that we make the place more user friendly physically, for example for pushchairs, there were at first the responses, "Why? There aren't any to make space for." Then the gradual realisation that neither would there be if we don't expect them.

If we invite people to our home, we don't usually wait until they get there to make room for them to stay. We prepare for them. If we want families in our church, we need to look at our church through the eyes of a family.

We provided a space at the front of the church (don't put the children, specially the small ones, at the back) with child-sized chairs and activities that they could go on with in the centre of things. Session, without a qualm, voted to remove one third of their beautiful pews to make space and sold them. We then discovered that space for one group also made space for others. We hadn't had room for wheelchairs and walking frames either. The congregation wanted families and they were supportive of all this.

At first we had a roster for sitting with the children. The two children that now came most Sundays enjoyed the activities. Members of the congregation who looked after grandchildren then brought them to church as they saw there was a place for children, and people who came to funerals in our church looked and saw children are welcome. Our gifted bannermaker made a children's banner and some families came with their small children.

But by the middle of 2004 it was clear that our real need was for a children and family coordinator. The roster was

not maintained and the need to be ready every Sunday, regardless of whether there were children or not was pal-ling; other weeks there were too many children and the continuity of a leader who they knew was needed. In the interim Jill Kayser, from Kids Friendly, was giving a huge amount of encouragement with resources and enabling ways forward. The session had approved and agreed to incorporate the Kids Friendly mission statement as part of our overall mission. We were already certified for OSCAR, and all our staff and elders were police-checked and so the compliance work had already been done for our holiday programmes.

Slowly, families came, almost imperceptibly, until we realised that 20 children were actively on the roll and their families came too

If God provides everything a church needs then the person we need will come, but we have to do the preparation. In St John's, the session

had been there and done that and the expense of a children's coordinator was not part of our stretched budget.

Then Kids Friendly asked us what we needed. We knew exactly what our needs were: a person, a children and family coordinator, and for that we needed money. We produced a job description and position for a children's coordinator anyway. Then the wonderful thing we needed to give us hope occurred. There was money available, a small amount of seed money for children and family ministry, enough in fact, for a coordinator for two years. We did not know if it would work, we had a handful of children, we didn't even know if in our changing neighbourhood there was anyone out there who would bring their families, but Kids Friendly had faith to risk and give hope to a church that had fished all night and caught very little and was cautious about sending the boat out again.

So we had a job and the finance for employing our worker, but who? How and where do we find someone? Someone who liked children, who would be willing to prepare every Sunday when no one might turn up and not be dismayed. Someone who would be free of having to produce numbers, someone who would have as their prime task to love the children and relate to their families. We had a session and congregation who would back it all up, welcoming the families, learning the children's names, giving encouragement and making space but we did not have the person.

We looked around. She was there all the time, as it happened. One of our students who was working on Sundays to pay her way. She knew immediately that this was her

task. Look first around your own congregation; many of our natural leaders, young adults, have to work in the weekends to pay for their studies, so work out a way to make that unnecessary and free them to lead. She didn't want to be paid, but that was essential so eventually others could share in the leadership through their finances, as they couldn't do it themselves any more. As one of us and not full time, we couldn't fall into the trap of saying "now it's all yours", and leave her to it - everyone realised they were part of this still. And over time, Jill Kayser has provided supervision and the resources for what training was available and we sent our coordinator when possible.

Slowly, families came, almost imperceptibly, until we realised that 20 children were actively on the roll and their families came too. Church had changed. Over the last two years, 40 new attenders were in church, most connected with the children's ministry.

Babies and toddlers are in church as a matter of course these days and the older ones go off for their time of teaching and sometimes stay in church for the whole service. Those who have grown older have had a youth meeting start on Wednesday nights and we are looking for another leader.

But whatever else we do, when we have communion, and when we have baptisms, everyone is there.

Children do not "perform" but sometimes take their turn with the readings, sometimes they do a play or sing a song, but more often are part of groups with both adults and children leading part of worship. They made a film of the Christmas story in south Auckland to show last Christmas Day. (Yes, there is a lot of room for improvement, Peter Jackson need not worry just yet!)

Families who bring their children for baptism are keen to ask their neighbours in the street to the service, and their wider families, and one day we heard one of our regular little ones saying to a cousin, "no, it's not like school" and take him round all the things they did that were hanging in the church café. The cousin turns up now. Two young girls came with their father. He said they had gone to many churches but this is where they wanted to go and he was happy.

One young dad was baptised, after bringing his child for two years and others are having good conversations about their faith.

We have never had any expectation of numbers, but have concentrated on doing our task: loving, giving the good

news of Jesus and accepting all who come, and providing for families, including their children.

St John's looks different now. We look more like our neighbourhood. Our community centre, which has about 400 people a week going through it, offers parenting and family courses in partnership with Parent Trust and PSN as part of our other adult education courses, as well as our work with the elderly people in our area.

We give thanks for the practical encouragement of Kids Friendly in networking and sharing the experiences of others so we can share our faith with children and their families.

I do not believe there is one formula for carrying out the work; we can only tell the stories from our own context and place. But we must like and want children and families as a congregation and be genuine in our love and obedient in our calling to follow Jesus, if we put growing a children and families' ministry as one of our priorities.

Jesus said: "Let the little children come to me, do not try to stop them, for of such is the Kingdom of heaven".

Bush Telegraph

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Violence in the lives of our children

Eric Dodd*

The other day I received two booklets produced by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in association with Presbyterian Support Northern. They were entitled “Caring for our Children” and “Connecting with Young People”. Both these publications struck a particular chord with me as, amongst other things, I am a member of a school board of trustees of a reasonably large secondary school, including being a board representative on the disciplinary committee.

I have participated in this disciplinary role for a number of years, and there have been times when I have been discretely made aware of situations in which abuse on a regular basis has been suffered by a student. Broken relationships, resulting in anger and the use of physical force, have sometimes been the precursor for a student’s behaviour, and this in turn has resulted in them inflicting hurt on others. This does not mean that all such students are condemned for the rest of their lives to live a life of crime and/or violence; however, it takes very special people to provide the key that unlocks the years of torment that has contributed to the young person’s defensive and violent behaviour, with this often being the only form of self preservation that they know.

There is a paragraph in one of these booklets describing “What Children Need”, and I believe that it is worthy of repeating:

To grow up healthy and happy, children need their basic physical need met, including good food, adequate clothing, enough sleep, and supervision appropriate to their age. They need to feel loved and cared for by people who express affection and approval towards them. Mental and emotional stimulus through a wide range of experiences will help children grow and learn. They also need interaction with others to develop language, social and emotional skills. Clear boundaries are important for fostering a supportive relationship between children and their parents or caregivers. Within these boundaries, children will be encouraged to explore and make decisions, building competence and independence. A child who grows up nurtured in these ways is more likely to be a confident adult with strong family and social values, and respect for themselves and others.

Scientific surveys have shown that improving parenting is among the main tools in an approach to antisocial be-

haviour. Research has shown that cognitive deficits that predispose children to violent crime may be acquired in early life through poor nutrition, birth complications or low birth weight. In the New Zealand context, the latest report released by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) shows that at least one in five New Zealand children are living in poverty, while 185,000 are living with severe or significant hardship. Nevertheless, in children with a potential genetic predisposition to bad behaviour or who are experiencing social risk factors like poverty, good parenting can still make all the difference. Teachers can also do a lot to stimulate children to ultimately become better behaved students but there needs also to be an improved understanding by Government of the social context that children are learning in.

Some primary schools in poorer areas recognise the wider social causes of under-achievement and potential class disruption problems and ensure that children are given breakfast before lessons begin. The transition to high school also presents teachers with a unique challenge. A programme (Travellers Programme) has now been developed that uses themes based on slogans about self-reflection and esteem-building to get year nine participants to share experiences and develop skills to cope with whatever life throws at them. Groups, in a confident and safe environment, discuss feelings and what influence they have on their behaviours. They keep a diary about each session and the end point is reached when they have their own “life maps” and see that everyone’s life has its ups and downs. After two years of trialling, evaluation and a further two years of wider implementation in 55 schools in Auckland and Northland, the Ministry of Health is now rolling it out across the country.

In 2001 Stephen Scott at the Institute of Psychiatry in London tested a three-month parenting class that taught the importance of praising good behaviour, and consistently and calmly punishing bad behaviour. Parents reported significantly fewer conduct problems and, even with no further instruction, the improvements remained a year later. No matter what the intervention, the clear message from all researchers is “the earlier the better”. While programmes for teenagers have met with some success, manipulating behaviour in children under eight years of age is apparently more effective. One characteristic that has been reported is that abused nine-year-olds were far quicker to spot anger and hostility in faces compared to

children who had not been maltreated. Furthermore, while this threat-primed outlook may help children adapt to a life filled with danger and deprivation, it may also lead to heightened levels of reactive or impulsive violence, as anxious children lash out to defend themselves against perceived hostility in others.

It should be noted, however, that there is a subset group of children with early onset antisocial behaviour and this group scores high for callous and unemotional traits. Punishments have proved ineffective for these children but using praise and award is said to work well, particularly with girls. It follows that social-environmental factors or biological ones are both important, but the effect is most dramatic when they act together.

Recently in the news it has been reported that, with the exception of Auckland, the overall number of students suspended from school has fallen. However, the cases of continual disobedience, violence and physical assault resulting in suspensions has continued to grow and this has significantly affected the overall Auckland statistics. New Zealand Educational Institute President Frances Nelson has said that on the surface, the data in the report do indeed show that disciplinary measures were falling overall, but when you look deeper into those statistics and you start to tease them out, then you get a different view of the world.

For example, the number of primary school children stood down and suspended has grown from 4800 in 2000 to 6565 last year. In 2007, 945 primary school students were suspended and 5650 stood down, which represents 28 per cent of the total number of students at all levels stood down in that year. Educators say those numbers reflect an ongoing trend for increasingly violent misbehaviour by children as young as five.

Canterbury Primary Principals' Association president David Taylor says that there is a growing issue with extreme misbehaviour by students getting ever younger. Denise Torrey, from Christchurch's Ka Mahuri, a remedial school for troubled primary-age children, says the story behind the figures is clear. "What it says is that we are seeing an increasing number of younger and younger students with behaviour and mental health issues." She went on to say that things are happening earlier and we're

seeing children as young as five and six who are exhibiting dangerous behaviour.

Dr Trecia Wouldes, a senior lecturer in psychological medicine at Auckland School of Medicine, is conducting a study on the impact of methamphetamine on fetuses and has stated that children who have been subjected to psychoactive stimulant drugs, such as methamphetamines, during the gestation period seem to fit in with the paradigm of development delay. This has shown to be the case in USA for cocaine use during pregnancy.

Methamphetamine unfortunately has a longer half life than other stimulant drugs and therefore may have a greater impact. It has also been more readily available and has been used more by women since 2001, and this would appear to correlate with some of the serious primary-school-age behaviour problems, low levels of literacy, verbal communication problems and impaired cognition ability that we are seeing today.

Anxious children lash out to defend themselves against perceived hostility in others

It is thought that a number of women may suffer from such a substance dependence disorder and the excessive use

of alcohol and/or methamphetamine and cannabis by a pregnant mother shows up by the time the child is four years of age, when some real differences become apparent and sadly, by this time, violence tends to become entrenched.

It follows that early intervention is necessary and Trecia Wouldes states that there is a need to identify affected babies either post-natally or even pre-natally. Also there is a need to further educate young mothers as to the effects of drugs and alcohol, on their unborn child. Furthermore, where families are supportive, then the potential damage may be mitigated and in some cases may be completely reversed. In ongoing domestic violence situations, however, problems with the child exhibiting violent behaviour can be expected to be exacerbated.

The Ministry of Education Senior Manager of schools and student support, Jim Greening, has said that the recent report was designed to present a wide view of stand-downs and suspensions nationwide and that it is a high-level summary document looking at general trends with suspensions and stand-downs. The overall improvement in suspensions for such things as student engagement initiatives, signing up students on health board-run drug and

alcohol counselling programmes and, following a prominent court case, ensuring that students can no longer be suspended unless the procedures have been diligently followed, has consequently resulted in a direct effect on the suspension reduction rates.

However, as already indicated, the resultant figures tends to mask the disturbing trend of increasing violence in schools. In a bid to try to curtail violence in the schools, Education Minister Chris Carter has recently launched a range of initiatives aimed at making schools safer for students by ensuring that they have anti-bullying programmes in place.

The minister has also looked at anti-bullying programmes developed in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. In some of these countries, bullying and physical assault has reached epidemic levels. Teachers in some UK schools, for example, are alleged to be wearing stab-proof vests. In Australia, bullying is reported to be rife in Queensland schools, with more than 70 students suspended every day for assault; and the problem is growing. One in six students has at some stage been a victim and new research shows that this puts the Australian school system among the worst for bullying of any country in the Western world. There is also evidence that shows that school bullies in Queensland are defying attempts to control them, with a cluster of school violence videos recently posted on the internet. Parents of both bullying victims and expelled bullies in Queensland are turning to home schooling in a bid to salvage an education for their children, with an estimated 22,000 students now learning from home, which is double the number counted by a working group in 2002.

One Brisbane mother has been driven to release details of a diary she kept of the daily trauma suffered by her disabled son at the hands of classmates. Another parent said her daughter after continuous bullying, had twice attempted suicide and she had once been a bright, caring, talented musician.

The sad fact, as one New Zealand principal has stated, is that often the student who has bullied someone doesn't actually realise the impact their actions have had on the student they've bullied. This is even more the case with cyber bullying, where students can gang together to repeatedly harass or taunt a student through text messages or through emails. Cyber bullying, which can go on 24/7, 365 days per year, is in many respects worse than physical bullying. The Government supports and funds "NetSafe", an Internet safety group that provides information about preventing and dealing with cyber bullying. Cyber bul-

lying online, via email and via mobile phone texting, as well as through fake "MySpace" and "FaceBook" postings, is a global problem.

With children, cyber bullying usually starts between the ages of 10 and 11 and peaks at the age of 15. A 2005 survey of all cellphone users found 23 percent aged between 12 and 19 reported receiving offensive, pornographic, abusive or threatening texts or pictures on their phones. More than one in three of these respondents didn't tell anyone about the abuse. A speaker at a Netsafe-organised conference earlier this year, Marian Merritt, from internet security firm Symantec, advised all parents to look for signs of depression and an uncharacteristic avoidance of communication technology by their children, because these are obvious signs that their child is being bullied through social networking online communications.

**Eric Dodd is convenor of social issues for Churches Together in Northland*

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Additional copies available in late September from:
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Rituals

Last Sunday I led the worship at my home church, St John's in the City. It is always a privilege to be invited to fulfil this role. For more than 20 years, my ministry centred on the provision of the Sunday services and so it feels a little strange in my current role not have this ever-present commitment. In our training, we put huge resources as a Church into preparing ministers as preachers and worship leaders. I have often pondered an anthropological concept that continues to fascinate me: that of liminality.

To give you a (wikipedia) definition: Liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold") is a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the "threshold" of or between two different existential planes, as defined in neurological psychology (a "liminal state") and in the anthropological theories of ritual. In the anthropological theories, a ritual, especially a rite of passage, involves some change to the participants, especially their social status. The liminal state is characterised by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are relaxed - a situation that can lead to new perspectives.

Take, for example, the airport transit lounge. You have to say "good bye" to your family, your home, the places where you are known and know, and you enter into this neutral place where your identity becomes one of passenger or traveller. You fly to your destination with your fellow travellers and there you are quite often reunited with people and places that also give you a sense of identity and connection. But we can even think of a doctor's waiting room (where you become a patient), or the period between finishing your final exam, graduating and finally getting a job, or between becoming engaged and being married. These are times of transition where you are identified and named differently and where most often there is some change in perspective or self-understanding at the end of the process.

A now-retired Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Seminary in New York, Tom Driver, ran a course that I was fortunate to attend, looking especially at how this concept related to what we do at church and the rituals that feature in our worship. Many of our churches in their architecture reinforce the idea of separation from the "outside world" and suggest within them some experi-

ence of liminality. In most of our churches, you can't actually see out or in. When you arrive, the ritual starts: you are often greeted and find a seat, the service is marked by some beginning event and in the confines of the service, there is frequently behaviour and activity that isn't common in everyday life. We describe this order and ritual as our liturgy and it exists within both the most free-flowing and the most ordered of worship events.

The last thing I want to suggest is that our worship can be reduced to a series of anthropological formulas. However, all of us who are involved in organising worship and its associated rituals and liturgy are also involved in orchestrating events in which powerful psychological forces come into play. We have seen in history terrifying examples of ritual abuse, where despots and evil men and women have used such events for their own ends or to normalise acts of fear and hatred. On the other hand, we have all been involved in worship where we have experienced an overwhelming sense of God's spirit at work and have come away from the event with a transformed view of ourselves and our relationship with God and with one another.

When I reflect on times when worship doesn't seem to have "worked", or on other occasions when worship has left me feeling in some ways far from comfortable (in a bad way!), I wonder if it is to do with matters of liminality. In one case, this happens perhaps when no sense of holiness or the wonder and awe of God is created, and in the latter where worshippers find the circumstances of worship excessively manipulative.

I think worship has to be liminal. It needs to provide these moments and opportunities of transition that are central to our faith – hearing the Scriptures and their words of forgiveness and restoration, being open to the spirit and the new life and resurrection hope of Christ, and learning to participate in a community where we learn new ways of being and understanding and relating to one another. Leading worship, with its risks and responsibilities, is a privilege and a challenge.

I pray for God's blessing for you in your ministry



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