

Children's Work in Small Churches

There are only two occasions in the New Testament where we read that Jesus got angry. It is significant that one of these occasions was when the disciples wanted to prevent children being brought to Jesus. How wrong they were. Rebuking them, Jesus said, "Let the children come to me and don't stop them." Our attitude to children should be the same as that of Jesus, but far too often children are marginalized or the subjects of poor church policy.

Churches must rise to the challenge of providing quality ministry to children. This may mean treading new paths and changing attitudes and activities in order to fulfil God's call. We dare not allow our ministry to children to slip on our list of priorities. As Gregg Harris wrote in *People of Destiny magazine*, "The most important thing we [Christian leaders] can do in our lives is to raise our children. No matter how dedicated we are to serving God in our lifetime, our children are probably our greatest contribution to God's purposes."

What are the particular issues for small and rural churches?

Communities in the rural areas are often small. This means that the potential numbers of children are small too. This will significantly affect the kind of activities we plan, and the kind of teaching material we need. Teaching material is often found to be very inappropriate because it is produced with larger numbers in mind. Look out for material that is appropriate both for smaller numbers and for a rural rather than a suburban culture.

Whatever is planned for a rural group must be lightly structured, able to grow and change as the youngsters in the group change. Small groups are able to be spontaneous and flexible and programmes ought to be able to be modified and changed easily to suit changing circumstances.

When there are only a few children present things may appear to be less exciting. On the other hand it is easier for children to be involved in the programme, and for teaching to be applied to fit their personal circumstances. There is a more intimate and friendly atmosphere, so we should play to these strengths.

On the other hand, in such situations children often form themselves into a close knit group which makes it difficult for others who move into the area to integrate into the group.

Although small can be beautiful it is important that rural children feel part of the larger Christian community. They need to see that there are other Christians in the same age group as them, in their own area. Therefore we should take every opportunity to join in events with other churches, both ecumenically and within our own denomination. Perhaps we need to invite others to join us from time to time.

In situations where the homes from which children come are scattered over a wide area transport becomes a problem. It may be necessary for the church to provide transport if the children are to come to activities. It is important to remember that, whether our church is large or small, we must adhere to the "Safe from Harm" legislation. Every church, whatever its size, must have a child protection policy in place and properly managed. All who have contact with children must be police checked.

Another common problem is that there is a smaller pool of existing or potential leaders. Sometimes this results in a leader having to serve a single group of children covering a wide age range. This calls for special skills and planning, and courses and

guidance on how to cope with this problem are available. Where leadership resources are limited joint church programmes may prove to be the best way ahead.

Rural church premises also may pose problems. There may be inadequate or inappropriate spaces for working with children. Health and Safety issues as well as Children Act provisions must be considered. A proper risk assessment should be made by a competent person.

In many instances church services are traditional and children find them irrelevant and uninteresting. Making children sit through badly planned, boring services with little or nothing that engages their hearts and minds is doing harm. We are turning them off if we are not turning them on to the truths of the gospel! Where churches do not take this responsibility seriously, they are giving out negative signals to the children. If we speak of God's love, and how he values children, then we must also show it.

While the rural context does present some special problems for children's work, it also provides some wonderful opportunities. A rural church should not try to compete with larger town churches but instead build on its own strengths. We have opportunities that are not always open to a larger church.

In rural churches it is easier to really get to know the young people personally and to take an interest in their lives. We are then better fitted to meet them at their point of need. If one of them is missing, then that absence is noticed and a pastoral response can be made. Members of a small group can feel and become more involved and feel that their contribution is important. All the children can be given a voice in formulating their activities. A small group will, therefore, have a clearer sense of identity and purpose.

There are usually wonderful opportunities for rural churches to link up their activities with what others in the local community are doing. Partnership possibilities abound and we ought never to be seen as an exclusive society. What we do with our children must not be isolated from other work which is happening with children in the community. The same problems we have will be repeated in the schools, uniformed organisations and other activities. It is important for us to talk with, and to work together with these groups. It would do well for the leaders to meet together from time to time. There will be special moments in the community that we can celebrate together.

Whatever happens to the children is the responsibility of the whole church and not just the children's leaders. In Africa it is often said that it takes a whole village to bring up a child. In a village church every individual is noticed. It is like living in a goldfish bowl - every one sees what we are. Our behaviour will either enhance or contradict what we teach. Relationship is at the heart of the Christian gospel, and good loving relationships that cross culture, age and other boundaries are essential. This is foundational and a good small rural church can be a marvellous visual aid.

It would not hurt to ask ourselves questions such as I wonder "What does my church look like to a child?", "Who can he or she make friends with?" Children will go where they are loved, so making them welcome when they arrive in church, listening to their needs, building relationships with them, respecting them and discovering what ministries they can exercise in the church, is vital. If children are given responsibility and are involved in the life of the church, then it becomes their church. This will mean that our churches won't be drained of young people when they reach their teens.

Children's leaders as well as the children, should be prayed for regularly, and encouraged in the work they are doing. Sufficient money should be set aside so that leaders can buy all the materials they need and be trained properly.

Good churches, whether small rural ones or large urban churches, should not be drifting along aimlessly, but have a clear sense of purpose that generates our policies and programmes. It is important that our work with children reflects the overall vision of the church. Our young people are not “the church of tomorrow”; they need to be fully incorporated into the church of today

So let us rise to the challenge of children in our rural areas. We may need to learn to work in new ways and we may feel inadequate, but God is our great enabler, and can use the small, the weak and the feeble.

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