

Where are the children?

Seek, pray, serve – a simple
framework to develop churches'
engagement with children





'Where are the children?' is a question for many churches today. It is tempting to look back with rose-tinted spectacles to an earlier period when there were large Junior Church classes, thriving children's clubs and many families making their presence felt on a Sunday.

Times have changed, and, for a whole host of reasons, many churches now have fewer children or even none at all. However our calling today is to read the signs of the times, and to respond in ways that build the kingdom.

Jesus said: 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:14, RSV).

In this, we can hear Jesus asking us: 'Where are the children?' So, this booklet invites us to consider where children are in our hearts, our premises, our community, our church life and our worship.

Using the simple model of **Seek • Pray • Serve** (originally developed by Jess Poole, Synod of Scotland, based on Matthew 7:7)

We encourage you to:

Seek: Discover the answers to 'where are the children?' for your church. *'Seek and you will find.'*

Pray: Prayerfully discern how your congregation could be extending Jesus' welcome to children in the most appropriate ways for your context. *'Ask and it will be given you.'*

Serve: Start to serve children directly or indirectly in ways that reflect your gifts and resources. *'Knock and it will be opened to you.'*

Our vision is to see children playing their part in the mission of God. This requires every church to find and fulfil their role in supporting children. It could range from praying for the local primary school to running children's clubs and events; from providing baby basics for struggling families to enabling children to lead worship; from blessing local volunteer children's workers with cakes to supporting children's passion for justice and environmental issues. If we all play our part, then Christ can build us up together and his kingdom will grow.

We pray this booklet will be the start of an exciting journey that will connect your church with children in myriad ways and enable you to experience the blessing and hope of engaging with those beloved by Jesus.

Dr Sam Richards, Head of Children's and Youth Work

The Revd Jenny Mills, Convenor of Children's and Youth Work Committee

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1ur community?

Where are the children in your hearts?

Seek: Spend some time identifying the children you carry with you in your heart. Think about:

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Serve: There are many practical ways in which the minister, elders and congregation of the church can build links and relationships. Remember, the important thing is that families and children begin to recognise the church as a place where they belong and are valued, are welcome and supported; a place where the love of God is demonstrated to them in tangible ways.

Think about the welcome they feel in the building. Are the toilets



Help the organisation to feel valued in your church family

This might include giving them a section on your website, in your church newsletter, or on your noticeboards. If they are putting on a show or concert of any type, advertise it in the church and encourage the congregation to go along.

Remember to invite the leaders and families to join you for any special events. These may be your regular events or something new, specifically aimed to develop relationships. Joining in a pancake party, submitting a tree for the Christmas tree festival, making decorations for a harvest festival, doing an item in a church concert – all these give groups a chance to contribute in a non-threatening way. Involve them in your fundraising for charity and make sure the church gets involved in supporting any fundraising that they are doing.

Your church could write letters or cards occasionally, thanking the leaders for the work they do with children and the positive influence they have on the lives of the families they serve. And is there the option of giving a gift to the groups – e.g. Easter eggs at Easter time? The Bible Society produces some lovely small booklets at Easter and Christmas which might make good gifts.

Most importantly, don't view these groups as merely numbers or steamroll them onto a church rota; don't preach at them but come alongside them.

School visits: Have you invited your local school to do a school visit? Classes love getting out of the classroom and visiting somewhere new. Scripture Union produces some lovely resources for church visits while www.assemblies.org.uk has some good suggestions and The Hope Journey also equips churches for hosting schools.

Seek:

Spend some time thinking about the local community: where are the children? Where do they go and what do they do? What connections do you already have? What could you find out more about?

A good place to start would be the local primary school. Find out what's happening there. Are they doing any fundraising events? Going

to the park? What are the children doing? How do they spend their time? What are their interests? What are their hobbies? What are their favourite activities? What are their favourite places? What are their favourite things? What are their favourite foods? What are their favourite drinks? What are their favourite colours? What are their favourite animals? What are their favourite plants? What are their favourite games? What are their favourite books? What are their favourite TV shows? What are their favourite movies? What are their favourite songs? What are their favourite artists? What are their favourite bands? What are their favourite genres? What are their favourite styles? What are their favourite brands? What are their favourite products? What are their favourite services? What are their favourite companies? What are their favourite websites? What are their favourite apps? What are their favourite social media platforms? What are their favourite influencers? What are their favourite celebrities? What are their favourite sports? What are their favourite teams? What are their favourite players? What are their favourite coaches? What are their favourite referees? What are their favourite commentators? What are their favourite broadcasters? What are their favourite channels? What are their favourite networks? What are their favourite stations? What are their favourite frequencies? What are their favourite wavelengths? What are their favourite frequencies? What are their favourite wavelengths? What are their favourite frequencies? What are their favourite wavelengths?

Serve: Consider your gifts, talents, and passions – how might these be of service to children in the local community? Think about your time and energy. Could you realistically offer any to support children in the local community? This might be directly or, just as valuably, indirectly – supporting those already working with children, giving behind-the-scenes help and encouragement. Service can be very small, one-off or occasional, right through to a regular commitment or taking on a big role like school governor.

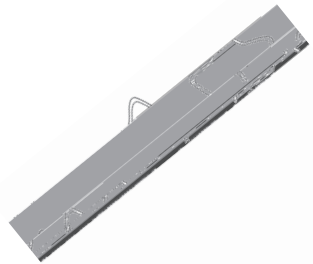
Look for ways in which you can serve the local primary school. Perhaps you could use **Pray • Bake • Read**. Could a couple of people offer to be an extra pair of hands for a trip? Not only do you get to know the children and the teachers but you also go to the zoo, or the cinema or a museum! Would they like snacks for children (being mindful of any allergies) and teachers? Does the school have a gardening, cooking, knitting or craft club, or would it like to start one? Are there people who could pass on their knowledge and skills to the children? Are there particular needs you could challenge the church to help meet, for example breakfast club volunteers, new IT equipment or grants for uniforms.

Where else could you serve children? What about ensuring that the local play park is clean and tidy, with the equipment in a good state of repair? Can you serve parents tea and coffee while they wait for children to finish their dance classes?

Do you have existing church groups who could include children in the community in their focus? For example, knitters could make cuddlers for the local hospital, craft groups could make items for School story bags, choirs could

Organisations you might like to connect with:

- **Pray • Bake • Read** helps churches support local primary schools by praying, baking cakes for the staff room, and providing volunteers to hear children read on a regular basis.
- **Share the Miracle** in an initiative to collect donated Easter eggs

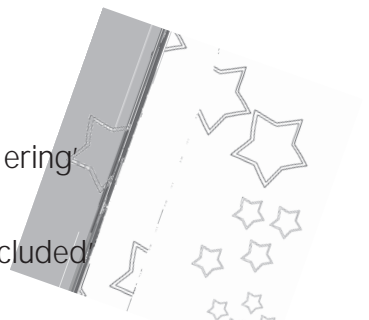


'I play my ukulele'

'Being involved in the service, taking the offering'

'I like sharing my feelings about God'

'It involves all ages and everyone can feel included'



Wishes: A common theme was wishing they did more outside, that groups/activities happened more often, that more children came. Others wished for a younger version of a specific church group, an Xbox or a games room, more plays, a book corner, a bigger garden, more use of technology. Some wishes were more imaginative: a bouncy castle, a swimming pool, a monthly party where we could bring our pets, a hot tub, a pony, more ice cream, poo emoji cushions!

'A quiet place to pray alone'

'I wish there were arts and crafts for all ages, not just the younger ones'

'I wish there was more aimed at children – singing, acting'

'I wish the church had Jesus' blood every day'

'I wish to go on trips to places to learn about God more'

'I wish we could watch about God'

'I wish that children had more of a voice'

'I wish that my school friends were here to enjoy the fun with me'

'I wish there were non-boring meetings'

'I wish this church could be part of Star Wars'

'I wish I could see and hug God'



How could *your* church invite children to share their thoughts and feelings about what the church does and how they experience church life?

How could you enable everyone to listen to them?

Where are the children in the life of your church?

Seek: Who counts as part of the church 'family'? Where do children fit in?

If it is through formal church membership, at what age may a child become a member? This is not stipulated by General Assembly. If it is through baptism, dedication or a similar celebration, how do you foster that connection? If based on attendance, what activities in the life of the church count? Sunday worship? Midweek worship (see pages 18 to 19)? Other church activities (co o 1Bs3.5 (o)5n.6 (h)9.2 (i)19.9 (n)g (o y)1s (l c),12 (s p)3.5 (a)

Serve: 'Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a real blessing.'
(Psalm 127:3, GNB)

If children are welcome as full participants in the life of the church, then they and their families and carers need to know this! Make sure you show it on your website, noticeboards, newsletters, choice of images, use of language, toilet facilities and so on.

Next, make sure that the welcome you give children on *any* occasion is warm and inclusive. You want them to enjoy the experience and want to come again! Show you have already thought about their needs and interests, so they feel valued and precious to God and the people of God.

Think about how children can be part of all aspects of the life of the church: the church meeting, social activities, mission projects, the church's giving, social action, choosing themes/hymns/prayers/preachers, celebrations, and so on. What times of day might work best? What length and style of gathering enables them to participate? The United Reformed Church Charter for Children in the Church states

Small is beautiful – ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ (Matthew 18:20, NRSV)

Some churches may be teeming with children, but many only have two or three children, often none. For those look at the positives:

- Each child can be known by name – you can celebrate birthdays, milestones and achievements.
- Small numbers with diverse ages is more like a family setting, less like school.
- Activities and resources can be personalised.

Creative storytelling can be intergenerational. Visual images can help the youngest, spoken word will help others. Godly Play, drama and story bags invite children into the in story in different ways.

It is good to think of everything as play; cooperative, creative, musical, worshipful play! This builds relationships through fun, gives space and time for reflection and encourages awe and wonder.

‘We are made in the image of God and God is the great creator. As we create and play together, we echo God’s playful creativity.’

Where are the children in your worship?

Seek: There are all sorts of different types of church and congregation throughout the country – some teeming with children and some without; some where children leave for a Junior Church or Sunday School, some where they stay in throughout the service, and some which work intergenerationally. However you describe your church, it is important, essential, that you consider the children who regularly attend or who just might turn up to your worship.

Value the worship of your children – don't 'send them out' to Junior Church/Sunday School but acknowledge that they are worshipping too in their activities there. Remember, that midweek activities such as Messy Church, Pilots or Toddler Praise can and should equally be classed as worship.

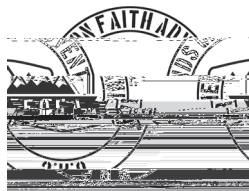


Worship beyond Sunday

Perhaps your church runs a Messy Church or Toddler Praise or a family service of some type during the week. This is worship too. Likewise Pilots, Boys' Brigade or Girls' Brigade. Do you include these on the list of 'worship times' on your church website or newsletter? They could just as fittingly be there as under the heading of 'children and youth'.

If you haven't been before, pop along. It may not be worship as you normally experience it, but if you approach it with an open heart, God will speak to you through the worship and praise of the children. Again, these are perfect opportunities for you to make contact with and support the children in their faith formation, as well as a chance to talk to parents and support them. It is worth remembering that the church may be a strange and alien place for them too. Just a smile and a word of encouragement may be all they need to feel welcome and at home. It is amazing how some Sunday congregations may mutter about never seeing the Messy Church families coming to the Sunday service, and yet are not willing to go and join them in their worship during the week!

No Messy Church or Pilots group? Perhaps there is opportunity to start one. If not in your church, maybe ecumenically in partnership with the other churches in the locality – working together to provide opportunities for families to learn, pray and worship together in a Christian environment. In 2020 the URC is launching a new children's work programme, Friends on Faith Adventures, especially for churches looking to start something new.



Suggestions for using this booklet

We hope this booklet will stimulate thought, prayer and action!

You could:

Reflect on it: Listen to God's call to you personally with regard to children, adjust your prayer life accordingly, and find a practical way to express your call that serves children.

Share it: Read it with others in a small group; discuss the questions together, pray together and encourage one another to follow through in action. You could even agree to share stories of how you are getting on in prayer and action, in mutual support to persevere.

'So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.' (Galatians 6:9, NRSV)

Make it a focus for your church: Give a series of sessions, or sermon slots, to work through the sections. Use creative methods to capture people's responses. Allow time for prayers to be created and used. Commission people into a whole variety of ministries, large and small, long-term and occasional. Update noticeboards, the website and newsletters to include regular features on how as a congregation you are seeking, praying for and serving children. Find ways to reflect this in your meetings and times of worship, Remember to celebrate the riches these connections with young lives add to your church!

*I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
They are ever giving liberally and lending,
and their children become a blessing.*
(Psalm 37:25-26, NRSV)

Prayer

Lord God, **thank you for the gift of children.**

Help us to seek, pray and serve.

Jesus, who instructed his disciples 'Let the children come to me',

We bring you our prayers for the children and for our church
as we seek to pave the way for the children to come to you.

We pray for the children in our hearts, naming them before you now,
That they might know themselves loved and valued

And that we might nurture the growing seeds of faith

Through our words, our actions, our listening and our witness.

We pray for the children in our premises, naming them before you now,

That they may find a welcome here and relationships may blossom.

We pray for the children in our community, thinking especially of those
Who feel lost or alone, anxious or afraid, or in need of a mentor
or support.

May we reach out to them, directly or indirectly, with your love and
compassion.

We pray especially for the schools and clubs in our neighbourhood

And ask for your strength and guidance for all who work with children in
any capacity.

We pray for the children in our church life, naming them before you now,

That they may find a voice and a purpose and feel a valued part of the
family,

And that we may all be open to learn from each other and play together.

And we pray for the children in our worship, naming them before you now,
that we may not prove a stumbling block

But truly let the children come to you.

Lord God, **thank you for the gift of children.**

Help us to seek, pray and serve.

Amen

Thanks

This booklet has been compiled by the Children's and Youth Work team of the United Reformed Church with contributions from Nicola Grieves, Jessica Poole, Sam Richards, and Lorraine Webb. Illustrations are by Samara Andrews. Edited by Michelle Howard and Lorraine Webb. Design by Sara Foyle.

Contact us

If this booklet has inspired you to do something new, or if you already do something that we may not know about, please do get in touch. We would love to celebrate the work you are doing and share it to encourage others.

On our good news page on the United Reformed Church website: **www.urc.org.uk/good-news-stories**, we are able to share stories of all the ways that our congregations support children and young people playing their part in the mission of God. We also have pages of resources and news of events for children and young people.

