

PLAYGROUP PROFILE: OCEAN GROVE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Ocean Grove Church of Christ has a largely elderly congregation, and only one family with preschoolers (the Beasleys) attends the church. Cate Beasley has a heart to minister to children and families in her local community, and three years ago, began running a playgroup at the church. Over time it has expanded to 30 families attending 3 sessions. A feature of the group is a team of dedicated child-free helpers (the “Grannies”) who attend regularly to build relationships and help out where they can. Cate uses some bible stories and Christian songs as part of the program, and the children always sing “The Superman Grace” before snack time.

David Wanstall (the minister), his wife Chris and Cate Beasley all have a heart to reach playgroup families for Jesus. For some time they have held a children’s service once a term, where children have been involved in leading the Sunday service. Only a few playgroup families have attended this service, so they developed the idea of running “Playgroup Church” on a Friday night once a month. This is a “hands on” activity-based service pitched at children. The night begins with tables set up with activities as people arrive. Then there is a song/dance session for the children, often using Colin Buchanan’s music. Then everyone sits at tables in family groups to complete a hands-on learning activity. For example, at a recent service, the theme was “forgiveness”. The families had to construct a bridge made of icy pole sticks, linking together blocks with the phrase “I’m sorry” on one side, and “I forgive you” on the other. David wrapped up each family group with wool, and tied up all groups together, while explaining the kinds of things that can bind up our lives, such as anger, misunderstanding, or jealousy. He then took scissors and cut through the tangled wool, as a picture of forgiveness. A “Food for thought” handout with a reflection for adults related to the theme of the service is also placed on the table. Some adults take this home at the end of the night.

After the 45-minute service, the families enjoy a fish and chip dinner. The children watch a “VeggieTales” video while the adults chat.

40 people attended the first two “Playgroup Church” services, although numbers were down at the last service for a variety of reasons.

Another initiative of the church has been to run a seminar for playgroup parents based on the book: “The 5 love languages of children”. This was enthusiastically received.

Although no community families have become Christians yet through the ministry of playgroup, Cate firmly believes that God can do great things through those who are obedient to Him, and that we may never know the impact we are making. She heard a story recently of a family of ardent atheists who shielded their daughter from all Christian influence. However, this daughter was strongly drawn to Christ and became a Christian as a young adult. She later discovered that an itinerant Methodist preacher had scooped her in his arms and prayed a blessing on her when she was a 3-month old baby. “This story gave me goose bumps” Cate said. “It reminds me that God is sowing seeds into the lives of young children through our ministry, although we will probably never see the results. I’m absolutely passionate about ministry to children, and it’s easy to do when God lights the fire!”

Cate is happy to visit groups by invitation, and is also more than happy to share about “playgroup church”. She can be contacted on 5250 3327.

CHILDREN

DECISIONS TOWARDS CHRIST

Ron Buckland

I wrote “Children and the Gospel” (published by Scripture Union in 2001) to explore how children respond to Christ and to challenge the way we too often view a child’s spiritual journey. The following is based on chapter nine of the book.

Too often evangelism is linked to a particular understanding of response, based on a particular interpretation of Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). The main ingredients of a

conversion response, according to this interpretation, are that the response is sudden, time-specific and definite.

This was the time, according to the interpretation, when Paul made his “decision for Christ”—not a phrase ever used by the New Testament. In the minds of some, over time, “decision for Christ” came to equal “conversion”. Response cards at many evangelistic crusades offered three categories of response:

- (a) Decision for Christ.
- (b) Assurance of salvation.
- (c) Rededication.

Some see Paul’s experience as in line with Jesus’ teaching about “being born again” (John 3), and then draw the conclusion that every person, to become a Christian, must make a clear, time-specific, “decision for Christ”. They apply this conclusion to all age groups, including children. The aim in evangelism is to help people of all ages make a “decision for Christ”, which is equated with conversion.

I am totally positive about the idea of response. Every human being, of any age, receiving information, responds to it. The question is not whether or not they are responding, but what their response means.

When Paul encountered the risen Christ that afternoon, it was not his first encounter with the Christian gospel. He was so zealous for God that he was already persecuting followers of Jesus. Then he had minded the coats of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:60) and had heard Stephen’s testimony to Christ and watched him die with forgiveness on his lips. The Paul who encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus was already on another kind of journey.

Then there is Acts 16, with two conversion stories in the one chapter. One is the Philippian jailer, who as far as we can tell was pagan one minute and Christian the next, with an earthquake in the middle. Very time-specific! But there is also Lydia. She is a “God-fearer”, a term that described non-Jews attracted to Judaism. Lydia, beside the river with some other women one Sabbath, heard Paul talk about Jesus. The Lord “opened her heart” and she became a follower of Jesus. A “sunrise” conversion. That moment would always be an important one for Lydia, but she had made a number of decisions about faith before that morning.

Many people, including children, make **decisions towards Christ**. Rather than making a once-for-all decision to follow Christ, many take gradual steps into the dawning light, steps that can become the radical reorientation of life that is Christian conversion. It is not necessarily a cumulative process: only God knows the point at which a person is “saved”.

If we faithfully teach what it means to belong to Christ, and the cost, we are evangelising. This is true, whether it is our own children we teach, or outreach ministry. Children can, and probably will, make decisions towards Christ as a result of our teaching. We are not responsible to get that response, or to decide what it means to God. That is incredibly releasing.

Many people grow into faith. They move through steps and stages of faith at their own pace. This is partly because of their own unique developmental clock, and partly the outcome of their (unique) experiences of life. The joy of Christian ministry is to be available to people of all ages, helping them interpret life in relation to God.

The children of believers are likely to mirror something of the experience of Timothy in the New Testament. Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15, “From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Even here, there are no guarantees given: the “Timothys” of this world are in touch with knowledge that can lead to salvation; but they must still exercise individual faith to enter into what is promised. As they are introduced to more and more knowledge and agree with it, they make responses, and decisions (decisions towards Christ).

The Christian life is an ongoing series of responses to Christ. That doesn't mean we are converted over and over again. But it does mean that we continually give evidence of the direction of our life by the decisions we keep on making. As we move through the ages and stages of life we face many decisions. We give evidence of our faith journey by the decisions we make along the way.

For example, it is not possible for a nine-year-old boy to submit his sexuality to Jesus. His sexuality is dormant at that age. By the time he is nineteen, with hormones hopping in all directions, it is imperative that this aspect of who he is has been related to his Christian discipleship. Similarly, an eighteen-year-old single woman cannot surrender her marriage to Jesus, except in some theoretical, "in principle" way. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with "in principle" submission. It is just that it will have to become reality for a twenty-eight-year-old mum, if her Christian discipleship means anything at that stage. We can only surrender to Christ those things about which we face real choice.

What the idea of "surrender" means for a Christian will change beyond recognition between the ages of seven and 70. It is the direction of the decision-making that decides the destiny. Jesus taught that it is not a matter of "blasting out of the blocks" that matters most, it is finishing (Matt 10:22). The Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint (Heb 12:1-2).

The children with whom we minister will make any number of decisions towards Christ. When we accept this fact, and understand what is going on, we can be positive, supportive of the child and settled in our own mind. We can, in fact, be calmly urgent.

Ron Buckland worked in Children's ministry with Scripture Union for 30 years. He is currently minister at Montrose Church of Christ.

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CHILD FREE AT PLAYGROUP – by Kaye Plowman

It may seem a contradiction of terms but at playgroups right across Victoria there is an army of dedicated volunteers who attend playgroups without a child. They are just there to help out.

Child free adults (CFA's); I have met many of them and I've been one myself. They are usually, although not exclusively, women in churches with a real desire to share their time, faith and expertise helping the new generation of mothers.

They willingly undertake tasks such as setting up, snack preparation, kitchen duties, activity supervision, story reading, holding babies, minding the leader's child, collecting fees, playing with children or chatting to parents to share their insights on child rearing.

There is great potential for a CFA to be the link between the church and the community families, particularly when the CFA bonds strongly with families and gains their love and confidence.

Want to recruit a CFA for your playgroup?

- Talk to your church leadership about who they suggest may be suitable
- Choose carefully to avoid a disaster; playgroups are not the place to dump someone who doesn't fit in anywhere else
- Know that patience with small children is a prerequisite
- Ask potential CFA's personally
- Carefully explain your expectations, give clear boundaries
- Give them time to consider if they are willing to make the weekly commitment
- Ask them along to visit the playgroup before making a decision
- Warmly welcome them at playgroup

Handy hints for playgroups:

- Use CFA's in their area of expertise
- Explain their role to playgroup members and new families as they join throughout the year
- Don't just give them the jobs no one else wants to do

- Honour them and thank them often
- Remember their birthday; get the children to make them a Christmas thank-you card
- Regularly ask their opinion and listen to them
- Include them in all playgroup activities
- Regularly check that they are enjoying the position

Handy hints for CFA's

- Know this is a legitimate calling - a ministry; you will impact lives
- Don't try to take over
- Always remain under the authority of the playgroup leader
- Be warm and friendly, learn the names of all the children and adults
- Be a model of Christian values
- Build relationships with children and adults slowly but surely
- Don't gossip
- Always speak enthusiastically and positively about the church leaders, church programs and church families
- Be honest and open; share what you are feeling with the playgroup leader
- Take your commitment seriously, be dependable
- Pray regularly for the playgroup leaders and members
- Keep confidential any information shared with you
- Give advice only when requested
- Submit to the playgroup leader any suggestions you may have for improvements; don't be offended if your suggestions are rejected

Above all remember that CFA's are volunteers and volunteers are like wet soap – squeeze them too hard and they will slip through your fingers. Or on a more spiritual note consider that you are releasing someone into their divine calling. Release, support, encourage, respect and value their contribution.

A LETTER TO THE CPN

To the Christian Playgroup Network,

I celebrate the coming together of all the denominations as a network. Congratulations!

I share the gift of evangelism and am passionate about “Thy Kingdom Come”... that more people would get to know Jesus through me.

I believe that we firstly need to “earn the right to present Jesus”

Jesus was a friend of sinners. Why are we so often evangelizers of sinners instead? When we are modeling values of humility, love and care then we are being faithful in our witness. The Christian involvement means sacrifice. It is through our living/being that we give feet to our faith. This would be my commitment, to love, teach and encourage the Christians in our playgroups to BE Jesus to their playgroupers.

- 1 To pray for them
- 2 To be a friend and get together at playgroup and elsewhere
- 3 To follow up during the week with a phone call, responding to needs and celebrations
- 4 To have an answer as to what I believe. To invite them to a church event or interest group where they can connect with the church family. To respect their yes or no.
- 5 To continue 1 – 4 and to keep on loving them as Jesus would.

We have encouraged all of the above and yet the sacrifice seems minimal. Jesus makes it clear that those who belong to His Kingdom will give food to the hungry, will care for the sick, etc. Witnessing to Jesus means a great responsibility. It means involvement in the lives of others. When we surround them with Christian love and support them with Christian witness then we are able to share what God is doing in our lives.

God wants to be recognized in us. He wants us to represent Him on earth! If our Christian playgroupers are to be Jesus to people then it takes time. I don't want anything to occupy time that could be spent in building relationships.

My prayer is that God would break our hearts for the lost.

Helen Telfer

Helen's playgroup ministry at Eltham Baptist was featured in the last CPN newsletter. We wanted to share the passion for mission evident in her letter with all of you!

GEELONG NETWORK NEWS

The last "coffee and cake" evening for the Geelong CPN was held on the 14th of June. Jo Lowe from Ocean Grove Baptist shared about her playgroup, and how two of the women attending had recently become Christians through the Playgroup ministry. Then there was a time of open sharing in a circle about prayer needs and playgroup news. Jacqui Berris from the CPN Executive was also able to visit and encourage those involved. The next "coffee and cake" will be held on August the 16th, and will focus on how to lead someone to Christ. For more information, please contact Emily Lewis on 5243 0424.

BERWICK TRAINING DAY

A CPN training day for playgroup leaders will be held on Saturday the 7th of August at Berwick Church of Christ. For more information, please contact Pat Horman on 9653 4220.

A RECOMMENDED RESOURCE:

"Let's All Play Together", an activity card set.

"Let's All Play Together" is a wall chart and set of cards designed to assist playgroup leaders in choosing and planning play activities according to the interests and developmental levels of the children in their group.

This resource provides an activity poster and consists of over 50 wipe clean activity cards. These are colour coded into the following play areas: Creative, Physical, Sensory, Pretend, Musical, Words, Water, and Sand play. They also use codes to specify appropriate developmental levels and the skills and benefits of each activity. This system is a simple way of ensuring your playgroup offers a good variety of play activities and gives many great activity ideas.

This resource can be ordered from:

Playgroup Association of Queensland
Level 2, 16 McDougall Street
PO Box 1897
Milton, Qld, 4064

Phone: 07 3368 2622 / 1300 362 552

Fax: 07 3367 2522

Web: www.playgroupaustralia.com.au