



I heard a whisper the other day that someone in a church leadership team said they thought Playgroup Ministry has passed its Use By date. It made me furrow my brow with concern at the same time as laughing.

Playgroup ministry for churches is about as out-of-date as air is for lungs.

Playgroup, like other valuable things in life – loyalty, family, simplicity, rest, listening – is easily underestimated in a culture that’s anxious to keep up, to achieve, to prove itself. Some times our churches are touched with this culture too, and can be prone to underestimating what a valuable ministry might look like in the face of other early childhood activities that might be revenue-raising, more marketable, packaged programs. This is not to reject other forms of ministry, but to remind ourselves, and perhaps others around us, of why Playgroups can form a bedrock foundation which other ministries may enhance.

Playgroup is not really the kind of ministry to go ‘out-of-date’, on account of it not really being the kind of ministry that is ever going to be fashionable to start with. Playdough, trackies, nappy bags, baby wipes, paint, plastic animals, sandpits, coffee from the kettle, five little ducks, ‘*Where is the Green Sheep?*’ ... hardly sexy. And that, in this slick, seductive and sell-sell-sell world, is precisely why Playgroup is Good News.

Playgroup is the garden variety, veggie patch ministry that is no showstopper, but nevertheless is rich and abundant with the good things of the kingdom of God.

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In fact, the lack of polish and shazam-factor is one of playgroup’s most important qualities. Spaces where tender young humans, and their significant grownups are discovering how the world works, and how to do life safely and wonderfully and messily together, are not performance spaces. They are not places for display, for churches to showcase anything. They are precious spaces worth protecting from judging eyes and the urge to tidy up.

Most Pastors I know, long for their church to host communities where the real, true, good and beautiful things of Kingdom life can flourish in abundance.

Playgroup is obviously a significant ministry in terms of its value for mission in connecting families to church communities, and in service in providing care for families at the critical stage of life when there are many pressures, and patterns are being established.

But more importantly, best-practice Playgroup ministry is a strategic space of kingdom living, bearing witness to an ethos of life that aligns with the ways of Jesus. At Playgroup, we live the grace we believe; we live the ethos of simplicity, contentment, relationship, forgiveness, welcome, compassion, loyalty in tough times, speaking hope in dark times and solidarity in struggling times.

Playgroup celebrates the ‘no frills-life’, the ‘no matter about your hair or your tracksuit pants, great that you’re here-life’, the ‘we’ve got time to listen-life’, the ‘tears are ok-life’, the ‘crayons and paper are enough life’, the ‘that happened to me too-life’, the ‘life-together-life’.

The best playgroups are not those with amazing craft activities, spick and span set ups, super toy collections or trained mat time leaders; but the ones in which there is welcome and acceptance for everyone, resources are simple and shared, there’s no agenda, no special ‘have to’ activity;

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PLAYGROUP – no use-by-date

where life is easily joyful and we mourn together, there is lots of listening, mistakes are met with mercy, and small triumphs (like 8 hours of sleep) bring a champion’s cheer. Young children are not marginalised, and their mums or dads or nonas or nannies are not neglected either. Where the budget doesn’t indulge excesses, but there is still enough; and both contentment and exhilaration is found in a large cardboard box, a tray of rice and piece of red shiny cloth. Because in just these three things you have a bat-cave, a cubby house, a tractor, a shop, a castle, a hiding place, a drum; the sound of rain, mice scratching, stirring, pouring, shaking; a red carpet for the queen, superman’s cape, a table cloth for tea, a ball gown for a princess, a parachute, a fire, a blanket.

The rich simplicity of playgroup makes a hospitable space where the kingdom of God – the justice, love, mercy, hope, faith, risk, generosity, truth telling, forgiveness and second chances – belongs easily.

Of course, you can run a playgroup in such a way as to squeeze these things out. You can allow unrealistic expectations to define norms. You can turn the invitation to creative



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play into an artistic burden. You can make morning tea into a Bake-off competition. You can swamp the

natural development of friendships with party-plan selling invitations and obligations. You can force mat time into a mock-kinder session.

Most of us who have led playgroups have felt these tides swell a few times. Hopefully we have found the strength, conviction and encouragement not to be submerged under the waves. That is the very purpose of the CPN, to keep all of us afloat and swimming with strong strokes against the current of culture.

Those of us who have studied child development know that simple sensory play is very good for growing children. Those of us who have studied psychology know that community is very good for the mental health of parents. Those of us who have studied the scriptures know that spaces of welcome and grace are very good for gospeling.

Let’s remind ourselves and our church leaders that, like the old, old story, playgroup is never going in or out of fashion. No apologies needed.

By Beth Barnett



Christian Playgroup Network

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