

Children and Participatory Ministry: Nurture

I was excited as I read a past article in this series where Robert makes mention of Dominic's suggestion that the family should have a 'silent meal'. Robert explains what this means in practice ... the silence being proactively listening to the Lord. At the 'Fire from the Isles' conference, held in Jersey in 2008, I had the privilege of leading the children's programme with children aged 3- 5. From breakfast to lunch is a long time for such young children, so we made lunch part of our morning's session. The children buttered the bread for their own sandwiches and chose their filling then took turns to give thanks before we ate. Taking his turn, one five year old boy not only gave thanks for our meal but also interceded for children without food on their table: a concern for 'wider matters' reflecting the nurture he had received from his parents, rather along the lines of Dominic's meal-time suggestion.

Where does Nurture start?

I am sure you will agree with me that nurture starts in the family. Young children want to do what we do. It's how they learn. To a greater or lesser extent they model what they see in us. If Bible reading is important to us and children see this, it is likely that they will want a Bible of their own. If we write down in a notebook Bible verses that speak to us, or underline them in our Bibles, our children may well want to do the same. If we pray, praise, worship in music (dance, drama, painting, banner-making, sculpting, etc.) they will want to have a go too. If we are in leadership, we may find our children sharing in this with us.

If Family is the primary place for children to learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus, how can church support this?

Nurturing – Discipling –in Church

All of our congregations are on a journey. There are various models for nurturing and discipling children. Some go the "Kid's Church" route – with, perhaps, opportunities for the children to take on leadership roles, or which might be adult led with plenty of action and fun. Other churches prefer the 'All Age' route, where the whole church remains together for either all or some of the time, dividing into groups for the main teaching. Still others run traditional services for everyone. There are many variations, but the church you attend will fit into one of these models – with varying degrees of success in making children and young people feel welcome and part of the church.

The journey of one church

I have been involved in children's ministry and all age worship in our church, Christ Church, Lye, in the West Midlands, for nigh on 30 years. It all began with Lion Club at a time when our own children were small . . . a creative activity group for parents and their pre-school children. Most of these children were 3-5 years old, some parents were Christian, others not, but all participated in the activities of the group, both Mums and Dads. Out of this came co-ordinating Children's Ministry across the church with children up to 11. The challenge – and it was a major one – was to change from being a traditional Sunday School, where the teacher taught the class, to a Children's Team where we all learned together. One of these Sunday School teachers, a prayerful lady, said to me:

"Jan, what you are speaking of is revival and when I see it I'll change. Until then I will carry on as I always have."

Years later, she came to tell me that, in her eyes, she *was* seeing revival – and to apologise for her unbelief in questioning what the Lord was saying and how He was leading.

What was the Lord saying?

"That He would empower our children." He would fill our children with His Holy Spirit. It took a visiting pastor from Estonia to affirm these words. Then, with the support of the Vicar at the time, a letter was written to the

Church. We were in a time of Transition, seeking to get from where we were then to where we believed the Lord was leading.

Following the letter to the church, we began unpacking what this might mean, gift by gift, with the children. As the weeks passed, we saw children praying for those amongst them who were sick, and healing being received from the Lord; children receiving and giving prophecies and having pictures from the Lord; children speaking in tongues with others being given the interpretation. True to His Word, the Lord empowered our children – and that generation of children are now adults discipling their own children, and others, for His service.

This was in the early nineties. Years have passed and leadership changed but the heart of the Children's Ministry has remained the same: a belief that the Lord will empower our children. Discipling is still the key to making this happen – along with the expectation and active input of the children's parents. We follow prepared teaching material, but we also incorporate discipling in Music, Dance and Prayer- all aspects of worship, applying Biblical teaching, and engaging with the worship in Church. This is the Church nurturing and discipling – applying the principles of Participatory Ministry and making them relevant. Depending on their experience on their journey of faith it will be received at different levels by different children.

How does this work out in practice?

Music

- We teach the children to use percussion instruments in church. They in turn teach the adults. Percussion instruments are available for all ages to join in the music of the church together with the Worship Team, following the beat of the drum.
- Children take their turn with drumming. They have been taught how to drum, and three children at a time join the Worship Team on African style drums under the direction of the Children's Music Co-ordinator.
- From time to time, children are invited to bring in the instruments they are learning in music lessons. This works particularly well at Christmas, when the Children's Music Co-ordinator invites children, teenagers and adults to be part of a 'church orchestra' to play carols before the Carol Service. It is a joy for children who may only be able to play one or two notes on their violin, for instance, to be playing alongside a violinist from a famous a symphony orchestra! Those who began playing one or two notes on the French horn can now play a tune. In turn, many adults have dusted off their instruments and brushed up their playing to take part, and so adults, young people and children alike grow in confidence as they play together – and enjoy it!
- One of the highlights last Christmas (2010) was the children playing handbells. The Children's Music Co-ordinator introduced these some weeks before Christmas. I had the privilege of joining them for a lesson on how to use them. We had great fun learning how to strike a note and then together play a tune. We tried a few carols and the children chose the one they felt went best to play in the All Age Carol Service . . . a service led by the Children's Team. They did so well and the congregation were blessed through their lead.

Dance

Dance has been a part of the worship of our church for nearly 30 years. It has not always taken the same form. Over the years we have had presentation dance, whole congregation dance, 'Messianic' style dance, spontaneous dance, dance with (and without) flags and ribbons. The children have been taught different dance styles in their Sunday Groups to give them the movement vocabulary for use in Church. They have also been taught about the place of dance in worship and prayer.

As with music lessons, some of the children attend dance classes. Some parents have asked that their children be encouraged in using the dance styles they are learning in their dance classes in worship. This reflects parents and church working together in nurture and discipling and in providing opportunity and acceptance of gifts. It is all about heart worship – and these children bring blessing to others!

Prayer

Once a month the children remain in church for the whole service. On other Sundays, they stay in until the teaching time. We are an Anglican Church, and so each Sunday the children will be in church during one or more of the formal prayer times. The Children's Team have taught many different aspects of prayer: praise, confession, The Lord's Prayer, prayers of intercession and so on in order to equip the children when they are in church to be able to engage with the prayer and make it their own. This doesn't always work, of course, as it depends to some extent on parents and their attitude and expectations of their children. Do they believe that the children can be part of it, even very young ones? We are convinced from our experience that they can!

Creative Prayer in Church

From time to time, we have led creative prayer in all age services, for instance:

- The Lord's Prayer has been led in movement and dance.
- Praying for the world by rolling a large blow up globe between a group of adults and children. When it is rolled to you, you pray blessing over the first country you see.
- Praying for our Mission Partners in Malawi. We take the painting style of Malawi and use it to depict our prayers.
- We prayerfully place a battery tea light candle on a world map to symbolise the Light of Christ.

Last Sunday, three of our young people led prayers, having listened carefully to the morning News on television. We have used craft, clay and creative writing to express our prayers. The key is not expecting everyone necessarily to pray in the same way. Some prefer traditionally led prayers. As part of the transition to Participatory Ministry, this can be offered alongside activity prayers, as can praying spontaneously, either individually or in two's and three's – or using prayer headings to guide the focus on acetate or Power Point.

Church Prayer Group for children

When our youngest daughter was a child (she is now 22!), we ran Stopwatch Club. Some of you may remember this national organisation that prayed for the world. Our eldest daughter, then in her teens, helped to lead it as we met each week to pray. She herself already had a heart for mission. All who attended this group were meeting to pray so this was, in effect, a Prayer Group for children . . . praying for the world. The children also hosted our Mission Partners when they were on Home Assignment, adding first hand experience to their discovering of the prayer needs of people in other countries and of those who were serving the Lord amongst them.

Family Devotions

Just as we did when our children were young, our eldest daughter has been reading a story from an early years Bible each night with her small children and praying, inviting them too to say their own prayers. Their latest news is that our five year old grand daughter has given her life to the Lord. She loves Family Devotions – it nurtures her commitment to the Lord and engages her heart with those closest to her.

So how does praying and Bible reading in the family work?

Giving thanks at meal times, sharing a Thought for the Day, reading from a Children's Bible to young children as a bedtime story, letting them read to you . . . What you do and how you do it changes as the children get older, become more involved and own this time for themselves . . . or at any rate praying that they will!!

What can you do?

- There are a number of Bible reading notes for children and young people in Christian Bookshops. Encourage them to choose the one they would like to use to help their Bible Reading and prayer.

- Plan special meetings (we did this once a week) and consider inviting others to join your family, both those who have their own children and those who do not. (We did and it brought blessing especially to those without children.)

For this, the children/ young people can:

- choose and maybe write the songs/ poems
- play instruments

Together you can

- Find creative ways to give the Bible reading – dramatised, with puppets, in movement/dance, with flags, parachute or other props (depending on space!).
- Be creative with prayers . . . e.g. flying prayers written on folded paper aeroplanes, writing prayers on pieces of paper and placing the paper in a cup to be passed round and in turn taken out and read.
- Tell the story using dance, parachute, craft, banner making, baking, bread-making, sweets/chocolates according to the theme.

Examples:

Make bread and use in the Lord's Prayer, Feeding of the 5,000, The Last Supper.

Make pigs from marshmallows for the telling of the Lost Son.

Hide chocolate coins for the telling of the Lost Coin.

Tell the Easter story and use clay to make the money given by Judas, the empty tomb, the cross, etc. This could all be placed in an Easter Garden.

A parachute can be used in games and then to tell the story or for praise/ worship songs, prayer. If you do not have a parachute, for a small group and especially in a small space, a kingsize bed sheet can be used instead.

Being willing and available

In Participatory Ministry (ii), Robert wrote about '*Making ourselves available*'. This is not only a message for us but for our children and young people too. Are we willing? Are we available? Children growing up in an environment at home and church where their God-given gifts are being recognised and affirmed, where they are valued and respected will grow in confidence and be willing to 'have a go'. This is the Lord at work, encouraging, empowering and releasing.

At the same time we should not forget that children *are* children and *should* be children. They will pray over someone one minute and race around the next! Nurturing and discipling, is about bringing them up to know Jesus, to exercise His gifts, to be available for His ministries in the power of His Holy Spirit, and to have opportunity to explore/ try out in a safe place.

Children will learn other skills away from church, in school and in music, drama and dance classes. Can they be part of an orchestra when they have only learnt a few notes on the violin? As discussed above, with encouragement they can, if they learn to play the notes they know at the right time. They are part of something bigger, playing their part as members of the Body of Christ – this too can be adapted in the many forms available with Participatory Ministry.

As also discussed above, we have families in our church who want their children to use the dance training they were receiving in their dance classes, in worship. With great joy they have watched as these children, now young people, use these gifts for the Lord. They bless many as they offer back to the Lord their gift and training in heartfelt worship.

Our Youth have been *practising* and learning the '*how*' of leading services, delivering talks, facilitating prayer and ... giving the Notices! This too is part of Participatory Ministry with the outcome that they offer their gifts (and practice) to the Lord with a heart to serve Him and the church, leading all ages with humility and in the Lord's strength.

Conclusion

This article has focussed primarily on the nurture of children in the family and in church. Nurture is the third key in this series on Participatory Ministry and is, of course, important for us all . . . from the youngest to the oldest.

About Jan Dyer

Jan is married to Graham, a Licenced Lay Minister at Christ Church, Lye. They have three grown up children and three grandchildren. Jan co-ordinated Children's Ministry at Christ Church, Lye from 1989-2009 and, with Graham, headed up the Pebbles Team for 3-5 year olds at Soul Survivor for 13 years. She has led children's programmes for Robert on a number of occasions, including conferences in Malvern and Jersey. She is presently National Co-ordinator for the Christian Dance Fellowship of Britain.

If you would like ideas for prayer or Bible teaching activities at home, in Sunday or mid-week groups and all age services, you may find the following books/ booklets of interest. The ideas are designed for using as they are, or for creatively sparking new ideas that will work better in your situation.

Jan is author/ co-author of:

100 Creative Prayer Ideas for Children, pub. Kingsway Children's Ministry

100 Children's Club Activities, pub. Kingsway Children's Ministry

Food for Thought: Chocolate in Talks and Prayer, co-authored with Trish Deeley and produced by The Christian Dance Fellowship of Britain www.cdfb.org.uk

Parachute for the Puppet Team and Children's Ministry, pub One Way UK Creative Ministries
www.onewayuk.com

She is also a contributor to: *Playchutes in Christian Teaching* compiled by SeamStress www.playchutes.com