



ChurchArmy
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Encounters on the Edge



no. 31:
Small
Beginnings:
Church for Under 5s



Discoveries about fresh expressions of church from The Sheffield Centre

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Small Beginnings: Church for Under 5s

A personal u-turn

I never saw it coming. Before the birth of my daughter, Natalie, in April 2005, I had a feeling that being a mother would be hard work (although I didn't realise how hard). I knew deep down something incredible was about to happen so I was not altogether surprised when it felt like **my heart had to triple in size to contain all the love and fear I now felt.** What was so very unexpected was the instantaneous u-turn in my attitude towards children's ministry in church.



Claire and Natalie

Before Natalie, I must confess I didn't really think about children's ministry at all, especially provision for under 5s. I was vaguely aware of strongly-held differing opinions about children in church but, to my shame, I used to roll my eyes upward when I saw puppet-making workshops advertised; I thought something so twee was a million miles away from "cutting edge" mission that we researched in The Sheffield Centre.

When I had Natalie, everything changed. When I came back to work part-time after maternity leave, it seemed blatantly obvious that under 5s work should be a part of my research role. By meeting with practitioners and advisors in this field, I have begun to explore my newly-found passion from a mission-shaped church perspective. This has the advantage of helpfully broadening our team's awareness of what people are finding regarding fresh expressions of church for under 5s and their families. My journey is an intriguing one and a timely one.

Why is under 5s work so important?

Changes

I started my journey with the well-known statistic discussed in *Mission-shaped Church* that in 2000 only 4% of children in the UK went to church, based on attendance at Sunday worship. I then met with Margaret Withers, Archbishop's Officer for Evangelism among Children, who confirmed my fears that **the number of children in this country who know the Christian story is frighteningly low**. She and others are concerned, not just for the continuation of the church in the future but, more importantly, the responsibility on our part to take the spiritual nurture of children seriously and resource ministry among them, just as we would any other people group in society. *Mission-shaped Church's* lack of any meaningful exploration on work with children is illustrative of this marginalisation, as is the fact that the funding for Margaret's role has ceased now she is retired.

As Margaret's book *Mission-shaped Children* explains, **there is just as much need for mission-shaped church thinking for children's ministry as there is for adults**. Changes in employment, mobility, divorce, free time and consumerism have profound effects on even the under 5s age group. "The last 20 years have seen more changes in a child's life than any other time in history."¹ Churches must seriously engage with children how they are today and not wish for the children of yesteryear. "The tradition of seeing children's ministry as their attending church or Sunday school has been unproductive for at least 50 years", so Margaret writes.² She then goes on to

describe some of the mission-shaped church thinking and practice that is already taking place. Those churches that are seriously engaging with children are finding growth in unexpected ways and in unexpected places, but "many of them are almost unnoticed and are not seen as integral to the parish's mission in the community."³ This is substantiated by the Diocese of Guildford which found that its churches

They are finding growth in unexpected ways and in unexpected places.

¹ Margaret Withers *Mission-shaped Children* Church House Publishing 2006 p.1

² *Mission-shaped Children* p.13

³ *Mission-shaped Children* p.13

had 6,868 children on Sunday registers, but nearly as many (6,615) on weekday registers.⁴

A rare openness in parents and in under 5s

For new **parents**, especially new mothers, the birth of their baby can lead to an unusually open time of life spiritually as the continued - though declining - stream of baptism requests for the average church illustrates.⁵ The sense of partnering with creation through giving birth can feel very profound. There is a remarkable social openness too to meet new people in a similar situation. **I have found myself talking to complete strangers about relatively private things just because we are both pushing prams.** "Looking after small children is miraculous, tedious, hilarious, exhausting, soul-destroying, extraordinary and lonely."⁶ These days, many women are waiting before having children and consequently, when their first child is born, they miss the stimulation of work and the company of colleagues and experience a loss of confidence as they wrestle with very different skills.



Close encounters of a pram kind

I have not met a mum yet who hasn't sought companionship and solace with another mum. I am constantly surprised at the number of mums, dads, grandparents and child minders who don't hesitate to cross the threshold of a church building for a midweek mother and baby - or mother and toddler - group. However, **this openness, on the whole, seems to stop short of attending church on a Sunday morning**; the frequently hoped-for transfer of members of



⁴ Archdeacons' Articles of Enquiry 2004 cited in *Mission-shaped Children* p.27

⁵ The number of infant baptisms per 1,000 live births fell by 24% between 1990 and 2000 Bob Jackson *Hope for the Church* Church House Publishing 2002 p.2

⁶ The Sunday Times Magazine 27th August 2006 "Choosing Your Moment" An article comparing the experiences of mothers in their 20s, 30s and 40s, asking the question: "Is there a right time to have a baby?"

a flourishing midweek under 5s group to Sunday morning seldom materialises. While there are glorious exceptions, the yawning chasm between midweek and Sunday morning is not closing; if anything, it feels as though it is growing wider for all sorts of reasons⁷.



For **children** under 5, this is a very precious time of openness and curiosity. They will explore anything in their physical environment given half a chance and have not yet developed the prejudices that adults work with in choosing their friendship groups. But, more importantly, there is mounting evidence to suggest that **children might be born with innate spiritual awareness**. The work done by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, published in *Spirit of the Child*, concludes that there is what they have termed a “relational consciousness” in children as young as 6 or 7; when invited to reflect on things of a more spiritual nature, the children showed an unusually profound awareness of something beyond the everyday taking place. They were encouraged

to consider the wonders of creation and significant relationships in their lives as well as traditionally conceived notions of spirituality.

Working with children in a broad range of cultural settings for over 35 years, Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi (building on the earlier observations of Maria Montessori) have been left wondering whether there “*exists in the child a mysterious reality of union with God?*”⁸ There are some fascinating accounts in *The Religious Potential of the Child* of children who appear to have **a spiritual awareness that cannot be explained by their upbringing**. For children aged 3-6, Cavalletti developed the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* as a framework within which children can continue to come closer to God by themselves.⁹ Interestingly, while I was researching Cavalletti, I read that, based on a study of 200 pre-school children, researchers at

⁷ *Mission-shaped Children* chapters 1 and 4 explore these reasons further

⁸ Sofia Cavalletti *The Religious Potential of the Child* Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications 1992 p.32

⁹ Sofia Cavalletti uses the parable of the good shepherd almost exclusively in the spiritual nurture of young children. It speaks so effectively to their fundamental needs to love, be loved and protected. The ambiguity of the identity of the shepherd allows them to make different and necessary associations appropriate to their development. Interestingly, it follows straight on from Matthew 18 v.1-9, the famous passage on Jesus’ thoughts about children and childlikeness.

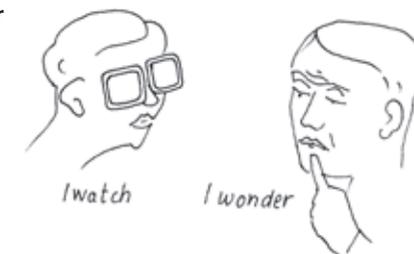
the University of Bristol concluded that children have an inbuilt belief in magic and spirituality, “*almost as if their brain is being trained to believe the unbelievable.*”¹⁰ Perhaps Wordsworth was right when he wrote,

*“But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”*¹¹

Judith Wigley makes an excellent point in her book *Working with Under 5s*: “*research ... tells us that if babies’ gestures towards adults are ignored, they will eventually stop trying to gesture and their ability to relate and respond socially will be limited. Perhaps, then, those who are not stimulated in the spiritual realm may also be prevented from growing spiritually.*”¹² If this is the case, as Judith rightly says, the time churches spend with under 5s is crucial.

New resources

Wonderfully, for those who are eager to pursue the implication of these research discoveries in practice, we now have available to us *Godly Play* which is proving accessible and effective despite being an import from the US. Based on Montessori educational methods and influenced by Cavalletti’s *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, *Godly Play* is about creating an environment where children can engage with God without the interference of lengthy explanation from the facilitator.¹³ It deliberately encourages a child’s capacity for learning through imagination, wonder and play at the expense of a method of teaching more concerned with the memorising of facts. **It is, therefore, delightfully counter-cultural to the information-rich but imagination-poor world** that many children live in nowadays due to two-dimensional technologies and pressures to tick educational development boxes. The “wondering” questions allow children to experience *themselves* how God can speak in



¹⁰ Daily Mail online 4th September 2006

¹¹ William Wordsworth “Intimations of Immortality” from *Recollections of Early Childhood* v.5 1803-6

¹² Judith Wigley *Working with Under 5s* Scripture Union 2005 p.12

¹³ For more information about Godly Play, visit www.godlyplay.org.uk

personally meaningful ways through Bible and Christian language. They discover that Scripture is not a collection of finite answers or neat formulas for the Christian life.

An increasing number of dioceses are acquiring *Godly Play* materials to lend out to churches and offering training in facilitation. *Godly Play's* respectful, non-coercive approach lends itself to good use in schools with children of any background or religion and is proving increasingly popular with adults. While under 3s may not be able to follow the story as well as the older children, some practitioners use it as they see their under 3s fascinated by the visual stimulus and are keenly aware that, by the atmosphere of stillness and wonder created, something special is happening. Natalie and I have also experienced "See and Know"¹⁴, a methodology from a different educational approach to *Godly Play* developed specifically for children from 6 months to 5 years old, to introduce them to basic Christian truths using simple songs, repeated simple vocabulary and visual aids, all in a set sequence.

The limitations of all-age worship

Despite the fact that in the last 15 years more than ever has been done to enable children to take part in the main service of a church¹⁵, from the perspective of an under 5 and his or her family, **all-age worship can still be very hard work for the parents**¹⁶. Most parents I have met say that they struggle to find connection on a spiritual level in all-age worship. Some value the chance to get out of the house and mix with others, but seldom is it a time they can focus on God because of the need to focus on their children. I have even heard the word "dread" used by friends for those occasions when they find themselves taking their children to all-age services without their spouse. At its worst, you pack a bag of toys and food and spend the whole time making sure your little ones don't get upset.

It would appear that many under 5s find all-age worship too long and too "big". How would you feel if everyone else was three times your height? They can't physically see who is leading, let alone follow what is going on. All-age services have to be pitched at some age group and somewhere around the

¹⁴ <http://members.aol.com/andrewreidas/>, cited 14th September 2006

¹⁵ Margaret Withers *The Child in the Midst of a Mission-shaped Church* Lecture given to the Diocesan Children's Advisors Conference April 2005

¹⁶ The same could be said for "family worship" or "intergenerational worship".

8-12 year olds seems to be most common. So it may not be laziness or convenience that prompts parents to want to leave their children in their own groups; it could be because the children enjoy them. This might explain why, bizarrely, churches find that **all-age worship seems sometimes to keep young families away** when they would otherwise attend. In the context of a small church, I have heard this inexplicable phenomenon described as a "secret rota of attendance"¹⁷, as if the congregation have agreed a random pattern (regardless of service type) amongst themselves without telling the vicar.



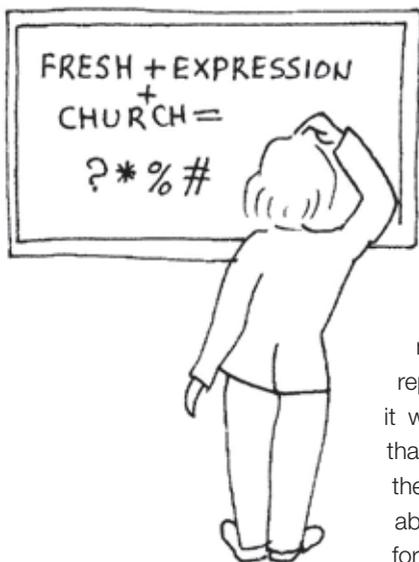
My fear with all-age worship is that, on closer exploration, other motivations might be at work and that the needs of under 5s and their parents are not being met in the meantime. Through all-age worship, do churches seek to bolster their image as a central part of community life? With only an average of 4% of children attending on a Sunday morning, is this claim realistic? Surely the local schools, shops, pubs or working men's clubs are the real centres in this day and age? Is all-age worship pursued in order that the church can model a counter-culture heterogeneity that witnesses to the inclusivity of God's kingdom? Won't that sound a little hollow while so many of our churches are made up of white, middle-aged, middle class lovers of middle-brow classical music?

While churches wrestle with these seemingly impossible, albeit worthy goals, is the spiritual nurture of young children really a sufficient priority? The tendency for churches only to tweak existing adult worship suggests it might not be. The early stages of parenthood are relentlessly tiring, with sleepless nights and the redefining of roles and relationships. As well as the initial changes, every stage seems to bring with it new demands that challenge you to your very core. If all-age is the only opportunity for under 5s and their parents to worship together, **there is a danger that tired parents will miss out when they need help and support most**. We shouldn't be making it more difficult for them than it already is.



¹⁷ My thanks to Revd Andy Colebrooke (Rector of Mistley with Manningtree and Bradfield in north-east Essex) for this wonderful phrase.

What is a fresh expression of church for under 5s?



Dazed and confused

It would appear that confusion over what a “fresh expression of church” is extends to the world of ministry to under 5s also. I have met **two extremes** when it comes to the phrase. Firstly, the term is studiously avoided as just another bandwagon or fad that disempowers the practitioners on the ground and makes them feel inadequate for the good work they are doing already. A common misunderstanding of the *Mission-shaped Church* report is that it was implying that all that existed before it was ineffectual. Careful reading of the report shows that its authors were simply attempting to reflect back to the church what it was they were seeing happen. The absence of any detailed exploration on the implications for children’s ministry in the report has probably not helped this misunderstanding. I note that work with other age groups such as older people was not investigated either.

Secondly, I am learning that many children’s workers use the term “fresh expression of church” over generously because of a belief that any group of two or more adults or children meeting to explore aspects of the Christian faith is “church”. I would usually agree with this now common instinct for minimalist thinking. Being able to use the term “church” rather than “a church” or “the church” acknowledges that, although it may as yet be incomplete as a fully mature expression of church, it is authentic. My only hesitation with everything new being called “a fresh expression of church” is that it might prevent the sort of self-reflection that will enable a community to develop into something more complete and still more effective than it already is.

So what am I looking for?

My guess is that it is not just the sort of outreach programme or community activity that only offers a time of play for the children and a coffee for the mums, even though a group like this may well be a lifeline for those that come. While it might have the potential to become so, or it might be a crucial stage towards the eventual growth of a church, I do not think in and of itself it can justify being called a “fresh expression of church” yet. Perhaps we could call it a “fresh expression of community”?

Neither do I think the re-working of an existing congregation to be child-centred in its worship is, in a strict sense, a “fresh expression of church”, even with the most effective of approaches. I am not saying this is wrong; this is clearly a praiseworthy development through which the spiritual nurture of children is being taken seriously. My concern is with the correct use of language. It may be more accurate to say that such a church is doing mission-shaped *worship* rather than mission-shaped *church*.

To take seriously the “church” element of the phrase “fresh expression of church”, I’m more convinced by new worshipping communities that are forming in this way: the time of gathering is the primary or only expression of church belonged to, so **the membership includes some, if not all, children and adults that wouldn’t otherwise be attending another church** or another church service.

Why be so exacting? As I have said, mission-shaped worship is not wrong. The challenge to take seriously the spiritual needs of its young will be met. However, in calling it more than it is, my fear is that churches may be more susceptible to disappointment in mission. It is very easy, when starting with an existing congregation, for mission to be blurred or eclipsed in the process.¹⁸ The instinct for “come to us” is still common, but non-Christians will not emerge out of the woodwork automatically. Or, as Encounters on the Edge 30 warned us, “*when churches...describe the worship they offer as their mission, this is merely changing labels on bottles*”. A church will have to wait and see if this “mission-shaped worship” approach does connect with children and their, as yet, non-Christian friends and whether something different is needed.

¹⁸ www.encountersontheedge.org.uk carries a very helpful short document that helps distinguish between mission-shaped church and mission-flavoured church. It can be found under “George’s talks”.

Mini Mass

Where?

On the Tuesday morning after Low Sunday, I visited “Mini Mass” at the Chapel of St Mary and St John in north Ascot. I had been told it was a good example of a fresh expression of church for under 5s and their families and additionally notable as an example with Anglo-Catholic influence. The Chapel of St Mary and St John is one of two sacred buildings that serve the parish of Ascot Heath. Built in 1910, it is tucked neatly between the prosperous suburban houses on King Edward’s Road only a couple of miles from the famous racecourse.

The service began at 9.30am in a smaller side chapel room with flexible seating and carpet. Chairs were arranged in a large circle with a small table at one end on which stood the elements. On walking in, I found myself unexpectedly choking back a tear. **I don’t often see sacred space specifically set out for children.** I am used to having to stay constantly alert in case Natalie bumps her head against a pew or falls on the stone floor. Even if it is a more modern layout, usually the size of the room means I have to keep her in eyesight when she is feeling adventurous, or comfort her if she is intimidated. Here children were in **a safe environment, with the right amount of space,** and both adults and children had the freedom to move about as needed.

How?

We welcomed each other individually by name, by means of a song (a capella) at the beginning, a key *Godly Play* practice. We were all invited, both adults and children, to share something we were thankful for and something we wanted prayer for. As we went round the circle I was struck by the very positive feedback in the group and wondered if this was an indicator of a healthy, supportive community. Over coffee afterwards, I was helped to understand that this is a crucial moment for adults to flag up if they aren’t coping well; this can then be followed up informally and sensitively with each other over coffee after the service.

One of the adults sat on the floor to tell a short Bible story from a picture book, with the children around her so they could see the illustrations. We were then led in Eucharistic prayer F by Revd Alison Cooper (assistant curate), including short sung responses based on those used across all congregations in the church. The children were introduced to the musical phrases so wider church celebrations would be met with familiarity. The bread and wine were blessed and distributed. The children did not take communion but received a blessing. I understand that, having reviewed their policy on children and communion, as of September 2006, children who have been baptised will be able to take communion. Being used to weekly hour and a half services at my home church, to me Mini Mass was almost over before it started. Deliberately timed for the children’s concentration spans, and therefore a blessing to the parents also, it wisely lasted only 25 minutes. After a prayer of dismissal, we moved to the adjoining King Edward’s hall for coffee, biscuits, chat and crafts.



Why?

Over coffee, I was told that while Mini Mass is pitched at the children, it is ideal for parents too. In a busy week, it is a chance for them to stop for half an hour’s quieter reflection alongside their children. **They can relax a bit because their children are happy and safe.** There are no books or sheets needed, which leaves both hands free, and it is accessible because of the way you can “dip in and out”. Having been convinced that I could only properly relax when Natalie was asleep, I had underestimated how enriching and spiritually and emotionally energising the adults found the chance to do something of spiritual significance together with their children.

When I asked about husbands, I was reminded that in this day and age, Sunday isn’t any more inclusive than Tuesday and that other family members attend when not working or at school. Two dads regularly attend. They have a policeman who comes when he has to work on a Sunday. Although only ten adults and eight children were present when I visited, there are as many as 60 different parents, grandparents, childminders and children that come,

with a mixture of church connections. About a third of families that have joined Mini Mass are Christians who hadn't found a church having moved into the area. One third of parents attended church as children but not as adults until Mini Mass. The remaining third have never had any meaningful connection with church until now. There are even two members who wouldn't call themselves Christians.

Alison's role is understood by all to be chaplain to this self-contained community, which, in effect, is **run by the mums**. On the occasions that Alison is not able to be present to celebrate Mass, the service is then led by one of the congregation by extended communion. They have two designated mothers who have permission from the Bishop to perform this role. The core group of about eight adults meet every six weeks after Mini Mass to review rotas at someone's house over coffee. Members of this group commit themselves for a year. Every half term they meet for a "reflections" evening where they can talk through a variety of Christian topics. This is open to all adults in the Mini Mass community. Two questions they often ask themselves are: "How are you experiencing Mini Mass?" and, "How are you experiencing God in your life?" It was apparent to me on my visit that most were very capable women, some of whom had given up careers in the likes of marketing and administration to have children. Others still work part-time. It then made sense to me that they were so willing and able to take on responsibility of the day-to-day running of Mini Mass. A few of the Mini Mass families go to mass on a Sunday morning now that their children are older.

Lynn

Although on extended leave when I visited, Revd Lynn Trainor, curate, is the one responsible for the development of Mini Mass over the last few years. It is important to say that there has been a Pram Mass at the church for 35 years, so there is a sense of building on good, sturdy foundations. When Lynn arrived, there was little different in the style of service to a normal mass. Numbers had dwindled, and some of the mums began to ask whether something more could be done in worship to connect with the children, not just the parents. They were also keen **to develop something with a deeper sense of community for under 5s and their families**. A mother of four herself, Lynn was keen that what was offered actually worked. She and others felt that Sunday morning wasn't the answer, observing that, for their church, all-age worship often worked out in practice as youth worship.

One of the mums, Caroline, suggested meeting for coffee to work together on what might serve under 5s and their families more effectively. They knew that **anything that was developed had to be low-maintenance**; parents of under 5s have very little time and energy. Spirituality not dogma was their priority; a question they frequently asked themselves in the early stages of Mini Mass was: "Does this bring life?" Lynn had just completed a year-long intensive spirituality course with six of the mums, so this kind of thought process came easily to this close-knit, spiritually mature group. Even though Mini Mass is now established, the core group of leaders still take time to review its progress and talk with families about how they might make it even better.

For Lynn, Montessori-inspired **nurture, rather than a frantic time of fun activity, was always going to be the way forward**. She wasn't convinced the latter would feed a child spiritually or lead him or her to an encounter with God in the way that she suspected the former would. Neither does she have the temperament or gifting to create and maintain something so frenetic; she just isn't wired that way. Lynn believes that *"if you give a child a beautiful space, they will want to engage with it."* They have since introduced Godly Play sessions every six weeks and have been amazed at how the children respond. They have many of the Godly Play instincts already (Lynn learnt the Eucharistic prayer off by heart as focus was lost when it was read), and they may in time use Godly Play more regularly; to them, it is easily the most effective approach they have come across for nurturing their children's spirituality.

Lynn describes Mini Mass as *"organic, self-aware, robust and ready for visitors"*. Although she believes it is church, she is wary of the "fresh expressions of church" labelling. She described to me the huge pressure she feels to tick the box and the pressure to grow something that can be described as "successful". She is happier with the idea that God finds us, as opposed to us finding God through our cleverly-laid mission plans. The story and values of Mini Mass are open to change. She isn't too concerned with a goal or end point of establishing a fresh expression of church; she is more concerned with God doing what he wants to do.

Manna Munchers

Where?

On a warm but grey and misty Thursday morning in early July, I drove onto the Manor, a large low-rise housing estate, on the east side of Sheffield. Incomes are very low and unemployment levels are among the highest, being double the national average. Car ownership is lower than average so the area is helped by access to the Supertram which runs along one side of it. The estate was started during the 1930s as a garden city type development offering a healthier alternative to living in overcrowded central Sheffield with all its noise and grime. Like many other garden cities built at that time, places of work were not included in the Manor scheme. From the late 1990s onwards, large areas of the estate have been demolished and in some cases rebuilt with private housing.

The Manor is served by one large Anglican parish containing three places of worship, one of which is Anglican-Methodist. A small team of two Anglican clergy and two Church Army officers currently make up the paid staff. A Methodist minister is linked to the Anglican-Methodist building. Every year Cuddesdon students and Church Army students are sent here on placements to experience inner city ministry.

I entered the well-lit church hallway to find chairs arranged around a coffee table and mums and children making themselves comfortable within the circle. (Through a door, I caught a glimpse and a whiff of the food from the older people's luncheon club.) I was greeted by Suzette Maguire, a Church Army sister, commissioned five years ago to work as an Evangelist within the parish, and after about 20 minutes chatting all together, we followed Suzette through the double doors to the chancel area.

How?

We sat on chairs arranged in a circle, while the children looked for musical instruments that had been hidden around the room especially for them to find. We began with songs accompanied by shakers. As well as two songs that acknowledged everyone present individually by name, one of the songs required both children and adults to choose one word to describe their

day. In a similar way to Mini Mass, this is a non-threatening way of carers and children indicating to one another how they are feeling. The paschal candle was lit for story time; the children gathered around Suzette to follow the story pictorially. After more songs, the carers and children worked on a craft activity together. Suzette uses the story and craft time to gently introduce Christian themes; this last spring, she has introduced to them the fruits of the Spirit. To conclude our time, we gathered round the candle by the altar and Suzette read the names of people known to the group who needed prayer. The candle was then blown out and we went through to the foyer for tea and coffee, cake and more chat. The time of worship lasted about 35 minutes.



Katy and Megan

Two years ago when Megan was only six weeks, Katy walked into St Swithun's one day to see if it had an under 5s midweek group. There was no other provision of this kind in the area and she knew that churches often run groups. Katy grew up in a Catholic family but hadn't been to church since she was a child. She is grateful for the non-questioning, non-pressuring environment in which Megan can discover that there is more to Christmas and Easter besides presents. She occasionally attends on a Sunday, but the service starts at 11am which, with Megan, feels like lunchtime and, in the summer especially, Sunday is a day spent with family. Although there are many aspects of the Christian faith that she isn't sure about, she made a declaration of faith in a special service for her last November. Katy is very happy to recommend it to others; matters of faith are introduced in a very gentle way and, most importantly, Megan loves it.





Suzette

For Suzette, this is the highlight of her week. It draws on her previous training and work as a nursery nurse. She began Manna Munchers three and a half years ago as a response to a request from baptism families. She went back to them with a range of suggestions that might begin to plug the gap in provision for under 5s in the area; everyone she spoke to opted for something like a pram service. Thursday seemed the best day, as earlier in the week carers were tied up collecting benefits and shopping. The name came out of **wanting to get away from the term “pram service”**; as Suzette reminded me, “How many people push prams these days?” “Manna” came from playing around with the word “Manor” and seemed apt as the service feeds children and

adults just enough for their stage of life and stage of faith. The membership has grown steadily through Suzette’s contact with the families of children she has baptised and word of mouth by the carers. There isn’t too much preparation on a weekly basis, but a lot of thought goes into planning the theme for each half-term programme.

Like Mini Mass, they meet every week of the year except between Christmas and New Year. Suzette believes it is important that someone is always there on a Thursday, even if numbers are small. **An unexpectedly closed door when you need it most can be devastating** (it even reduced me to tears once), and this, on the whole, is a non-diary culture. During the school holidays, excursions are arranged for every Thursday, allowing older children and other family members to come too.

Suzette is convinced that Manna Munchers is a fresh expression of church. She makes it clear to people that it is church and that certain things (prayers, quiet space, teaching) will be included because of that. A few members occasionally now attend a Sunday morning service also, but the majority of carers would never darken the door on a Sunday morning. Suzette is well aware that the **Christian teaching will be just as new to the adults as it is to the children**. Furthermore, the adults have begun to meet up as a group socially outside of the Thursday morning.

What are we learning about fresh expressions of church for under 5s?

Expect small

Like many other fresh expressions of church that work with an instinct for the small, fresh expressions of **church for under 5s will always inevitably be smaller than congregation-sized**. If the numbers are too big, it will be too noisy. This means the children will get confused over who is leading, discipline (when needed) will be harder and the space will be confining. The intimacy of the circle also means a child can be near to mum for safety and be near to what is happening at the same time. The small numbers also enable everyone to be named individually in the songs of greeting. Like cell church, when at last you see numerical growth hoped for, **you will be forced to think about multiplication issues more quickly** than in congregational life, perhaps using different days of the week.



Expect regular

There is something about the pattern of meeting every week - even in school holidays - that is, I think, inescapable, for any under 5s group that wants to grow towards being a fresh expression of church. Firstly, **if it doesn’t meet every week, the feeling that it is merely a programme or community activity will be harder to shake off** and it will be harder to grow a sense of lasting community; it might feel like you are starting from scratch every September. Secondly, I think to have serious intentions of being church for under 5s and their families, **there must be awareness of the fact that school term time makes no difference**. If anything, school holidays are the hardest time. It might make a difference for mums who have older children at school, but even then, having more children than normal on your hands might mean you appreciate the chance to gather, as the case studies have shown. I know I found my first August with Natalie very lonely as that was

a busy time for my husband workwise. For those who are frightened of burnout for leaders, I would first ask them to review the way they lead.

Expect short

As well as small, I was surprised at how short the structured time together was. (Now that Natalie has discovered Cbeebies, a TV channel specifically for under 5s available through Sky and Freeview, I have realised watching it with her that no programme lasts longer than 20 minutes.)

The venue, too, is key. You will need light, heating and a decent floor. You will need nappy changing facilities and ground floor access for pushchairs.¹⁹ Will you meet on a morning because that is the best time, or would an afternoon teatime slot be better? Have mums been consulted? Have the children been consulted? What about asking health visitors in the area for their comments also?



Think long-term

Numbers may well vary considerably due to illness, not just of regular members but of any older school-aged siblings they may have who require Mum and the rest of the children to stay home. There will also be a regular turnover of attendance in a similar way to a youth church with teenagers who go off to university at 18 and never return, although, as Mini Mass illustrates, over 5s may still feel a connection and keep coming in the holidays. Something might be developed specifically for primary school-aged children as a follow-

on. The 4 o'clock family communion service in Todmorden (told in **Encounters on the Edge** no.11) which meets after school on a Monday would be a good example of this. We must be careful that subsequent expressions of church for these children as they grow up are just as well thought out.

Learning to encounter God through imagination, wonder and play is a gift for life, not just early childhood.

*Learning to encounter
God through
imagination, wonder
and play is a gift for life*

It is early days

As with many fresh expressions of church, these two case studies show fresh expressions of church in the earliest stages of their ecclesiological life.

¹⁹ See Judith Wigley *Working with Under 5s* for more comprehensive list

With no blueprint to follow, there is a sense in which they have been feeling their way forward. We shouldn't expect to find many examples that have achieved maturity in every aspect of what it can mean to be fully church. It is interesting to look at the start of the journey for each of the two case studies and how this has shaped what has formed so far.

Both have, rightly, started with the need to have under 5s-shaped **worship** and **community** that draws on education methods appropriate to this age-group. Mini Mass, as you would expect from their name and church tradition, have always seen the Eucharist as being at the heart of their time together.

I would encourage all churches to review their policy on children and communion just as Mini Mass have done; since 1997, children have been allowed to receive Holy Communion before confirmation with a bishop's permission²⁰, and Margaret Withers makes a brief comment in *Mission-shaped Children* of the very positive feedback given at General Synod in July 2005 based on the way that it had "*transformed and enriched churches and ... (the children's) faith and reverence had been an example to everyone.*"²¹ All that I have read exploring children's spirituality has certainly made me reconsider my views on this. For this "type" of fresh expression of church, if children do not receive communion when communion is present, there is a danger that it may send messages to both members and onlookers that it is more about the parents and, once again, the children are not being taken seriously. I note that the Orthodox church has always given communion to children.

For Mini Mass, baptism has been deemed most helpfully celebrated in the context of the wider church community on a Sunday morning, modelling a healthy sense of **connection** to the wider church. However, I do have one question. In the longer term, is **inherited church prepared to take the emerging church seriously by allowing them to celebrate baptism in the local context if they so wish?** If not, inherited church will deny them the chance to grow into the fullness of being church.

Mini Mass have achieved **indigenous leadership** in terms of the ownership and everyday running of the group, despite needing a priest present. In Suzette's absence, Manna Munchers is led by Barbara, a member of St

²⁰ *Mission-shaped Children* p.24

²¹ *Mission-shaped Children* p.120

Swithun's Sunday congregation. While there are some very gifted younger women in the group, low self-esteem will mean that developing their ability to lead will take longer. Manna Munchers' strength lies in its **mission**: its ability to connect with de-churched and non-churched families on the Manor estate, a type of area in which the church has traditionally struggled to connect with local people. It is also showing an ability to **self-reproduce** as needed. Both are seeing **community** life flourish within and outside the times of structured meeting as carers socialise together.



This is not just for the children...

Unless you go down a route of setting up an officially recognised and externally regulated nursery, you will always have more than one generation present because children at this age won't be dropped off and picked up later. Both case studies show how the fresh expression of church is not just for the children. Grandparents (and even a great grandparent!) are also members of these groups. It is more than adults' hearts being warmed by a good, safe, nurturing environment with friendly people. **Experiencing a short, simple act of worship at the same time as your child or grandchild can be spiritually enriching for adults.** For non-churched parents, this expression of church will act as a gentle introduction to faith for them as well as for their children.

Within the framework of Westerhoff's stages of faith development, adults as well as their children may well be at the earliest stage of "experienced faith" where theological words and doctrines are unimportant. **Experiences of trust, love and acceptance provide opportunities for faith to form.**²² Does the over-emphasis in achieving a heterogeneity in terms of age alone betray a subconscious Christendom mindset that thinks first of maturity of faith corresponding somehow with mental, physical and emotional maturity? Is it reminiscent of an age when all adults in society were considered to be Christian and only the young needed to be instructed in the faith?

²² John H Westerhoff III *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Seabury Press 1976 The four stages are experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith, owned or mature faith

Wider issues

Closer to existing

Having been quite careful to differentiate earlier between "new" and "existing" in my definitions of a fresh expression of church, I am now realising that **this "category" or type might be the one most likely to work closely with existing churches for a number of reasons.** Firstly, baptism contacts seem to be a natural feeder into this kind of fresh expression of church. Secondly, existing churches have a long-standing reputation for running groups for babies, toddlers and their carers in local communities. Thirdly, the age-boundedness of the demographic means that you have to ask questions of what happens when the children are older. Working closely with an existing church that has a flourishing children's work might provide a solution. In that sense, the nearest and most helpful comparison might be the best practice of multiple congregations. Having representation on the PCC will be an important sign that the work is being taken seriously. Having said that, there is nothing to stop a church continuing to evolve or multiply within itself, just as Soul Survivor Watford had to do when their teenagers grew up, got married and had children.

Unity expressed in a different way

We are helped in Anglicanism to have an ecclesiology that sees church as a multi-layered reality.²³ With this gift, we can explore unity and diversity at the same time. We can embrace Donald McGavern's conclusions that people become Christians most easily when within their own culture, but yet introduce them to the wider church family with all its breadth as they grow in maturity.

I am indebted to Margaret Withers for her use of **meals as an analogy for how people worship.** She rightly points out that no one would expect a Monday teatime or an extended family's Sunday lunch to have the intimacy of a romantic candlelit dinner. In the same way, neither should we expect an all-age worship service to provide the intimacy

neither should we expect an all-age worship service to provide the intimacy of evensong or Taizé service.

²³ Paul Avis *The Anglican Understanding of the Church* SPCK 2000 explores the layers of worldwide community, nation, diocese and parish



of evensong or Taizé service. I wonder whether the all-age meeting might function like the extended family Sunday lunch where the frequency is not daily but a weekly or a monthly pattern. Small children would struggle to sit still every day through the length of a Sunday lunch. They find the same problem with a weekly all-age worship service. **They need their short, noisy, messy meals of simple food on a daily basis.** But for special occasions such as festivals six or so times year, it will be entirely appropriate to bring together the family of different congregations for a joint (pardon the pun) celebration together.

A sense of **unity** across a number of small congregations under the umbrella of one parish might best be gained through their collective mission or community activity rather than worship. Things like litter picking, concerts, fun days or car boot sales could all be mounted jointly. Harvest suppers, carol singing and Easter egg hunts could be done together. I have heard of the older members of congregations “adopting” children as pseudo-grandchildren; the children make crafts for them which they present to them on visits, while the “grandparents” make a fuss of them and remember them faithfully in prayer.

All-age can be made to work well

I don't want to give the impression that all-age worship can never be good, but we are talking far more than swapping the sermon for a children's talk or substituting one of the hymns with an action song. The best all-age worship starts from scratch and it requires someone with very particular skills to design

an all-age service is the second hardest service type to lead well.

and lead the service. Margaret Withers is of the opinion that **an all-age service is the second hardest service type to lead well, the hardest being the funeral of a child.** It is often left to those who have little experience or training in the shape and flow of corporate worship. Curiously enough, it might not even be the vicar or the children's worker who can communicate best to both children and adults at the same time. I would begin by looking in the direction of

either experienced teachers or those who are naturally inclined to Ignatian spirituality. In my opinion, this important person resource is a key factor in an existing church deciding whether it should respond to the needs of its

under 5s through all-age worship or plant a fresh expression of church as discussed above.

Another factor is whether existing church members are willing to see their existing worship physically deconstructed and something less didactic and more creative take its place. I suspect, in the same way that it is with evangelism, if a church isn't already making small steps to try to action what is being talked about and hoped for, you may find they aren't really willing to change. But beware, size might be a limitation. If the hoped for growth in numbers from the easier to access all-age worship occurs, the harder it will be to use space creatively and **provide enough intimacy to engage the smaller ones.** It might be an ideal option for now, but if you are expecting to grow, you may well just be delaying the questions of multiplication for later.

Interestingly, the young adults who pioneered “alternative worship” 10 or 15 years ago have found that their multi-sensory approach, sense of mystery and deliberately designed ambient atmosphere engage very well with the children they are now parents to. The only significant thing that some groups have had to change is the time of meeting from late to early evening. CPAS are promoting “liquid worship”²⁴ as a way forward for all-age worship with different stations. Although, I have not experienced this yet, it sounds full of potential.

²⁴ Tim Lomax and Michael Moynagh Grove Worship W181 October 2004

Learn from the child



There is growing evidence to suggest that these initiatives for children are on the increase. An archdeacon of a northern diocese recently told me, “Overwhelmingly, churches seem to be exploring child-and-family fresh expressions rather than adult-oriented fresh expressions. It is, perhaps, easier for churches to imagine a new way of doing children and church rather than trying to imagine a way of doing ‘adult’ church that might connect with 20-30s or the Saga generation.”

I would encourage these fresh expressions to have confidence in shaping themselves around the nurture of children’s spirituality, at the same time as providing a spiritual resting place for tired and lonely parents.

Let the questions of heterogeneity follow later. The responsibility to nurture little ones and the mission task to their parents is too pressing. Rather than waiting around for the impossible dream of hoping families will cross the bridge from midweek groups to the Sunday worship, **the way forward is to take church to them.**

I don’t assume for a moment that this way into Christian community will be a solution for all young children and new parents. There is still the challenge of families on the lowest rungs of society. Like the government’s recent **Sure Start** programme, this approach will connect with mums who are willing and able to avail themselves of these resources, which sadly means that those who may need support the most miss out. A church in Bradford find they have to use texting as a means of inviting mums who wouldn’t normally seek out organised groups. Soberingly, all of the mums who are part of *Manna Munchers* come from those areas of attractive new housing on the Manor estate; what will connect with those living on the older, more deprived parts of the estate?

This type of fresh expression has something to teach us all. The popularity of Godly Play amongst adults illustrates this. The search for personal significance and questions of life that aren’t satisfied with easy answers never quite goes away. We, too, need to experience for ourselves God

speaking in personally meaningful ways. **We, too, long for reoccurrences of that same awe and wonder that we felt as children when our puppet toys came to life.** “Here we can see the child’s spiritual capabilities and perhaps even find in our own souls the child long burdened with religious information.”²⁵ I share the feeling of many children’s advisors that this way of unlocking spirituality which does not rely on academic understanding should be part of ordination training. If Wordsworth was right that “heaven lies about us in our infancy”, we have a responsibility to do our utmost in preventing “shades of the prison-house” closing “upon the growing child”. Spiritual development is now on government, health and social services agendas, but there is confusion over what this means in practice; this is an opportunity for churches to offer examples.

There is something about the obvious need to re-imagine spiritual nurture and church for this age group that makes under 5s, in a way, feel like a particular people group or subculture that the church must continue to learn to enter. Of all marginalised groups at the edge of church, **the especially young children are the least able to speak for themselves** and least aware that they can ask for more than just a tokenistic nod to their presence. **They need advocates** who will argue their case on their behalf. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven **belongs to such as these.**”²⁶ Can we really afford to ignore the potential that fresh expressions of church hold for the spiritual nurture of under 5s and their families? They teach us lessons to last for the whole of a life.



Claire Dalpra
November 2006

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

²⁵ *The Religious Potential of the Child* back cover

²⁶ Matthew 19 v.14 New International Version

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31: Small Beginnings

- Church for Under 5s



What fresh expressions of church are beginning among under 5s and their families? Why can't we simply invite them to existing church? How is spirituality nurtured in children of this age? When does work with under 5s qualify as a fresh expression of church and what do they have to teach us? Claire Dalpra, research assistant to George Lings, went to find out.

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The Sheffield Centre, Wilson Carlile Campus, Cavendish Street, Sheffield S3 7RZ

Tel: 0114 272 7451 Fax: 0114 279 5863

Email: l.keith@sheffieldcentre.org.uk **www.encountersontheedge.org.uk**