

Save Our Children

*A Personal Response to
'All Gods Children'*

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Thanks to my children, Joanna, Rachel and Michael as they help me to become more childlike.

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Introduction

I had been preaching away but arrived back in time for the second half of the parade service. Outside church was one of the sidespersons protecting the cars and reporting to me that there had been some trouble with youngsters in the graveyard. I quickly met three youngsters popping in and out of church hoping to get a drink and a biscuit at the end of the morning worship. The parade service had held about 300 people and the Schoolworker preacher had brought a very lively and vivid message from Jeremiah. But, however welcoming the feel of the service, it was not going to grab Stephen, James and Terrance. As the colour parties paraded back with their flags Stephen shouted the name of one of the Guides and called her a 'fat bitch'; James told me that he had been sent off at football the day before for kicking and swearing at the referee. He now faced a possible year's ban. And Terrance told me that his dad had finally left home. I reflected afterwards how little we seemed to be doing for these children. It is easy to feel guilty in the face of the fact that children's evangelism is in crisis. *All God's Children?*, the General Synod Report published in 1992 has alerted us to the fact that in England in the 1990s only 15 out of every 100 children have any direct contact with a Christian Church (1).

Commercially Driven Culture

The media have highlighted from the Report the commercial pressures and false values that assail our children. We now know via Sindy, Ninja Turtles, Thunderbirds and Designer Clothes how much childhood has been commodified - something bought and sold. Christian parents have been alerted to just how strong is the spirit of the world and the sad consequences of the slackening of their spiritual life. If statistics have not convinced the church that there is a crisis then the abduction in Liverpool by two children of a two-year-old boy and his subsequent brutal murder have provoked a painful debate about the values we are passing on to our children. Ahead of media interest and public debate the Report commented:

'Elements in our society are combining to create for today's children a prematurely adult and somewhat lonely world that accustoms them to materialism, hedonism, selfishness, sexual amorality, the unseriousness and even normality of violence, the possibility of spiritual power through an openness to the occult - and all this against an ever-weakening acknowledgement of the truth and relevance of Christianity.' (para 3.38).

It was out of the above context that the report recommended that 'Everyone concerned with children should ask what sort of church and society they would like to see in 30 years time - and what needs to be done now in order to enable that vision to be realized'. (AGC)

Status of Children's Ministry

What evidence is there that local churches are taking children seriously and that the status of children's ministry has begun to rise? I would like to argue that until we re-discover true childlikeness and until we move away from an adult-centred church that excludes children by giving them little theological or pastoral significance, then we are not going to reverse this process, whereby millions of children are facing adult life

without any awareness of a God who loves them. It is not easy for the church to commit small resources to a new work among children. The results are not easily seen. Children do not stand for the PCC or lead housegroups, and they do not usually put much on the collection plate. They are demanding of time and energy. The challenge of moulding and influencing young lives is often seen as either less important than leading housegroups or too difficult to contemplate. At the end of the Book of Jonah God questions the prophet's anger. The Lord said to him,

'This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!' (*Good News Bible*).

Where is our pity? What plants are we more angry about than the children in our vicinity? How low down are our children on our church's agenda? Meanwhile, until we absorb some of the lessons of the report *Children in the Way*, we are not going to do much about *All God's Children* and the scallies who play in our graveyard or ask for money and ciggies on the streets. However, while we struggle to turn this big ship around over a period of time there is still a lot we can do to evangelize children, especially in our schools, and the last section of this booklet will give an example of how this is beginning to happen.

1. The Child in our Midst

Let us compare a church stuck in an adult pattern of faith and one which holds the child at the centre of its life and theology and which structures itself accordingly; a church with the child in its midst. We can bring this into focus by examining two different worship services.

Adult-centred Church

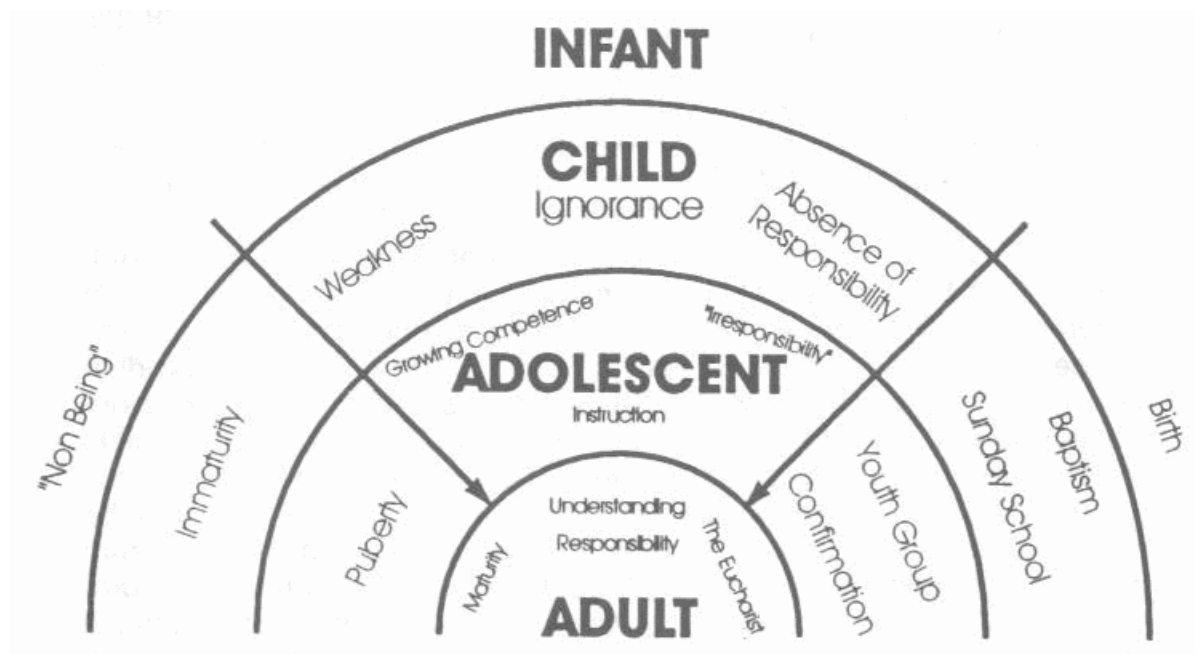
A typical 9.30 a.m traditional Anglican service of Holy Communion using Rite A and having a robed choir. It is largely an adult congregation. The early time, the books (including 1000-plus pages ASB), the atmosphere, the organ are not easy for children. The sermon is preached for an adult audience. The sacrament is for those who have been confirmed, which generally assumes that some understanding component regarding faith has been tested and found acceptable. Children do not understand doctrine and must wait to grow up. The structures, including the decision-making, are almost totally adult-centred. Children have some possible contribution through the choir, but on the whole there is adult autonomy and the children are suppressed. Nothing is being passed on through the generations. There is a real danger of losing the image of the child from faith and faith becoming intellectualized. Where is the childlike faith commanded by Jesus, that quality of trust and commitment, that simple dependence on the Father? There is the very real danger in such an adult pattern of faith of losing sight of Christ and the important symbolism of entry into the Kingdom of God. Children belong to the Kingdom unconditionally because they are vulnerable and dependent. Like the child, adults must depend on God if they are to enter the Kingdom. Sentimental pictures of stained-glass windows showing Jesus and children should not hide the lessons of Jesus' high regard for children and his announcement that the Kingdom of God belongs to children. How easily we lose that sense of grace and that simple trust through our sophisticated adult ways.

Richard Bewes, Rector of All Souls Langham Place, relates how his interpreter during Billy Graham's Moscow Mission in 1992 had come to Christ: 'A highly articulate intellectual, he had been an ardent member of the Communist Youth League until five years ago, when he was sent, as a teacher by his headmaster, to quell the Christian witness of a seven-year-old girl in the school.

"It was the most humiliating moment of my life," he admitted, "when the little girl exposed all my atheistic defences and led me to faith in Jesus Christ".'

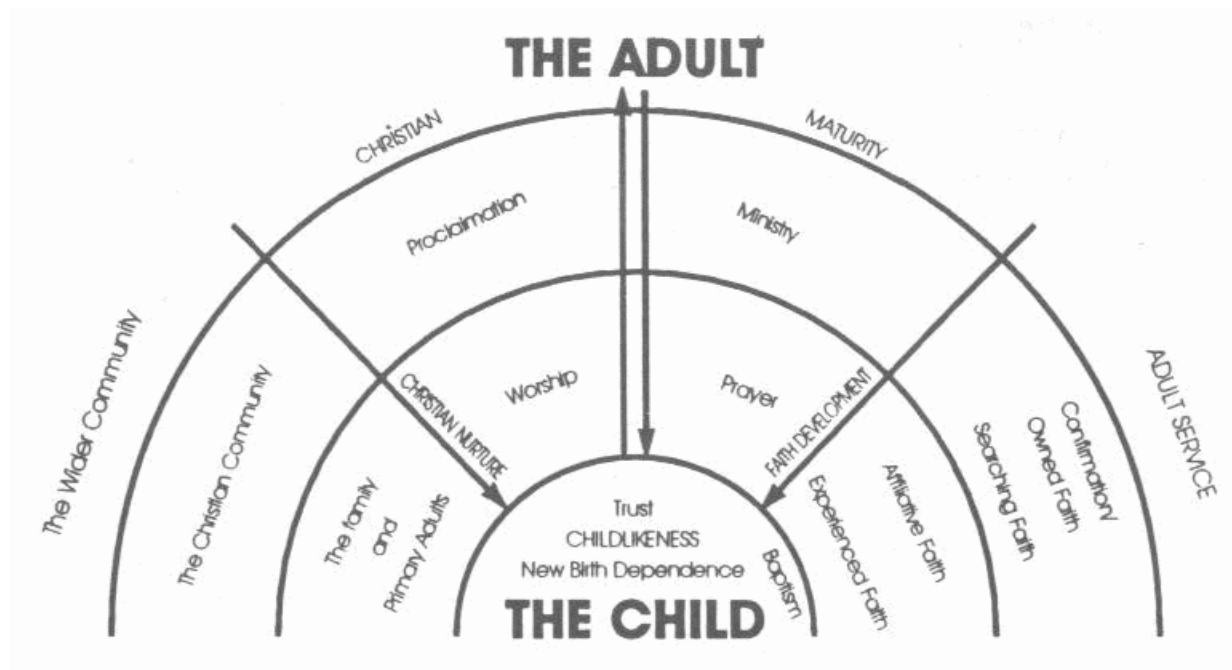
Audrey, a young mum, was getting really agitated about a particular situation when her two-year-old daughter remarked 'Don't worry mum, God will help you.'

Michael McCoy *The Child in Our Midst* (2) has developed the idea that by excluding children the Church ignores a sign of the Kingdom of God, shuts out Christ and lives with an empty centre. He illustrates the adult-centred church as follows:



Child-centred Church

Compare this to an 11 a.m Family Service which has a welcome feel and style for children. Children are welcomed as they come in, indeed some of the welcomers are children. No big thick books are handed out. It is inter-generational worship or all-age worship and learning. The whole faith community seems involved in one way or another. Time has been spent in preparing the communication of Christian truths. Visual aids and participation are standard. The atmosphere is not formal, less cerebral and more celebratory. People feel able to laugh, clap, express joy and sadness, to celebrate good news. Children are involved in a family orchestra and help take up the offering. They are among people who can adequately communicate by story and by example the Christian community's own stories, beliefs and observations. There is a rich pattern of relationships which is vital for the faith development of both adult and child. There is opportunity too for children to be with their peers as the worship is organized in such a way that acknowledges that learning in peer groupings has its place. As fellow pilgrims they are helped by different educational methods in situations that tend to be less wordy and more active than their adult counterparts. Teaching is done by some of the most able and gifted people in the church, male and female who feel privileged to be chosen for this key role. Under this scenario children are not only fully involved in the family life of the church but are also learning to minister to others that which they are receiving from God.



But is this not a bit of throw-back to some failed child-centred theories of the past? Is there not also a danger of removing the element of growth and maturity from faith? I believe that most churches, if subject to a schools Inspectorate report, would be rebuked for having a far too low expectation of children and their faith experience.

McCoy comments on the tension of this paradox:

'Childlikeness and Christian maturity interpenetrate and illuminate each other, yet always remain in a state of some tension. Remove the element of growth and maturity from faith, and it becomes infantile for the child needs always to be growing. But remove the image of the child from faith, and faith becomes adultised (adulterated?), for Christian maturity must be measured against the trusting, dependent faith of the child.'

A diagram above illustrating both movements is similar to McCoy's original although he argues for the practice of child communion I personally do not think that this solves our problems. It may help us to be more child-centred but it may also make it harder for children outside Christian families to enter the faith community.

McCoy draws the obvious parallel with the foetus' life in the womb. The child is surrounded by nurturing warmth and love:

'Its presence in the midst is a matter of sheer grace; the child has not had to earn nor achieve its place there. In contrast, the adult-centred church compels the child to fight its way in from the outside into the centre.'

'Acceptance in the womb of the church is conditional on achieving certain adult standards - maturity, responsibility, understanding. It is a fight most young people are not prepared to take on, perhaps because it seems as impossible to them as a "second birth" seemed to Nicodemus.'

In a nutshell McCoy argues persuasively that at the very point when Christian people feel grown-up, autonomous, secure in their adulthood, they most need to rediscover the

child within (Mark 10:15). And when they feel most dependent, vulnerable and weak then they most need to know that they can grow into 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4.13). Jesus was pressing the former when he placed a child among the disciples and the latter when he sent out the vulnerable disciples (Mark 6) to teach, heal and exorcize even though they were apparently unready for such responsibility. Adults need to realize the damaging effects on children's faith development that an adult-oriented church has. It is no wonder that there is so often a poor relationship between young people and the church. They find us boring, as well as forgetful of their status as fellow pilgrims with spiritual rights - unlike the woman retiring from twenty-five years as head of the Sunday School Beginners' Department, that Catherine Marshall speaks of:

"All these years", she replies, "the children have been teaching me about Jesus. He's real to them and they have made him more real to me than I would have thought possible twenty-five years ago"

'Her eyes were twinkling. "For instance, I remember the little boy who burst out with, 'If Jesus came right through that door now, I'd run right up and hug him.' I owe such a great deal to the children".' (3)

This teacher had learnt from experience to appreciate children. Others have gained insight from Jesus' own attitude to children (Mark 10.13-16 - his high regard for children in their own right as well as signs of the Kingdom with their vulnerability and dependence). At another level a theology of incarnation thinking of the 'word made child' invites us to discern God in the child. This links with faith development, and development psychology means that we cannot just focus our attention on those who have been through all the processes on the road to adulthood. We forget 'Whoever receives one of these little ones, receives me', at our peril.

So how can a church stuck in an adult pattern of faith rediscover the child within and how can adults be converted to the quality of faith which Jesus commended in children - the faith which alone allows entry into the Kingdom?

Enter Captain Hook...

2. Learning to fly

In the Steven Spielberg film *Hook* the actor Robin Williams thinks he is having a nervous breakdown. He is no longer even a shadow of Peter Pan. He has grown up and has forgotten how to fly. Forgetting what it was like to be a little boy and have fun, he is accused by Granny Wendy of even becoming a pirate. His business has become terribly important and he is missing out on his family life.

He tells Jack, his son 'Stop acting like a child.'

'I am a child' replies Jack.

'Grow up' growls dad. His wife pleads, 'your children want to play with you. These are just a few special years when our children are around. You are not being careful and you are missing it.'

Peter brings out his mobile telephone during his daughter's Christmas school performance and then fails to keep his promise and watch his son play baseball.

Granny Wendy loved many children and had saved many. But when Peter's children are taken captive by Captain Hook she tells Peter that he must go back to Never-Never-Land because only he can save his children. Peter thinks that it is all a complex Freudian hallucination. Has he stopped loving children?

In Never-Never-Land Captain Hook tries to capture Jack's mind. He encourages Jack to remember how his dad was always making promises and breaking them, never doing anything with him. Yes he even had a father who wouldn't and couldn't save him. 'Jack, do you want to be saved when the time comes?' asks Hook. The boy is confused.

Do we want to save the children of this generation? Have we been too busy? Have we forgotten how to have fun? Have we stopped loving children? How can we begin to fly again?

Imagination

For Peter in the film his telephone is thrown away and he starts to use his imagination. The Lost Boys begin to help him to bring joy into his life and think happy thoughts. This may not be intellectual enough for the reader but remember we can easily spoil precious things by intellectual greed: 'He who will be a man/woman, and will not be a child, must - he cannot help himself - become a little man, that is a dwarf. He will however, need no consolation, for he is sure to think himself a very large creature indeed.' (4) Bacon says that 'wonder', that faculty of the mind especially attendant on the child-like imagination, 'is the seed of knowledge'. A wise imagination which is the presence of the Spirit of God is the best guide that man or woman can have; for it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully. We live by faith and not by sight.

MacDonald again: 'Seek not that your sons and your daughters should not see visions, should not dream dreams. Seek that they should see true visions, that they should dream noble dreams. Such out-going of the imagination is one with aspiration, and will do more to elevate above what is low and vile than all possible inculcations of morality.'

In *Macbeth*, the imagination of the hero represents how the dead would appear to others. This imagination was his great impediment on the way to crime. Tragically he went to his wife to seek for refuge from his troublesome imagination.

She, possessing far less of the faculty, and having dealt more destructively with what she had, took his hand, and led him to the deed. Thus we see the danger of the repression of the imagination. What will happen in our country when the imagination of young juveniles who have committed grave crimes, rises up overshadowing them like Lady Macbeth with all the blackness of their crime?

Cultivating the Imagination

The first and essential means for its culture must be the growing and developing into harmony with God's will, learning to experience the faith of the Son who did the will of his Father in heaven. We therefore need to feed the imagination with the right food. This is not an easy task. At one stage we could easily steer the pupil away from the wrong influences in books and people. Now it's not so easy. Take an evening viewing *Comic Relief* on T.V. There is much that is high-minded as there are associations with nature and the environment, with responding to need and promoting generosity, there is fun and comic relief. On the other hand there is a stream of needless swearing, there are games which are crude and do nothing but contrast with some bits of excellence shown throughout the evening. It is not an easy task helping children to discern, not merely between the good and the evil, but between the good and the not-so-good. We want to help them learn about Jesus Christ and fill their imaginations with:

- Things that are good
- Things that deserve justice
- Things that are true
- Things that are noble
- Things that are right
- Things that are lovely
- Things that are honourable

Our commercially driven culture through television, radio, cinema, videos, peer pressure, designer clothes seems to feed quite a distorted view of values and role models. It doesn't foster any enthusiasm to discover beauty and true learning. As I write this, the record at the top of the hit parade includes the lines 'We do what we want and we do it with pride'. Do we want young people to be satisfied with that in a wonderful world with so much more to discover in it?

Spirituality

Children and young people obviously need the right teachers, but what of adults who are seeking to fly again? Interestingly many are exploring the rich paths of Christian spirituality. The great mystics of the Christian tradition are finding a response in their call to Christians to be stripped of all self-reliance. Being naked before God and being caught up in his love have striking parallels with the state of infancy. It is even argued that the charismatic renewal experience reflects elements of childlike dependence, simplicity, joy and self-abandonment, speaking in tongues has been interpreted as the joyful babbling of an infant in the Spirit. Richard Foster includes in the classical spiritual

disciplines that of celebration. I quote:

'Freedom from anxiety and care forms the basis for celebration.'

'The carefree spirit of joyous festivity is absent in contemporary society.'

'The Spirit of celebration will not be in us until we have learned to be careful for nothing. And we will never have a carefree indifference to things until we totally trust God.'

'In celebration the high and the mighty regain their balance and the weak and lowly receive new stature. Who can be high or low at the festival of God? Together the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless all celebrate the glory and wonder of God. There is no leveller of all caste systems like festivity.'

In this context children can introduce that note of festivity and hilarity. They stop us taking ourselves too seriously. They encourage us to be alive, free and interesting. Such adults are attractive to children as they learn to celebrate and to fly again. They have learned two important lessons, namely, 'Don't exclude the children,' and 'become childlike (not childish) if you wish to know the secret of faith'.

3. Starting in the Nest

According to the AGC Report three things about the home need to be recognized (para. 3.3).

1. The effects of the high cost of living on family life.
2. The inability of parents to control the experiential environment of their children.
3. The acknowledged inability of most parents to teach their children about Christ.

It would be easy to feel that in these days, with all their attendant pressures, good parenting is an almost impossible task and one which promises very uncertain results. To counteract that sense of an uphill struggle, I start with a positive, hopeful aim, learnt from that South African divine - Andrew Murray. Rather than live with the expectation that children will rebel, he believed that the next generation of believers should be more holy than their parents. A consecrated home, the faith of the parents and persevering prayer should all combine to help us trust God for our children's steadfast faith. In his book he deals with almost every aspect of child-raising, concluding,

'...surely it is obtainable, that instead of parental piety being diluted in children - this is so often spoken of as what we must expect - each succeeding generation of a God-fearing family ought to rise higher and higher...' Alongside this we must not underestimate the power of sin. However good the parenting, none can ever be presumptuous. Every young person is born with the freedom to make their own choices, and it is because of that God-given freedom, that parents ought not to berate themselves when the child's path diverges from their own. I cannot forget the foolish mother who told me that her child would never go wrong. How often as parents can we trace in the sins and evil tempers of our children our own shortcomings and transgressions. We are often humbled by the realization that our children have inherited their evil nature from us. But they can rise above it. Our prayer for our own children asks God to give them the fragrance of Jesus and to keep them from the power of sin.

Parental Guidance

Need parents be unable to control the experiential environment of their children? Perhaps parents have become so mesmerized by their responsibilities to earn money to provide material things, and intimidated by the power of their children's sub-culture with all its false values, that they have too easily abrogated their parental responsibilities to teach and train a child in the way he/she should go. Does the fact that the film censorship board gave an unusual, special warning for parents, along with the PG certificate for Steven Spielberg's film *Jurassic Park*, suggest that even they feel the parental role of decision-making needs emphasizing. The church has a responsibility to help parents take back their rights as authoritative figures in the lives of their children, and as that authority is exercised in firm, consistent, practical and loving guidance so young people will grow to respect their parents for it. Such guidance can only be given when parents are informed about the things that concern their children, and have a realistic awareness of the pressures upon them. That takes time. Time given as they grow older when it is convenient and when it isn't, when teenagers are ready to share themselves, is vital too. Dr. James Dobson illustrates that perhaps the time factor is a

significant failing. In his book, *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*, (5) he describes some research involving attaching microphones to one-year-old youngsters to record fathers' talking. The results reveal an average of about 37 seconds interchange between fathers and small children in a day. Compare this with another statistic that the average pre-schoolchild in America watches between 30 and 50 hours of television per week. He concludes:

'During the formative years of life, when children are so vulnerable to their experience, they're receiving thirty-seven seconds a day from their fathers and thirty or more hours a week from commercial television! Need we ask where our kids are getting their values.'

I use this material in baptism classes to challenge parents to think about how they might control the experiential environment of their children. It is surprising that more parents do not challenge Dobson's comparison. How then do conscientious parents convey their attitudes and faith to their children?

Natural Living

Our sixteen-year-old was anxious about her exams. Before she got out of the car to go into school my wife prayed with her. Yes it was a real help. She knew she was not having to face that difficult thing alone, but we would not have been able to do that if she had not already been used to the idea of a loving God who knows all about her worries and really cares. Teaching that truth had started right at the very beginning of her life. Values are taught right from the word go by our behaviour and attitudes as well as by our words. Truthfulness, obedience, consideration for others, and a host of other lessons for life, are taught by the way we react to little ones and their behaviour in the small things of every day. Likewise bringing them up in the Christian faith should be a natural part of living. If our homes are really Christian homes then we will talk about Jesus. He will be a part of everyday things as well as Sunday being a special day and God's people a real family where they are known and loved and cared for. It is common to hear people say 'I will leave it until they get older and then they can make their own mind up.' If we don't teach our children anything about living a Christian life how can they make a reasoned choice when they know nothing about it? This generation of parents is in danger of being captivated by the prevailing fashion of tolerance, meaning allowing everything and fearing to give clear guidelines on anything. To teach children lovingly and sensitively about Jesus is indoctrination only in as much as not to teach them is indoctrination in godlessness.

Books

We encourage parents in our baptism classes by stressing the importance of books. Little books, picture books, pop-up books, frieze books, colouring books etc. First of all children learn the stories and later on they will understand the real meaning behind them of how they show us what god is like. Some books help us with shaping our values and attitudes and others are available on topics like suffering and death. We encourage them to buy Bibles in everyday language and with nice bright pictures. Again an early appreciation on God's word as a special book will be a powerful force in shaping young lives.

Prayer

It is not hard to find the wrong kind of prayer book to show to parents and godparents. It usually has pictures of cherubs on the outside and archaic language on the inside. This communicates that prayer is a strange and irrelevant activity. Fortunately there are many good prayer books about that remind us that prayer is simply sharing with God about all the everyday things of life, just like a child might share with his parent. Praying at mealtimes, before journeys and about shopping trips and school events makes God a natural sharer in our conversations and decision-making.

A lot of this is about habit preceding principle. You are taking children in a certain direction and preparing them to make a sensible choice at a later stage. Obviously it is much more about a love that draws rather than a law that demands. That attraction is obviously limited where as family is overcommitted and time spent together is restricted by a hectic lifestyle. It is therefore vital for the local church to play its part in reinforcing right training and teaching, hence the place of Mums and Toddlers groups, Sunday School (with a different name - see next chapter), uniformed and non-uniformed organizations, all-age worship and learning, and many other opportunities for adults and children to mix together.

Single Parents

The more one writes in this vein the more uncomfortable we can become with our parenting. It is hard enough with two parents. As the Archbishop of York has written in his diocesan newspaper 'The stories seem to tell us that even a perfect child and a God-inspired mother need a man about the house. The Holy Family is three, not two.' So what of single-parent families? The 1991 census returns for Great Britain showed 825,238 single-parent families living in their own self-contained households. In parts of Central London, Manchester and Knowsley more than one third of all children come from self-contained single-parent households. Such households account for 3.8 per cent of all households in Great Britain in 1991 - compared with 2.1 per cent in 1981. This is a highly sensitive topic when some single parents have no option but to go it alone and others deliberately choose it as a way of life. Apart from emotional support and practical help single parents may need help with child discipline and with some good role models of the opposite sex for their children. The church and Christians can help to fulfil these roles.

So often though teachers in our local schools are faced by children with an attitude problem. Why should their pupils work? Some of them are third generation unemployed and the motivation has gone. Why should children stick with a task or even a group when they are fed up with it? Old values of perseverance and loyalty need restoring. It is a reminder that parents, church and government need to work together to bring about effective change.

A magazine for parents ran an article, 'What kinds of parent are you?' An authoritarian parent, the firm but fair parent, the permissive parent, the fun-loving parent or the protective parent? I just want to see more parents who will be able to teach their children about Christ; parents who will open their hearts in faith to rest in the promise and power of God; parents who put themselves and their children into God's hands. Meanwhile studies are increasing on the resilience of children because of the growing numbers of wounded children. Many of these children have been brought up in hostile

environment, reared by inadequate and often hurting adults. But are not many other children being wounded by loving parents whose chasing after impulsive desire and lack of positive direction pay scant regard to the real needs and welfare of their families?

4. Back on the Ground

It is all very well learning to fly but what if young Johnny is bored by church and does not want to go? What if the local church seems to deny the necessary welcome, love and nurturing growth? Is there any way of changing course and correcting past mistakes?

One church I visited arrived at the time in the worship when different groups dispersed for teaching at their own level. The children stayed where the worship time had taken place and all the adults moved! It was a lovely affirmation of the children present. So often the children are sent out to unsuitable premises. If it is too close to where the adults remain then they must be careful not to make too much noise. For others it is a case of starting from scratch.

1. Research and Start Where Children Are

The AGC report has a useful summary of findings with questions for local churches. It encourages an audit or assessment of children's work, taking into account what children do in their free time, what the main influences upon them are, who their heroes are, etc. It raises obvious such as the best slots in the week for church organized activities and how suitable are the premises? Once a picture has emerged this information needs to be used wisely. In Liverpool for example most of the children are football crazy. Even if a leader has no interest in football whatsoever he or she needs to at least start from the above premises.

2. Review and Begin to Initiate Change

This will reveal whether the church has any strategy and, if it has, whether it is working. This is the time to make long term and short term goals. It means working hard at sharing the vision and getting others alongside you to own that vision. What is your church aiming for over the next few months and what is your vision for 30 years hence. All this will mean involving people in the planning and the decision making. In pursuit of the long-term goals it may mean being the keeper of the vision when all sorts of other pressures try to force children off the agenda. Here are some challenging aims from the Ichthus Christian Fellowship:

In our relationships with children in our congregations, in our work with them and ministry to them, we are seeking to help them to be:

1. Kingdom Children - with a growing awareness and experience of living in the Holy Spirit.
2. Knowing the King - getting to know Jesus for themselves - not just getting involved in Kingdom activities.
3. Having Kingdom Understanding - learning to understand and apply God's word.
4. Being part of Kingdom Community - fully involved in the family life of the church.
5. Involved in Kingdom Work - learning to minister to others that which they are receiving from God.

3. Recruit and Support Leaders Fully

Often our best leaders want to be involved with the worship or leading small groups. We need them to take responsibility for the care and teaching of a children's group. Recruiting therefore does not mean taking anyone who shows an interest but approaching individuals to consider this sphere of ministry. If we want high quality leaders then we must be clear what the job entails and why it is of prime importance. We are looking for good role models, heroes even. Adult lay Christians on active service ministering in a positive and practical way. Here is the job description for the equivalent of a Sunday School Superintendent, only we call it JAM (Jesus and Me) Club Leader.

1. Working with children ages 5 to 11 to help them get to know Jesus and to experience the fun, privilege and responsibility of being in his Kingdom.
2. Helping to equip children to witness and share their faith with other children.
3. Helping the church to understand and experience the benefits of children being fully involved in the family life of the church.
4. Stimulating your own love for children.
5. Being aware of the current reports about children's ministry.
6. Helping the church leadership to choose team members who will give full support to the leader and give their best for the children.
7. Being responsible for encouraging other Jam Club Leaders and calling regular preparation meetings for them.
8. Submitting a budget for each year.
9. Assessing the regular training needs of the Jam Club team.

This is a three-year appointment starting from January 1993. Support should be given by team members, by the Co-ordinator of the Children's and Young People's Working Group and by the church leadership.

Once in place leaders need to be fully supported with regular training opportunities and tons of encouragement. Oversight does not mean just being in the background to pick up the pieces when things go wrong, but meeting with the leaders for prayer and support. Leaders need to feel that somebody is interested in them personally as well as wanting to know how things are going.

4. Resource and Keep Praying

Although youngsters learn many things from adults in one-to-one relationships, there are still many situations that require the local church to spend money. Work with children requires a realistic budget. It may be helpful to build up a small resource library that leaders can draw upon. Training can be costly but it is usually worth the investment. Time can be well spent checking out diocesan resources as well as those

provided by national organizations, local Christian bookshops and local authority R.E. centres. The best resource for this work is prayer. The Scripture Union Schoolworker on Merseyside was really encouraged by several old ladies who pressed him for details of the initials on his prayer letter. They were working through the material and did not want to misunderstand any detail. The above may just be a next step for the small minority of children in touch with church. Meanwhile what of the rest? We can reach them in our schools...

5. Everyone Goes To School

The process of change to a less adult-centred church will not happen quickly. Meanwhile a large percentage of the nation's children is growing into adult life without any awareness of God's love for them. One possible avenue where we can do something about this situation is in schools. Everyone goes to school. Just think, everyone between the ages of 5 and 16 (and a lot to 18) are together in our schools in each local community. What an opportunity! Especially since the 1988 Education Act we have experienced a much greater openness to school links with the local church. In our parish in Liverpool we have 3000 school children and young people in a mixture of schools. We have experimented with some of the following ideas.

1. Assemblies

My curate and I have been through most assembly books and tried a variety of approaches. He is very good with attention-grabbing ideas and memorable songs. I am happier with Bible stories from the experience of my own children. Having discovered one primary school where nobody knew who betrayed Jesus and other important parts of the story, I was keen to pursue my Bible story approach. The stimulus for this has come from using the old flannelgraph idea of the Bible in felt. Having used this approach several decades ago I thought it was a bit old hat in the day of video and fast-moving images. However the new flannelgraph in very bold colours with more realistic figures is a joy to use and, more importantly, the children love it. The art of good story-telling is still needed but to have a beautiful set of Bible figures really does help them to enjoy and remember the stories. The set cost nearly £200 but I find it to be worth every penny for its use in primary schools.

2. Extended Time in Schools

I was quite surprised to discover that the local aided church school had such clear-cut aims written down in its school prospectus. It reads, 'the highest possible development for each child intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually recognizing the need for the school to lead children to a knowledge of God as the Creator and Father of All, and to a knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Saviour, Friend and Teacher.' Certainly our piecemeal approach of six clergy visiting in turn once a week for one assembly didn't seem to me to be forwarding the above aim. I therefore suggested to the headmaster a step aside from the rota. I boldly asked for two separate blocks of input. The first one involved three consecutive days telling the Old Testament story of David (using the Bible in felt) and the second idea was much more radical. A neighbouring colleague and I were given three whole days of school time to explore Jesus' statement 'I am the Light of the World'. Based on the Scripture Union holiday club resource material (8) we made the school hall into a factory and involved the children in a mixture of songs, quizzes, interviews, factory keep-fit, Bible stories, praying, drama story etc.

The teachers entered into it with real enthusiasm, did lots of preparatory work, dressed up in boiler suits and followed up the work we had presented from the front.

Afterwards children wrote:

'Thankyou for sharing the things you shared and thank you for the prayer. I said a

prayer and it helped me a lot...Joanne'

'I learnt that Jesus is the light of the World and that false gods cannot do anything to harm or hurt us..Jonathan'.

Although we were very much casting our bread upon the waters (which is mostly what happens in children's ministry), it really felt that we were engaging heart and minds in a way that our one-off assemblies were not. It also did some good things for relationships with the teachers who felt that we were allies in the common task. We were not just dashing in and out, unaware of the challenges of upfront teaching.

3. Festival Times

A very undramatic happening occurred in another primary school. No musician was available on the Junior staff and it looked as though Christmas would pass without anything special being celebrated in school. A Christian teacher who does one and a half days work with those with special needs offered to do the music, teach them some new songs and organize some drama. She used some of the assemblies to prepare for the festival as well as making time at lunch-break. She could have done without this extra work on top of her busy schedule but she had read *All God's Children?* and was painfully aware that too many children don't experience much good news.

An appendix contribution in the AGC Report deals with a survey of special services and events. It encourages us to use these festival times to present the Christian gospel to children as effectively as possible.

4. H.U.S.C.I.E

Due to what seems like an ever-increasing stream of new legislation from the government, as well as many other more local factors, those concerned with work in our local schools seem to be under particular pressures and in need of some kind of forum for support and encouragement - teachers, non-teaching staff, governors and parents. My curate, a local headmaster, and his chairman of the governors took the initiative and HuSCiE (Huyton Christians in Education) was born. Its objectives are:

- To provide support for all Christians involved in schools and based in Huyton
- To pray regularly for the needs of our local schools
- Aim to provide good Christian-based resources to the local schools. This may be in the form of materials and people.
- Create opportunities for links to be made between the local churches and Christians involved in local schools.
- Provide a forum for Christians involved in education.
- To assist in the development of RE in the curriculum, ensuring that the Christian faith is fairly represented and clearly taught.
- To meet together once every half term

Its most recent meeting focussed on the role of Christian governors and sex education.

5. Schools Worker

On Merseyside we have an excellent Scripture Union Schools Worker/Trainer. He goes

into local schools, sharing the Christian faith with young people and encouraging Christians to be disciples and witnesses in the face of pressure from other young people at school. He supports Christian Unions whenever possible and takes lessons, more especially in schools which don't have a C.U. Although the pull is there into lots of schools he tries to be less like a factory - 'producing' all the time, but more of a laboratory - serving others.

This worker has been a great help to us in our school links. However, we began increasingly to feel that our own situation would benefit from a full-time schools worker who could develop and strengthen our commitment to school' work. Having failed to gain the support of other local churches for this venture we decided to go it alone, trusting that we would be able to find the necessary salary and expenses.

We chose a qualified teacher who comes to Liverpool to:

1. Reinforce links between the Huyton with Roby/Page Moss Churches and schools encouraging Christians to support the Christian witness and development of Christian values within the schools by pupils, teachers, governors and parents.
2. Encourage and, where practical, set up Christian groups for pupils and support groups for teachers.
3. Have good communication skills with young people aged between 7 and 16 years and be prepared to take assemblies and/or lessons as the opportunity arises.
4. Help the local churches develop a strategy to reach children outside school and church life.
5. Keep abreast of developments in religious education and advising local schools and church youth organizations of appropriate resources.
6. Network with other schools workers in the area.
7. Be willing to attend local and national training conferences funded and approved by St. Bartholomew, Roby P.C.C.
8. Meet regularly with the schools worker support group and prepare reports for the Roby prayer meeting and P.C.C., with accountability to the leadership team of St. Bartholomew, Roby.

Finally

And yet not everybody does go to school. BBC's *Panorama* has concluded that 66,000 school children are being excluded from school every year, i.e. approximately 1 in every 100 pupils. It seems that more schools are likely to exclude more pupils. Moving into a market situation means that competition and a limited range of discipline sanctions have raised the sad spectre of human unsaleable goods. We are not short of children to save in and outside an educational context. We are short of those with a burden to do something about it.

Appendix - Resource Guide

Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Graceway/Fowler Wright, 1992)
Geoffrey Barlow and Alison Hill (eds.), *Video Violence and Children* (Hodders, 1985)
Board of Education, *Children in the Way* (N.S/C.H.P. 1988)
Francis Bridger, *Children finding Faith* (S.U.)
Paul Butler, *Reaching Children* (S.U.)
Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (HarperCollins 1990)
Kathleen Crawford, *Under-Fives Welcome* (S.U. 1990)
David Durston, *Faith in the Family* (Bible Society)
Penny Frank, *Children and Evangelism* (Marshall Pickering 1992)
How Faith Grows, Faith Development and Christian Education (N.S / C.H.P. 1991)
Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Dallas: Word 1989)
Jeremie Hughes, *Questions Children Ask* (Lion 1981)
Steve Hutchinson, *Help! I want to Tell Kids About Jesus* (S.U 1988)
Ishmael, *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Kingsway, 1989)
Shirley Leslie, *Children Growing Up* (S.U. 1982)
Rosemary Nixon, *Who's The Greatest - A Study of Sunday School In Contemporary Society* (N.S. 1985)
Judith Allen Shelley, *Spiritual Needs of Children* (S.U. 1984)
Patricia Van Ness, *Transforming Bible Study With Children* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1991)
Judith Wigley, *Under Fives and Their Families* (Marshall Pickering 1990).

References

- 1 All Gods Children (AGC) - Children's Evangelism in Crisis - A report from the General Synod Board of Education and Board of Mission. National Society / Church house publishing, Church House, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3NZ. para 1.1
- 2 The child in our midst, Published and distributed by the Department of Mission, Church of the Province of South Africa, P.O. Box 4849, Johannesburg, South Africa 2000, 1987.
- 3 Catherine Marshall, The Helpers (Hodders 1980)
- 4 George MacDonald, A Dish of Oats (Sampson Low & Co. 1985)
- 5 Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline (Hodder 1980)
6. Andrew Murray, How To Raise Your Children For Christ (Bethany Fellowship, 1975)
7. Dr. James C. Dobson, Straight Talk To Men And Their Wives (Hodder & Stoughton, 1978)
8. Light Factory - Holiday Club Resource Material (Scripture Union (for 5-14's) 1991).