

Mission in the Community

Parent / Carer / Toddler Groups

Running a Toddler group for the local community is a great way to get to know people. There are, however, many challenges for a church wanting to utilise a toddler group as a vehicle for evangelism. We are currently on a journey with our group, and hope that some of what's written here will inspire others who are working hard with the community in groups such as ours.

We've had some successes and some failures over the past year, and that's what I'll be sharing in this short article on the challenge of setting expectations of the different parties involved in running a church toddler group.

1. As a starting point, the expectations of the wider church must be addressed. As the Pastor, this was an easy thing to do. However, even if you're not in leadership in the church, it's important to communicate to people that a toddler group is a slow, relational process, the purpose of which is often just to serve people in our communities.
2. The expectations with regard to staff members are vitally important to the running of the group. There needs to be some clear definition of how a member of staff should operate on both a practical and a spiritual level.

There needs to be some kind of training for staff, and this is an area where we got it wrong. We took on a member of staff to "fill a gap" rather than because it was where their talents lay. When we had to remove them from their position, it damaged the relationship I myself had with them. We are now working to introduce a "Volunteer's Contract" for the group, and some training which they will need to agree to in advance of operating as a member of staff.

3. The expectations of the community have probably been the hardest to address. When we took the group on, the previous management team (who were part of another church) had instilled two cultures that we needed to change.

The first culture was one of service; whilst we want to serve the community, doing everything for people created a climate of unreasonable expectations. The first time we missed a birthday, there were tears. When we didn't make as big a deal of a child moving on, we were shouted at.

We quickly moved to change this culture of service to one of partnership. We made it the parents' responsibility to inform us of their child's birthday on arrival, and we stopped doing things like leaving presents. Other changes included a reduction in the time we spent in the kitchen, preparing drinks / snacks, and parents helping themselves to refreshments rather than being served them.

The second problem culture was that of evangelism. In the first few months, I noticed that people braced themselves whenever I struck up a conversation with them. This was because

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they had been regularly invited to church activities directly from the toddler group. We have introduced a policy on this, and other than for Christmas / Easter services, we are not going to be constantly hosting events. People have finally relaxed, and are now very interested in what we are doing as church in the community. I have been asked to perform a dedication for one of the children, as the family see us as their church.

The difficulty we are now finding our way through is how to share our faith respectfully and powerfully with our new friends. Recently we had the privilege of sharing a meal in our home with a couple we've gotten to know. Having noticed the difference in how we live our lives, they wanted to know why, and spent quite a few minutes asking me questions. It was interesting that there was no discomfort, because they trust us as friends, and know that we have no hidden agenda.

We are at the very beginning of our journey to become a church which is part of our local community, and there is a great deal for us to learn. Almost all of the people who come to our toddler group have seen the change from service to partnership as very positive. Since making this change, the staff members have spent more time chatting to parents, and we have all been able to build significant relationships with people.