

YOUTH & CHILDREN



# “Such as these..”

Are you going to take your promise seriously?

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Isla is eight months old and is a lively, happy little girl who loves interacting with others and learning how to do new things, like playing peek-a-boo and blowing raspberries. I love watching children this age and seeing them soak up like sponges the world around them, learning new skills, words and sounds daily at a rate that may not be repeated again in their lifetime.

When I think of children like Isla, other things interest me as well. Will she grow up to know the God that her family all follow? Will the church support her parents as they seek to live out their faith, both in church and at home, as role models for Isla? Will the church that she is a part of teach her faithfully about life, faith and her place in God's story?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus welcomes the little children to come to Him, going against what the disciples' plans were. He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these..." And he took the children in His arms, placed His hands on them and blessed them. Jesus obviously saw children as important and valued them right from when they were really small. It says that Jesus "took the children in his arms". This is not something that you would do with a 10 or 11 year-old child but you would not hesitate to do it with a three or four year old. I am not saying that there were not older children there too but I do think that there were tiny children, just like the smaller members of our families and churches.

However, how we treat these smallest of children in our churches is not always as valuing as Jesus saw them.

*The youngest members of our churches are often forgotten about or considered last in church when it comes to teaching and ministry. Don't get me wrong – when a new baby is born people in churches are great at cooing over them and coming over to the mother in church to have a little cuddle with the new baby. However, is that enough? I don't think so! We often think that is enough to do when a baby is tiny and new. We may be there for the baby's baptism and go through the routine of that service as we do all other baptisms and then expect that the baby will be babysat in crèche until they are old enough to go to Sunday school and start to be taught about the Bible and God.* (Messy Church)

Don't get me wrong. I do not think that we can teach deep theological issues that need to be wrestled with to one-year-olds, but I do think that we are doing a disservice both to the children and their families if we leave any teaching until they

reach the typical school and Sunday school age. The church as a whole needs to see the discipleship of these children as important and the care of their families as paramount in the ministry that we commit to as a church.

At baptism services in the Presbyterian Church we make a promise as a congregation. The wording may be slightly different from congregation to congregation but the meaning is the same in them all:

*We promise to undertake to stand with the parents in the spiritual nurture of their child, in prayer, example and encouragement, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

We don't promise to do this once the child has reached school age and when our traditional children's ministry of Sunday school kicks in (important as this is) but we promise to do this from the beginning. This support and nurture is "about involving not just the nuclear family but the whole church family - from singles to older adults. More important, it's about incorporating [children] into the life of your church." (Mark deVries). We need to support these parents from making them meals

when the baby is born, to inviting them to crèche, to providing resources to help them begin to pass on their faith to children. We want parents to live out the Deuteronomy 6 command to impress faith on their children, and as a church it is our job to support parents and to do everything we can to help make that job easier and more effective. That is fulfilling our baptismal promise. That is the covenant that we make as a church.

**New parents**

There are simple things that churches can do to support parents with new babies in the home like cooking meals, either as a one off or a home group taking it on for a couple of weeks. A gift of Bible reading notes for the new mother and father or a "My first Bible" for the baby is also important. Introducing a resource like "Faith at Home" can also be important in helping parents to see their role as primary spiritual nurturers of their children from the outset of their lives.

In church, it is also important to welcome the new lives into the congregation – and not just at baptism. Announcing births and celebrating them in the service can be so important to welcome the new member of the congregation, and allows the parents to see that the church see this as a special event.

**Crèche**

In many churches, the crèche can be a babysitting service to allow everyone else to get on with church; because of this the environment in which the crèche is held is often a room that seems to be given to the youngest members as an afterthought. It is often a room that is mostly used for something else – mainly for adults – but is available on a Sunday morning. I am not saying that every church should have a designated room for crèche only, but we need to think about whether the room we use says "crèche" at all! Make sure there are suitable and age appropriate toys, put the children's photos on the wall so that the leaders recognise them, have Bible story books and a story time as a normal part of Sunday morning. Make sure there is a register to know when children are there and that the leaders are trained to know how to work with the smallest members of the congregation.

**Parents and Toddlers**

Parents and Toddlers (or whatever your church calls it) is probably the most consistent outreach that most churches hold, and yet it is often the one that is least made use of and connections made. New parents in churches should be encouraged to come along – both for support from other people in a similar situation but also to build friendships with other young mothers, fathers or carers who come into the

church week after week for a morning, but may never consider coming to church.

Consider holding a pram service, a teddy bear's picnic service, or a Christmas service for the adults and children that come along. Use the main church building for this so that the adults can see where church is held, and if they come along on a Sunday morning afterwards they will at least know the layout of the building and not feel so awkward.

Isla is very fortunate. She comes from a family that love her and love God. She belongs to a church that care about her and that want to make sure she has every opportunity she can to hear about the God who made her, loves her and wants to be her friend. She has an extended family who pray for her daily, and parents who understand their role as her primary spiritual nurturers. But not all small children are as fortunate, and as a church we need to think about how to support parents and children as they start the journey of life together.

*As a church, we must have a clear vision for our children – even one that's multigenerational – so we'll be intentional every day to pass along to them the things of God. The clearer the vision, the better we'll know what to do on a daily basis. The fuzzier the vision, the harder it is to be faithful to train our children daily in their spiritual development (Family ministry website).*

That is our responsibility when we say "we do" at a baptism service. Do you say it without thinking or are you going to take your promise seriously?

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