



## On your marks

For most churches today, Sunday school (or whatever your children's group may be called) is unlikely to be the place where you can share the Christian story with new children. To do that, your church will need to create new opportunities to meet the majority of children who are out there in your community. Working with local schools is one way forward; another is to run a special children's event or series of events spread out across the year. This latter idea is demanding but probably more feasible for smaller churches, as compared to the major one-week focus that some churches adopt in the summer such as the traditional five-day holiday club. So where do you start? What is involved? Who do you need to help you?

## Get set

Share your idea for a 'children's special' with your minister at church and a few other people who work with the children. Test the water and see what their reaction is. If at least some people feel it is a possibility, then organise a planning meeting and use the following pointers as a framework for your discussions and prayers.

## Go!

1. First, decide on the date and theme for your event. Take into account school holidays and other local events that are happening at that time of year. There are a range of Christian festivals and special times in the church's year which lend themselves to a one-day special.
2. Decide on the timings for your event. Will it be a morning or afternoon event on a Saturday or school holiday day? Will it be over lunchtime including a packed lunch or will it be an after-school event during term time? In order to comply with the Children's Act, such events should not exceed two hours if you are running a series of up to six events throughout the year. Decide what age range will be invited and what your maximum number can be, given a ratio of at least one adult to every eight children for those over eight and a higher ratio for those who are younger.
3. Special events such as these need a named team leader and a number of other key people to do a variety of important jobs that will hold the event together. These include people to be responsible for: publicity, first aid, registration, leading the key activity groups, refreshments, music, stewarding the premises. It is also a good idea to appoint someone to be a prayer coordinator so that the church can be kept informed and pray for the event.
4. A catchy title for your event is always helpful, particularly for the publicity. Think through the key Bible story or stories that you will be exploring. This will also give you some ideas for the graphics for any fliers and posters. For most children, this may be the only opportunity they have to hear some Christian teaching and to come close to the story of Jesus and key Bible stories. If these events become a regular feature within the life of the church, they are in effect becoming the main way in which we are passing on the good news to the generation of children who are entrusted to our care within our own particular communities.

5. It is important to think carefully about the choice of venue for your event. It may be that your church has good facilities where such an event for say up to 50 children is possible. Some churches lend themselves to these events, with all sorts of side chapels and areas where activities can be safely organised. Do however bear in mind the accessibility of toilets. However, you may like to consider a nearby school or hall as an alternative venue, which for many might be a more approachable and neutral place, if you are trying to reach out to new children who do not normally come into church. Using other premises may well mean there is a cost involved. In general, you will need to consider whether you put a price on the day to cover the expense of craft materials, for example, as well as any hiring of a hall. Parents are not unused to paying money for special events for their children and so do not be shy about making a modest charge. It often means that in the parents' eyes the day is more valued.
6. Check carefully through regulations concerning running children's events - for example, see 'Safe from harm' published by the government. All those working with children need to be registered and your church should have a policy in place concerning this. It is also advisable to inform the local authority (OFSTED) - especially if your event includes a number of younger children.
7. Your special event needs to be planned carefully so it includes a variety of activities - some all together and others in groups. When children arrive, they will need to be registered. You will need to know a contact number for each child and any information concerning their health and medication. It is a good idea to have some 'joining activity' to be going on with during registration.

The upfront leader should welcome the children and introduce the theme with games, an icebreaker and music. During the event, there should be opportunities for group activities, which could be craft, drama, music, storytelling or even perhaps cooking, depending on the skills of the leaders. Children could stay in groups with just the one activity or rotate around the different types of activities during the event so they have a taste of a number of creative responses to the theme. At some point, gather them altogether for the main story, which should expand and grow the theme of the day, including more songs. Quizzes and challenges are a good way in which to reinforce what is being shared with a lot of laughter! Build in a refreshment slot at some point about halfway through the event.

Draw the whole event to a conclusion, involving some closing prayers, time for some quiet reflection as well as a final song. Allow enough time to collect any items that have been made. This final section is an opportunity for the children to show and share what has been done and it is a good idea to invite parents to arrive to collect their children a little earlier than the advertised finishing time so that they can be part of this.
8. Although attention to all the organisational details and the running order of the event are both very important, it is vital not to lose sight of the fact that what really matters is time for relationships to be built up with the children. It is important for group leaders to learn names, talk with the children and to listen to what they are saying as they experience the event. Such opportunities often arise during craft sessions and the other group activities. It is worth reminding ourselves that if we are to share the good news of Jesus with children, then we ourselves must be the good news of Jesus.
9. Depending on the time of year, these events could well turn into an outing together with



families, a BBQ, a picnic or a crazy sports day! Some events might take a particular theme that needs the expertise of an outsider with drama or circus skills or experience with puppets.

10. Finally, it is also useful to think through what the follow-up from your event will be. Is there a big church festival coming soon to which children and families can be invited? When will the next event be? Is there a church social or outing planned which can welcome those with whom you have made contact through this event? Some churches make a point of following up their special children's events by visiting all the families of those who came. Certainly, it will be important to find ways to strengthen contacts with any new people who have come close to the story of Jesus because of these days. The work of the prayer coordinator needs to continue and these special events need to become a regular and attractive feature of your church's witness to Jesus.