A Children-led Sunday Service

The outline of what we did is told here to give you the opportunity of picking out any part of our story and using it in your situation. We hope at least something we did will be helpful to you also. The preparation of this service took a whole team of people several months at a cost of a few dollars also. We had no idea how well it would go until we saw the large crowd of mums and dads and grandparents coming to church that Sunday morning. We were thrilled by the positive feedback at the end of the service.

General scenario

When the new presbyter arrived in the parish he found a thriving Kindergarten renting out the old parsonage next door to the church. Relations were good in a business-like sense; we responded quickly to any property problems and they paid on time and we were on friendly terms with the staff, especially with the Kindergarten principal. The children used the church every year at Christmas for their seasonal pageant and prize giving. This was used as an introduction of the church building to the children and how to behave in church. The presentation was videoed by most parents and grandparents present thus raising the church’s profile in the local community. Many parents showed it as their Christmas message to relatives on Christmas Day. Despite this positive link we had established, there were distinct mutterings from parents that there should be no religion involved in the Christmas pageant! This diffuse, but discernible suspicion or even antipathy towards the church made it very difficult for us to move beyond the tenant-landlord relationship, but the church naturally wanted something closer with this section of the local community that came upon its premises in such large numbers every day. The arrival of a new presbyter was simply the excuse to make another approach in the hope that this time we might get somewhere.

Preparing the way

The initial approach came from those church members who had most dealings with the Kindergarten, suggesting that it would be nice if the new minister could come over and meet the principal. This ensured that the presbyter did not just assume right of entry and also allowed for a proper appointment to be set so that there would be time to have a decent conversation. At this initial meeting the presbyter raised the topic of forging closer links, but also acknowledged he was aware of the parental feelings and would respect those and tread carefully. There would be no “hard sell” in any sense. The principal, herself more open to creating better links than the parental body, felt that it would be worth pursuing the idea and it was agreed that the presbyter should write a letter to the principal laying out the proposal so that the issue could be formally discussed by the Kindergarten management. The principal subsequently informed parents what was proposed. A date suggested for the service was fixed some four months ahead and the presbyter went to that first meeting with an idea of what the theme of the service would be: we chose the story of Noah’s Ark.

Preparing the children

A gifted musician from the church prepared the music. There would be three songs sung just by the Kindergarten children which were rehearsed in the weeks leading up to the service. There would also be congregational hymns that needed to be introduced to our own Junior Church children, for the service had to incorporate both the younger Kindergarten children and the older children of our Junior Church. Congregational hymns/songs were: *Wide, wide as the ocean (Junior Mission Praise); Fancy Noah sailing in the ark (Faith Forever Singing); Who put the colours in the rainbow (Junior Mission Praise); Yes, God is good in earth and sky (Hymns and Psalms).* Our Junior Church came out to the front to help lead those congregational songs. The three songs sung by the Kindergarten were all based on the Noah theme and were action songs. This was a large commitment on the part of our church musician in the weeks preceding the service during the week and with our Junior Church on Sundays.

Preparing the Church

The church was prepared for the service too. A long coloured strip of material was draped across the front of the church, high up over the central cross to depict the rainbow. A large size Noah’s ark was made of cardboard and painted. It was large enough to cover the end of the choir pews, so that when the Kindergarten children entered the ark, they sat in the choir stalls behind the ark. Noah was an adult member of the congregation in suitable costume to welcome the animals on board. Blue material stretching across the front of the church represented the rising of the waves and was manipulated by two Junior Church boys. A tree with the branch for the dove to find was erected in the pulpit and another member of Junior Church was dressed as the dove to go out seeking the dry land at that point of the story. All the children of the Kindergarten had masks prepared to wear representing the various animals. The overall effect was that upon entering the church it was obvious that an enormous amount of work had gone in to this service and that immediately raised expectations and enthusiasm before the service even started.

The service itself

The service commenced with a procession, led by our Junior Church. In order to incorporate more of them, we had acolytes alongside the presbyter who carried the Bible into Church and another who lit candles at the beginning of the service and extinguished them at the end at the recessional hymn. The opening prayers were said, not aimed at a four year-old, but at the whole congregation, but they were simple in format, no technical theological words and responsorial. During the second song, the Kindergarten processed in dressed in their animal masks. They were welcomed to the church by a member of our Junior Church. The Kindergarten sang their three songs. The story of Noah’s ark was read by an adult member of our church in order to keep the timing right with the enactment of the story by our Junior Church with the dove searching for the branch, the waves rising, and so forth. It was read from the Children’s Bible.

Children’s Bibles were then presented to all those Church families (some of whom are not all that regular in attendance) whom we had contacted beforehand to present them with a copy of the Children’s Bible for their home. We also presented a copy to the Kindergarten principal, since the children had so obviously enjoyed the story of Noah.

A short sermon was then preached addressed at the adults with the many visitors in mind. From the technical point of view, it was Christian Apologetics. The task was to use this brief opportunity to speak to all these people who normally have nothing to do with the church in such a way as they were able to feel that going to church might not be such an alien thing to do after all. Using the Noah story, the preacher had to draw out from the story those aspects that are common motivations for all human beings and then explain how Christian faith satisfies those needs. The object was to build bridges with the non-church people in such a way as was empathetic, rather than confrontational or patronising, whilst still being a positive endorsement for Christian faith. Whilst the short sermon was being preached activity bags were distributed among the children rather like they are used to receiving at birthday parties, a gift they could take away from the church as a memento. All these had to be purchased and planned before the event.

The service ended with a recessional hymn and the last to process out were the minister and the two acolytes who picked up the Bible and extinguished the candles before processing out of the church. Morning tea was the work of many people of the congregation, engaging many of those by asking them to prepare biscuits made in the shape of animals, thus getting the regular attenders involved in the outreach event.

None of what we did was rocket science, but it did take weeks of dedicated work, careful planning, a budget, and a bit of enthusiasm. We hope that you might find the odd tip or two that you will find useful in your situation.