

## **CHILDREN SHARING IN LEADERSHIP (1):**

### **IN THEIR OWN GROUPS**

Involvement of children in the design of their group activities can take two forms. Firstly, material can be used which is either drawn from, or has direct reference to their life experience. There can be an element of decision making on the part of the children in this, and at the very least they can feel that their own concerns are having an influence on the activities they are taking part in. Secondly choice can precede or be built into the activity.

The more power is devolved to the children, the harder things may become for the leaders in one way – in that they may be called on to generate more of their own material; but the easier things should become in another – in that children who ‘own’ their activities will be better motivated and more enthusiastic about what they are doing. As ever, it is a case of striking a balance between the desirable and the possible in any given situation.

### **CHILD CENTRED MATERIAL**

Aspects of the children’s life experience can be used as a focus for prayer and meditation. This can either be directed by the leaders, which involves making assumptions about what the children will find relevant; or children can be asked to provide subjects. In the latter case, this might be on a given topic, or a free choice. Children could be asked to provide material for next week’s session, in which case they could bring in objects, artefacts or photographs to be a focus for prayer.

The actual topics covered in activities could be child centred. The following are from the list of topics found in ‘Under 5’s Alive and Kicking’: ‘Boots and Shoes’, ‘Vegetables’, ‘People Who Help Us’, ‘Animals’, ‘Going to School’, ‘Seaside’, ‘Bread’, ‘Roads’, ‘Pots and Pans’. Leaders could make their own choice from such a list, or could present the list to the children and ask them to choose. Lists of topics to be covered could also be built up by the children themselves if they are asked to bring in matters of concern and interest to them over a period of time.

Developing Christian teaching from starting points in daily life rather than scripture, or recognised themes from our faith is demanding! It can also be immensely rewarding for adults as part of their own journey of faith. It is also an area in which other members of the church who are not able or willing to have direct contact with the children can lend a hand in thinking through the relevant links to scripture and Christian teaching. Clergy and Readers might welcome the opportunity to be involved!

## **CHILD REFERENTIAL MATERIAL**

An approach which is easier, because it begins at the more familiar points of scripture and the teaching of the Church, is to introduce a Biblical story or topic, and ask the children to provide illustrative examples of the points involved from their own lives. In this respect, the approach can be more problematic, however, in that it relies either on children doing some preparation for the next week or on a good spontaneous response. It might be wise for leaders to have some 'back up' material in reserve, in case the children draw a blank!

The major strength of this approach is that it encourages the children to think through for themselves the connections between scripture and life. The connections they make may be quite unexpected, but will have a more personal validity than the links that are made for them by others. Another advantage is that it gives children the opportunity to discuss the application of faith to life with their adult carers – an opportunity which may enrich the spiritual life of the family.

## **CHILDREN MAKING CHOICES**

### **Overall provision**

Consultation with children and their families about the day, time and length of church children's group sessions can be very helpful. Children can also have a say in the overall shape of the sessions, for instance, what elements they should contain. The content of the sessions could also be open to consultation: if a new scheme is being considered, children could 'trial' some of the material and give their responses.

One of the most important ways of responding to the children's direction is to be prepared to 'go with the flow' both within a session and from one session to the next. If a group of children really 'take off' on a topic, then go with it for as long as the interest lasts. This does, however, involve being sensitive to the moment when the enthusiasm wanes and it is time to move on to something different.

### **Choice of Activities**

One way of giving children a degree of choice within a prearranged structure is to provide a 'menu' of activities related to the theme of the session, from which the children pick one. Resources such as 'Roots' and 'Seasons of the Spirit' supply a number of activity ideas within each session, which saves the leaders having to generate a lot of material; however, all the activities still need setting up and supervising.

One way of looking at this kind of arrangement is to see it as an alternative to having a number of age related groups. Instead of having three groups based on age, for instance, you could simply have three different activity groups that are open to children of all ages. The advantage here is that children can make choices that they feel are appropriate to their own maturity and interests, rather than being restricted by their chronological age.

The children's choice of activity can also reflect their own internal response to the material you are covering. This is the essence of the 'Godly Play' approach to continuation work after a scripture story has been told. A 'Godly Play' room will have a wide range of art and craft materials which children can use in any way they want in order to respond to the scripture for the day – or they can write, play through the story again, or simply talk. The advantage of this approach, as well as giving wide freedom of expression to the children, is that there is no requirement for separate 'activities' to be set up, as such. All that is required is for a plentiful supply of materials to be available each week, and for adults to help the children in what they want to do, if and when required.

### **Elements in a Session**

If the leaders want to work within certain predetermined structures, yet still leave room for choice, they could offer a variety of perhaps five or six 'elements' which could go to make a session (eg, story, song, drama, prayer, quiet time etc) from which the children as a group could choose, say, three to make up next week's session. This 'choosing time' for next week would become a regular feature at the end of every session. 'Planning for next week' activities can help encourage the sporadic attenders to be more regular (if their family circumstances allow, of course).

### **Songs and Prayers**

Within an individual session 'element' such as song or prayer, choice can be offered. A book of songs and a book of prayers could be produced for use in the group, and the children could choose which song or prayer to have each week. The prayers, particularly, could be the children's own work; although it is also possible to help children write songs – using well known songs and rewriting the lyrics is a good starting point. The children can also be encouraged to collect favourite prayers and songs. This is a good opportunity to find out what prayers and songs they use at school.

### **Sharing with Others**

Often the children will share what they have been doing with the adults - from small scale showing 'what we made' to full scale drama presentations. All of these occasions give opportunities for children to make choices - from what pieces of work to hold up and what to say about them, through to what stories to use in the drama, and which out of a range of techniques (eg dance, mime to music, mime to narration, acting out, puppets etc) should be used in presenting the story.

If the children's group is given responsibility for planning a whole act of worship, it is usually expected that the leaders will do the work. The leaders could, however, explain the liturgical structure to the children - ie what different bits there are in the service and what kind of things are supposed to happen in each of them – then get the children to take a role in choosing how to fill the different slots.

## **METHODS OF CHOOSING**

A fundamental choice in any situation is how you are actually going to *make* your choices. There are several ways of doing this. Not all of them are appropriate to every group or to every situation, and it would be good to give the children experience of several ways of going about the task. Eventually, they should be able to make informed decisions as to how best to decide!

### **Voting**

This is the most straightforward way for a group to make a decision, but it does have a disadvantage: unless there is a tie, a vote always produces losers! For this reason, Quakers never vote on business matters: a Quaker clerk will seek to establish the ‘sense of the meeting’ before making a minute. If the clerk does not feel that even those who have spoken against the main thrust of the discussion will be prepared to support the final outcome, then the decision is not taken and the matter is left. Although voting is quick and clear-cut, if there are poor losers in the group, it should be used with caution! There may be times when it is safer to seek a ‘sense of the meeting’.

### **Discussion**

If a vote is to be taken, this is an essential preliminary. As long as they don’t dominate the discussion, leaders can help in clarifying the issues and in pointing out the practical implications of suggestions before a decision is made. Discussion takes time, of course, but it can often be an excellent teaching activity in itself. As the children talk about an issue, they are exploring it and learning about it, and the contributions of the leaders are not ‘teacher telling us’ but an adult providing the information the children need to do the job in hand.

Even if the ultimate decision on an issue has to rest with the adults, or some other sector of the church community, a full discussion with the children is a very good way of informing the final outcome; and if children can see something of what they have said being reflected in what eventually happens, then they will know that their contribution is valued. It is often helpful to point out to children how the points they have raised have influenced subsequent events.

### **Preferred Options**

Many (maybe most) of the decisions we have to make in life are not straightforward. It may be appropriate in some situations to produce a list of options for children to base their decisions on. The list may have been produced by leaders, children, or leaders after discussion with children. The children could vote for one item on the list, or they could be asked to mark their three preferred options in rank order. This can help get a broader picture of the group’s feelings than a straight vote – it also diminishes the ‘loser’ effect, since the ‘top option’ will probably have been selected by many children as their second or third choice, and they will therefore be able to feel they have a share in the ‘win’.

A list can also be helpful in getting children started on a decision making process. Being given a completely free choice – like being given a blank piece of paper – can sometimes be disabling. ‘What would you like to do next week?’ is likely to produce

the response, ‘Dunno.’ But, ‘Here are some things we could do next week. Which would you prefer?’ will get the ball rolling, and a follow up of, ‘Are there any other ideas you’d like to add to the list?’ might help the children make their own contribution.

### **Working Parties**

If we want children to take a role in the wider decision making structures of the church they will need to have some experience of the methods used – chief amongst which is the Working Party or Committee! One of the big disadvantages of the adult version of this, is that it puts more pressure on a crowded life (‘Not more meetings!’). Children, however, can *enjoy* the importance of a special meeting – especially if they know that what they decide on will actually have influence (and if a good selection of drinks and biscuits are provided!) It would be possible, of course, to hold a meeting during the normal group time and the children’s discussion would then become their activity for that morning.

*[NB Child Protection requirements must always apply wherever and whenever a meeting involving children is convened.]*

### **Feedback**

Discussions in working parties, the group as a whole, and in the leaders’ planning meetings can receive valuable guidance from structured feedback. It might be helpful at suitable times during the year to ask the children to give feedback on the activities they have been involved in in their group, or on wider matters to do with their place in the church. A carefully worded questionnaire about the issue under consideration can sometimes produce more useful results than more general questions.

### **Having Fun**

Giving individuals a choice can, of course, simply be a bit of fun. You could have a number of options on cards in a basket and just ask a child to pick one. This could be developed into a system in which there was a basket for each element of the session in which a choice was possible, and children could be invited to dip in each basket as the session progresses. Decisions made in this way would have to relate to ‘minor’ options which could be quickly and simply provided eg whether to sing, or listen to a piece of music.

Who gets to dip in the basket can be decided by rota, or as a reward, or to mark something special like a child’s birthday. It is important, of course, if a rota is not being used, that the leaders make sure everyone gets a dip in the basket at some point over a period of time (keeping a note on the class list of who’s had a go is a good idea). The ‘lucky dip’ basket isn’t the only way individuals can choose, of course – they can be given lists to choose from, or have a free choice at appropriate points in a session.

## **CHILDREN SHARING IN LEADERSHIP (2):**

### **IN THE WIDER CHURCH**

#### **CHILDREN'S FORUMS**

A major initiative of the Church of Scotland for its 'Year of the Child' has been to set up children's forums across the country to inform the church of the children's needs, views and concerns, and thereby facilitate the fullest possible participation by the children in the life of their church. Key features of these forum meetings are that they are regular, fun (including 'ice-breaker' games) and prayerful (with children taking a role in prayer and selection of Bible readings). Details of the agendas for these forums can be found on [www.parisheducation.org.uk](http://www.parisheducation.org.uk)

Perhaps each deanery could establish a children's forum to address a wide range of issues of current interest in the Church (not just children's issues). Issues on Deanery Synod and General Synod agendas could be explored and the views expressed by the children fed into the relevant structures. The children could also raise issues of their own of local, national or international significance, and feed these into the appropriate church channels. It is important in any initiative of this nature that the children are kept informed of what is happening to the issues they have raised, and what progress has been made.

#### **PARISH STRUCTURES**

How can children's views be made known in the various groups and committees of a parish such as the Worship Committee or the PCC? It may sometimes be possible for groups of children to attend meetings to give presentations on certain issues. Remember, children may have a view on any number of 'church issues' not just specifically to do with their own group and its activities. If children *are* going to give a presentation to an adult group it is vital that they are properly prepared, accompanied and supported.

Children's views can also be fed into the church in written form, or by an adult who has been 'briefed' at an earlier meeting with the children. The Worship Committee or PCC could make a point of delegating members to act as 'liaison officers' with the children's group, with a brief to gather the children's views on forthcoming issues. The parish could adopt a policy that *all* its groups and committees should establish some means of enabling children to make a contribution to their business.

## **SPECIFIC PROJECTS**

Children like to see results sooner rather than later, and the limited timespan of planning for a special event can give them an experience of having an influence and seeing its effect in a relatively short period of time. When a parish is planning a mission weekend, festival, 'Summer Fayre', Lent course, Easter service, link diocese initiative, Christian Aid Week contribution etc the children could be given a way of feeding their views into the planning. It should be remembered that the children will have views on the *whole* event – not just in a specific 'children's bit'.

*[NB Whenever children and adults are working together Child Protection requirements must always be followed]*

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