

# 'COMPANIONS IN CHRIST'

*Companions in Christ* is a series of publications designed to resource children's spiritual journey. It is intended for use with 6-11 year olds in groups of about 8-12. It could be used as a Bible study or house group resource and the writers, Steve Pearce and Doug Swanney, suggest that it could be used as a special activity rather than a weekly programme. Adult children's leaders and children's families are invited to be 'companions' with the children in their spiritual journey.

A distinctive feature of the approach taken by the resource is its emphasis on three qualities that it maintains Christians through the ages have found to be fundamental in nurturing spirituality:

1. Quiet, silence and solitude
2. Imagination
3. Peace, reverence and respect

Accordingly, the children are encouraged to, 'slow down, listen to their inner voice, listen to God, and begin to discover themselves'.

## INTRODUCTION

### Leisure

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars like skies at night.

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.

A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

W.H. Davies

## **The Juggling Generation**

A recent advert for *Anadin* painkillers shows a woman walking purposefully through a busy city street, juggling. The 'voice over' asks us, the viewers, if we are leading busy lives, juggling many concerns. A red blast of pain stops the woman in her tracks, and the 'voice over' asks us what we do when pain interferes with our busy schedules. Instead of suggesting the obvious solution to the problem – drop everything and take a rest – the 'voice over' tells us to buy a packet of painkillers and keep on juggling.

At the end of May, an item on BBC Radio 4's 'Today Programme' explored the way that we seem to vie with each other to be 'the most exhausted' by our work. The item identified a growing sense in society that sleep was just an inconvenient interruption in the flow of life's activity.

Is this the way that a God who *commands* a regular regime of rest in our lives wants us to live?

## **Being There**

One of the many facets that are often identified in spirituality is the ability to be 'fully present' in the moment. David Hay suggests the following activity (borrowed from Dr Patrick Pietroni) as one way of promoting spirituality amongst children. It is an exercise in 'personal awareness' but it also promotes a detailed awareness of every facet of an everyday action – living fully in each moment. The children are given a plate with slices of apple on it and asked to experience the apple as if they had never encountered one before, using all their senses. They close their eyes and feel the different textures of the apple slices, lift a slice to their nose and smell it, then open their eyes and notice as much as they can visually. Finally the children begin to eat their apple slice. They are encouraged to notice not only the taste but also the way the slice feels in their mouth, the noises it makes as they bite and chew it, and last of all the sensations as they swallow and it makes its way to their stomach (*The Spirit of the Child* p170-171).

David Hay and Rebecca Nye define spirituality as 'relational consciousness' and see this in terms of relationship with: self; others; the world; God. Being fully present in the moment can be seen as promoting a deeper relationship with ourselves and the world around us. That ability to be present, without being distracted by thoughts of 'the next thing on the agenda', is also very important to our human relationships. We all know the frustration of talking to someone who is continually looking over our shoulder, obviously impatient to be 'on to the next thing'. In contrast we also know the deep sense of communion that can be drawn from someone who is truly and completely 'there for us'.

As for our relationship with the divine, Psalm 46 says it all: 'Be still and know that I am God.'

## WHAT HAPPENS IN A 'COMPANIONS IN CHRIST SESSION' ?

The intention of the programme is to equip the children (and adults who work with them) with some spiritual disciplines that they can use throughout their lives. For this reason, the basic shape of a session always follows a set pattern so that, through repetition, the children can have the opportunity to get used to the various approaches suggested. Several features of a *Companions in Christ* session derive from practices to be found in *Godly Play*.

The pattern of a session is as follows:

### **Arrival**

This merits mention as part of the 'pattern' since it sets the mood for the session. Children are greeted personally by a leader and asked to take off their shoes to show that they are entering a special place and time.

### **Conversation**

The children gather with the leaders in a circle, ideally seated on a rug, and share some of the things that have been happening in their lives. After a while a 'Community Candle' is lit as a reminder of God's presence, and small votive candles are lit for any group members who are absent. There is then some input to introduce the theme of the session.

### **Reflection Stations**

The same basic reflection activities are provided for each session but the details of the activities will change as the themes change. There are usually six 'stations' but children are not expected to engage with more than one or two per session. The stations are: gazing; reflecting on world events; contemplating at a sand table; making art; journaling; and reading. The activities are designed to be done silently, as individuals.

### **Regathering and Closing**

A chime is used to call the group back into the circle and there is time to share thoughts on the reflective activities. The session can end in prayer, song or a meditative activity. The leader concludes with a blessing.

### **Room Care and Goodbye**

The chime sounds again as a signal for children to take responsibility for making sure the room is properly tidied, then for them to leave in the quiet way in which they entered this special time and place.

## RESPONSE

Here are some things you might like to consider in the light of your experience of a *Companions in Christ* session.

### SWOT Analysis

What

**S** trengths  
**W** eaknesses  
**O** pportunities  
**T** hreats

can you see in the *Companions in Christ* approach?

### 'Formation' or 'Information'

- What do you think these terms mean?
- What would you say was the balance between 'formation' and 'information' in the *Companions in Christ* session you experienced?
- What is the balance of 'formation' and 'information' in the sessions you currently run in your church?
- What do you want children to gain from their time in Church?

### The Spiritual Nature of Children

The writers of *Companions in Christ* have been guided by six basic beliefs about the spiritual nature of children:

1. 'Children have an innate connection to God'
  2. 'Children are naturally open to mystery'
  3. 'Children have a capacity for awe'
  4. 'Children are able to receive' (ie 'They have no difficulty expressing their needs and accepting their dependence')
  5. 'Children love what is real'
  6. 'Children are humble' (ie 'They haven't yet put on the masks of cultural niceties and rationalizations')
- Do you agree with these beliefs?
  - Would you add any beliefs of your own about the spiritual nature of children?
  - Can you see evidence of the six beliefs forming the way *Companions in Christ* has been designed?
  - Do your beliefs about the spiritual nature of children influence the way you work with them at the moment?

## **Families as ‘Companions in Christ’**

There can be a ‘contracting out’ syndrome when it comes to parenting these days – a feeling that parents aren’t properly equipped to bring up their children and so had better ‘leave it to the experts’. There is a particular danger that the spiritual upbringing of children can be seen in this light, with the ‘experts’ being the children’s leaders at church. *Companions in Christ* seeks to encourage parents to be involved with their children in the spiritual journey. Children can discuss the sessions or material they take home in their folders, and parents are encouraged to allow space at home for children to create their own reflective place. The following suggestions (drawn from John Westerhoff’s *Bringing Children up in the Christian Faith*) are also made:

1. Tell and retell Bible stories
  2. Celebrate faith and life with family rituals
  3. Pray together and for each other
  4. Listen to each other and talk together
  5. Perform faithful acts of service, love and mercy
  6. Cultivate a spirit of gratitude and thankfulness
- In what ways do you, or could you encourage parents to share their children’s spiritual journey?
  - It is suggested that parents are invited to a preparatory meeting to explain how *Companions in Christ* operates. Do you, or could you meet with parents to discuss the spiritual nurture of their children?
  - Would it be possible to pray with parents?
  - The term ‘spiritual parenting’ is becoming popular. What would you understand by this term? How might parents be encouraged to see parenting as a spiritual activity?

## **Children’s Leaders as ‘Companions in Christ’**

Preparing spiritually for a children’s session is as important as preparing the materials you will need, but it is easy to let the latter crowd the former out of your timetable. *Companions in Christ* provides the children’s work leaders with a brief spiritual exercise for each day of the week leading up to a session. For example, the following is the ‘exercise’ for Day Two in the run up to the session you have just experienced:

*Read Session 1, jotting down the supplies you will need and thoughts that you do not want to forget. Now read Genesis 1:27. Meditate on these questions: In what ways are you made in the image of God? What abilities, attributes and characteristics do you see in yourself that communicate ‘God-ness’? Sit quietly and listen to what God may be saying to you. Record your thoughts in your journal.*

- How do you think this preparation would affect the session?
- How would it connect with your own spiritual journey?
- How do you currently prepare for a session with your children?
- How might you be a ‘companion’ during a *Companions in Christ* session?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

Gill Ambrose (2000). *The 'E' Book: essential prayers and activities for faith at home*. London: National Society/ Church House Publishing.

Jerome Berryman (2002 Vols 1 – 3; 2003 Vols 4 – 5; 2006 Vol 6). *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*. Denver (USA): Living the Good News.

Liz Dorton & Christine Wright (2005) *Colours of Easter*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship

Penny Frank (1994). *The Questions Children Ask*. Warwick: CPAS

Jill Fuller (1996). *Gazing in Wonder*. Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew

Jill Fuller (1996). *Looking Beyond*. Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew

John Hattman (2000). *Families Finding Faith*. Warwick: CPAS

David Hay with Rebecca Nye (1998). *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Fount.

Peter Privett (2003). *Living in a Fragile World*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship.

Mary Stone (1992). *Don't Just Do Something – Sit There*. Lancaster: St Martin's College.

Steve Pearce & Doug Swanney. (2006). *Companions in Christ: Advent & Epiphany*. Peterborough: Inspire.

Steve Pearce & Doug Swanney. (2006). *Companions in Christ: Lent & Easter*. Peterborough: Inspire.

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Marion Stroud (1994). *The Journey Parents Make*. Warwick: CPAS

Sue Wallace (2000). *Multi-sensory Prayer*. Bletchley: Scripture Union.

John Westerhoff III (1980). *Bringing Children up in the Christian Faith*. USA: Winston Press.

John Westerhoff III & William Willimon (1980). *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle*. New York: The Seabury Press.

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