

Making children feel welcome

By Matt Cresswell

My first reaction upon reading the title of Stephen Kuhrt's publication extolling the virtues of the 'Sssh-free church' was one of deep scepticism, if I'm entirely honest. The idea of children being allowed to roam free during our church services, whilst crying and knocking things over sent shivers down my spine. I am, if anything, an inveterate 'sssh-er', the sort of person who might put a gentle word in the minister's ear if the children were 'too loud, once again...' However, having read the 28 pages of 'Church Growth through the Full Welcome of Children', I have come to the realisation that Stephen's vision, and one which has been effectively rolled out at Christ Church, New Malden, is actually a well thought-out idea. It not only benefits children, but families too.

Since 2000, Stephen's church has run an earlier service for families and children in addition to other church services which start at different times. The 9.30am service encourages local families to turn up with their children for a 55-minute service in which children are encouraged to be themselves, whether that's laughing crying or jumping - in essence a 'sssh free church'. Those who desire to worship God in a quieter environment are free to attend at a later service, with considerably less children.

Stephen says his church is "trying to do everything possible to break down the barriers which stop young parents from coming to church." That means families can go to church in an environment where their children will be welcomed and accepted, noises and all. In his booklet - part of the Grove evangelism series - he writes that many families fear going to church because of their children. Discussing these types of families, he writes: "When such families do approach local churches they are frequently put off by cultural factors, particularly unrealistic demands and expectations by the church (and sometimes themselves) regarding their children's behaviour and therefore quickly give up coming." He goes on to say: "If local churches can eliminate the factors which make it difficult for young families to attend (principally any element of 'ssshing' or 'tutting' towards children) a vast amount of exciting

growth is very possible."

In his publication Stephen looks at some of the changes parents face when children are suddenly thrust into their lives. He argues that the arrival of children frequently prompts couples to look into spiritual matters as they contemplate bringing up young ones in an increasingly 'mixed-up' world. He adds: "Hearts seemingly hardened by the tough world of work and ambition can be remarkably softened by the arrival of a child." It is therefore vital that such families have somewhere they can freely take their children. At Stephen's church in New Malden, part of Southwark diocese, there are now 254 children attending the 9.30am service and many of these parents have gone on to explore the Christian faith in more detail on the Alpha Course.

Much of the model at New Malden centres around infant baptism. Stephen's model actively encourages couples to have their children baptised. From reading the gospels, Stephen is convinced that it is his duty to respond to parents' requests for baptism with 'enthusiasm'. This is one part of the model which some churches might be less eager to embrace. The Anglican Church is still divided in its warmth towards infant baptism, evidenced by groups such as Baptismal Integrity, who want it reformed. Stephen would argue that in New Malden his church's openness to infant baptism

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has borne fruit, judging by the numbers of new families now attending Christ Church. However, this, to me at least, has a slight whiff of pragmatism about it. There is perhaps room in Stephen's booklet for a model for those churches that are cautious about being too enthusiastic about having children baptised. Or even for those against the practice - not a theological position held only by the Baptists.

All in all, the success of the 9.30am church service at Christ Church in New Malden is a success story which church leaders need to study. A separate service geared around young children and families in a 'tut-free' environment should be something every church with enough means should think about starting.

'Church Growth Through Full Welcome of Children' by Stephen Kuhrt. Published by Grove Books Ltd. £3.50. ISSN 1367-0840