**A Tale of Two Missions**

On the edge of a busy town, a big and thriving parish church with a heart for mission. On the edge of a council housing estate, a lone Christian with a heart for telling local families about Jesus.

Perhaps neither of these two situations, at opposite ends of the spectrum, seems to be anything like your situation, but the stories that come out of them may help you think through how you go about bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the children in your area.

At certain points in the telling of these stories you will see this symbol. It encourages you to look at your own situation in the light of the experiences of the people involved, and to think how the different issues raised might apply in your situation – and how you might resolve them.

**Beginnings**

St Mark’s Church wanted to tell children in their area about Jesus, and so approached their local Scripture Union evangelist to work with them on a mission to children in the parish. They started by looking at the parish geography – at the number and position of the primary schools in the area (there were several), at the lifestyles of families in the parish, at the activities that the church already ran (Sunday groups plus multiple Brownie and Cub packs) and where there were already openings for possible new work. They looked too at the team of people already working with children, and at their skills. And then they began to dream Godly dreams as they prayed about the best way forward. Although they wanted every child in the parish to have a chance to hear about Jesus, they knew that they couldn’t do that in a week and they wanted their contact with the children to be meaningful, rather than minimal.

The church already had some input to the local Church of England Aided School as the clergy went in to take assembly regularly. Situated about half a mile along the same road, this seemed like the right place to start work, as they already had strong links, and this was the children’s own ‘territory’. When the ideas was raised with the head teacher both she and the rest of the staff were very willing for the church, helped by the Scripture Union evangelist, to run a week of early evening clubs there. A date was planned that suited both the church and the school, and people in the church were told so that they might keep the dates free. And all this was done about 9 months ahead of the date, so that there was time to do good planning and preparation.

One Sunday Myrtle found a group of fifteen children in her garden stealing apples from her fruit trees. She caught a couple of them, so they all came to talk and she ‘dared’ them to come to her church that night. One took up the challenge and told the others that they had to come too, and so the whole group turned up that evening (a real shock for the church, which was small and very traditional!) Myrtle began to talk with them whenever she saw them and invited them to both the church and the youth group that was held at her house. Some of them came one day when the Scripture Union evangelist who worked in Myrtle’s area was visiting the regular group. The new ones didn’t fit into the group very well: they knew nothing about the Bible, found it difficult to join in discussions and obviously needed a different approach. So Myrtle and the evangelist decided to run a ‘fun day’ one Saturday in Myrtle’s house and garden: lots of games, and a Bible story told in a way that was appropriate for these children.
Where are the children in your area?

Why do they not come to things that the church is already running? Is it to do with when they happen? Or where they happen? Or is it because the content is not user-friendly for those outside the church?

What points of contact are there between the church and children who don’t come to church, or between them and Christians in the area?

What appropriate activities or event could you put on for the children whom you are not currently reaching?

If you decide to seek the help of someone from outside the church, such as the Scripture Union evangelists used by Myrtle and St Mark's Church, be sure to plan ahead and to contact these people as early as possible. At the end of this article you will find details of how to get in touch with them.

Why?

Why are you concerned about the fact that some children are not involved in the church? Is it because you feel that you should be doing better? Are you concerned about low numbers in your Sunday groups? Or do you want children to know the love of Jesus? It may seem like an obvious question, but pause to consider it now before you go any further. With the other children’s leaders of your church or club, discuss what motivates you in wanting to draw into church children who are currently outside it, and then use your answer as a check point for all that you do.

Both Myrtle and the people at St Mark’s wanted children to know about Jesus so that they had the chance to choose him. They had the realistic aim of making Jesus known, rather than thinking in terms of numbers of children who might respond positively and start to follow Jesus.

The team at St Mark’s knew that there was a limit to what they could say in a school assembly; in that setting it would be wrong to challenge – or even to invite – children to follow Jesus. This was not a regular feature of Brownies or Cubs either, so the evening clubs gave a special opportunity for the packs to hear more about Jesus.

And of course there was a hope that they would see growth in the numbers of children coming to church week by week. But this was not the church’s main aim; the key thing was for more children to hear the good news of Jesus explained clearly in ways and language that the children could understand. A week of evening clubs would provide a good opportunity to do this.

Myrtle knew that the children with whom she came into contact had very little knowledge of Jesus: neither the facts about him nor the impact of his life, death and resurrection. Whilst the informality of the fun days meant that they enjoyed coming, it would take a long time to move them on in their knowledge and understanding. However much she wanted them to know, she would have to work at their pace!
Recruitment of leaders

As Myrtle got to know the children they dropped by her house with increasing regularity. They came to tell her their news or just called because they were bored and needed somewhere to go, so she talked with some of them very regularly. But there was a need for more opportunities to talk about Jesus, so as well as the fun days, Myrtle and the evangelist set up a week-long holiday club. This still happened in her home but drew in new children and necessitated finding more adults to work with them too. It provided an opportunity to develop their skills in working with children. These were not necessarily people who had helped in the church Sunday groups in the past, but those who were willing to be involved and had a heart to tell the children about Jesus. In time, the club moved to the church as more and more children came. Finding adult leaders was always hard and sometimes limited what could be done.

Meanwhile at St Mark’s things were moving well; the special week was planned and the vicar’s wife, in charge of recruiting team, began to draw in people for the various jobs that needed to be done. She began with a general announcement in the church notices but then followed that up with specific requests to individuals, asking them to do jobs for which she knew they were suited. But not everyone had done work like this before, so they were reassured that they would be given training and a clear explanation of their role. The roles were very varied: from small-group leader to car park attendant; from crossing patrol to making drinks for the children; from playing in the band to registering the children on arrival. Almost 100 people from the church were involved in one way or another at some stage in the week! The evangelist came to lead the training sessions, including looking at the material to be used so that everyone involved with the children grew in confidence about the week, and everyone involved in whatever way was clear about the aims of the week. This also gave them chance to pray together for God’s work in the children.

Again, this allowed new people to get involved in working with children. One great-grandmother’s initial involvement was in helping to make up orange squash, but then was recruited to be a granny in the drama. As she was persuaded into each successive role it was outlined to her clearly so that she knew what was involved, and by the final preparation meeting before the event, she told the evangelist ‘And now I’m a group leader – isn’t it wonderful?’ It was!

What different stories! One used a handful of helpers while the other involved a large proportion of the church congregation!

Whatever the size of the team, you need to be sure that everyone on the team has been checked in accordance with current legislation about child protection. Your church may have a code of practice laid down by your denomination, but if you need help contact The Churches’ Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) at P O Box 133, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7UQ (0845 120 4550) or www ccpas.co.uk

Make sure that your team know what to do if any child makes a disclosure of abuse, or says anything that gives cause for concern. Again, if you are unsure about how to deal with this, check it out with CCPAS before the event so that everyone is clear about the procedure.

Ask specific people to carry out specific roles, as well as making a general plea for help. People are far more likely to respond to a personal invitation than a general request. Make sure that your team know what is expected of them, so run both an information session to tell them what will happen and a training event to equip them. That way anybody can get involved, whether they have worked
with children before or not – like the great-grandmother. You may even find it helpful to give people a written job description so that they are clear about what their role entails.

Look together at the materials to be used and answer people’s questions about them. Try to help them think it all through from the children’s perspective, and imagine what questions the children might have.

Let them try any craft activities, sing some of the songs that you will use with the children and play any games, so that everyone is clear what will happen. They will enjoy it, and will grow in confidence too!

If you are inviting children to follow Jesus, talk through with those involved directly with the children how to handle any questions or to help children understand what they are deciding. If you are using booklets that explain the simple steps to saying ‘yes’ to Jesus make sure everyone has a copy and is familiar with the content. Help them know how to handle those who say ‘no’ to following Jesus, as well as those who say ‘yes’.

Dealing with the unexpected!

Three weeks before the event at St Mark’s the head teacher at the school had a phone call from Ofsted. ‘We've had a cancellation: we’re coming to do your school in three weeks time! Oh, and by the way, it will be a training exercise, so there will be eight inspectors; four of them will be learning.’

The head explained about the events planned by the church and suggested that this was not the best week for the school to be inspected. ‘Oh that’s alright, they won’t be in our way!’ said the inspector.

‘That’s not what I was thinking!’ replied the head. ‘More the other way round!’

Over time Myrtle and her team of helpers were able to develop a whole programme of events for the children and teenagers, sometimes working on their own and sometimes supported by the evangelist. She began a family service at the church, using songs that would be easily understood by anyone who came, rather than just by those familiar with church. She started a home group for adults, which drew the grandparents of some of the children.

Some of the children went on holidays organised by Scripture Union and by a local charity – their first holiday ever! – and Myrtle thought it would be good to hold a service at the church to say ‘thank you’ to God for holidays. The church was packed with children, but they simply couldn’t contain their excitement. Discipline had always been difficult, and on this occasion it was impossible to get them calm enough to do anything. With great sadness Myrtle had to call a halt to the service, and send everyone home.

Why? Why were the children so especially hard to control that night? What was happening? This is the evangelist’s interpretation of the children’s behaviour:

“These children have tough lives; most of them come from homes where their parents have split up and then begun new relationships, and in quite a few cases that partnership has broken down too. Some of the children live with adults who are not even their relatives. Of course it has a major impact on them so that they find it hard to be so accepted by Myrtle and her helpers. It’s almost as
if they can’t cope with being loved that much, so that eventually they behave in ways that will, they expect, make the adults love them less. And if that happens, the children feel that they are on familiar ground because it’s the response they have come to expect from people who say that they love them.”

You may not face difficulties like either of those, but things may not go smoothly for a variety of reasons. It can be hard to keep focused and to keep going when the unexpected occurs, but in God’s mission that is often the norm, not the unusual! As far as you can, plan for it – or at least be ready to respond!

• Have a team of people praying for the event. Give them specific things to pray for before the event – activities, elements of the programme etc and for strong friendships to be built between children and adults, and so on – but also have people praying while the event takes place. This is a lovely way to involve those members of the congregation who can’t be there in person during the week, such as elderly or housebound people. If the event takes place over a week or several weeks, give them updates of needs and answers.

• Think through everything thoroughly and try to anticipate any problems, planning how you might deal with any that arise. Pause to consider the children who will come and the activities that you have planned:
  o Do you have enough helpers?
  o Have you agreed a maximum number who can attend, and what will you do if more children turn up?
  o Do you have the right activities for the group? If you have any children with special needs will they be able to join in everything? If not, what will they do as an alternative?
  o Do you have extra activities for those who finish the planned things quickly?
  o Do you have a trained first-aider and first aid kit? Access to a telephone? Contact details for the children in case of emergency?
  o Do you have anywhere quiet where tired or shy children can sit with a book or other activity if they find things too much for them? And who will supervise that if it is needed?
  o Have you agreed what steps will be taken to maintain discipline – who will do it, and how? It needs to be positive rather than negative – ‘Come and do this!’ rather than ‘Don’t do that!’ where possible. Keeping children busy is the best way to distract them from misbehaviour. Lay down some simple rules at the start of the event; be clear what the boundaries are. Be fair and consistent – children hate injustice and more children may get involved if you deal unfairly with a situation, or don’t deal with it at all. Work through simple steps to achieve control: for example, if there are two children fighting, stop them and explain what behaviour you expect, then separate them temporarily if they still fight, and put them into separate groups if necessary. Physical contact should only be in the form of restraining, and then only as a last resort. Make sure that your team know what to do so that incidents can be dealt with quickly and quietly before they blow up into anything worse.
The end result

After much consideration and prayer the church and school decided to go ahead with the week as planned, despite the inspection. The school staff bent over backwards to be cooperative and seemed to appreciate having the evangelist in school all week, as that took the pressure off them to lead assemblies, and gave them a fellow-sufferer in the inspection! The school did very well – as expected – and despite fears and doubtless increased tension for the staff, the inspection added something to the mission week, and the mission week brought an added dimension to the inspection.

Perhaps the knowledge of this extra pressure encouraged the congregation to pray more and the team to rely on God more, but it proved to be a brilliant week! There were over 200 children there every night, and the sense of excitement and expectation was very high. One of the church congregation said after the event, 'It was brilliant! I came home on a high every night!' After the event the church began a midweek club at the school. At the start around 45 children came each week but as summer wore on and the novelty wore off, numbers decreased a little. Eventually the club moved down the road to the church hall; the leaders still met the children at the school and walked them along the road, but again some children stopped coming. The lesson here seems to be to take things slowly and to go at the children’s pace and to recognise that being on their territory really does seem to help.

There was always more that could be done: another special week, special events through the year, another school, even, where the same style of event could be run. Wisely, the vicar warned people that another event would never be quite the same; it may even be better, but they would never replicate that first week exactly. They have continued to work with the children of the parish and they continue to run the weekly club. They continue to be open to the needs of the children in the area, and to how God might ask them to meet those needs, especially that of knowing Jesus.

Work such as Myrtle’s never comes to an end! Children grow up and need a different group to which they can belong and within which they can continue to walk forwards or with Jesus. Discipling children and young people from tough backgrounds is not easy; it often feels like one step forward and two back. For years Myrtle has prayed not just for the group as they are now but for the future of each individual, asking God to provide Christian husbands and wives for them so that there might be a Christian home set up in the area and a contemporary model of Christian marriage from which future young people can learn.

Other children take their place in the younger group, just as much in need of knowing about and knowing Jesus. More leaders are needed if the work is to develop, and more understanding from the church if these families are feel welcome and able to take their place among God’s people.

Where is your work with children going? Do you have some idea of where God might be leading you, or do you simply keep going and think about things as they arise? Have you got a strategy for telling the children in your area about Jesus? It is sometimes hard to think ahead when it’s all you can do to keep going from week to week, but it’s good to pause every so often, to take time with God to evaluate your current work and the needs of children in the area, and to plan ways to be more effective and to reach more children.
As the Myrtle and the people at St Mark’s discovered, Scripture Union can offer you help with this. Go to the evangelists page of the Scripture Union website for the contact details of your nearest Scripture Union evangelist, or contact Scripture Union for further help.

You may be confident to do this alone; you may be already doing all of this and more. Keep going: the need is great. May God make you ever more effective in your work to tell children about Jesus!

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