

Chapter Twelve

Church in Community

‘I don’t want to go to church – it’s boring.’ I wonder how many times words like these have been said in houses throughout England. Your teenagers may say it out loud, but how often has this thought been in your mind as well as you climb into the car on Sunday morning. For all of us, church can seem a million miles away from the problems and decisions of day-to-day life. For the teenagers it can often seem not only miles away but also centuries away. We have looked at ways of living our faith in a generational covenant keeping God out in our daily life, but how does church attendance relate? If church is boring and remote what can we do about it? How do we make it relevant and compelling for them? Are there some churches that have got it right? Is there one kind of church that has the answer to keeping its teenagers? Does a single denomination have the solution?

The good news is that according to the Christian Research Organisation’s finding it doesn’t really seem to matter whether your church is Baptist, Anglican or Catholic. The bad news is that each

denomination seems to fail as much as the next. But scattered through the different styles and names of churches there are examples of churches where faith is transmitted successfully down through the generations. It is not denomination but life that matters. Our teenagers are growing up not just in families but also in churches – and the kind of church they are in has a very definite effect on their continuing or not in faith through into adulthood. So the topic of keeping the children as they grow up is not just relevant to parents but also to church leaders. In any church the children's work is vital – without it the church dies. Equally, church attendance is a vital part in the children's growth into adult faith. Unfortunately it can often be a huge stumbling block instead. But this does not have to be the case.

Imagine a new housing estate with 1000 houses on the edge of a large town. Scattered among the families in those houses are a few Christians, who Sunday by Sunday get in their cars and drive to churches all over the town. Gradually they get to know each other and start a children's work. A Bible club after school in three houses on the estate involves the younger children, then a coffee morning for mums and preschool children is added. This grows to monthly Sunday services in the local school, then weekly, and a church is born. A church that intended always to be a community church serving and loving the people living in the area. We had no full time workers, the church was owned by everyone who was part of it, and when the time came for a building, in the centre of the estate, it was literally built by the men of the church, and some who weren't at the start but

belonged, and believed, by the end of the building process. It was prayed into being and kept safe by the consistent prayer of a group of older people living in their own homes and in the sheltered housing on the estate. The older children joined in and helped and the younger ones did their bit by bringing a picnic lunch along for the workers, and staying to share it. While the men were building the church the women were building family – the older people from the sheltered housing were included, visited, loved, taken shopping, used as babysitters, and generally provided another layer of adult attention for a whole generation of children. Working mums knew that their children would go home from school to a house where other children were; where homework, television, afterschool activities, drinks and tea would happen just as if they were in their own homes. Meanwhile their contribution to the world of work was valued, prayed for and they were able to continue knowing their children were not being neglected. Children knew they were welcome in any of ten or so houses, for meals, sleepovers, chats, Bible clubs, music groups.

Clothes were recycled to such an extent that we could have put Mothercare out of business; my daughter's clothes, handed down to her from an older friend, then went through at least three younger children before finally giving up, and a favourite topic of conversation on Sundays before the service started was, 'Who's was this *first*?' Lest you think this was all too idyllic, it wasn't just nice cosy middle class church – we had spiky haired petrol sniffers coming to the youth group (on condition they hadn't been sniffing when they

arrived on the door step). There were many housing association houses on the estate and we often had children watching the services in the church from vantage points high in the trees around the edge of the site, before deciding to hang around by the doorway, and eventually after many weeks make their way just through the door to the bench at the back. There were many old and lonely people living in the sheltered housing who found a new family and a reason to live again in the children of the church who regularly visited and also invited them to activities at their schools and clubs. The homes were not just open to other members of the church either, one family regularly hosted foreign students learning English before going onto the mission field, another fostered children, a third gave respite care for a Downs syndrome child, yet another welcomed an elderly lady into their home to live. The teenagers had their youth group in a family home, and as they arrived on Bible study nights, enjoyed the bedtime ritual of the toddlers – who thought everyone there needed a goodnight kiss! The toddlers parents enjoyed the luxury of twenty ready made and willing baby sitters whom the children already knew, and who later, on babysitting nights taught the little ones to play marbles and draw in perspective.

There were single-parent families whose children learnt it was fun to play rounders with everyone, other people's dads included, and who found a male role model lacking in their own homes. In those same rounders games and picnics the young men learnt to relate easily to small children too. Living on a modern housing estate

with walkways and car free areas, meant that the children had more freedom than many, and were always in and out of each other's houses. Most of the church business went on in homes too, from home groups to youth groups, from Bible clubs to services. All this meant that church – and God – could not be divorced from daily life – he was part of it. The children grew up with prayer happening naturally all round them, with the Bible being as much part of family life as breakfast cereal and bath time. And even if it didn't happen that way in your own home, it did in your friend's round the corner. While the first generation of children was small, we didn't completely realise the preciousness of what we had. We were just busy being church in a new and exciting way and bringing up our families in a way that helped and supported each other. Except that even then, when we went to Spring Harvest and in the leaders' seminars they described what church should be like, we wanted to leap up and shout, 'but ours is like that!'

As the children progressed through school, we began to realise just how important the close foundational relationships we had built into their lives were. From the estate the children went to many different schools, both private and state – but came home to play and live together with their church friends. These strong peer structures seem to have been a dominant factor in their growing up into faith of their own. For the children of those idyllic early years, church, family, friends all built into a community in which to live and grow into faith. The strength of what they had protected them as they went out into the dangerous waters of secondary school and university. Even now, the

oldest, in their thirties, are still close friends and like nothing better than to get together, remember the old days and compare their own children's development.

Community is important – God knew it when he chose the Israelites and we are rediscovering how important it is. Church is community; a people called together to demonstrate the life of God in their own lives. Open, welcoming homes, where Jesus' life is lived out and shared, are the outworking of that community. The church community must, as we managed to, value the very old and the very young, and everyone in between. Our children were never talked down to, very seldom during this time did we have Sunday school; they contributed to the music for worship; acted, read, and learnt to respect the adults' right to quietness while the sermon was happening. At every level, we tried to show they were an integral and valuable part of the community. Before you think that we must have been an extraordinarily gifted set of people let me assure you that we weren't. We had not been to seminars on how to run family services. We had not all been to Bible College. We were not handpicked in any sense, except by all living in the same area. But we experimented, we learnt, we made mistakes and we had successes. Over the years we got better at what we were doing. And we talked – how we talked, we discussed and prayed about everything. But the secret I think was this. We never expected it *not* to work. We knew God had given us a very special church environment and that he was involved in our community, and that included the children. We had a strong feeling of being in the covenant,

and because we did not have any church traditions or experiences to tell us otherwise, we knew that our children, the minute they were born, or even before, were part of God's people in that place. Somehow we learnt to live, as God's people in community in a way I have not seen duplicated anywhere else, though I am sure other churches like that exist.

Maybe it worked this way for us because it was a new church, and it began by meeting in people's homes. Maybe it was because geography became more important than denomination. Maybe it was because we started from scratch and discussed and prayed about everything. Our one 'tradition' was that we had no traditions. Maybe it was because we all lived so close to each other that there was no room for pretence or Sunday-only Christianity. Maybe it was all these things. Maybe it was because we needed to know it could happen, so that later, when many of us have had to move away, the vision is still there. At the time, of course, we did not realise just what we had, but I am so grateful to that church because it gave, not only mine, but all its children, a secure church and home foundation from which to grow into faith – and with only one or two exceptions, they all have.