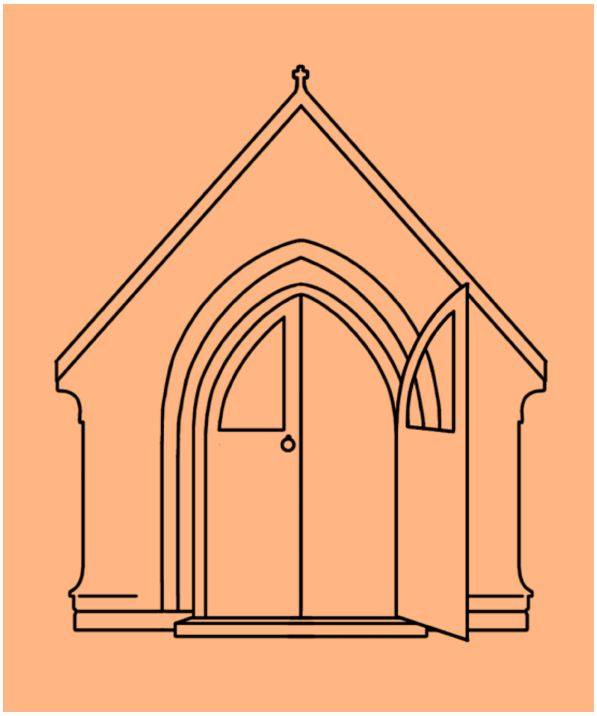
Guide for hosting a school visit to your church



Introduction

While not all churches may have children worshipping among the congregation on a Sunday morning, most churches have children and schools in their local community. This guide suggests ways to build and strengthen the relationship between your church and local school(s) by hosting educational visits or services, and offers other suggestions of how to build meaningful connection between the Church and school.

Our church buildings and people are a God-given resource and there are many opportunities to use these assets to meet the needs of visiting school groups.

No two churches are alike, even within the same denomination. The aim of this guide is to be adaptable to whatever your situation and setting – take from it what fits.

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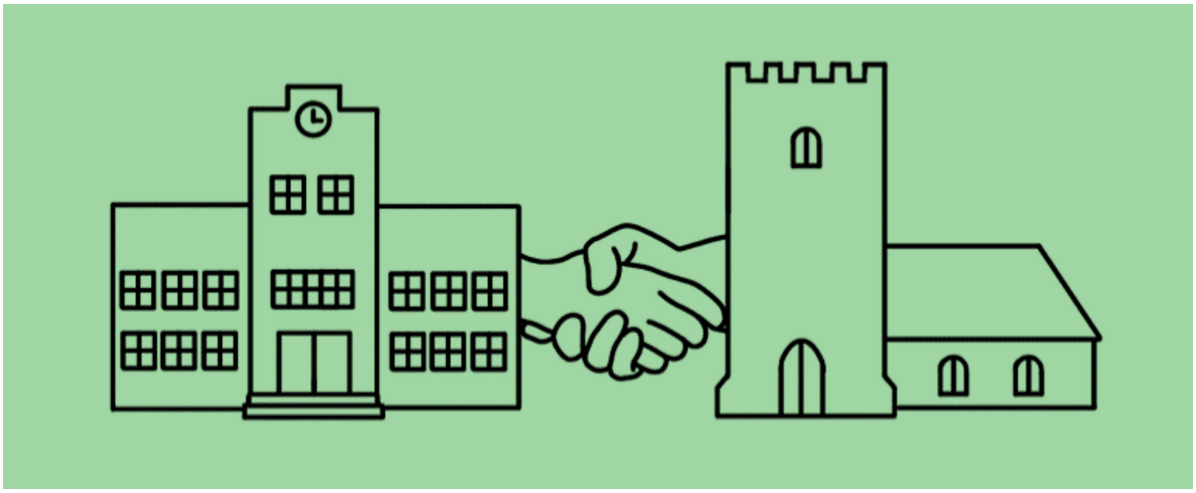
Throughout this resource, we offer a wealth of ideas and suggestions for how your church can connect with your local school. We pray that as you read and reflect, God inspires you to grow or embark on a fresh ministry which bears fruit in myriad ways. Have a notebook and pen at the ready, to jot down what springs to mind for your local context. Be expectant of what God is calling you to do and be.

1. Getting started – Building a relationship with your local school



At the heart of ministry with local schools is our mission as God's people to be salt and light in the places we find ourselves. As we build connections and relationships between the school and church, new opportunities arise for all involved to encounter faith and to learn and share together.

From the outset, it's important to recognise that you are forming a partnership – a healthy working relationship. This should be mutually supportive, where the church can contribute in ways that meet the needs of the school, and the school can respond in kind. As a church, it is best to come with an open heart and mind, leaving our assumptions of what we might do or achieve at the door. Building good relationships is key.

Make contact with the school

The most significant step is to make contact with your local school. This may be with the head teacher, a school governor or another key figure known to you. Whoever it is, always begin by seeking to know what the school's needs are, and how best the church community can serve the school. By recognising that we are a guest in that space, we aren't driven by our own agendas but instead guided by those leading and responsible in school. Starting here is the best possible way to ensure a mutually supportive relationship can be nurtured, one that is built on trust and partnership for the benefit of all involved.

Once you have established a good relationship with the school, ask how the church can be a source of support for pupils, parents and teachers. As a church, you may feel you have a little or a lot to offer in terms of resources, but regardless there will be something your faith community is uniquely able to contribute. Whether it's a pre-school, primary or secondary school, ask 'What can we help you with?' You are bound to discover new possibilities not previously considered.

For more ideas see: 50 ways to engage local schools: https://www.churchleadership.com/50-ways/50-ways-to-engage-local-schools/

Build a team

As you consider your next steps, think about who else from your church could get involved. Being part of a small team, even if it's just two or three of you, can make a big difference and bring some impetus as your creative ideas take shape.

Select volunteers to assist with educational visits carefully. Try to match their skills with the activities you have planned. Choose confident communicators to lead. Fully utilise any volunteers you have with teaching experience and especially those with a clear understanding of how to pitch things suitably for different ages and abilities. You may want to partner with other churches in your area so you can have a pool of volunteers able to help with events during the school day.

Training opportunities

It may be helpful to provide training for those you have selected to help with school visits. This could involve asking a local teacher to explain what priorities they have and approaches that get the most out of children.

RE Hubs will support you in this work – they provide a 90-minute training session for speakers and for places of interest. Participants receive a kite mark and are added to a list of recommended places to visit/speakers.
https://www.re-hubs.uk/get-involved/register-as-a-place-of-interest/

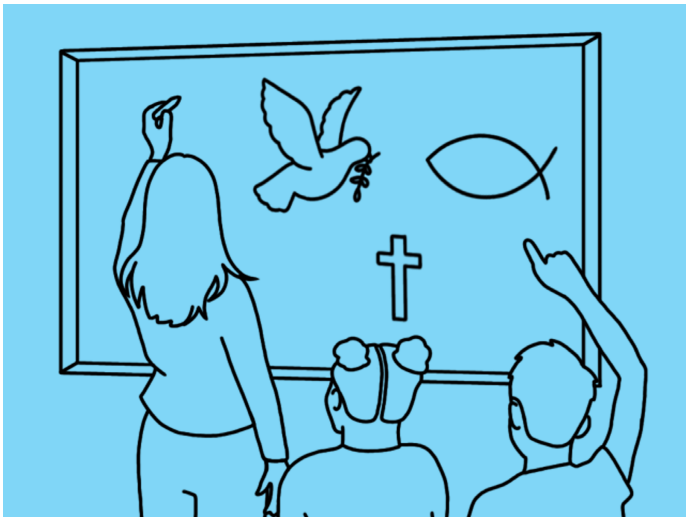
Provide a welcoming and safe space

For many children and even school staff, the visit could be their first time inside a church, so do all you can to create a positive environment. Think carefully about how you will provide a warm welcome, being mindful to remove physical or other access barriers where possible. Class teachers may wish to arrange a pre-visit. They can share what sort of activities will engage their cohort of children, and advise you of any additional needs or other things you need to be aware of/accommodate. Invite staff to carry out a risk assessment with you before the visit. Highlight your safeguarding policy and any relevant training.

Reflect & evaluate

- What resources or assets does your church have that could help or bless your local school?
- Thinking about your local school, are there any essential needs your church could help to meet?
- What people or connections do you already have in your local school(s)?

2. Connecting with the school curriculum



Religious Education visits

Within the curriculum, pupils are asked to find out about different faith traditions and visit places of worship – so schools may value the chance to discover more about the history, tradition and symbolism of your building, as well as the opportunity to find out about Christian belief and worship practices.

When considering how your church could provide suitable learning opportunities for schools, it is helpful to be aware of the key themes and principles within the syllabus the school is using.

Be aware of the syllabus

Religious Education, Religious Studies, Religion and Worldviews, Philosophy and Ethics – there are many names and approaches to teaching about religion in schools:

- The Religion, Values and Ethics Curriculum for Wales was introduced in September 2022. https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/humanities/designing-your-curriculum#:~:text=Religion%2C%20values%20and%20ethics%20(RVE,%3B%20business%20studies%3B%20social%20studies.
- In Scotland, the subject is called Religious and Moral Education (RME). https://www.gov.scot/publications/curriculum-for-excellence-religious-and-moral-education/
- In Northern Ireland, it is called Religious Education. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/statutory-curriculum
- In England*, there is no national curriculum for RE. The syllabus is decided locally with advice from a SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) which includes members of different Christian denominations, other faiths and beliefs, representatives from the Local Authority, and teachers. The syllabus must 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.' Schools with a Church of England or Catholic Foundation may use their own syllabus, as may those which belong to a Multi-Academy Trust.

As there is a lot of variation in syllabuses across the UK, it is advisable to have a conversation with the teacher requesting the visit. They will be able to tell you where a church visit fits within the school curriculum and what they want to get out of the visit (their aims and objectives).

Visiting for 'RE'

An educational visit might well involve helping children to understand the key features of a place of worship, but it can be so much more. Within RE teaching there is an increased emphasis on demonstrating diversity within religion and lived faith experience – activities that enable students to find out what it means to be a Christian in today's world will impact and enhance a child's learning far more than a simple diagram of the layout of the church!

A truly successful visit involves children being made to feel fully welcome and at home in what may be an unusual space and a genuine encounter with the people who worship there.

Child-centred, interactive and hands-on activities are popular. Sensitively giving space for quieter activities such as candle-lighting or contributing ideas to a prayer tree are appreciated, recognising that the children may come from a range of religious or belief backgrounds. Listening to children and learning from them, will be valuable all round, and will help to inform how you approach future visits.

Training opportunities

At primary school level, many teachers will have had little specialist training in RE and may lack the confidence to teach Christianity coherently. Churches are well placed to support this need, while acknowledging the expertise teachers have in helping children to engage with and enjoy learning. Once you have a greater awareness of the curriculum being followed by the school(s), consider setting up a mutually beneficial planning event for local schoolteachers, exploring how the space can be used as a rich resource for learning. This can be a fascinating exercise! And don't forget to provide plenty of refreshments for attendees – hospitality is a vital tool in building relationships.

How to approach faith

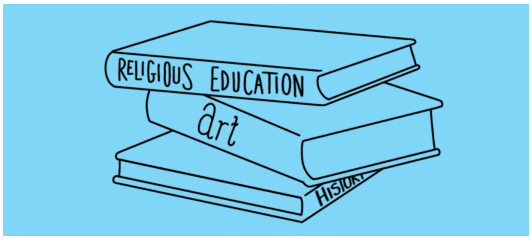
The 2021 Census tells us that younger people are less likely to identify with religious faith, so an enquiry-led approach can be helpful.

Be mindful about how you speak to children about faith and church practices – do not assume they are religious and never proselytise. Aim for an invitational approach, 'If you would like to...' and respect those who do not want to participate.

Even if they do not have a religious faith, children and young people will inhabit a worldview, meaning they experience the world from their own context, experience and position. The Nobody Stands Nowhere video from Theos (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFRxKF-Jdos) is a helpful way of looking at this and reminds us that children and young people will bring their own understandings to a topic, whether or not they are involved in an organised faith or belief tradition.

An enquiry-led approach, exploring a key question, such as 'What does it mean to be baptized?' or 'Why do people go to church?' can provide a helpful framework for the sessions you devise, as many schools already use this approach.

* section 375(3) of the Education Act 1996



Suggestions for other areas of the curriculum

Humanities and social sciences

If you have a historical building, no doubt you're aware of the ways you could use it for local historical studies, but newer buildings have much to offer too. Local studies in Geography often look at the way communities have changed and evolved. You could explore how the area has changed using maps and statistics. Why was the church built here and who does it serve? Why are some former church buildings now used for different purposes?

Art and music

Churches are often great spaces to explore art, and also to create art. Perhaps you have some interesting windows, or artworks that might inspire pupils' own creations.

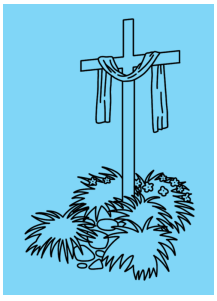
Encourage children to sing in your space – they are sure to appreciate the acoustics!

STEM

Bring learning to life using maths, science and technology by offering activities such as biodiversity trails of your churchyard or grounds, maths trails (perhaps even looking for the divine ratio), engineering and architecture tours.

SEND and Home-school visits call for a tailored, child-led approach, often at a more relaxed pace than a typical school visit. Hand-on activities are greatly appreciated.

Case studies from a church in West Yorkshire



The Easter Story

We explored the Easter story with classes of children from the four primary schools in the parish. Six scenes happened in different parts of the church to create a sense of atmosphere and journey, and a lit candle (with careful risk assessment!) was carried round to represent the Light of the World; on occasion, a child took the part of Jesus. We were lucky to have a balcony to use to explain the story of the Last Supper, and to sing a simple song. Plants turned a side chapel into the Garden of Gethsemane, where the children pretended to sleep and wake with the disciples. In the main church, two squares of chairs represented the Courtyard (with a mock fire) and the Trial (with a raised dais, purple drapes and 'throne'). The Crucifixion happened right at the front of the chancel, with the Resurrection scene at the other side, complete with a 'tomb' and large papier maché stone to roll across and back. Appropriate props were included, and the children were encouraged to imagine themselves into the scenes, as disciples or crowd, and to join in with what the onlookers would have been saying/shouting. It worked really well.

Faith in Art

A couple of our schools asked us if they could visit church with a view to looking at the art found within. They had simple questionnaires to find and explore different artefacts, and we talked about what they meant, why they were there, the Bible stories behind them and the people who made them, and how making art and craft can be used to glorify God. We also talked about how pictures can tell a story to people who can't read. We looked at stained-glass windows; stone carvings of heads, and who those people might have been; pottery, the reredos paintings, and silverware were included. A number of the children noticed small details we never had – such as a disciple with red socks, and a donkey in the nativity stained-glass window. We also got out a number of our banners for the children to look at, and back in school they made their own versions; our church school made 12 fabric banners of the Christian values of the school.

Further resources to explore

Scripture Union
https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/mission-in-schools

Prayer Spaces in Schools
https://prayerspacesinschools.com/

Experience Journeys
https://jumpingfishpublications.co.uk/product-category/experience-journeys/

NATRE Voices of Faith and Belief in Schools
This is written for people who visit schools but includes some useful principles that apply when hosting visits.
https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/Voices%20of%20faith%20and%20belief%20in%20schools.pdf

Top tips for a school visit to your church

- Spend time training your volunteers and complete the RE Hubs Places of Interest training https://www.re-hubs.uk/get-involved/places-of-interest/
- In partnership with the lead teacher, find out as much as you can about the aim of the visit and about the learning needs of the students who are coming.
- Discuss the risk assessment with the lead teacher. Make sure the school is aware of your church safeguarding policy and note any requirements the school may have.
- Inform the school about any parking restrictions if children are arriving in a coach or minibus.
- Inform the lead teacher about toilet provision. Discuss whether refreshments are to be provided by the church, and note any special requirements regarding access or allergies, etc.
- Make sure you know who is providing basic equipment such as paper and pens. You may be able to suggest a small donation per pupil to cover other materials.
- Stick to the allocated times for the visit and plan the itinerary carefully, checking that you have a variety of activities to occupy students and opportunities for pupils to discover more about your place of worship for themselves.
- Following the visit, ask for feedback – from students and teachers, to help inform the approach to your next visit. Share this with your volunteers and the wider church.
- Consider working in partnership with other local churches: you will have access to more volunteers and can offer different experiences.

Reflect & evaluate

Think about how your church building and congregation can be a rich resource for schools. You could do a SWOT analysis (list Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to consider what learning opportunities you could offer that would benefit schools in different areas of the curriculum. Could you explore this further with education contacts from within the church community who have curriculum expertise?

3. Drawing out the significance and meaning of things children will see

In this section, we will consider the artefacts that children might discover within the church setting, as well as the evidence that they might gather from the things they see. Every church is different, but there are consistent themes (even if there is little visible evidence, for example, where a congregation gathers in a community centre or school hall). This section will also explore some of the ways children might interact with or respond to the things that they see in the church, and how you as a church might encourage them to do so.

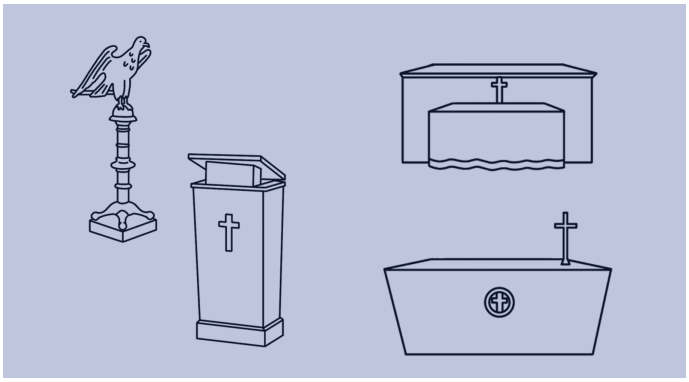
Explore the space and objects

It is important that children are allowed to explore and touch things. Seeing a kneeler, for example, is different to understanding why someone might kneel to talk to God.

Your church leadership may need to discuss in advance whether there are areas or artefacts that are out of bounds and the reasoning for this. How will you explain this to the children without making them feel unwelcome or untrusted? If there is anything particularly fragile, you may want to supervise this or to put it away, or you could provide reproductions of the item for handling and/or photographs so they can see the authentic artefact more closely. Most children, however, even the smallest, can respond to being shown how to handle things carefully and respectfully, especially if you explain why these things are important to you (i.e. 'This chalice is very special because we use it to remember Jesus' last meal with his friends' rather than 'Don't touch that. We don't want dirty fingerprints on it!'). Most things can be cleaned, repaired or replaced, if necessary, but rejection and censure can have a lasting impact on children.

It is good to start by giving children the opportunity just to be in church. Let them sit quietly and then give them chance to voice their thoughts and feelings. Remember to value whatever they say. If they say it feels unfriendly or cold or scary, that is an honest response. Why not learn from it and ask what might help it feel more welcoming?

Some things are common to all churches but might look very different in each, and even be called something different. Avoid church-based jargon, explain vocabulary, and remember that children may have very wide-ranging experience. How might they recognise a pulpit, lectern, font, table/altar? What role do these things play in a church?



Encourage children to look around and choose things that they particularly like in the building – could they mark those things with a label or sticky note, perhaps using a different colour to mark things they have a question about. If you have access to instant cameras, they could even take photos of the things they particularly like.

You could prepare a photo hunt, giving children a sheet with cropped photographs of different things and sending them to find the item and draw the rest of it. This is one way to get them to look more closely.

Encourage the children to think about symbolism. What is a symbol? Start with symbols they know to help explain the concept (e.g. fast food and gaming brands). Look out for symbols as you explore the church and try to unpack their meaning. Children will most likely find a cross, but why do we use it and what is the difference between a cross and a crucifix? Prepare how you will explain which your church uses and why. Again, it can be helpful to personalise it: 'When I see the cross, I think about....' or 'Some Christians like to see a cross in the church because it helps them remember...', and give children a chance to voice their opinions, too.

It is important that children encounter church as a place where people have a living connection with God and each other rather than just a building.

As they explore a purpose-built building, encourage children to think about why and how the building was constructed. It needed people who could work with bricks, with wood, with glass, etc. Encourage children to see that the space is a living building and not a relic. Notice what has changed over time and look for evidence that the church is a living, welcoming faith community. What have people done to make it a special place, e.g. pictures on the walls, embroidered kneelers, flower arrangements? What visible evidence is there that the church is used? Maybe there are notice sheets, hymn boards with hymn numbers on, etc. What evidence is there that Christians gather here together? Why might they want to meet? What evidence is there that they care about their community? Why might their faith mean that they want to do things like support foodbanks and twin their toilets? What evidence is there that God is important to them?

Think about the special services children might hear about or encounter. The obvious ones are Holy Communion, Baptism, marriage and funerals. Consider in advance how these are celebrated in your congregation/denomination. Remember that practices and theology differ between churches so use language like 'in our church, we...' or 'Some Christians do..., while our congregation does....' explaining your reasoning without disrespecting that of others. Again, use personal insight: 'When I take Communion, I sometimes feel like I'm eating a meal with someone who really loves me'... Or even, 'The wafer tastes a bit funny, to be honest, but what's important is that I'm sharing with God's family and know I belong'.

Reflect & evaluate

In considering what the children might see in your church, you will want also to consider how the experience will make them feel about the church and the congregation, what lasting impressions they might take away. They might not remember the name of the pulpit, but they will remember whether they felt welcome and if your faith sounded sincere.

- How will you to build on the relationships formed while exploring the church building together?
- Could you send photographs that you have taken during their visit, with a letter saying what YOU enjoyed?
- Could the church offer to host an exhibition of the children's artwork following their visit, and invite parents and congregation to view it (offering coffee and cakes, of course)?
- You might invite the class to create something your church could use – a banner, an altar cloth, a design for a kneeler. If you explored the artefacts for a special service, offer to host a mock Communion or Baptism in church or in school. Whatever you do, do try to touch base again in some way.

4. Explaining worship practices in your church

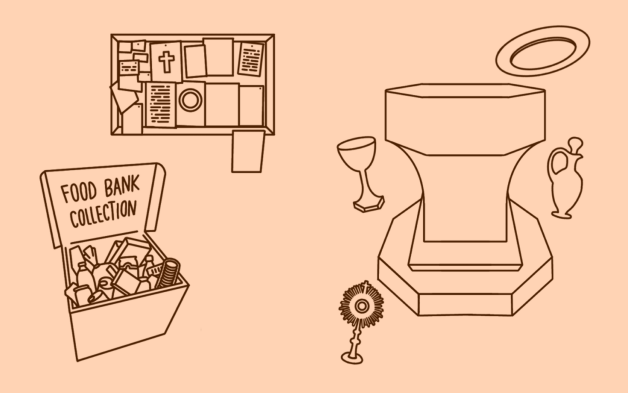
Learning about Christian worship

In this section, we will explore how to describe and explain the activities children might experience if they were to attend your church service. We will focus on helping children to grasp the different elements of worship, what they mean, and why they are important. It's important to keep in mind that there's limited time to present the services, so we can't go into great detail about each aspect or provide indepth theological explanations of the sacraments, even if we're enthusiastic about it! Think of this as a movie trailer for our services – highlight the main points, keep it engaging, and interactive when possible – and make those in attendance eager to come and experience the full service for themselves!

Think about ways children can notice, listen, touch, see and experience aspects or elements of Christian worship. It's important to note that every church is different, even within the same denomination. Therefore, it's essential to preface any explanations with phrases such as 'in our church, we...' or 'some Christians do...'. This will help explain the diversity of styles in the Christian Church and validate the worship styles of children from different church backgrounds. Just as we talk about diverse cultures, we should talk about diverse practices as 'not wrong, just different'.

Context

The majority of families rarely visit a church, let alone attend a service. For many of the children who will visit the church, their only exposure to services may be during major holidays like Christmas and Easter, or for important family events such as christenings, weddings, and funerals. While it's important to talk about these significant services, it's also crucial to help children understand what happens during a typical Sunday service.



After becoming more familiar with the actual building of the church, you will hopefully find that the children will begin to relax a little. This is important if they are to effectively understand the concept of the Church being more than just bricks and mortar, but also a group of people who love God.

To start the conversation, you could ask the children about the clubs they belong to outside of school, for example, football, brownies, gymnastics, or coding clubs. Choose a club that might not be as well-known to everyone. Ask the children who attend that club to describe some of the things they do at a typical meeting. They might say a pledge, wear a uniform, sing a song, play a game, raise a flag, etc.

Ask the children how they felt the first time they went to their club. Did they understand everything that was happening, and the words being used? Every club has routines and uses words that others not in the group might not understand, and in many ways, the Church is no different. But just like the clubs you are part of, the more you attend, the more you understand, and the more things make sense.

We are going to think about some of the things that happen in a Church meeting that you might not understand and help explain what it's all about.

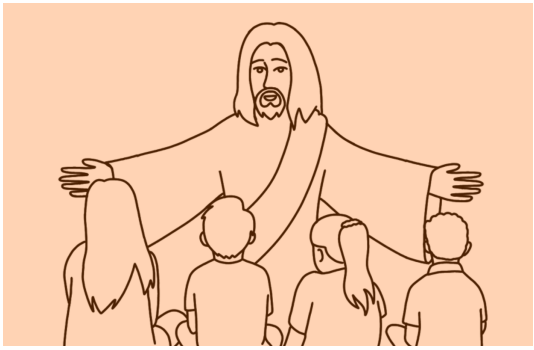
It is up to you to decide what key aspects you feel are important to help the children understand, depending on the style of your church and the time you have available with the children. Below you will find a brief outline of the elements you might wish to focus on, and ways to enable the children to experience it.

Welcome

Explain about when your church building is open, e.g. for private prayer, a toddler group, youth group, Messy Church or weekly church services. Explain that all are welcome, even if they wouldn't consider themselves a Christian. (You don't need to pay money or have been baptised or christened to come along.) Explain that Church is a good and safe place to explore faith, ask questions, learn about and experience God, and meet other people who are interested in faith too.

Worship

What is worship? In simple terms, it is a way of expressing our love to God and reflecting on how God wants us to live our lives. If you use hymn books, you can give each child a book to look through and see if they can find a song they know. If you use a screen and have a band, consider showing a video of a lively worship song and ask the children what they think it's about. Ask: Is it expressing love to God or reminding people how God wants us to live? Encourage the children to express their opinions about the song, what they like and dislike, and maybe even invite them to join in with the song using percussion instruments.



Bible reading

Why do we read the Bible? What is it? You could say: 'As Christians, we believe that God wants to have a friendship with us. How do we get to know our friends? We spend time with them, we talk to them, and we listen to them. In this church, we believe the Bible is like God's letter to us. What sort of things do you think God might be saying in his letter to us?'

'We believe it is one of the ways God tells us how much he loves us. It tells us about the things that have happened long ago, and it tells us about Jesus, God's Son, and what he said and did. It also tells us the things God wants us to know about life.'

To help you develop this part of your session, see:

https://www.parentingforfaith.brf.org.uk/post/telling-the-whole-story/

https://www.cefonline.com/articles/teach-kids-articles/how-to-teach-kids-about-the-bible-cef/

https://youtu.be/dv8dHsxjLd8

Prayer

Are there visual reminders of prayer in your church: kneelers, a prayer room, a published intercessions/prayer list, posters about missionaries, candles to light in a chapel?

Explain that there are many ways to pray. Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Because Christians believe that God wants relationship with us, we are invited to talk to God about everything. We don't have to pray in church, we can pray anywhere, but we often pray together in this building. Christians believe God listens to our prayers and responds. Sometimes God speaks to us. It could be through his Word in the Bible, sometimes in our hearts through a sense of deep peace, sometimes God speaks through encouragement from a friend.

Prayer can be done lots of ways. Sometimes we speak, sometimes we listen to someone else pray. Sometimes we are quiet and listen to God. Sometimes we sing or say prayers out loud. Sometimes prayers are said in the silence of our hearts. Sometimes we read a prayer together, sometimes we have one memorised, like the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes we write the words, draw pictures, kneel, stand, laugh or cry.

You might want to have some prayer stations set up where children can engage with different prayer prompts or allow them to try kneeling as they pray. Think about how you phrase any prayer prompts so that children of other faiths, or none, can be included.

Communion

While there might be some big differences between churches regarding how Communion is shared (from the altar given by the minister, passed from one person to the next in the congregation, whether children are allowed to take Communion or not, etc), the core explanation as to why Christians take Communion is the same. The aim here is not to confuse the children but instead to keep things simple. Again, remember to use the phrase 'In this church, we…' as you explain the ways in which Communion is shared.

Then move on to why we share Communion. Here are some videos and resources that will help you consider simple ways to explain Communion to children:

https://request.org.uk/resource/restart/2015/09/18/communion-a-special-meal-2/

https://youtu.be/YEXdXbkXYks

Invitation to worship

Some schools may wish to attend a worship service or ask you to provide a short act of worship for the group. Look for ways to welcome and include the children and staff – mentioning the name of the school, providing support materials and reserving appropriate seating – and arrange in advance whether the children will observe and/or participate in worship, as appropriate.

Reflect & evaluate

As the children leave, take time to reflect on the questions they have asked, the comments they have made and the ideas they have expressed. Consider this experience, not simply as an opportunity for the children to learn about your church but for your church to learn from the children. Hear their voices, consider carefully their words. Did they reflect a sense of belonging and acceptance in the church? Do you feel they would be comfortable coming back again? What might you change – if anything – to help them to see this as a space for ALL ages not just an adult space?

5. Other opportunities to use your building to engage with schools

While a standard church visit can be helpful educationally, there are lots of other opportunities for a church to encourage children, staff and parents to come into the building as well as making connections and building relationship with them on their own ground.

Whatever a church offers should enrich the children's engagement with the church, provide support and a welcome to them and their families and teachers, be offered with no expectations or assumptions about the children's faith, background or future involvement. It may be that the church just offers premises for an event, provides something for the children, encourages shared participation in an event, or supports pastoral needs.

Whatever you are planning, ensure that you have carried out a thorough risk assessment and have appropriate safeguarding measures, as well as the necessary DBS checks in place for the benefit of all.

Other ways to explore faith

Celebrations and seasons

- Many schools value support and involvement around key times of the Christian year, for instance at Easter, Harvest, Remembrance Day, Advent and Christmas, or to mark transitions like a Primary School leavers' service. Partner together to commemorate/celebrate these occasions through simple services or creative acts of worship. Coming together as school, church and local community at these times can prove enormously rewarding for everyone involved.
- Create a Nativity or Easter trail for children to follow round the church premises, exploring the story as they go. You may choose to create your own, maybe using QR codes to link to videos of the story being told; maybe using church members dressed up as characters who tell their part of the story; or maybe having craft tables/prayer spaces linked to each part of the story. Roots for Churches have produced some ready-made nativity and Easter trails as well as many seasonal and school service plans. wwwrootsforchurches.com/schools
- Act out a pop-up nativity with children taking roles as you tell the story.

Nurture spirituality

- We can invite school groups in to do Bible Alive or some religious education in a creative way. There may be opportunities to set up reflective spaces or prayer stations in the school or in the church. These can be spaces to ask big questions of life, share some of the foundations of Christian faith and explore the overarching story of God's love, grace and provision that we discover in Scripture. Through activities that engage the senses, everyone can find a way to respond to their own spiritual queries and longings.
- Offer workshops exploring the intersection of Science and faith. God and the Big Bang (https://gatbb.co.uk/church-school-link/) and The Farraday Institute (https://www.faraday.cam.ac.uk/schools/overview/) offer resources and speakers for schools.

Offer your space

Churches generally offer a large and often adaptable space that could be used for a range of activities.

Offer the church premises

- As a venue for a school carol concert, special assembly, event or nativity play.
- To host an art exhibition of children's work (especially if they do artwork or write poetry in response to a church visit). This provides an opportunity for parents to visit the church and maybe be provided with refreshments while there.
- For children to explore any war memorials, epitaphs or gravestones, to talk about remembrance, death and dying, or for local history.
- If the school is holding an event and the church is close enough, it may be helpful to offer parking (if you have a car park).
- To provide space for families who homeschool to gather to engage in projects together or simply supporting one another.
- Some churches use their space for a breakfast or afterschool club, or for toasties at lunchtime in the school holidays. Why not take a walk around your premises and list the variety of ways in which it could be used?

Don't forget the outside of your church

This provides lots of opportunities for art, technology, history as well as RE.

- Hold a minibeast hunt in the grounds – this is also an opportunity to talk about creation.
- Your church's outside space could be a location for school gardening groups.
- If your church has a graveyard, children may want to talk about your beliefs about death and heaven. You need to be prepared for this. Avoid vocabulary such as 'went to sleep', 'we lost them' or 'went to glory' – children cope better with the word 'died' than many adults, and can be confused or frightened by other terminology. Encourage children to voice their own thoughts. https://childrensministry.com/deal-with-death/ can help you prepare.
- Utilise some of these wonderful outdoor trail resources. Invite the school to complete the trail and explore the biodiversity in the church grounds.
  - Muddy Church https://www.muddychurch.co.uk/
  - Sunhats and Wellieboots https://www.sunhatsandwellieboots.com/
  - Roots for Churches www.rootsforchurches.com/outdoors

Host events offering support for parents

- A coffee morning on the first day of the school for parents to come after dropping their children off for the first time. Encourage them to talk to each other, and have some pastoral support available for any who might appreciate it. Cake is also good.
- Run a series of parenting classes. The Kitchen Table Project from Care for the Family is one example: https://kitchentable.org.uk/

Churches generally offer a large and often adaptable space that could be used for a range of activities

Provide support for children

- Offer your church hall to the school for extra space for exams if needed.
- Consider if you could provide an afterschool homework club, preferably with snacks – volunteers might be able to help with homework or revision for tests.
- Many schools would value volunteer help supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Volunteer and community groups can be part of Mental Health Support Teams. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/mental-health-and-wellbeing-support-in-schools-and-colleges
  Explore training in Active or Reflective listening for your volunteers and work together with the school to meet safeguarding requirements. There could be opportunities for volunteers to train as mentors with organisations such as Transforming Lives for Good (TLG) https://www.tlg.org.uk/your-church/early-intervention

Support emotional and mental health

- Where a community or a school has a tragedy or loss, people need somewhere to come to grieve together. Consider what you could offer in the way of pastoral support, a place to grieve, a way of commemorating loss. You may wish to link with a charity that offers more specialist counselling for this. Churches can be places of comfort by inviting people to gather in buildings, hosting vigils or simple, reflective spaces or services. It may be appropriate to be a gentle presence in school, available to have conversations with pupils and staff when requested.

Link with another organisation

- Explore KICK, an organisation which provides sport and dance coaching and mentoring for children in a church setting https://kick.org.uk/
- Starfish – A Salvation Army mentoring programme https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY6OWrV4ieo&ab_channel=TheSalvationArmyUK%26IrelandTerritory
- Make Lunch – A programme from Transforming Lives for Good providing meals during school holidays https://www.tlg.org.uk/your-church/make-lunch
- Prayer Spaces in Schools https://prayerspacesinschools.com/
- Invite a Christian drama group such as https://ridinglights.org/ or https://saltminetrust.org.uk/theatre or https://www.playitbyeardrama.com/ to put on a play for the school children in the church.

Go into school

- Volunteer to help with hearing children read or to assist with SATs as a reader or scribe.
- Volunteer to be an extra helper on school trips.
- Offer assemblies – Open the Book is a good starting place for this.
- If members of the congregation have special skills, they could offer to go into school and share those skills or support with clubs, etc.
- Encourage the congregation to support events held in the school – relationship works in two directions!

Connect your toddler group

- If your church runs a toddler group, you may like to consider making connections with the reception class in a local school. Parents and children could enjoy a visit to the school, welcome back children who recently left the group with parents and pupils invited to share a little about their school experiences. Perhaps they have tips to offer which can help smooth the transition and encourage everyone to feel more at ease at this transition.

Build a sense of belonging

- Invite the school to a 'back to school' or 'Backpack blessing service' at the start of the school year.
  See www.rootsforchurches.com/educationsunday
- Liaise with the school to encourage children to contribute pictures or posters that can be displayed in the church or on the noticeboard. Ask the school to decorate an altar cloth, to bake cakes for a church event, or to create a model/display for a particular time of year.
- Include news from the school in your church newsletter and send a copy to the school regularly.

Reflect & evaluate

It is impossible for any church to do everything and would be foolish to try. The important thing is to find the right opportunity that meets an actual need for the school and within the capacity of your premises and your available volunteers. There is no point offering to host a school play if the school has a theatre-style hall with lights and a stage, while your church is a tiny space with fixed pews. Choose one thing to try, and maybe reflect on its success with the teachers/children/families themselves. How can this inform the next step you take?

- Which of these ideas strikes a chord for you in your context?

6. Conclusion

Remember that the purpose of engagement with your local school is the building of relationships. Many children who come to faith do so because of a positive relationship they have formed with someone of faith during their childhood years. The aim is not to get 'bottoms in pews' on a Sunday morning, but to share God's love with the children in your local community and help them recognise church and being part of God's family as a place where they can feel safe, valued and welcome. You may not see them again in your church setting, but you are sowing seeds. And you will find your faith is nourished and grows in return.

Credits

This guide has been written by members of the Children's Ministry Network (CMN), an official network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). CMN exists to bring together all those with national responsibility who work with children and families in denominations and Christian agencies who are in sympathy with the aims and objectives of CTBI.

Roots for Churches, who have contributed to the design and formatting of this resource, are members of the CMN and partner with many of the denominations represented there. Line drawings have been provided by a young illustrator, Gus Richards.