

As the editor of resources for 3s to 4s, I was talking to a minister about using Scripture Union resources in his church. 'There's no point', he said sadly, 'We don't *have* any young children in this church.' If only he had looked beyond the Sunday morning service he would have found a group of 120 under fives with their parents and carers meeting every Friday in *his* church rooms. For that group the crisis is not whether there *are* any children in the church but whether to open two mornings a week and so enable all the people on their waiting list to join!

Under fives are everywhere! They get taken along with their parents and carers wherever they go – and they have many groups just for them: pre-school, playgroup, carer and toddler group, childminding networks, creche; swimming, ballet, parties, to name but a few – the social life of many toddlers would leave the Beckhams gasping!

Scripture Union believes ministry with children is more important than ever before. Wendy Strachan, SU's International Children's Ministry Coordinator says : "we are battling the clock. There is an urgency here that makes me wonder why so few of our ... ministries stretch to those in the most *receptive* age group of all: children below six years of age?"

Scripture Union believes that pre-school ministry is frontline evangelism. Our vision is to expose young children to faith and encourage their spiritual growth - *as young children*. All our material for this age-group comes from the understanding that children can experience God and have a relationship with him *in their own right*. They are more than simply a means to making links with families or drawing their adult carers into the church - although of course we want them to come too!

Someone wrote recently: 'a society can be judged by its attitude to its youngest children, not only in what is said about them but how this attitude is expressed in what is offered to them as they grow up.' Through resources like *Tiddlywinks*, designed to meet the needs of children in their earliest years, we want to offer quality materials which allow them to encounter God in ways which are valid for them and give them an authentic experience of being part of God's family.

We recognise the diversity of early years settings, so we wanted the Tiddlywinks resources to be as flexible as possible. They assume little or no Bible knowledge or Christian background for the children or their carers and users can simply pick and choose from a flexible bank of resource and ideas for their pre-school setting.

Scripture Union's core values with under-fives

- ✓ ✓ Valuing young children as Jesus did: welcoming them, wanting them, loving them, caring for them - for who they are *now* (as well as for who and what they may become)
- ✓ ✓ Acknowledging that they can have a relationship with God in their own right, in ways that are appropriate to their age and stage of development.
- ✓ ✓ Enabling young children to feel included, secure, valued and accepted.
- ✓ ✓ Creating positive self-image, building self-esteem and confidence.
- ✓ ✓ Engendering feelings of trust.
- ✓ ✓ Giving opportunities for children, in their early years, to know and be known as individuals.
- ✓ ✓ Providing Bible-based content that matches young children's needs and presents spiritual truths in ways which they can understand.
- ✓ ✓ Encouraging 'providers' to offer high quality care and leaders who appreciate the rapid development of young children in all areas, including their spiritual development.
- ✓ ✓ Planning experiences and activities that are interesting, imaginative, motivating, enjoyable and stimulating, while running a 'God-thread' through every aspect of the resources.
- ✓ ✓ Acknowledging the different ways in which preschool children learn and develop and so providing a variety of ways of exploring the same theme, subject or truth

Children under five are not strongly represented in church attendance statistics – but they are *there* in their thousands. Let's value them and rise to the challenge of helping them to grow a healthy friendship with God alongside healthy bodies and minds.

Maggie Barfield