

Special place, amazing space



Emma Anderton, Children & Families Adviser for Chelmsford Diocese, and Editor Pam Elliott offer some top tips about how to provide memorable learning experiences for school children at your church.



Hosting school visits into your church building can be beneficial for all involved – strengthening relationships between the church and local community. Most primary school teachers have little formal Religious Education training and a church visit can help develop the teacher's expertise as well bringing the subject to life. Church visits offer students first-hand experience of what it means to belong to a faith community – meeting Christians and discovering how they worship, and hearing stories of faith is an experience that can't be easily replicated in a classroom setting. For many children, such a visit is their first experience of church, so the welcome they receive is important and can have positive reverberations. As you start to host visits and develop your relationship with a local school, there's bound to be opportunities for other collaborative projects – the possibilities are endless!

A church building is rich with opportunities for exploring the Christian faith with children:

- Older buildings with stained glass windows, artwork and other features lend themselves to a visual introduction.
- Use drawing and spot-it sheets and bring it all to life through storytelling, using props and costume to enable the children to participate.
- If the church has an interesting history, or a saint name, then build story around this, keeping dates to a minimum.
- If your tradition uses liturgical colours and symbolism, use these to explain aspects of worship. What do these symbols mean and how do Christians respond?
- Use sound and silence, time to be quiet, to take in the sights, sounds and atmosphere.
- Music provides an experience of worship in the church, allowing children to engage their senses.
- If your building is modern, you still have a story to tell and experiences to share about how and why you worship.
- Examples of how the church serves the community: Foodbanks, visiting care homes and supporting charities.

Inviting a school to visit provides a great opportunity to get church members involved. Consider who is part of your church community and how they can help. Musicians, storytellers, people who are good at crafts are ideal to have as part of the team. Asking an individual to do a specific task is much better than a general call for helpers.

- Create a role description – it is important that people know what is being asked of them.

- Gather the volunteers together before the visit to check everyone is sure of their roles and some simple rules when working with children such as: not touching the children; being careful to avoid church language/concepts the children might not understand; the teacher is in charge of behaviour and has ultimate responsibility for the children. And SMILE!

There are some excellent resources which can support you in this ministry:

- Your local SACRE could offer support. Search SACRE and your local council.
- Train and register as a school speaker on the RE Hub. <https://www.re-hubs.uk/get-involved/register-as-a-school-speaker/>
- Adhere to your denominational safeguarding guidance and ensure your volunteers have the required training.

A good visit will include interaction, movement, and creativity.

- Use questions to engage the children: What can you see? How did the music make you feel? What do you think...?
- Include a story, e.g. **The Last Supper**: Gather the children around as if you are at the meal. Have water, a bowl and a towel and pour water to show washing the disciples' feet. Have bread, wine (juice) in a jug and a cup. Tell the story, using the props. Or create an 'eyewitness' retelling, using a reporter and characters who witnessed the risen Jesus.
- Ensure you have a creative activity, e.g. **The cross**: spot crosses in your building and show children some different crosses. Talk about the cross as a symbol of love and of pain because of Jesus' death on the cross. Decorate a simple lolly stick cross, representing the sadness and the joy. Use pens, pipe cleaners and wool. To talk about the mystery of the cross with older children; show them how to make a Mobius strip. <https://www.instructables.com/Mobius-Strip/> It creates a one-sided strip but looks like it should be two.

We hope that you will have a wonderfully blessed time with the children who visit your church and that you build some excellent relationships with the school through the visit.

For more ideas and support to host a school visit to your church, see this new resource from the Children's Ministry Network www.rootsforchurches.com/school-visits-to-churches

Education Sunday falls on 8 September and provides churches with the opportunity to pray for all those who teach, learn and work in schools, colleges and universities in their communities. Check out our resources, specially compiled for Education Sunday, on pp.4-5 of this issue.