



How and why to prioritise ministry with children and young people

Why prioritise?

In most churches the urge to do too much is more of a problem than the urge to do too little.

Churches are typically well aware of the challenges and opportunities that their context provides them. They know what the needs are in their community. They see those people and groups who are in the worshipping community, and those who are not, and care about reaching out to those who are missing. And this leads to a list of good ideas, worthwhile projects that the church would like to develop. So they aim to do good pastoral care and good local mission, with clubs and groups for older people and younger people, for people inside their churches and those outside. Then there are usually one or two areas that a PCC member is very passionate about and thinks is the most important thing of all. Add to all this the need to fundraise for a new boiler, to get the Eco Church bronze award, to keep the building in good order, and it's no wonder that many churches have a to do list as long as your arm.

All of these ideas for action are good in themselves, it's just that for lots of churches there are simply too many. A medium-sized church of forty people, with no staff other than the vicar, and an aging volunteer base is simply not going to be able to do all of those things well. So they try them all and feel frustrated that none of them really go well or bear much fruit.

This is where prioritisation come in. The most important and strategic conversation that many churches can have is: 'Which of these good ideas shall we decide not to do – at least, not now?'

Why prioritise ministry with children and young people?

There are many good reasons why churches may decide to prioritise ministry with children and young people at this time. Here are three of them.

1. Most people come to faith before the age of eighteen. Think about the beginning of your own Christian journey. How old were you? Statistically, the chances are that you were a child or a teenager. Perhaps you grew up in a family where Christian faith was normal. Maybe a school friend invited you to youth group. Or a Christian teacher took you under their wing. However it happened, according to all research, most of us were young when we came to faith in Christ. It makes excellent sense that the church should put a priority on engaging with people in that age group where big life decisions about values and purpose and meaning are being made, and that means children and young people.

2. Children and young people are the fastest declining group in the Church of England. We are all familiar with the stats that show that numerically the C of E has been in decline for a long time, a half-century or more. While there are examples of churches which wonderfully buck this trend, they are in the minority. And within that overall picture of declining numbers, attendance by children and young people is the fastest declining. In some parts of the country, if present trends continue, there simply won't be any young people in church before too long. Of course, that would mean at some point the Church of England simply disappears altogether. But more importantly, it means that we are failing to engage with people at the exact time of life that they may be most receptive to finding faith for themselves.
3. The Church has committed to prioritise work with children and young people in the 2020s. In the Church's Vision and Strategy for this decade there are three broad priority areas. One of those is that we should become younger and more diverse, reflecting the make-up of the nation we are called to serve. In becoming younger we have committed to these objectives:
 - a. To double the number of children and young disciples in our churches.
 - b. To raise up 30,000 new leaders of work with children and young people.
 - c. To have a church with thriving children and youth ministry within reach of every child and young person. That would be about 5000 churches, one in three of our total.

How to prioritise ministry with children and young people

Achieving this wonderful vision will take all of us, and every church, playing our part as best we can. But how can we make this ministry a top priority in our churches?

One very useful tool to use in prioritisation discussions is the Mission Action Planning (or MAP) cycle, summarised in this graphic.



The MAP cycle has four stages.

1. It begins with review of what is presently going on, what is working, what isn't, asking good and robust questions, such as 'How do we dream of providing for young people's faith journeys all the way through from 0-18?' This leads to a list of ideas, things to continue, things to start.
2. Then we choose which of these ideas we are going to work with. This isn't a once-and-for-all decision. Many good ideas will come back in time and make it to the top of the priority list. So here we choose which one or two things are we going to focus on now and any things we need to stop to free up resources for our priorities.
3. The next stage is to make a plan. Many good ideas fail from the lack of a plan. A plan will answer very specific questions. Who is going to do what and when? If your plan doesn't answer these questions then it isn't yet a plan!
4. The fourth stage is to act. Plans don't count for very much if we don't put them into action. This is the point at which we do what we said we were going to do. After a while we will review how this is going, and then the whole cycle begins again.

So, a church which is aware of the need to do more in children and youth work might begin by reviewing what is already in place, perhaps existing relationships or schools that they could relate to. Having generated some good ideas they will choose which one or two to put into practice, based on the opportunities they have identified in the review stage. Then they will generate a detailed plan and put it into action. A wise church will make sure that all this flows from their areas of passion and is surrounded with prayer, which is why those two words are at the centre of the MAP cycle graphic. And a wise church will celebrate every success, no matter how small, to build faith and momentum for the next phase of action.

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