

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: The Nursery: Gateway for Families

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Let me share two experiences from newcomers.

The problem was that there were no signs to tell us where the nursery facilities were. We went into the entrance hall of the church looking for help, but no one seemed to be available to give directions. We wandered down a dark hallway and by a minor miracle we found a door marked "nursery". When we went in, there were about six kids in a very dirty room. The kids were wild, jumping around and screaming as a young teen watched passively. It was clear in our minds our infant daughter couldn't be left there, so we retraced our steps right back to our car and headed for home.

Compare the above with this:

I purposefully looked for a church that would be good for both me and my daughter. I asked a lot of people if they knew one that would have good facilities and programs for my two-year old. Lot's of people told me to check out a particular church. It was twelve kilometres from my home but it seemed to have what we needed. I was really impressed. There were designated parking spots for parents with infants. There were signs from the parking lot and in the building that led to the childcare area. People greeted and welcomed us. And you should have seen the place – it was clean and had marvelous infant furniture and toys. Since it was my first visit, the people in the room completed a form with questions about my daughter's health, allergies and personal preferences. I was hooked and now it's my church home.

One family left never to be heard from again; the other stayed and became an active part of the congregation. The nursery and what happens in the nursery is not to be taken lightly. One of every four newcomers specifically names the nursery as one of their main reasons for not coming back or for returning the next week.

What are parents looking for in a nursery program?

Safety is the number one concern. Parents want to know that the facilities are sanitary and no dangerous uncertified toys, furniture or other items are being used. They want to be certain that only the parents can take the children from the room during and after the service. They insist on some type of identification system to

pick up children. They want windows into the room from the hallway so the space is not restricted from security observation. They want to be certain that sufficient trained adult workers are present.

The second worry of parents is accessibility to their children. The further the nursery is from the sanctuary, the greater the unease. It becomes an even greater concern if the nursery is several flights of stairs away or in another nearby building.

The third frequently expressed anxiety is the ability to be notified during worship if needed. Many churches are now using pager units that parents can keep in their pocket or on their belt. Other churches are using a numbered notification monitor in the sanctuary. It is clear that the least preferred option by parents is to be centred-out in worship by having someone walk up to the end of their row and wave at them in the middle of the sermon.

Lastly, many discouraged newcomers report the decision not to return to a particular church is because a rude or indifferent worker met them in the nursery. Care needs to be taken to match volunteers to tasks and to check regularly with volunteers on their level of satisfaction, accountability, training, and having the resources to do a great job.

Many congregations are now hiring a worker to coordinate and be the lead staff person for the nursery. A paid staff person assures proper recruiting and training of volunteers, good maintenance of the nursery, and the presence of a least one qualified and trained person every Sunday.

Whether paid or volunteer, all people who work with infants and children must provide a police check. Such checks are now the norm and an important "due diligence" requirement for liability insurance purposes. It is also essential for congregations to develop written safety procedures and policies and to share them with parents.

When Jesus invited the children to come to him, he declared they were important. When children come into our care, we need to make the same declaration.

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