



Starting Afresh with Children and Families

Craig Mitchell

“**W**ho would like to make a video of today’s story?” Hands leap up around the group. About thirty children and adults are seated on cushions and chairs in the church foyer. “We have four activities today—video making, craft, an interactive game, and a prayer station. You have 40 minutes. You can choose which activities to join in during that time.”

Alive@5 is a monthly gathering for families with elementary school and younger children, mixing worship, learning and community time. It was birthed four years ago as an attempt to build a new future for our congregation in Adelaide, South Australia. In many ways it is still a fragile experiment in a new way of ‘being church’ together.

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Addressing the Decline

Rosefield Uniting Church has been a medium-sized church by Australian standards. A decade ago there were 250 people attending worship and about 50 children and young people actively connected with the worship and Christian education programs. Today there are half that number in worship and just a handful of children and youth. This is the story of many, many churches in Australia and the US—a slow but steady decline, with an ageing congregation wanting the young families to return and ensure the future of the church. It is a familiar tale.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) was formed in 1977 from the union of the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches. A recent national census by NCLS indicated that the median size of worship attendance across all UCA congregations was 35 people, with 41% of these churches in rural towns of less than 2,000 people. Our churches have an average worship attendance of just 3 children across all congregations. 43% of them have no infant baptisms. (Powell et al) Clearly, something drastic is needed.

Congregations of the old Protestant mainline denominations... continue to sponsor many educational activities, but they lack the intentionality, the coherence and the continuity needed to maintain and renew their identities as communities of faith. (Foster, 45)

His critique is that there is no longer much coherence between what denominations do and what they hope for in the life of congregations. Churches go program shopping while denominations are consumed by issues of structural reform, financial and property woes, and ministry placements. The key word for me is “intentionality.” The keep challenge is to adapt.

Charles Foster sees three particular challenges for churches:

1. *Reclaiming a notion of learning conducive to forming faith in the education of congregations—in particular through the interdependence of developmental, practice, and discovery learning*
2. *Revitalizing congregations as catechetical cultures of faith formation and transformation—in particular through “the interplay of formal and informal social processes and practices that maintain and renew vision, values and practices through the generations.” (Foster, 9)*
3. *The cultivation of an ecclesially grounded educational imagination in congregations—this is an adaptive challenge based around events in the congregation’s life rather than a technical challenge of new curriculum or activities.*

Fresh Steps in Mission

Just as the decline in attendance was becoming evident, Rosefield Uniting Church employed a part-time children’s worker whose role was to commence a daytime playgroup ministry to pre-school children and their parents. This was immediately successful and led to playgroups being run three mornings a week, plus a group for babies. Within two years, about 100 families were connected to the church through this ministry.

Yet only a couple of these families became connected with the Sunday morning worshipping congregation. Some brought their children for baptism, yet even they did not engage with the church community.

Alive@5 was born as an attempt to bridge the gap, not as a stepping stone to Sunday morning, but as a place to belong for those who might never connect with a more formal, structured worship service. We began in 2011 with “Interactive Easter,” a public, all-age event on Palm Sunday evening, and the

following month started **Alive@5**, which runs from 5.00-7.00 pm once a month.

The **Alive@5** pattern is fairly constant:

1. Arrival activity (since people drift gradually)
2. Welcome and theme introduction
3. Song
4. Prayer of thanksgiving (usually participatory)
5. Scripture passage: usually participatory or using multimedia
6. Contemporary version of the Scripture passage: storybook, drama, puppets, video
7. Brief theme commentary
8. Activities: three to five activities (30-40 minutes)
9. Show and tell: sharing with others what we did and learned
10. Prayers for others: sometimes this is incorporated in the activities
11. Song
12. Blessing: writing a blessing each month to match the theme
13. Meal: church folks are rostered to provide a stand-up 'finger food' meal and people stand around and chat

The seating and mood are informal. We seek to blend Christian and vernacular language—to speak faith in everyday terms. We want to avoid anything that looks like a caricature of Sunday School (everyone cutting and pasting to make the same item). Encouraging parents and children to interact is key, although a constant challenge.

Our inspiration for **Alive@5** was “Messy Church”, an approach to starting a new faith community that has emerged from the UK and has become quite popular across Australia. We looked at and learned from Messy Church, but for both educational and theological reasons took a different approach. This included a more inductive and expressive approach to both listening to and responding to the Bible, hence the activities being a response to the

Word rather than an introduction to the theme or text.

Themes

As we are writing our own program each month, we've been free to choose and develop our themes, short series such as:

- exploring the life of Jesus
- exploring parables
- exploring “big” characters in the Old Testament: Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi
- exploring practices of faith: forgiveness, prayer, hospitality
- exploring life themes: friendship, family, pets, heroes, food
- exploring creativity: drama, music, play
- exploring faith themes: creation, faith as a journey, Pentecost

The “big characters” series linked people from the Hebrew Scriptures with recent animated movies, such as Queen Esther with “Brave” (Theme: Courage), King Solomon with “Frozen” (Theme: Finding Our Gifts), Joseph with “Up” (Theme: In Your Dreams), Jacob and Esau with “Monsters University” (Theme: Rivalry). We've centered themes around storybooks such as Dr. Seuss' “Oh, The Places You'll Go” and Maurice Sendak's “Where The Wild Things Are”.

Alive@5 takes a narrative approach to Scripture. We try to find ways for people to experience and enter the story, not assuming that they are familiar with the details, yet allowing the sweep of the story to do its work. We selectively use videos of the life of Jesus to introduce the context of the story, and we're big fans of Sparkhouse's *Holy Moly* video series².

Activities

Each month, several activities take the place of a sermon or homily. Our hope is that across their range, the activities are multi-age, multi-

sensory multi-intelligence. We would rather give people opportunity to explore the narrative than tell them what it means. (The prior plenary theme conversation is the opportunity to open up the story.) This is probably the hardest part of the gathering to plan and succeed with. Activities include art, craft, drama, games, music, prayer, making videos, simulation activities, food, puppets, and anything else we can dream up.

We try to avoid giving people a particular craft to make, preferring instead to give them a range of materials, an idea (such as making a card for a friend) and letting them create their own response to the theme and Scripture.

Hands-on multimedia is a common activity. People have made movies with smartphones, composed music using a loop pedal, acted in “green screen” videos (with biblical scenery and a TV news desk setting added behind), made dance-beat songs and raps using keyboards and sampled sounds, taken photos of miniature Lego scenes to tell a story in tableau, and used mobile device apps to create ambient tunes as backing to a psalm of praise.

Generally, people can go to any activity in any order and spend as long as they wish at them. Occasionally we have run sequenced activities for the whole group (acting out “Where the Wild Things Are” together) or structured simulation activities (each group simultaneously preparing a meal for another group as an expression of hospitality). Most activities are facilitated while some are self-directed, such as the prayer stations.

We have learned to ensure that there is at least one activity suitable for children under four years of age. Involving parents and grandparents is a challenge, as many are inclined to stand back and watch the children, so we are constantly trying to design their participation.

When we gather back as a whole group after the activities, “Show and Tell” provides an opportunity for anyone to share something about what they did and what it meant for them. Each gathering closes with a simple blessing that we say together, reflecting the

theme, written in plain language, reminding us that God loves us and is always with us.³

Interactive Easter and Christmas

Our “Interactive Events” started at Easter and Christmas in 2011 with the aim of engaging both the church and the wider community with the stories behind these key celebrations in the Christian year. Easter in Australia is a four-day holiday weekend when many families with children go away for a brief vacation. Christmas falls in the middle of a two-month long school break. So on Palm Sunday evening we explore the story of Easter from Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem to Easter Sunday. Three weeks before Christmas we invite people to encounter the narrative of Jesus’ coming and birth. Whether or not people come to worship on Easter Sunday or Christmas Day, they will have had an encounter with the story.

Like **Alive@5**, these “Interactive Events” involve music, drama, art, craft, stories, prayer, games and food. Otherwise they are quite different. The events are open from 5-7 pm. People can come and go when they wish. The sequence is like this.

1. *Arrival activity*: a simple craft activity in the church foyer
2. *Telling the Story*: a 12 to 15 minute presentation in the church, introducing the story of the event using music, video and drama
3. *Activities*: up to 15 activities throughout the church premises, allowing people to explore and respond to the Christmas or Easter story
4. *Final activity*: the last activity is either the Christmas stable or the empty tomb, a darkened room which expresses the culmination of the story.
5. *Food*: people exit to our church tennis courts where there is a BBQ and opportunity to relax and chat. At Easter time the BBQ is ‘fish fingers’ and bread as a reminder of Jesus’ resurrection appearance on the beach.

Interactive Activities

While our activities are varied, we've developed something of a pattern that helps with planning. The pathway through the building follows loosely the events of the celebration—from Palm Sunday through to the Last Supper to the Cross to the Resurrection, from the Annunciation to Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem to the birth of Jesus.

Activities include self-expression on the theme through a range of art activities (painting on tiles, clay), some guided craft work (making palm crosses or angels or Easter butterflies), a computer with a range of short movie clips telling the story, activities such as "Christmas around the world" where people share their home traditions, making theme-related food (such as pretzels as an expression of Easter), and a story-reading tent. A few activities need special mention.

The Last Supper

At Easter time we "black out" our crèche with black plastic and set a table for twelve with plates and cups, candles and Middle Eastern food - dried fruits, olives, pita bread, assorted dips, nuts, dukkah, grapes, bottles of grape juice and wine. A projector screens a loop from a Jesus movie showing the Last Supper scene. The dialogue is turned off. Ambient music is playing. People are invited into the space in groups. Any child must be accompanied by an adult (in pairs). On each plate is a printed parchment which welcomes people to the table and invites them to tell the story of this night to one another.

We allow people about 15 minutes at the table, but every time we have to almost forcibly eject them as they want to stay, eat and drink, reflect, and talk. It is a somber highlight of the event. Every 20 minutes we reset the table and welcome the next group.

Prayer Stations

On some occasions we have set up a pilgrim's prayer walk through parts of the story—the

events of Holy Week or the events leading to Jesus' birth. Five or six stations are set in a candle-lit room. The stations feature classic and contemporary images, video loops, recorded music and sound effects (a rooster crowing), art installations (sand, pebbles and sandals to symbolize a journey) linking the story with contemporary experience, tactile prayers activities (such as magnetic poetry), and symbols to hold and take away (a palm cross, a nail, a coin). The reflections have been an amalgamation of the work of Cheryl Lawrie from Australia⁴, "Mucky Paws" by Roddy Hamilton from Scotland⁵, the Iona community⁶, and my own writing (see references at the end of the article), as well as various collected poems and prayers. We have also included display tables with Easter symbols or nativity scenes from around the world.

Any child entering the room must be accompanied by an adult. This is to invite conversational engagement with the stations across generations.

The Stable and Empty Tomb

The final room is a stable or a tomb, in both cases an enclosure built with a steel frame and black cloth, carefully lit and arranged with simple. We narrate part of the story using poetry or prose. On occasion we've had Mary and Joseph with a very young baby in the manger. There has also been live, reflective music by the remarkable Leigh Newton.⁷ People each receive a laminated blessing and symbol to take home—last Christmas this was a wooden cutout star with the word "Shine," our theme for the event. It is an effective, reflective culmination to the experience.

Reflections on Our Experience

Drawing on the experience of churches in the United Kingdom, we're seeking to grow a "fresh expression" of church, not another group or program, but what might become a

new faith community.⁸ The Church of England recently completed a ten-year longitudinal study of “fresh expressions” across ten diocese.⁹ Across their study, about 25% of attendees were churchgoers, 35% were ‘de-churched’ and 40% were ‘non-churched’. “Fresh expressions” were led by teams of 3 to 12 people. The average size of each “fresh expression” was 43 participants.

Alive@5 is attended by 20 to 40 people each month. It’s not a large gathering, yet half of those who attend have no other regular contact with the church. Our Interactive events attract 80 to 100 people; about half are people who don’t attend Sunday morning worship. Yet we are seeing the same faces and parents and grandparents bring children to these special occasions. While we would welcome a large influx of people, our limited success after four years mirrors the experience from the UK of fledgling faith communities.

Creating a monthly experience that mixes worship, learning, and genuine community is a significant challenge. It would be much easier to have a curriculum! We occasionally borrow ideas from resources such as *Spill the Beans*¹⁰, the United Church of Christ’s *Faith Practices*¹¹, and Lifelong Faith’s *Living Well*¹². Yet it is difficult to find activities that take the imagination and spiritual life of the child seriously, avoid shallow explanations of biblical texts, and don’t involve mass reproduction of a craft item. Added to this, we want to operate at the high end of technological learning. After four years, we have a bunch of local leaders and parents who “get” what we are trying to achieve, yet few of them are able to author the kinds of activities that fit our educational ethos.

However our biggest challenges in terms of evangelization are relational—building friendships across our playgroups and engaging pastorally with the families who connect with **Alive@5** and our Interactive events. Christian community is more than liturgy or learning, it is about living and becoming disciples together. At least we’re on a worthwhile journey towards this.

Work Cited

Foster, Charles. *From Generation to Generation*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012.

Website Links

- Many of our **Alive@5** and Interactive Christmas and Easter programs can be found here: http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala/alive5 or go to the Worship Resources Links.
- See an album of our promotional images here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/craigmitchell/sets/72157652116624745>
- Here are photos of **Alive@5** Interactive Christmas and Interactive Easter: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/craigmitchell/sets/72157649786509393>

End Notes

- ¹ <http://www.messychurch.org.uk>
- ² <http://wearesparkhouse.org/kids/holymoly/try/>
- ³ Download our **Alive@5** blessings here: http://craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala/2013/05/blessings.html
- ⁴ <http://holdthisspace.org.au>
- ⁵ http://abbotsford.typepad.com/abbotsford/mucky_paws
- ⁶ <http://www.ionabooks.com/about-wild-goose-publications>
- ⁷ Go to <http://www.willowpublishing.com.au> and search on “Leigh Newton.”
- ⁸ <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential>
- ⁹ <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/anglicanresearch>
- ¹⁰ <http://spillbeans.org.uk>
- ¹¹ <http://www.ucc.org/faith-practices>
- ¹² <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/living-well-chapters.html>