

Who are we here for?

4 August, 2019

Blurb for Service Sheet: You're Losing Us

According to SUNZ (Scripture Union): "50% of children & young people in our churches will be gone in the next 15 years." They ask the question "How well are we doing discipleship – the growing of lifelong followers of Jesus?" This morning we will look at how our church, fits into this picture. As part of our "maturing in Christ" we need to ask "Who are we here for?" If we are called to be the Family of God, the Body of Christ, what does that look like?

Readings: Psalm 78:1-7, Romans 12:1-16, Ephesians 4:11-18

Good morning. I realise that was a long Bible reading, but I'm not going to apologise; Richard stood here two weeks ago and as well as telling us about his streak of 600 (and something) on his Bible app, said that he reads 4-5 chapters a day, and that's just a snack! So I'm thinking that we can probably manage a snack on a Sunday morning. Particularly if we have forgotten to eat all week?

There are some key verses we are going to look at this morning but I would encourage you to go home and read those passages again. They are words many of us have heard before, but the way we relate to each other is always open to improvement!.

Before we go on, we're going to watch a short video.

Video clip: "You're Losing Us" <https://youtu.be/IQdq1c3Fonc>

My work colleague, Cheryl Harray first saw that video at a conference in 2007.

As for the 'decade long emphasis on children's ministry', I haven't been able to find out what that was. I have however read recent articles from Australia, the UK, North America and New Zealand, and they all put the figure of young people leaving our churches at around 50%. Whatever this decade long initiative was, I've never read about it, and it didn't seem to have had a wide reaching impact.

Here are four more children from a similar period. 11 years ago to be exact.



Slide:

For those of you who don't know me well, those are my children. There's George at 6, Harry at 2, Kezia at 10 And Heidi at 8.

And yes those children are now 17, 12, 21 and 19.

I work part-time in Children's and youth ministry, and conveniently for my employers I'm quite passionate about the future of our young people.

And as 50% of *my* children have already left the church, at least for now, this is personal.

If you were here two weeks ago, you will have heard Richard say that if we are going to change our behaviour, we have to change our thinking. Growing up in our faith requires transformation of our minds.

The topics covered so far in our "Maturing in Christ" series:

[Slide] Prayer, Knowledge and Love are not going to happen if we don't believe deep down that they are important. On the front of our newsletter each week we see our motto: Seeking God's Kingdom, Growing great community we say, or perhaps we complain that we're not. You.....We are all responsible for that. We are a family.

Slide: Romans 12

'Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body and **we all belong to each other.**

Slide: Maya and Lisa dancing

These gorgeous girls who dance in our all age services are **our children.**

Slide: Kidztime Christmas play

These children who sing and perform and so *adorably* forget their lines are **our children.**

A devotional called "Should Christians attend church" had this statement in it:

[Slide] "Jesus did not come to found a non-profit, he came to start a family." (Troy Black)

This is not a **club** with voluntary membership. Whether you turn up on Sunday or not, if you are a follower of Jesus then you are in his family. You may not come to church all the time but you **are** the church. You have been adopted into the family and that comes with privileges and responsibilities.

Story: Kezia's workmate Chinese girl was abandoned on a railway station platform as a baby. A single kiwi woman adopted her. She (the girl) now works two jobs to help pay the mortgage on her mother's house. She is determined to show her gratitude and to play her part in the family that she has been adopted into. Are we??

Church services are not everyone's cup of tea. But, going to Grandma's house, hearing about the old days and how you need a decent haircut and to fix those jeans with all those holes in them, is that everyone's cup of tea? Probably not, but we teach our children to put up with the good and the bad parts of being a family. **Because its family.**

I read this wonderful quote recently. It was written by a new Christian who had just started attending church, almost a hundred years ago. **[Slides]**

It was to begin with, a kind of collective; a wearisome "get-together" affair. I couldn't yet see how a concern of that sort should have anything to do with one's spiritual life. To me, religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters.

And then the fussy, time-wasting botheration of it all! The bells, the crowds, the umbrellas, the notices, the bustle, the perpetual arranging and organizing. Hymns were (and are) extremely disagreeable to me. Of all musical instruments I liked (and like) the organ least.

Who could this grumpy old cynic be? Any guesses?

[SLIDE: C.S.LEWIS]

So, if you sometimes find church to be a wearisome get together affair, you're in good company. BUT! ...he didn't stop going. And there's a clue in his statement

I couldn't YET see how a concern of that sort had anything to do with one's spiritual life. The implication is that he did see the point, later on in his journey.

So what are some of our responsibilities in this family?

Slide: Psalm 78

**‘We will not hide these truths from our children;
we will tell the next generation
about the glorious deeds of the Lord,**
about his power and his mighty wonders.
‘For he issued his laws to Jacob;
he gave his instructions to Israel.
**He commanded our ancestors
to teach them to their children,
‘so the next generation might know them—
even the children not yet born—
and they in turn will teach their own children.**

There is so much we could talk about here but I'm just going to quickly highlight two things;

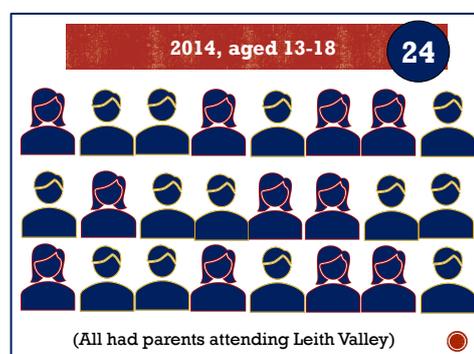
1. Teaching something is how we consolidate our learning.

2. We need to be **telling the glorious deeds** of the Lord. We need to be sharing what God has done in history and what God has done in our lives. Or if we're going through a "wilderness" season, about what he's done in our friend's life? Or in the life of a missionary you correspond with. Find some good, noble, praiseworthy things to put into your mind. Unsubscribe to all those shops and cynical blogs that send you emails and sign up for Orphan's Aid or the Barnabas fund or Helen and Wayne's newsletter. Encourage each other with these stories

[Slide: Ephesians 4] So that the **whole body** is healthy and growing and full of love. (4:16)

And let's not leave the children out! Let's have more interviews as children's talks and testimonies from all ages. Let's pray that our youth would have something happening in their faith journeys more than once a year at camp and have them tell us about it.

One advantage of having been the church administrator for five years is that I have all sorts of interesting documents buried in my computer. I looked up our youth group from 5 years ago which means that even the youngest ones then, will now have left school. Here's what I found:



Slide: 2014 youth group

2014, Twenty four high school kids attending youth group, all of whom had parents attending Leith Valley. These are church kids. Not unchurched or non-Leith kids who went along to the Leith youth group with a friend. These are the solid ones. Most likely dedicated or baptized as babies.

Which means that their church family, has promised something along the lines of **[Slide:]** "As Christian brothers and sisters representing God's people, we are glad to stand with you today as you dedicate yourselves and to God. **We want to support you in this, to continue to pray for you and to be examples of the love of Jesus for her.**"

But surely we've all done our duty in that regard? We clapped when the child got their books from Sunday school. We took the family a meal when the next baby was born.

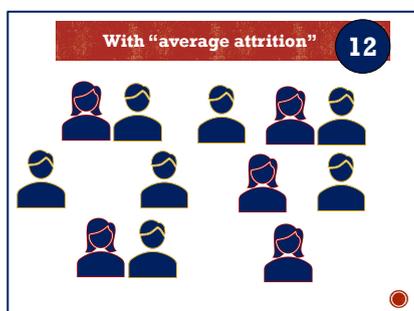
Maybe you were here two weeks ago when Kim and Liam had Jacob dedicated. You promised to pray for that family.

Have you?

I have, because I knew I was going to be asking this question and I didn't want to be a total hypocrite.

But have I for all the other children I've seen baptised and dedicated over the years? No I haven't and I don't think I'm alone in this negligence.

Back to 2014. How did we do as a church with this cohort? Surely **we're** above average We have a youth pastor! And a children's worker. And clipboards!



Ok, so average would be this

Slide: "average attrition rate"

That would give us 12 young adults in the 18-23 year old group, who are still an active part of our church.



In reality here are the ones still involved

Slide: 'partially involved'

There are seven people who are still involved in Leith Valley either on a Sunday morning, or helping out with Youth group on a Tuesday night. Most of these youth leaders don't come to Leith on Sundays but may be going to another church. I think our young people need their leaders with them on a Sunday morning, but I don't want to diminish what they're doing on Tuesday nights and I really appreciate the strong team we have at the moment. So how many of our 2014 youth group, actually come to Leith every week or at least once a fortnight?



Slide: Sundays

Two. Two young men. Extremely committed families. Sensible, hardworking guys who have largely stayed away from the party scene, managed to make a friend or two despite there being very few their age around anymore, and (for goodness knows whatever reason,) they still come along. Let's assume they have a genuine faith and are here for the long term.

But fortnightly church attendance? Let's be reasonable. The *Faith and Belief Study* conducted in NZ last year (both Kristin and Aidan have mentioned this in sermons) defines 'regular' church attendance as once a month. I wonder how you can grow a family, a community of believers journeying together, in 90 minutes on a Sunday, once a month?? You can't.

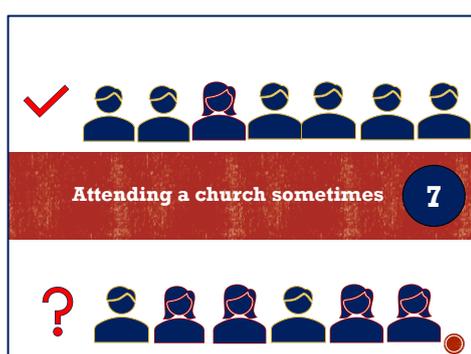
But let's go with it and see if our figures improve.



Slide: 'regular' church attendance

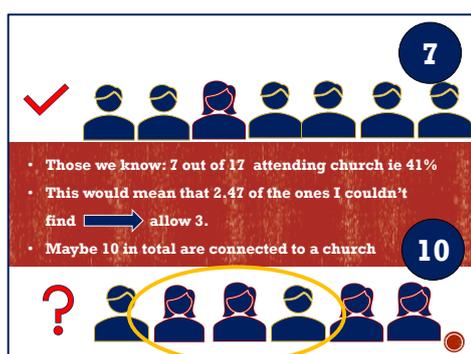
Yes, Marginally better.

Hold on, you say, what about the families who moved away from Leith or the young adults who have started going to different churches with their Uni friends? I **knew** you were going to ask that so I got in touch with some people and found out what I could. This was the result



Slide: Attending any church

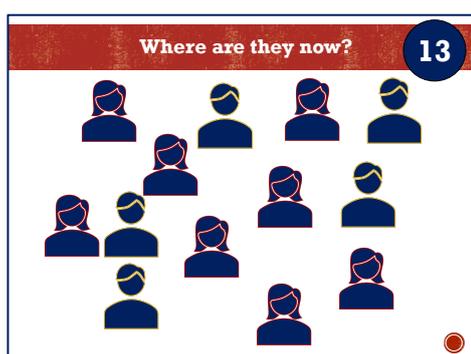
Seven young people who are involved in a church, and six more that MAY be, but I couldn't find out. Either my email addresses were out of date or they chose not to reply to me. And if I've lost touch with those families that quickly, did I ever **really** see them as part of my spiritual community?



Slide: extrapolate: explain $7/17=41\%$,

Which would mean 2.47 of the "unknown" 6

Round up: assume that 3 of the unknowns to be going to church somewhere.



Slide: Where are they now?

So the figures aren't as bad as we originally thought. But this does mean that 13 young adults are not going to church at the moment, that's 54%. And interestingly the girls have fared worse than the boys.



Thirteen of our children. Who went to church with their families, became part of our youth group, and who have now left, slipped away, un-noticed.

- Did we know them?
- Do we miss them?
- Do we pray for any of them?
- Do we care that we've somehow let them down?
- Or do we breathe a sigh of relief and say "we're close to average that's good enough"

No! Because average is bad! If the road toll comes down, is that something to celebrate! NO! Not for the ones who die. Or their loved ones. Because every life is priceless. Every child we have lost from our church is a tragedy.

These 13 human beings are growing up in this postmodern, consumerist, individualist, information overloading, pluralist, relativist, mental-illness inducing world, on a groaning planet that is also in crisis....without their spiritual family! Maybe they are in flats, romantic relationships, maybe not, maybe wishing to be. They're learning to budget, pay bills, to dry washing

in Dunedin.... in the winter (this is no mean feat in a flat where heaters and driers are only allowed during the "hour of power")

They are still finding out who they are.

They're trying to figure out how they are going to earn a living, have a career, stay healthy. They are forming opinions about politics, religion, ethics, marriage, they're starting to think about how they might bring up their own children (differently to how they were brought up for sure!!)

And they are doing this without a church family. Many of them have no adult mentors other than their parents to help them with his stuff. Because once you've left school, it's often only the church that cares about that sort of personal development. Oh wait, do we?

They have their parents, sure. But some don't have good relationships with their parents. Or they desperately want to be independent and grown up. Or they don't want to burden their parents who are busy with younger teenagers... or new jobs...or midlife crises...

What can we do? Lots!

Way more than I have time to talk about this morning, or have the authority to instigate, so I'm going to focus on two small steps in the right direction that we can all start doing today.

Olivia preached in May about what it means to love our neighbour and gave a few figures and examples of what young people need to help sustain their faith.

She said this

Slide: Olivia Dawson, 19 May

A Barna study compared those who left the church and those who stayed and noticed that those who stayed were much more likely to have a close relationship with an adult inside the church – an adult other than the pastor, minister, or parent.

Authentic relationships with people from a spread of generations in the church seem to be a key faith anchor point."

How are these relationships built? 95% of the time by the older person initiating them! We need to start talking to them! And remembering their names. If you have trouble remembering names, start small. Ask God to direct you to one person and have enough of a conversation with them to stick them in your brain. Then go home and write it down if you have to.

My Grandmother was a ministers' wife, with eight children, and people were always amazed at how she remembered so many details about them. Her secret weapon? A notebook. She would go home from church and presumably while she made the gravy for the Sunday dinner, write it all down in her notebook! She knew that people who feel valued and interesting, start to feel as if they belong.

Also, don't go back the next week and ask them **again** what school they go to, what year they're in, what sport they play. After three weeks of that, they will suspect that you're not really listening to them.

Here are some things you can say in that first conversation: (slide 1,) and in consequent weeks (slide 2)

<div style="background-color: #800000; color: white; padding: 5px; display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> 1 How to talk to young people The Basics </div>	<div style="background-color: #800000; color: white; padding: 5px; display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> 2 How to talk to young people The Basics </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hi, I'm what's your name?/ You're (Kevin) right? ➤ What year of school are you in? ➤ Do you like your teacher(s) <i>(singular up to year 6/8, plural for high school, which could be year 7 or year 9 up...)</i> ➤ What do you like about your school? ➤ What do you do in your spare time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What was the best thing that happened this week? ➤ Who taught you in Kidztime/Junior youth today? OR Were you in church for the sermon today? ➤ I liked that quote/picture/Bible verse about.... Did anything grab you? ➤ Is there anything big coming up for you? <i>(remember to ask about this next time you see them)</i>

And a few do's and don'ts for conversations with young people (all people really!)

<div style="background-color: #800000; color: white; padding: 5px; display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> DO... </div>	<div style="background-color: #800000; color: white; padding: 5px; display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> DON'T... </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Be genuine ➤ Look at them when they speak ➤ Encourage them but be real ➤ Use good listening skills (eg reflect back what they have said, make a comment in response, increase your vocab!) ➤ Give them feedback if they have participated in the service, door greeted, taken a younger sibling to kidztime) ➤ Act your age. No "youth" speak or baby talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Immediately give an example from your life. Wait till they ask you. ➤ Push too hard. If they don't want to engage have a dignified exit line. "Oh well, I better get going. Nice to meet you" ➤ Interrupt them ➤ Judge their opinions, (poker face) ➤ Be creepy... Crowds are good. Sit down near where they are playing or chatting to other peers. Gender considerations?

And of course we can pray.

P
R
A
Y

For God to change our thinking

For God to reveal how He wants YOU to respond to this crisis

For wisdom for our leaders and those who work directly with our children

For parents to grow in their faith and share it with their children

SLIDE: PRAY

Pray for God to show you how He would have you share your gifts and resources with His family.

We are **so** busy these days. I have no idea what's going on in your life. Your reasons for not getting to church some weeks, most weeks, maybe. Maybe we need to think laterally. Can you meet up with some people during the week? How about small groups you can take your kids to? I know some people have

done this, maybe it's still happening. Or how about inviting some teenagers along to your small group? Offer to pick them up even. Yes they have youth group and homework and a million other things to do, but maybe a group where they get to hang out with some people who really like them and welcome them and make yummy food, will become a priority for them.

Our culture has become predominantly individualistic. And we are conditioned from birth to look out for number one.. If we don't do it, no one else is going to right? "Your life is yours, you be you, you look after your body, your belongings, be the best you can be. Reach for the stars and work hard towards your goals." That all takes up a lot of time and energy and none of it is *bad*, but we follow a man who said "Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity." In fact most versions say whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" I don't think it means "I hate my life, poor me" which is why I like the New Living Translation in this case. Actually all the readings today were NLT because I think sometimes to hear something put a little differently helps us to hear it afresh.

SLIDE: Ephesians 4

Ephesians 4 reminds us to "Live no longer as the gentiles do."

The gentiles for us, are those outside the church. The world. Our society. Where the individual is god.

Am I implying we don't need boundaries? No I'm not. Boundaries are important. Saying no is a skill **many** of us take years to perfect. But we need to make sure there is something inside those boundaries other looking for our own happiness and fulfilment.

Is God asking us to re-evaluate where *family time* with **His** family ranks in our priorities?

[SLIDE :Foskett]

John Foskett, an Anglican priest, hospital chaplain and counsellor who worked extensively with people who were mentally ill said

"No activity is more likely to expose the inadequacies of the idols of individualism than a profound concern for individuals."

You may not have kids. You may have adult kids who are 'going strong with the Lord.' That is wonderful. But being part of a family is not just about you. Or me. Or anyone. **We all belong to each other.**

I also want to say that although I mentioned my two girls earlier, who are not currently coming to church, I don't blame the church for that. I recognise that parents are the key influence in passing on faith and I'm willing to take responsibility for not doing a good job. However I would have loved it, if someone had gotten alongside Kezia or Heidi and had built a relationship that could have lasted into this time. Who even if they didn't keep coming to church could meet up now and then and see how they're doing. If there was a good level of trust, they could ask them where their faith was at. What they felt about church.

I also think that parents need mentors too; they don't always (ever?) have it all together. Sometimes their own faith is shaky and they don't know what they're trying to pass on to begin with. Or perhaps the family-faith thing is just something else they're failing at and feeling guilty about. Partnering with parents in this task is another whole area that I am reading about, but it's not the focus of this morning.

P R A Y	Aila	Jed
	Amelia	Jessica
	Anna	Johan
	Annalise	Joseph
	Ashley	Joshua
	DJ	Marissa
	Eli	Matthew
	Freya	Natalya
	George B	Oliver B
	George C	Ollie N
	Hannah	Rebekah
	Holly	Sophia
	Hudson	Tim
	Imogen	

We can also pray specifically for our young people

Slide: PRAY (names)

-Choose a name from this list and pray for them this week. It doesn't matter if you don't know them. God does.

-Ask God to bless them at school this week.

-Pray this afternoon that they would come home from ski trip uninjured if they've gone.

-Pray that God would reveal himself to them and that their parents would have wisdom in relating to them.

Some of these high school students don't come to church any more. Maybe they don't even go to youth group. But someone in their family is part of Leith. They're in our church phone list!

There are currently 12 Year 8's who will join our youth group next year. They've always been a big group. They were 1 when I started at Leith, some have grown up here and I feel genuine affection for them. That's an advantage I have, and one of the reasons I love to take Junior youth as often as I can. Your part to play will be different, but you do have a part.

Close in prayer