

# 9DOT

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## RESEARCH



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Research conducted for Church of England with Church in Wales  
Report September 2016

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Benita Hewitt

9Dot Research— 112 Blandford Avenue, Kettering NN16 9AS

T: 01536 521942 M: 07940 155131 E: [benita@9dot-research.co.uk](mailto:benita@9dot-research.co.uk)

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## 1 Background

Toddler groups have been part of the provision of churches for many years. Usually led by volunteers and run on a small budget, they have been a life-line for new parents and helped build community amongst those with young children in their care. In contrast to childcare which offers supervision of children away from their parents, toddler groups keep adults and children together as they take part in a range of play, story and craft activities. Many church based toddler groups are closely connected with the church, having been established by church members and continuing to be run as part of the church's regular activities. However not all groups are confident about their Christian distinctiveness or about the missional opportunities of Toddler Groups can offer.

Past research has shown:

1. Around 55% of churches in England ran toddler groups
2. Many of these groups are actively re-depicting the significance of the church and Christian faith in their areas and modelling new ways of being church in challenging times
3. Toddler Groups which feel supported by their church leadership, and which are aligned with their church's mission and vision, are likely to contribute towards church growth

## 2 Research objectives

The aim of this project was to explore the range of church-based Toddler Groups and consider practical ways in which they might be encouraged to become more confident in their Christian distinctiveness. In more detail, the research objectives were as follows.

1. Identify what makes church-based Toddler Groups distinctively Christian (and the challenges associated with this)
2. Identify the missional opportunities of church-based Toddler Groups and what is needed to help maximise these
3. Recommend practical ways in which church-based Toddler Groups might be more closely linked to their church's strategy and community
4. Recommend ways in which Dioceses could better support church-based Toddler Groups
5. Explore ways in which church-based Toddler groups might be linked with other church based early years initiatives and projects which foster faith and spiritual growth (such as the Christenings Project)
6. Recommending ways in which church-based Toddler Groups might encourage families to live and share their faith at home

## 3 Research method

The research involved four stages:

- A. Telephone conversations with 5 Diocesan Advisers, May 2016
- B. Online survey of Toddler Group Leaders (115 responses analysed), invites sent 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016
- C. Face to face qualitative interviews with toddler group leaders and users at 23 toddler groups. Visits started on 6<sup>th</sup> June in Essex and ended on 15<sup>th</sup> September in Cornwall
- D. Online survey of Diocesan Advisers (16 responses), invites sent 20<sup>th</sup> July 2016

All research took place with these five dioceses, except stage D which had a wider reach:

- West Yorkshire and the Dales
- Blackburn
- Chelmsford
- Truro
- Monmouth

More details on the research method and sample can be found in the Appendix 1

## 4 Summary and recommendations

These five main recommendations are largely associated with the mission opportunities for toddler groups:

1. Love and serve young families
2. Be distinctively Christian
3. Nurture faith journeys
4. Build the church community
5. Support toddler group leaders

Here is a summary of key findings around the main recommendations. There are more detailed recommendations throughout the report, at the end of each major section.

### 4.1 Love and serve young families

Church toddler groups were respected most for the love and care they showed to young families. This was largely unconditional love, without judgement and without fixed expectations of particular beliefs or behaviours.

The greatest praise was usually for the warmth of the welcome and for helping parents/carers feel comfortable as part of the group. Toddler groups placed importance on fostering relationships between members of the group, creating a sense of family and community. For some users, the toddler groups became a very important part of their lives, using words such as 'family' and 'home' when talking about the groups.

An important factor in loving and serving young families was to recognise, understand and meet local needs – of both communities and individuals. Examples included: a group in a very deprived area providing hot meals to all who came; a group in an area with stressed parents focussing on giving the weary rest; groups helping to create support networks for those who were isolated; group leaders listening to and supporting individuals who were going through difficult times in their lives.

Loving and serving was also demonstrated in many groups by gathering everyone together to share hospitality. In some groups this was simply drinks and biscuits, but others were more generous in their hospitality – providing home-made cakes each week, more elaborate snacks and even multiple course meals.

Toddler groups that loved and served young families well were attractive and likely to be recommended by others. Recommendation came largely from within the toddler group community, but also came from the wider church community and relevant professionals such as health visitors, children's centres or doctor's surgeries.

Whilst the toddler groups might have been filled with a real sense of God's love, it was not always apparent to the users where this was coming from, particularly if the group lacked Christian distinctiveness.

## 4.2 Be distinctively Christian

Many of the toddler groups visited were intentional about being distinctively Christian. Users recognised this distinctiveness through what they saw, heard and experienced.

Christian distinctiveness was seen through:

- The environment such as church buildings, symbolism, noticeboards or displays
- Clergy being obviously present
- Group leaders and helpers engaging in Christian activity such as prayer
- Written information such as welcome packs which included information on church or faith

Christian distinctiveness was heard through:

- Mentions of church and faith, including invitations
- Christian music and songs
- Informal conversations
- Christian storytelling

Christian distinctiveness was experienced through activities at toddler groups such as:

- Celebrations of Christian seasons
- Singing Christian songs
- Praying
- Faith related craft
- Church services

There was an expectation that church run toddler groups would show Christian distinctiveness, that church groups would be well run, and be likely to love and serve young families. Some users even actively sought toddler groups that were intentionally Christian.

Most group users were either de-churched or unchurched, with toddler groups being the main or only point of contact with church. As such, they provided precious opportunities for building good relationships based on positive experiences of church. There was a little apprehension about church toddler groups, with some fearing that they might be 'judgemental' or 'pushy'. However, none of this was associated with their experience of the toddler groups researched, regardless of the level of Christian distinctiveness. The apprehension was largely due to fear of the unknown, which they may have experienced before attending the group, or have expressed when asked for their views on their group becoming more distinctively Christian.

It was clear from the research that there is far greater risk from disappointing those who want to see Christian distinctiveness in a church run toddler group, than of upsetting those who may be a little apprehensive.



### 4.3 Nurture faith journeys

Many of the toddler groups visited nurtured faith journeys, of both toddlers and parents/carers. This could mean anything from breaking down barriers associated with church or faith, sowing seeds for the future or re-kindling past faith, to nurturing a present and growing faith. Some were very intentional about this, whilst others were doing so more passively.

Faith was mainly being nurtured through toddler group activities such as songs, stories, crafts, seasonal activities and prayer. The most inspiring examples of toddler group activities were:

- Toddler appropriate, engaging and memorable
- Relevant and meaningful, not disengaged from normal life
- Making good use of the talents of group leaders/helpers

Faith was also being nurtured through activities such as:

- Informal conversations
- Providing opportunities to explore faith with others
- Inviting people to develop closer relationships with the wider church community
- Providing stimulus for faith at home

The best examples were authentic to the culture, theology and practice of the local church and did not impose or expect particular behaviours, beliefs or outcomes.

As well as nurturing the faith of toddlers and their parents/carers, the toddler groups could also provide a focus for nurturing the faith of leaders and helpers. Although in some groups this was not happening, in others the toddler group team were inspiring examples of people growing in faith together.

### 4.4 Build the church community

Toddler groups provided good opportunities to build church communities. In the research, there were examples of this happening in three ways:

1. By the toddler groups users becoming more aware of and engaged with the church
2. By the wider church community become more aware of and engaged with the toddler group
3. By the toddler group team providing an inspiring example for the rest of the church to follow

In order for this to happen there needed to be good relationships between toddler group leaders and church leaders, ideally with a shared vision and strategy for the future.

## 4.5 Support toddler group leaders

It is important to have good toddler group leaders, with the motivation, confidence and competence to run a successful, distinctively Christian toddler group. These leaders need to be well supported if toddler groups are to progress towards meeting their mission potential.

They would benefit from being supported by a range of people, including:

- A team of toddler group helpers
- Clergy and other church leaders
- The wider church community
- People with relevant experience (e.g. leading toddler groups, early years teaching, health visiting)
- Diocese and national Church of England

They need supporting in these ways.

Pastorally:

- Being valued and encouraged, knowing that what they do is an important for the future of the church
- Having their confidence built
- Having their faith nurtured and strengthened
- Knowing that people are praying for them and their toddler group

Practically:

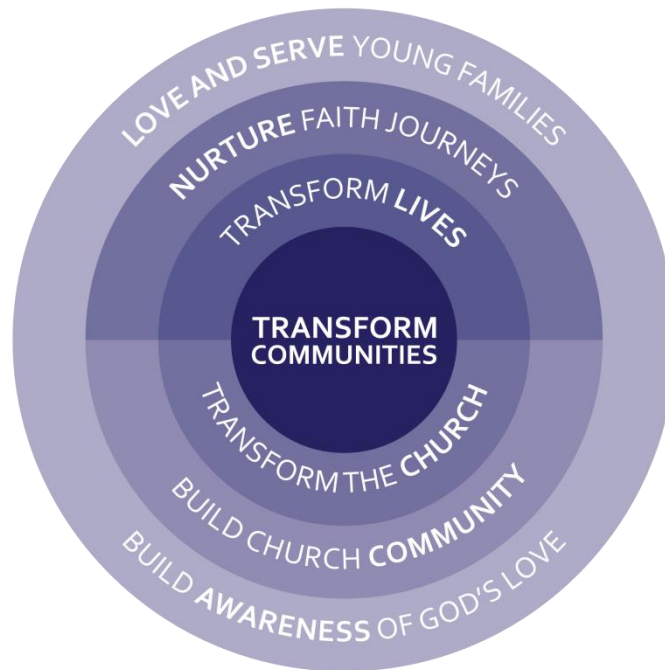
- Being adequately resourced
- Having enough helpers for the group to operate effectively
- Having easy access to a wide range of ideas and further resources
- Being networked with other people to provide ideas and support

Training and educating:

- Being trained in leadership and management
- Learning about how to be a distinctively Christian toddler group in their local context
- Being taught how best to discern and use their own talents for the toddler group, and how to identify, harness and nurture the talents of others
- Learning about faith development in toddlers and how faith can be nurtured
- Learning how faith can be nurtured in other people

## 5 Missional opportunities

Research objective: To identify the missional opportunities of church-based Toddler Groups and what is needed to help maximise these.



The foundation for toddler group mission is to love and serve young families. By also being distinctively Christian, toddler groups can help to build awareness that it is God's love which underpins that mission to love and serve. There are many opportunities to nurture faith journeys of all those involved, including the leaders. There is opportunity for the toddler group to build the church, from both inside and outside. The ultimate mission opportunity is for transformation. There were examples in the research of lives and churches being transformed through toddler group activity. Together with other activities, this can contribute to transforming communities. There were examples in the research of this taking place.

### 5.1 Love and serve young families

Loving and serving young families was the foundation for toddler groups visited. The best examples of this were with toddler groups that understood and responded to the needs of individuals and communities. They did this by demonstrating generous hospitality through being friendly, welcoming, inclusive, inexpensive and by building relationships in a warm, family-like community. There were many examples in the research of toddler groups transforming lives through loving and serving.

Here are some comments from toddler group leaders/clergy:

*We are here for the mothers, not the toddlers. It's run by grannies [Mother's Union], that's how we promoted it. Some of the mums here do not have any extended families nearby ... It is recommended by doctor's surgeries. Health visitors and social workers also promote us. We were used as a safe place for a mum to meet her child who was in foster care ... The person who runs it used to work in special needs and gives advice, support and reassurance to mums. We tell mums to let go 'we are your safety valve'. They cry on us.*

*We remember everyone's names, even if we haven't seen them for months. We're a very friendly group.*

*Mums make great friendships. One mum wrote us a moving letter as she said the group helped her through major postnatal depression, and years later she still talks about it when we meet her.*

*One lady came who was new to the area and after a while said ' You are my family now, you've no idea'*

*They will chat to us if they are dealing with anything like illness in their family or bereavement ... They know we pray for them ... Mums and grandmothers will sometimes come back even when the children have moved on. We want everyone to feel comfortable and welcome anytime - we are here for whenever they need us, welcome whenever and for whatever*

Here are some comments from parents/carers:

*It's really friendly here. When you come here you feel you are a part of the community*

*I've lived here for most of my life and never really felt part of the community until coming to this group*

*It's very friendly and welcoming here, with a nice atmosphere. It's like coming home now, I know everyone. My child is very happy here.*

*From the minute we arrived we felt very welcome. They are very conscious of new people. The vicar came to chat and so did the leaders.*

*Friendly people run this group and make you feel very welcome. If you've had a bad night then come here, you feel better.*

*I've got to know a lot of the people, it's very friendly. It livens me up. You can't stay down when you are here. ... My husband is fighting cancer at the moment so we're not in a good place at home. ...but I always leave here feeling refreshed.*

*It's very relaxed and welcoming here. If I'm having a bad week they play with your child and make you tea to give you some time out*

*This feels like a family. I'm not a churchgoer ... although there are religious parts (stories, their clothes, song, craft) it's very subtle and it is not pushed in your face. But you are aware it is a Christian group. There is a lovely sense of togetherness, and people are very willing to help each other – that comes from the leaders. They transmit family and community. I really like the vibe here, it's very inclusive.*

All toddler groups offered food and drink as part of their hospitality. For most groups this consisted of tea, coffee and biscuits for the adults, with healthy snacks and drinks for the toddlers. Some had home-made cakes each week and many baked cakes for birthdays. In one deprived area the hospitality extended to a full meal including homemade butternut squash soup, cheesy pasta, fish fingers, fresh fruit, and yoghurt. The leader explained that it was not unusual for children and adults to arrive having not eaten, so providing a meal was an important part of loving and serving the local community.



Although this hospitality was often driven by the Christian mission to love and serve the local community, it was not always recognised as such, especially if the group did little or nothing to overtly show its Christian distinctiveness.

However, for others the provision of food and drink was more actively Christian.

*Eating is big deal. We all sit round a big table to eat together, it's extraordinary, and that for me makes it more sacramental, it has that vibe about it. For all the world it looks like a mini Leonardo da Vinci [Last Supper] with tiny people. Often the mums will say the children don't often sit like they do here. We do snacks. ... We say grace and say thank you Jesus for these snacks after story time before coming back into this room, and we say let's go and find out what they are. There are rituals and patterns in what we do, and I'm quite keen on that. It's creating a new normal really, people think this is normal now.*

It was clear that Christian content was acceptable when built on a foundation of love and service to the community. Without it, other missional activities were likely to fail. Some users in the research talked about visits to other church toddler groups that were less hospitable:

*I went to one toddler group run by a church and I only went once as it wasn't very friendly and the church part was rammed down your throat. All the songs were religious and there weren't many toys. I think it was either evangelical or Baptist. None of the helpers spoke to me or my friend. They made all the children pray. All the songs were religious – I didn't know any songs so I couldn't help my child join in. It was more like Sunday school. There were a small number of people there who all knew each other. We just sat in silence. We were only spoken to to be told the cost and let us know that there would be juice.*

*I have travelled to others and some make you feel really uncomfortable. Everyone here said hello as I came in, it is very friendly and welcoming ... they bake cakes for children's birthdays*

## 5.2 Build awareness of God's love

Toddler groups were active in loving and serving young families. However, whilst the toddler groups might have been filled with a real sense of God's love, it was not always apparent to the users where this was coming from. Without Christian distinctiveness there was thought to be little difference between church groups and well-meaning secular groups. Some were passive in communicating that it was God's love that underpinned the love and service shown in the group by not demonstrating any Christian distinctiveness.

*I didn't know it was run by a church, but it doesn't make any difference to me at all. I used to go to Sunday School and enjoyed all the activities there. It's nice that it's run by a church ,,,, I wouldn't be bothered if Christian songs were sung, I think it's good to learn about different faiths. I'm a Catholic married to a Muslim so would like my daughter to be exposed to and learn about different faiths.*

*I didn't know that it was a church run group but it doesn't make any difference to me*

*You can't tell it's run by church, [The leader] runs it. It's the people that count*

*I don't think of this as a church group but religious elements wouldn't bother me. I used to go to Sunday school*

## 5.3 Nurture faith journeys: transform lives

### 5.3.1 Nurturing faith of toddlers

Nearly all parents involved in the research were comfortable with their toddlers learning about the Christian faith, even those who were atheists or from another faith. Some were even actively seeking Christian content from a church toddler group. Just as with baptism, it is laying the foundations for a faith journey.

*It's nice to introduce the children to the concept of church, and that there is a routine for the children. It's good for them. They really enjoy the church [service] part, especially the songs and the music ... My son notices the church things, like the candles and the stained glass. .... The church service is very good, it's very broad and friendly. It's not high church. The children feel very relaxed in church. No-one is pushed in to church. My daughter picks up things about the Christian faith. I feel it's very inclusive here, as a non-British person. People from different ethnic backgrounds are welcomed.*

*I am an atheist, but have family members who believe. It's not a problem at all, I can't believe that people would be offended. That's like people being offended by me being an atheist. I have no problem with the inclusion of Bible stories, crafts etc. It's not a problem in the slightest, and I'm not bothered that we are about to go through into the church. I'm fine with anything as long as they don't christen my child. ... It's nice for children to be exposed to different beliefs, then they can make up their own mind when they are older*

*It's good for the children to learn about the Christian faith ... I would expect Christian content from a church toddler group*

*It's important to teach them the Christian background when children are young.*

*This is run by a church and they have a duty to introduce people to the Christian faith, it would be great to have songs, craft or things like Christmas related activities going on. We do all need to understand more about religions, ignorance is not good. I was a bit lazy about teaching my children about faith so I'm happy for someone else to do it*

Many parents mentioned that they expected their toddler to progress to a church school. They felt that a church based toddler group would give their children a foundation of faith which would continue at school.

*It's not an issue that it's run by the church, I know that it's well supported and it gets you to know the people linked to the church. I value the bible story, it's good to give her a grounding in the Christian faith, which will continue at school. The first time it was a surprise to me, but it is good as it gets me involved too and takes my back to my Christian roots. ... It's good to give them exposure to faith at this age, if they learn it now then they can make their own choice in future*

*I found church ones are well run, and he's going to a church school. It's important that he's taught about the Christian faith. It has a nicer feel to it here, a different atmosphere. I'm open to more Christian content as long as it's gentle for the little ones*

*It's a good thing that it's a Christian group and their mum thinks so too. [Grandmother]. It's good that children have some faith in their lives.... I've never felt uncomfortable about church and always enjoyed a bit of contact. It's a good thing that they do bible stories and other things, we were brought up with it. They will be doing it a Christian school.*

*I was brought up as a churchgoer so think it's good for my son to learn about Jesus and the Christian faith. He will probably go to a church school, and then make his own decision when he's older.*

Toddlers may be considered too young to have their lives 'transformed' but they are certainly not too young to have their lives shaped by Christian values (e.g. honesty, kindness, thankfulness, patience, respect). Parents in the research were enthusiastic about this role for church toddler groups.

*It's really nice that they do the bible stories, it helps to teach children morals and how to behave. It's good that they learn these things, and it's all done at a toddler level*

*I don't have a problem with Bible stories [there were none at this toddler group], my children are going to go to a faith school. I'm Catholic so I think Bible stories and prayers are a good thing, especially for children. ... At this age the lines are blurred between what is right and wrong so it is important to teach them morals – it doesn't go on much these days*

One of the best examples of this in the research was a group where toddlers were being taught about giving using the widow's mite story. They were told the story in a very engaging way and then prayed, including prayers about giving. For the craft activity toddlers were given two chocolate buttons and asked to put at least one of them into an envelope to be decorated and given to someone special.

### 5.3.2 Nurturing faith of adults

There are opportunities to nurture the faith of adults. The research found evidence that this was happening in a variety of ways, both actively and passively, including through:

- Relationship-building
- (Re-)Introducing them to faith/church through the toddler group
- Learning from toddler activities
- Inviting them to other church activities, courses or services

*A lot of people come here and something about what we do, maybe the overtness, makes them think about faith and what it means, it's appropriateness in their lives and the lives of their children.*



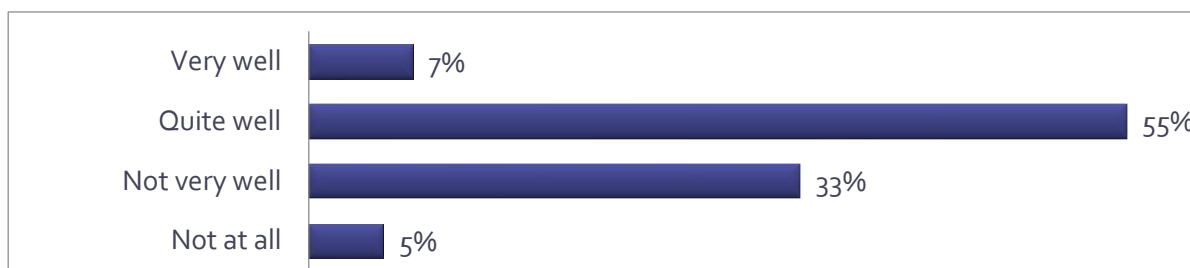
*One of the group leaders was a mum; she brought four children here and now looks after all admin etc. She has also come to faith, she wasn't a Christian when started coming. She is now confirmed and is a server at church*

*There is a huge bond between the people here and the church. One mum is now very involved in the church, it changed her life. We have at least three grannies who are planning to carry on once toddlers have moved on.*

*I have a lot of friends who are not religious and this is very open and welcoming, not pushy at all and easy for them to access. We go to church but my sister-in-law who comes does not, and she is happy here as it's very comfortable. It's a good introduction because she gets to meet the vicar and get to know him, it's easier than going to church. My sister-in-law is getting more comfortable with the idea of church now.*

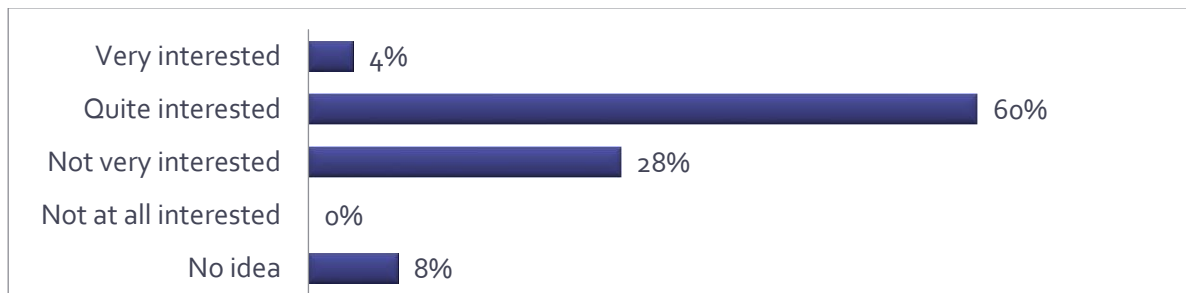
In order to nurture the faith of parents/carers it is helpful to know where they currently are on their faith journey. The quantitative survey showed that whilst over half of leaders claimed to know the faith of parents/carers quite well, only 7% knew it very well and almost 4 in 10 claimed they did not know their faith well, if at all.

Q. How well do you know the faith of the parents/carers that come to your toddler group?



The quantitative research also showed that leaders felt two thirds of parents/carers were quite or very interested in the Christian faith, none claiming that they were 'not at all interested'.

Q. On the whole, how interested do you feel parents/carers are in the Christian faith?



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

There were many examples in the research of parents/carers that were re-discovering faith, often building on foundations that were laid when they were children themselves

*I started to take faith seriously again when I had my child. It has become an anchor for me and I want that for my child. He may come back to it if he falls away in his teenage years.*

*I feel ready for church now, I was confirmed at 14 but drifted away from church as I wasn't ready.*

*Friends recommended this group and I was on a waiting list. I was new to the area and have met a lot of people here. Going into church reminded me of going to Sunday school, it was comforting and had a familiarity about it, like coming home.*

*Coming here opened up the opportunity to re-start a relationship with God. ... There is a light touch to faith at this group. I'm very comfortable with it and want my child to have an introduction to church, so that she can make her own choice when she's older. We go to some family services now. My husband said perhaps we should explore faith together. We tried Alpha but didn't find that so useful. The conversations we've had here with the vicar and leader have been very helpful. My husband is becoming more open to God. We've been exploring and enquiring. ... Come January my daughter will go to nursery so will not be able to come any more, which is sad. ... Coming to this group has given people permission to go to the family service, it's easy to go along to once a month. It keeps the other Sundays free for the family, and doesn't disrupt the rest of the congregation with noisy toddlers. ... It's a shame that some church toddler groups are not Christian as I really enjoy that element for her. ... I think the relaxed approach to the faith element is really good here, there's no obligation to take part ... I usually go home and discuss the story with my husband. ... Now sometimes I bring my mum along to church groups, it has had an impact on the wider family.*

There were also examples of parents/carers discovering faith for the first time in their lives through the toddler group.

*Since I've been coming to this group I've started going to this church and I've enjoyed it. I'm beginning to feel part of the Church of England community, through the community of this toddler group*

*I came to the toddler group, then did an Alpha course, then started going to church. This group doesn't force anything on you, but it is all Christian based – prayers, stories and songs*

*We were new to the area and this group was recommended as being friendly and welcoming. I was a non-churchgoer in the past but now go along to the family services and help out with things like fetes. My child loves it here too. ... I've started helping & planning messy church. My husband is not religious but he comes along to family services. There is a community feel here*

*and we feel part of the family. It's nice for my daughter to grow up feeling part of the community/church family.*

Some toddler groups offered courses or small group activities to help support those who were interested in exploring faith. The research showed that to encourage engagement it was important to remove as many barriers as possible and to tailor the courses or groups to suit young families e.g. running within or immediately before/after the toddler group, offering a crèche facility, making it familiar by using leaders and spaces already known, making the focus relevant to young families.

*The best thing we did was to start the Christianity Explored type course, alongside the toddler group. It ran inside as part of the toddler group, sometimes one to one, sometimes with or three or four people. Church members came to provide support, to look after their children. The courses ran in different room.*

*We do Mum's Bible and Cake, it takes place in home and is mainly to help people with Christian parenting. It's a mix of Christians and non-Christians and runs in the evening 6 times a year. We get to have proper conversations there.*

*I might do a course at some point, although this age group are quite reluctant to do any sort of course. We offer things like Alpha and we are looking at offering parenting classes with the Lighthouse Group (who usually work in schools). We thought we might try that. We've also looked at other courses. But the people of this generation are happy with where they are and the relationship we have with them. It can be a weird thing, asking them to take a course. We do Alpha very lightly, but it's not for everyone. It's a grace based approach.*

*We have Friday Fellowship morning. It's bible study with crèche in the vicarage. It's a great relationship builder and many from toddler group come.*

*On Friday we have a session 12:30 til 3, a little like a small group thing. We do worship, we look at life and faith through a bible passage, often a sermon on DVD/streamed, prayer for each other, all round a table with coffee and cake. It's more intentional than normal small groups. It's Friday church. It came out of Alpha – they wanted a follow up somehow, and it ran on Friday at that time. It came out of a desire to disciple people. Some people come from the toddler group, go to Alpha, then go to Friday church for year or so and then may go on to Sunday church.*

Some also found there was demand to set up small groups or activities to meet the needs of those who had valued the toddler group community and wished to continue meeting once their toddlers had outgrown the group.

*Some mums have joined the Wednesday morning Bible Study Group when their children start school.*

*We now have a ladies group that meet once a month which grew out of this group. It's very low key, we chat and then gather everything together in prayer and we now need to step a bit further with that group. We've prayed with all of that group. These are not churchgoers.*

*We have bi-monthly family parties with play, bible story, afternoon tea, to help keep the connection after toddler group. We also offer 'chill out church', aimed at young families.*

One church in a very deprived areas offered various life skills based activities including 'Heaven's Kitchen' - a fortnightly cooking club, which included a crèche and Bible study. The toddler group was often a point of initial contact, where relationships were built and people were introduced to other parts of the church community. There was evidence of the church helping to transform the local community.

*We all live here so all know each other. There's a real community spirit, and it's nice that other dads come along too. The church does home cooked meals for people too. They have hairdressing here at church and people can buy fruit and veg here. Getting out and about with other people is always a positive thing. If this wasn't here it would make my parenting job a lot harder.*

#### 5.4 Building the church community – transform the church community

Thriving toddler groups visited had a clear intention to build the church community. The most common way of thinking about this was to build the existing church worshipping community by encouraging toddler group users to engage with it. This was largely done through invitation and is discussed in section 6.4 of this report.

*I probably go to more church services because of this toddler group.*

One other way to build the church community was to think of the toddler group as an integral part of the church community, rather than a separate outreach type activity which it was hoped that users would 'progress' from. One church even 're-branded' the toddler group as a Toddler Congregation in order to change the way it was viewed by the wider church. In these examples, integration with other parts of the church community was encouraged, but not considered necessary for building the church.

*People come from quite a large area to the toddler group. They are selecting us for our spirituality, they know there is something different and we are clear about that. It is only fair that we are clear. They also know that they won't be constantly badgered to come to the other congregations. We are happy for them to be here as this congregation. ... we don't put up barriers and say you're in and you're out we try and make it inclusive ... it doesn't really matter where you are. It can be a bit of a grey space!! We have seen quite a lot of growth through that, some people come through to Sunday congregation. We do a lot of festival stuff, but we are not that bothered about whether they come through, because they are here. We accept that some just come to this.*

*I'm not sure whether mums pick that up, but they do know something's different here. ...I think the two stage model which is very common (a toddler group then a religious service) is a problem, I think this works a lot better as there are no unnatural boundaries.*

*I feel this is 'church on Tuesday, and a part of the church family. The bishop says we are doing church here, it's like messy church.*

*We are now moving to a benefice of 3 and will have a new vicar – so I've no idea where we are going now. I would hope that they see the benefit of children's work. I think there may be a number of different congregations. That's the only way churches can hope to survive really. They have to think that this Monday group is actually another congregation and people should not start to complain because they don't see them on a Sunday, that's not the way the world works these days.*

*We consider the toddler group to be 'church'.*

The other way that toddler groups had the potential to build the church was by transforming the lives of those who were leading, helping or supporting the group in any way. There were some examples of leadership teams spending time together in fellowship and prayer, planning the future of their toddler groups.

*It's a team thing. We are in it together, supporting each other and praying together. Prayer is key. ... We sit and think about why we are doing it, what the aims are. If there is no vision, nothing from God, no passion then what is the point?*

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## 5.5 Transforming the local community

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Through the toddler group, and other similar activities, there is potential to transform local communities. Here is a quote from a curate where the children's work is huge:

*The whole church supports the toddler group – they are aware of it and hear the stories. We have over 400 children on our books, through the weekday childcare (6am to 6pm). Apart from the primary school and Tesco, we are the next biggest thing in the community – not our Sunday church but our childcare. The impact we have on the community because of that is huge. A lot of people in the community know us and the building, but not our church on Sunday. So every few weeks we have a service where we introduce the community to the church and vice versa. The biggest problem we have is the separation between childcare and Sunday church, there is not a lot of crossover. So this is an attempt to develop some contact. Once a month we do this thanksgiving service and have developed it over time. It's a short 45min service and we do some of the songs we do at toddler group (e.g. hosanna rock and my god is great big god). Because it is*

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*something they know it's easier for them to come along to, more familiar. So we are seeing families come across more regularly.*

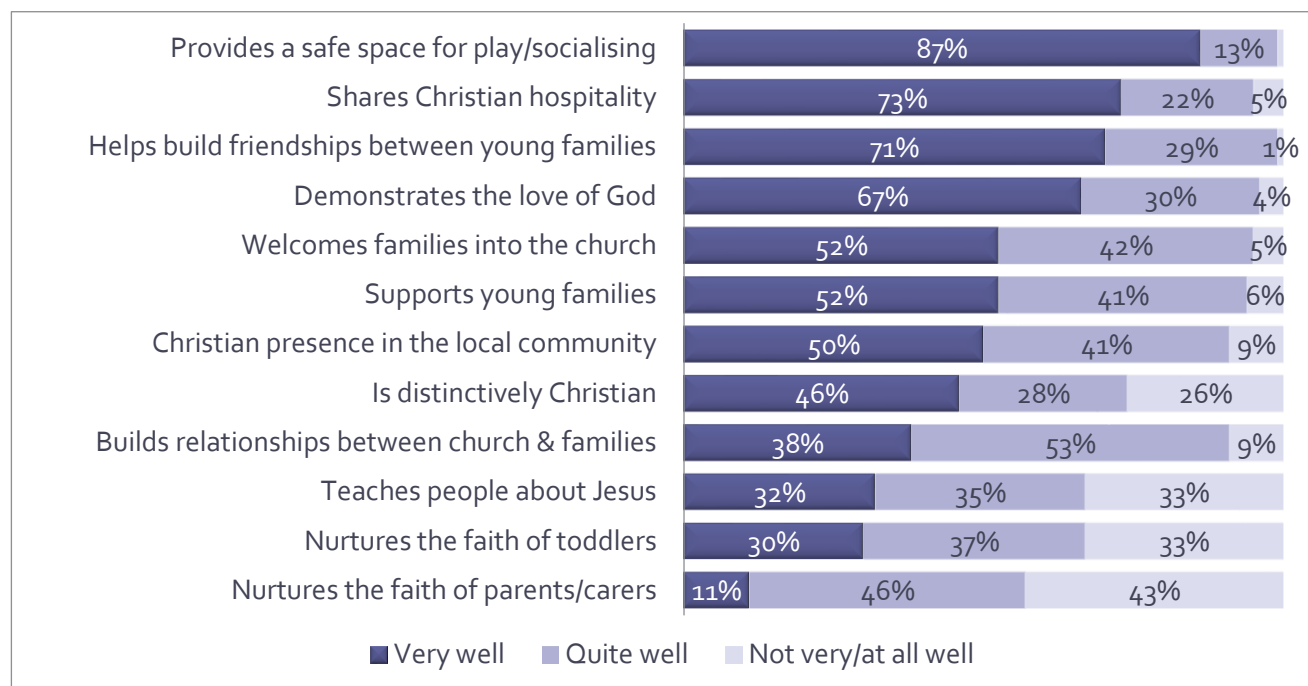
Here is a quote from a toddler group user in a very deprived area, describing how a recommendation to join the toddler group had transformed family life and commenting on how important the church is to the local community.

*This group was recommended, a friend introduced me to this church and the children love it. I come to the Tuesday group too. I also come to church café on Thursday and Church on Sunday, and to heaven's kitchen to do cooking this week, and in two weeks it will be bible study. The children will come along too, to play. We also use the after school club here. I'm here at church nearly every day and my partner is now the deputy church warden. We went to church down south before, but we were never involved with church. I take my children to the vine group on Wednesday, that's bible stories and singing. This church is a huge part of the local community.*

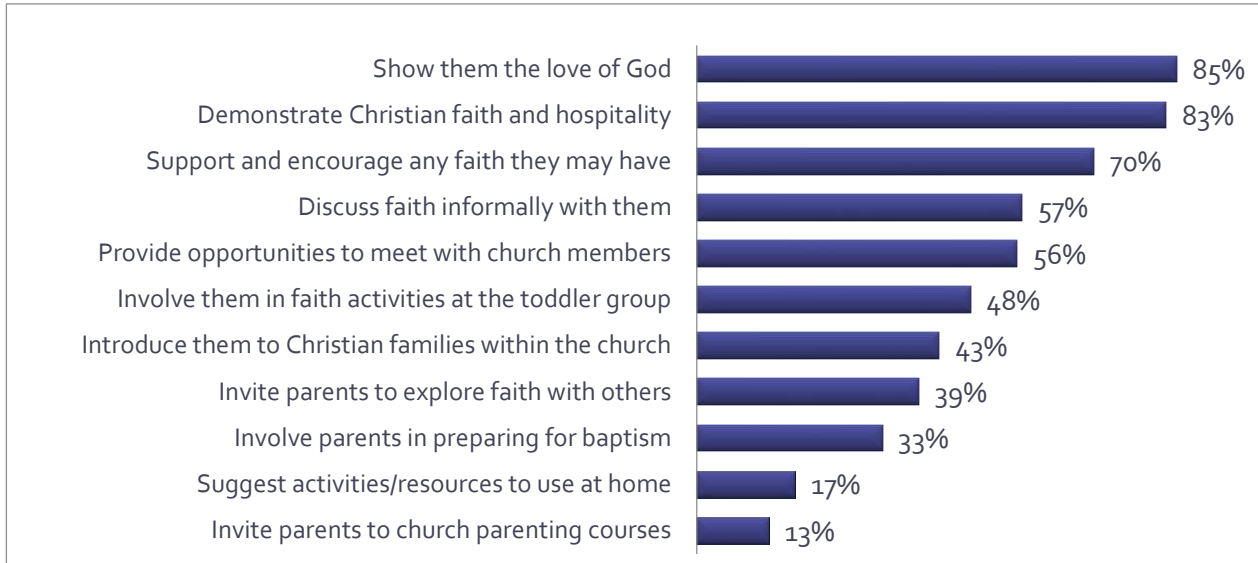
## 5.6 Quantitative findings

The following findings are from the quantitative survey with toddler group leaders. It shows that they feel they are doing well with loving and serving young families but less well with aspects such as nurturing faith journeys. They tend to be more passive in maximising mission potential rather than active and intentional.

Q. How well do you feel each of these describes your toddler group?



Do you do any of the following to help nurture Christian faith with toddler group parents?



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

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## 5.7 Recommendations: maximising the missional opportunities

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To maximise the opportunities for mission it is important to:

1. Acknowledge that the opportunities exist
2. Understand the opportunities in the local context\*
3. Create a vision of the future with clear aims for maximising the opportunities
4. Develop an active, intentional strategy for achieving those aims
5. Make sure that toddler group vision and strategy is linked to the overall church strategy
6. Have regular planning and reviews of progress

\* Understanding the local context includes both looking out: to the needs of young families in the area, and looking in: to acknowledge the strengths and talents available as well as the style and theology of the local church.

It is also important for the toddler group to have good leadership that is well supported by:

- Church leaders
- Toddler group helpers
- Prayer

Other recommendations regarding missional opportunities include:

- Provide a good quality welcome to all, particularly newcomers
  - Understand and respond to the needs of young families
  - Build relationships with individuals
  - Foster relationship building between members of the group, to create a sense of family and community
  - Offer generous hospitality
  - Be distinctively Christian (detailed recommendations in the following section of this report)
  - Lay of foundations of faith with toddlers by introducing them to bible stories, characters and practices (such as prayer) as well as Christian values
  - Nurture the faith of adults through toddler group activities/relationship building, supporting them with prayer and through invitations to other church activities, courses or services
  - Consider the toddler group to be an integral part of the church community, rather than a separate outreach type activity, and build the worshipping church community by encouraging them to engage with the toddler group
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## 6 Being distinctively Christian

Research objective: To identify what makes a church-based toddler group distinctively Christian and the challenges associated with this.

To maximise the missional opportunities it is clearly very important to also be distinctively Christian. Here is a quote from a curate who ran a toddler group and was passionate about it being distinctive:

*I don't see the point in running a group and not making it Christian. We provide a service but if we don't let people know why we are providing the service we are no different from any other club. And if Jesus really is the Good News, and really is the reason, then we are doing a disservice by withholding that. I think people appreciate the honesty, they know we want them to be part of our church. I hope that in our overtness that we are still gentle ... we are overt about who we are and we don't pressure them to be anyone other than who they are.*

The research identified four main ways of showing Christian distinctiveness, as well as a variety of other ways to communicate that the group was run by a church:

- Being visibly Christian
- Christian activities
- Clergy involvement
- Introduction and invitation
- Other communication and activities

### 6.1.1 Being visibly Christian

The easiest way to be distinctively Christian is to show it visibly. Although this is passive rather than active it is still very important and can serve as a constant reminder that the group is run by a church. There were a variety of ways of being visibly Christian.

### 6.1.2 Using the church building

Using the church worship area for the toddler group helps to remind users that the group is Christian. For some groups, the church was used all the time, for others it was used for part of the session and others used it on an occasional basis e.g. seasonal activities or end of term sessions. Churches are usually full of stimulus which can be used in the sessions or for generating conversations, particularly with toddlers who are keen to explore and question. Being in or around the church helps both children and adults to feel comfortable and familiar with the church environment, which helps to remove potential barriers to attending church services or other events.

Of course, relying on the building alone to demonstrate Christian distinctiveness is not enough as in some cases secular groups use church buildings to run toddler groups.



### 6.1.3 Using symbolism and other visuals

Even if the worship area is not used, there are always opportunity to use Christian symbolism and other visuals to remind people that the toddler group is Christian. Examples from the research included: church noticeboards, posters or wall hangings, crosses and books (bibles, storybooks, prayer books).

### 6.1.4 Clothing

Some toddler group leaders wore church branded t-shirts or polo shirts, which not only helped them to be identified but also served to remind people that they represented the church. Some other leaders wore distinctively Christian name badges or crosses. Of course, clergy were also a visible Christian presence, assuming they were at least wearing a collar.



## 6.2 Christian activities

One of the main ways church toddler groups showed their Christian distinctiveness was through activities. These included:

- Seasonal activities
- Stories
- Craft activities
- Songs
- Short church services

It was clear from the research that Christian activities were largely expected at church run toddler groups. In some groups the activities such as songs and stories took place in a separate space and were optional activities, whereas in others the expectation was that all should join in. Some were regular activities each week whilst others were occasional. One toddler group alternated Christian story and craft with secular:

*Being distinctively Christian – I think it's about striking a balance. We do a Christian story every fortnight and tie the craft in, that's about the right balance. So it's not every week, it's not off-putting; they don't feel like they have to be a Christian to come. It's in there, even if just in a small way. We did creation the other week, not a bible story but thanked God for all things in the natural world. Sometimes it's bible stories, today we did psalm 23.*

In well planned groups there was a theme to bring Christian activities together, which worked well. For example, in one group they used the theme of Father's Day to help communicate the message that God loves us. They told the story of the prodigal son, the craft activity involved creating large hands of the father to hug his son (and associated bible verse), together with relevant songs. The intention was for the hands to be given to fathers, which extended the activity into the home.



In another group the story was told of the widow's mite in a very engaging way using a felt board. This was followed by prayer with the toddlers sitting round a coffee table full of candles and included prayers about giving. For the craft activity toddlers were given two chocolate

buttons and asked to put at least one of them into an envelope to be decorated and shared with someone special, which again extended the activity into the home.

### 6.2.1 Gathering together

With the exception of craft, Christian activities were often a time to gather the group together. In many groups it was expected that everyone would gather, including the parents/carers – for songs, stories and notices. This sometimes took place in a separate space and often happened when the toddlers did not have access to (distracting) toys, either before or after free play time. This was a key time for communication.

### 6.2.2 Seasonal activities

Both Christian and secular seasonal events were being used to show Christian distinctiveness, all of the toddler groups did at least something to acknowledge Christmas and Easter.

*We invented two new things that happen at festivals, and we do these in church, targeted at this group. We have a hide and seek service at Christmas where they have to find all the bits associated with the nativity but we also do the same on Good Friday for Easter where they have to find all the bits, including a plastic ear! The children really love it, and they remember it. It gives them a feeling of being welcome in the church.*

*We do an Easter tea and treat session at the church with crafts and activities, most mums attend*

*Sometimes we do Lenten challenges, but not every year. The first time we decided to raise money for the church. It was also partly to get the congregation more aware of us as a community. They question why they don't see them on a Sunday, we just say – do you come on a Tuesday? ... Our first Lenten challenge raised over £1000, we did a sponsored pram push, coffee mornings etc. We did a presentation in church on Sunday morning. The mums work out what they want to do for Lenten challenge – the activities and the charity. They own it and we support alongside.*

It was clear from discussions with parents that they expected a church toddler group to do something to celebrate the main Christian festivals. One toddler group that previously had no Christian activities used Christmas as an opportunity to introduce bible stories and craft activities which then continued with other stories after Christmas.

Some of the research fieldwork coincided with Father's Day and toddler groups were taking the opportunity to tell appropriate bible stories e.g. The Prodigal Son. One toddler group uses the lectionary as part of its planning process, to see what is coming up each term that might be used as a theme for the toddler group session.

*First we sat down with the lectionary and looked to see if any feast days fell on a Tuesday, so we did some stuff for St David's Day. We try to tie in with church year, Ascension and Pentecost for example. We also look at what's going on in the world in general e.g. father's day*



### 6.2.3 Songs

Toddlers love singing, action songs, dancing, and making a noise with simple instruments. Using Christian songs was one of the main ways toddler groups were being distinctively Christian. One of the challenges with this is having someone with confidence to lead the toddlers in song. Some groups had a gifted leader or were able to use someone else with appropriate talent, usually from the church. CDs were also being used well, although some commented that they would like more recommendations on suitable CDs to use for toddlers.



Most of the parents/carers were happily joining in with the songs and talked of singing them with their toddlers at home. There was some apprehension from users about not knowing the songs:

*They sometimes have Christian songs, at Christmas and Easter. If there were more Christian songs then I wouldn't know them and I couldn't join in, and we wouldn't be able to carry on singing them at home. That would make it difficult for me as a parent, my toddler wouldn't want to opt out even if I did. Then I might have to leave*

Some groups were aware that new users may be unfamiliar with Christian songs and had put some effort into alleviating any apprehension:



*They are quite happy with the songs. I typed the words out so that people would be able to sing them and not feel uncomfortable. [Have words on sheets]. I've recently added in some secular songs too, so there are familiar ones for newcomers. It depends what they pull out of the bag – we have all sorts of objects linked to songs and it depends what object they pull out as to what song is sung. It works. The kids get to know what the objects are so they feel for particular objects. It helps to give them confidence as well, as some toddlers go on to lead the songs!*

One group used nursery rhyme tunes that were familiar, but used Christian words. Examples of songs from the sheet were:

- **Twinkle Twinkle:** Candle, candle standing tall, Jesus love is for us all ...
- **London Bridge:** God can hear me when I sing ...
- **Skip to my Lou:** The sun in the day shouts 'Praise the Lord!' ...
- **She'll be coming round the mountain:** And we know God will be with us going home ...

#### 6.2.4 Christian Stories

As well as singing, toddlers also enjoy a good story. The most engaging story times were those that actively involved the children e.g. asking questions or helping with actions or props. Most of those leading the stories recognised that although the stories were aimed at toddlers, it was also relevant to engage the parents/carers.

*The stories are told for the toddlers to learn and remember them. But also, so many people, particularly in their 20s and 30s, are completely biblically illiterate. They don't realise that some stories, like Adam and Eve, are from the Bible and they think parables are old wives tales. You can't presume they know anything, and sometimes it's difficult not to talk down to them. It's good to be able to communicate through the toddler stories as it's at a very simple level ... it works on many different levels. It's particularly good for that age group. The church in England is really missing those in their 20s and 30s and this is one of the very very best ways to reach them. I'm not sure it's THE answer, but it is ONE of the answers of how to reach that age group. And it is slightly underhand in that we are doing it through their babies but I think God would forgive us that. We are genuinely trying to communicate to the adults as well as the children.*

It clearly helped to have someone leading or helping in the toddler group with good storytelling skills.

*We're very good at the story thing, it's quite silly! ... It's just about doing very simple things [to make it distinctively Christian]. Just 10 minutes out of our lives to do the Bible story. It's very funny, we enjoying it.*

*People like the bible stories and want to hear them, no-one has ever been put off because of the bible stories*

*I go to another group that does bible stories but they are too young to sit and listen, they just want to play. One of the others does Bible stories through play and puppets and that works well.*

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*It's not that it's a bible story, it's that the activity wasn't appropriate for toddlers. The main thing is for toddlers to enjoy coming ... as long as anything fits with that then it's OK*

Regardless of whether their toddler group had bible stories or not, no parents/carers objected to the idea as long as they were being told in an engaging toddler friendly way. In fact, most, including atheists and those from other faiths, were positive about the inclusion of bible stories because they perceived them to be educational and to help give the toddlers moral guidance.

*It's really nice that they do the bible stories, it helps to teach children morals and how to behave. It's good that they learn these things, and it's all done at a toddler level*

*I'm not an overly religious person, and not a churchgoer but it's nice because all the stories have meaning. It's great for them to have the opportunity to hear the stories.*

*It's lovely to listen to the Bible stories, it's just a little thing but it's appreciated. The kids listen and it's fun, sometimes they get stickers and things.*

*The bible stories usually relate to real life so they have meaning, on a 3 year old's level. They use puppets and are interactive*

*I want my children to learn the bible stories, it's important to me and they make it fun and engaging*

*I wouldn't have a problem with Bible stories being introduced here. We have toddler bibles at home and I read bible stories to them at bath time. I'm not religious but they need to make their own choices when they get older ... Even for those who were bothered by 'religion' the Bible stories are still good stories to share*

*Sometimes the vicar comes in and does stories about Jesus and things, like at Christmas. The vicar makes it interesting and the children love it*

*It always ends with a Bible story and they engage the children and make it really good fun.*

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### 6.2.5 Craft activities

As already mentioned, craft activities were often linked into a Christian theme for the session. There were also other benefits to the craft activities:

- In toddler groups with a team of people, there was usually someone helping in the craft area. This provided the opportunity to engage with parents/carers and toddlers, and the possibility to use the craft as stimulus for further discussion on the theme.
- The intention was usually to take the craft activities home, which could lead to more conversation at home around the theme

Toddler groups with craft activities were attractive to parents/carers, particularly if this type of thing was rarely done at home due to time, practicality or lack of skill.

*The arts and craft is really good, it's the sort of thing I wouldn't do at home and it keeps them occupied*

In an example of a planned Christian theme and related activities, one group told the story of how David was a shepherd who became a King, the deacon then gave a talk about being God's sheep. This was followed by an activity in the church where the toddlers had to find the hidden sheep. These were then joined together to make one big sheep that was to be put on display in the church to help raise awareness of the toddler group with the congregation.



The main challenges associated with doing Christian craft activities were having the creative ideas and having the necessary skills and resources.



### 6.2.6 Prayer

Those that prayed considered it to be of utmost importance. In the context of showing Christian distinctiveness, prayer was taking place with toddlers and with or for parents/carers.

There were a number of examples of toddlers being involved in prayer:



*We do prayer with the children. Children pray with hands over their eyes, something I picked up from New Wine. I know at least one parent does this every evening with their child.*

*Prayer is deeply important. Our church mission statement is 'Helping our children understand and experience God'. We can teach until we are blue in the face, but they mainly learn through experience.*

*We have spirally amens that are very popular at the end of every prayer. If you meet the children out and about they'll quite often do that to you! It is lovely. We also do parachute prayers.*

*Prayer bubbles have been around for a long time. I just adopted that idea from what I'd seen elsewhere. We usually say a prayer for anyone who is poorly or not here etc. We usually ask for things – today we prayed for someone's dog that has just been run over. We pray for everyone at the group – the toddlers, mums, grandmas and thank God for a good day. It's just simple things.*

Prayer was also included in any 'church services' that happened in toddler groups, and some said a short grace before snack time. Some groups also taught toddlers the Lord's Prayer.

There were a number of examples of prayer being used to support those using the group. A variety of methods were being used, each appropriate to the culture of the church and the character and confidence of those involved. One church was even using text for prayers.

*We offer to pray with mums that we see are struggling or have issues. It's always been positively received. [Otherwise no overt Christian content]*

*We have a prayer box on the counter, next to tea and coffee. We've also made prayer cards recently. The prayer box is valued – it shows that we care about them as more than just attendees at the toddler group.*

*They know we pray for them (not with them) and we talk to them, they share issues and problems with us.*

*We pray with people ... we prayed with someone this morning who had a bit of a problem. We pray with the adults as and when. This person is 'on the way' to becoming Christian. Her journey*

*has been over a period of time. Things have gone horribly wrong in her life and we asked if we could pray for her and she's always said yes. We usually go through to the church and would never do it in front of other people. This person has started to come along to church. She has a sense of belonging.*

*Someone had lost a dog and we put out little altar with candles with those words from Jesus 'Come to me all who are weary ...' and it was interesting that people did light candles and join in with it.*

*I'm very pastoral, very relationship oriented. One of the most important things is get to know who they are and what they need. A couple of the ladies had to have hysterectomies and couldn't get here so we supported them through texts etc. They really appreciated it. We went to visit one of them at home and took gifts. We kept praying for her, and she knew the church was praying for her at Wednesday morning prayers. We've also been praying for a child that had meningitis. That's how prayer texting started and now we have most people's mobile numbers and they appreciate prayer text, they ask for it now if they need it. They are mainly non-churchgoers but appreciate the prayer. Text prayers are a modern way of doing it, a good way to interact with non-Christian culture. ... I wouldn't pray with them face to face, hands on etc. unless I thought they would be comfortable with that. It's what we do in church though.*

*We teach everyone the family prayer, which we know some of them use at home too. Sometimes we light a candle for prayer is someone is poorly*

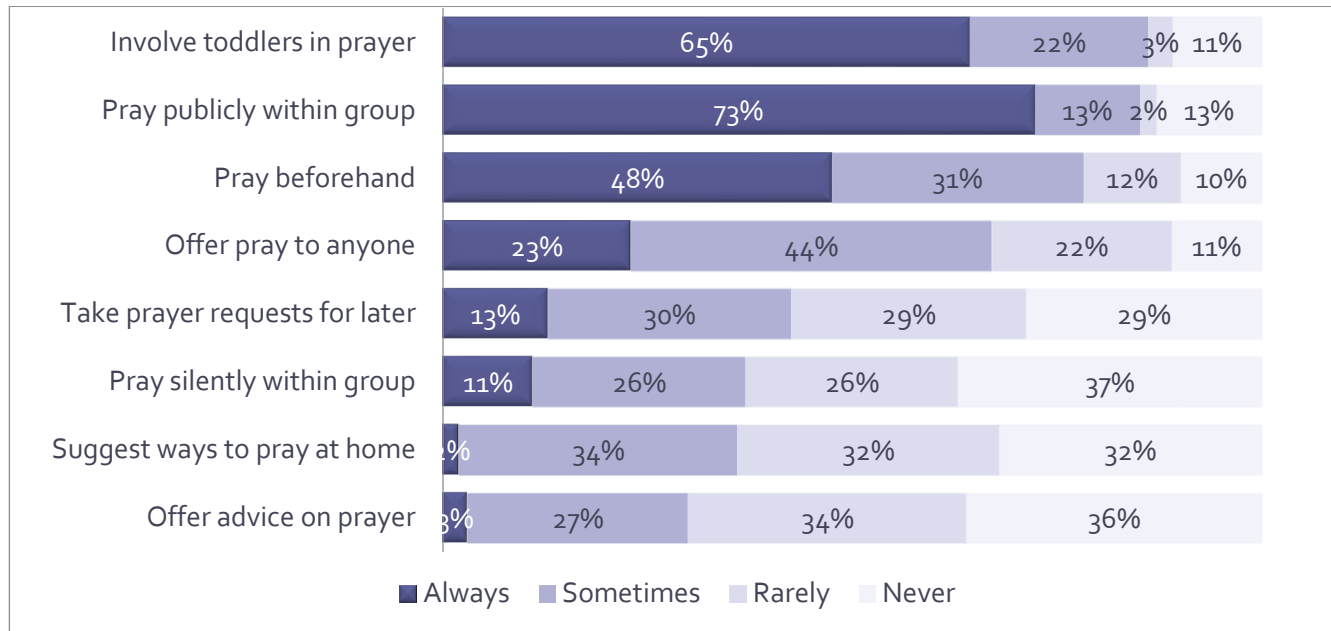
*Sometimes the mums go out with the church/toddler group leaders to a quiet space for a chat or prayer*

Although not always public, another way that church toddler groups can be distinctively Christian is by praying for the toddler group. Many groups prayed before the group started, there was evidence of seeking God's guidance on the future of the toddler group.

*We pray beforehand, sometimes parents come in while we are praying*

*We pray for the group, as does the church. We pray for them and pray for God's guidance on where to take it next.*

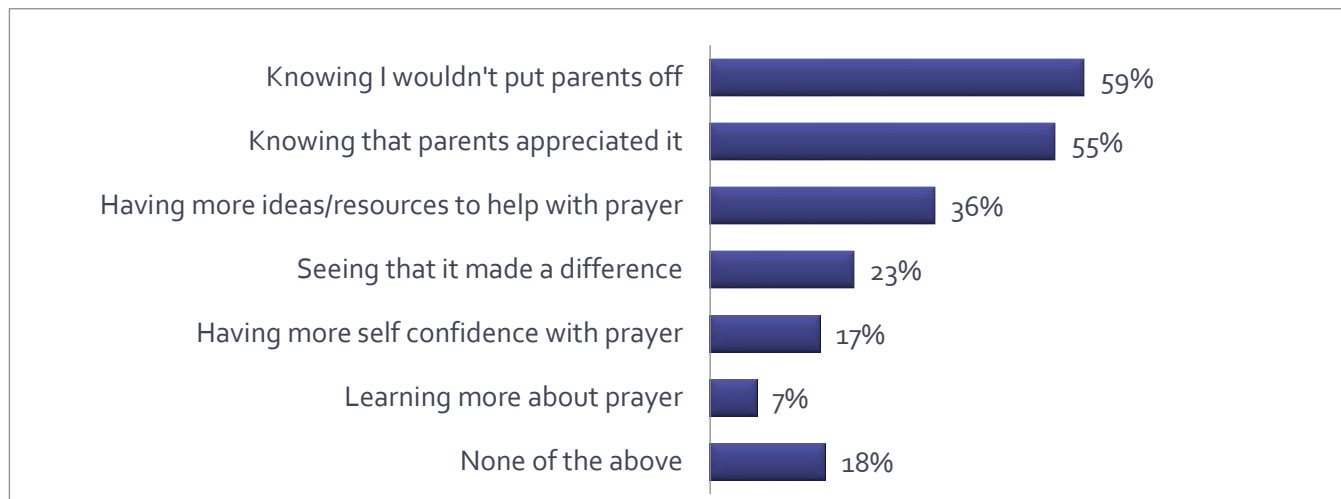
Q Thinking specifically about prayer at your typical toddler group session, do you do any of the following? [This question was asked only of those who claimed to Always/Sometimes have or offer prayer at a typical toddler group session, sample = 65]



NB % are of those who Always/Sometimes have or offer prayer – not of the total sample.

Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

Q. Which of the following might encourage you to do more with regard to prayer at your toddler group? [total sample]



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

### 6.2.7 Church services

Some toddler groups include a small service as part of the session. Those that experienced services as part of the toddler group were very positive about it.



For one group the service took up most of the toddler group time, with refreshments and a little playtime afterwards. The picture shows the layout, with a Mission Praise on every seat. There was a table/altar set up with candle, bible cross etc. and a flip chart for the songs. The service included worship songs, a bible story, intercessory prayer, Lord's prayer (traditional), notices and a closing blessing.

Although this toddler group was unusual in its Christian distinctiveness, and may not have been universally appealing, the users of this group were very positive about it. Here are some of the comments:

*I particularly like the church part. It's not too forceful for children. It's very laid back and it's not in your face, nobody is judging you. This would work well as a church service. I love the songs, then we sing them at home. He takes the colouring home and does it as soon as he gets home. We like learning the songs, and the prayer is good too*

*If you go to a toddler group in a church and they don't talk about God then you might as well go to an ordinary toddler group – at least here they learn about God. ... It's important that church toddler groups share their faith otherwise we may as well be in any old hall. ... I've tried other church toddler groups but didn't go back as they didn't do anything structured, just play, with no faith input.*

*I'm new to the area and I came here as it's linked to the church, although I haven't been to church yet and am not a regular churchgoer. My child is about to be christened ... they love it here, particularly the songs and playing. I really value the church service part*

*I was brought up as a churchgoer so think it's good for my son to learn about Jesus and the Christian faith. He will probably go to a church school, then make his own decision when he's older.*

*The first bit [church service] is good. It teaches them bible stories and songs, which they like. I've been to some toddler groups that are free play but they can be boring, just ordinary toddler groups. ... I used to go to church, but not anymore.*

*This is my first time here and I really like it. I go to quite a few other toddler groups as well. It's good that there are stories from the Bible, my children have really enjoyed it. I'm not a churchgoer but sometimes go to church. I don't think religion is taught enough these days, it should be more upfront than it is. I'm happy with the prayer. The songs are good, nice and simple. There's a lot of church toddler groups that do nothing but we wanted to come to this one for the faith content – it's more engaging, shorter and simpler than a church service. It's very important for them to learn the bible stories, learn right from wrong. They will make up their own minds when they are older but won't become Christians if they've never learnt anything about it. We will definitely be coming to this group again. My children really enjoyed it*

Another toddler group had an optional service in the attached traditional church as part of each toddler group session. Most of those using the group went through to the service which included toddlers going up to the altar rail for a blessing from the robed vicar, a children's church prayer, the Lord's prayer with actions, a Christian song, a story with a little talk about it, a song (thank you Lord), a song with instruments, singing happy birthday, notices, and blowing out the church candles. Although this was unusual for a toddler group, the group itself was very popular and the users were very positive about the church service part. Here are some comments:

*He [child] really likes this part and I really like it. It doesn't matter if the children run around or are noisy*

*I'm a non-churchgoer but I go to the church service here, it's only 10 minutes. There is singing and a couple of prayers. It's very friendly and often very noisy in the church. I used to look after 2 Indian children and I asked the father if he minded his children going to a church service and he said he was very happy for them to take part in it. It is a valued part of the toddle group*

*My child loves singing the songs; the church service is a very positive thing. I used to be a churchgoer, though not regular, and all my children were christened here. We sing the songs at home. It's nice to have Christian options like this for your children.*

The most unusual part about this service was the blessing. It was so popular that a separate breastfeeding group in another part of the church would sometimes bring their babies through for a blessing too. The only slightly negative comment was from a non-churchgoing grandmother who felt that the blessing could have more meaning(!):

*The blessing part is optional, there is no pressure. I think it's lovely that they come into the church. It's a real benefit to be able to come in here, it's such a beautiful church and they are very welcoming. He [child] loves the singing in here. It's the part of toddler group he loves most ... you can play with toys anywhere. [Asked about the blessing] The previous vicar did a lot more and I thought it was more meaningful, he said a lot more ... No-one talks about religion, it's not forced on you. I look forward to this group*

Another toddler group included a service as part of its session, which was called 'Buggy Praise'.

*The christening was here and the vicar recommended coming to this group. I like everything about it and feel very comfortable here. I love the stories and songs with my child – the Christian part is really good. I would recommend it to friends. I'm going to ask my partner's mum to keep brining my son when I go back to work. She is not a church goer but I'm sure she will be happy to come here ... It's in a church [laughter] ... why would you come to a church and have a problem with religion being mentioned? It's like going to a curry house and not having a curry*

Yet another group had decided to run Toddler Church once a month, immediately after the toddler group. Here is their story:

*Because we did messy church anyway we decided to see if we could put the two together. We shared it with the younger people in the church team and they were very excited. So from that we created Toddler Church. Within 3 weeks it was set up. We asked the vicar to oversee it. Toddler church has been running since October, once a month. The next one is the 9th. It happens on the 2nd Thursday of every month. ... Toddler church begins with food after toddler group. There is a prayer and grace before eating. We gather them together. There is then a transition into the church space. There is what we call a little pilgrimage to get there ... 'let's all go together into the church' (through a glass door). We usually act out a simple bible story. Maybe share some sort of life experience (for the adults) that connects with the story. It ends with a couple of songs and always the same prayer to end with. It is important for us to go into the church. We put Ikea mats down and children sit on those, as if waiting for a show to start. It's very low key. Most people do go through to toddler church. We wondered at first whether they would stay or go. Some went initially, but nearly all stay for it now. There is a real sense of a worshipping community forming. There was some nervousness and awkwardness to begin with (from all), not being sure what was going to happen. Over time there has been a sense of them moving together, developing into a community, belonging and sharing. Worshipping and praying together.*

Here are comments from two users that mentioned the new Toddler Church:

*I was a little worried at first that we might be preached at. Actually, sometimes I forget it's a church as it's hardly mentioned. We do toddler church every 2nd Thursday. There's lunch then a little story. We go to it. It's not imposed. It's like lesson type stuff and teaches kids morals.*

*I started coming here because of toddler church. It is run by a very supportive team; they take time to talk to parents. They offer hospitality, care, love and welcome without prejudice. It's a great model for a toddler group. I'm a Christian myself. There is no hidden agenda, they offer unconditional love and obviously love what they do. ... I was intrigued by toddler church. It starts with lunch where the toddlers gather for a meal. Most people stay for toddler church. It's a place of joy and happiness. Parents have space to talk and share, everyone is welcome. Seeds are being sown here.*

These toddler groups with services have been reported in some detail to illustrate how fully toddler groups can be distinctively Christian, whilst still being attractive to parents/carers.

As well as those that included regular church services, many offered occasional services e.g. for festivals or end of term. Again, these were occasions that toddler group users looked forward to.

Another insightful conversation was had around the topic of church services for toddlers. It was with a childminder who described herself as 'not particularly religious'. She was attending a toddler group with no Christian content at all, and was ambivalent about the idea of it having any in future. However, the topic of Messy Church was raised and she talked about it with animation and enthusiasm. In contrast, the toddler group was described as 'a bit tired and sad'. This demonstrated, again, that it cannot be assumed people will reject or be put off by Christian activities – it can be attractive if done well.

*I go to Messy Church 4 times a year and love it, it's great. It's very popular. They send out an email and we get notes about it in the school book bags. There's an intro with a theme and around 10 tables with volunteers on them. There's lots of art and craft going on, then a story and lots of food. It's like a party, and it's all free. It runs for around 2 hours. About 80 kids go and it moves around the local churches.*

### 6.3 Clergy involvement

Another way in which toddler groups showed their Christian distinctiveness was by involving a member of the clergy team. This had a positive impact on both the toddler group leaders/helpers and the users.

For some groups, the vicar and or curate were present every week for the whole session as they considered this to be very important for the mission of the church and the best way to connect with young families in the local community. Indeed, at least one vicar claimed that the toddler group was so important it took priority over everything else in this diary, often turning down other engagements to be there. Clergy tended to focus on



networking and building relationships with young families as well as the story telling and/or church service, but were also involved in leading songs, prayer, playing with children and helping with craft and refreshments.

Other groups had regular but less frequent clergy engagement and some had little or no involvement.

*It has been 4 years of developing relationships with the people who come here. I've visited most of them at home. In the unstructured time I focus on the children, partly to give the adults some space to give them time to have adult conversation, and I do my best to let those children know that they are unique and special and loved. I guess the adults appreciate that.*

*We talk to those using the group a lot, and are aware of where they are with faith. Some are further along than others. Most have gone from, not hostility, but nervousness to being quite happy to talk about it. There is something very exciting about this 'millennial' congregation, they are much more interested to talk about faith. There are plenty of opportunities to chat with people here. Last week there were two conversations – someone is giving up work to go back to university a big life change and we were talking about God at the same time, and God bringing about new life, without it being heavy or awkward. Just normal.*

*The link with families is important. He chats with them, they recognise the collar – we don't have the same authority. Toddler groups need the support of the church leadership. We get that here. The vicar doesn't come every week, and he doesn't always wear his collar – it depends on what else he's doing.*

*The vicar always stays for the group. He plays with the children, engages with the mums, has meaningful conversations and invites them to events/services. It's the highlight of his week.*

*Toddler group coincides with 10am communion service so the vicar used to come over to mingle/chat after that. Having the vicar come in is really important, the informal contact is so important.*

The toddler group users were all very positive about having a vicar at the toddler group.

*The vicar is always here [not like the other church run toddler group] and encouraging people to come along to services and events. It's a good thing to bring these services and events to everyone's attention. The other church toddler group just gave out leaflets at the end so it was not so obvious. ...It is not a problem to be encouraged to come along to things*

*I've never seen the vicar here, but at the Methodist toddler group he's there the whole time, he's lovely. Most of the children here will go on to the Methodist church school, so they know that vicar and that church more.*

*This is a very popular group. It's nice that the vicar is here. He always comes round to have a chat. It helps if you're having a rough time.*



*It's important that the vicar is here. My child loves him and always runs up to him and is delighted to see him. He's also very popular at the school she will be going to*

*It's good that the vicar is here. He gets involved, chats to everyone and asks how you are, how things are going.*

*The vicar comes in for a sing song and a dance and they are a right laugh, it's very good to see*

*The vicar coming in is really good, he's very casual with the children and down to earth*

One mum mentioned how important it was to see the vicar at the toddler group every week. She said it helped non-churchgoers, like her, get to know the vicar and have a relationship with them. This meant they were then not worried about approaching him or going to church. This particular mum was planning to attend the church barbecue on the coming Sunday and said she was likely to go to church beforehand as well.

## 6.4 Introduction and invitations

### 6.4.1 Introduction

Most groups made it clear in their introduction that the group was a church run group; however some were much more explicit than others. Those that were largely Christian in their activities made it very clear what would be happening, so that people would not be surprised by the Christian content. One group had this message in their welcome pack:

**Jesus calls us to love our neighbour. Our neighbour is anyone we come into contact with. As a church we want to show you God's love and hope that these sessions are of benefit to you and your family. If at any time you would like prayer, please ask.**

### 6.4.2 Invitation

Most toddler groups gave information on relevant services and activities for young families offered by the church. There were many ways of doing this, including formal 'notices' at the close of a church service type session, written invitations and informal conversations. Most agreed that personal invitations were the best, but this was obviously time-consuming and resource dependent.

The group users were invited to a wide range of services and activities including:

- Special events such as summer barbecues, Easter bake-off, pancake day, teddy bears picnic
- Holiday clubs, for those with older children
- Family services/all-age worship
- Toddler services, such as messy church
- Seasonal services (Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Harvest etc.)
- Parenting support groups/courses
- Basic skills (cooking, money management etc.)

- Coffee mornings

Some also took the opportunity to thank people for coming to the church at the end of each toddler group.

## 6.5 Other communication and activities

There were many other ways that toddler groups communicated their Christian distinctiveness, both formal and informal.

### 6.5.1 Informal conversations

Many groups use informal conversations to show their Christian distinctiveness. The conversations need to be intentional to be effective in being distinctively Christian e.g. at least mentioning faith, church, prayer or other aspects of Christian life. For this to happen there needs to be Christians who are present and active within the toddler group. This was clearly happening in those groups with clergy present, some groups had leaders or helpers who were effective in this role and others encouraged competent Christians who were users of the group.

To facilitate natural conversations it helps to have some stimulus. The ideal situation is for the stimulus to come from the toddler group user's life and there was evidence of this happening in the toddler groups visited. Other stimulus could be from events and activities or seasons and festivals.

*We want to show God's love, be here for them, and share the gospel. We don't hide it, we're not ashamed of it but not pushy. We get to know mums and they open up to us which means we can offer prayer. It's all very natural. As a Christian it is our lives, I wouldn't be true to God if I wasn't sharing it. ... we must be open about sharing our faith. we take prayer very seriously. ... We want to share God's love and the gospel in a gentle, simple way. This is a place of peace for people, an oasis.*

*We like the free play time as it gives us more time to talk. This is the equivalent to coffee after the morning service.*

*They sometimes talk to us about things, have questions. What's the difference between Christening and Baptism, for example. Or want to talk about things. It's easier to talk to us here than approach vicar or go along on a Sunday.*

*We do a lot through relationship, which often leads to prayer. At the end of term there was a presentation from parents to thank the leaders. One mum was in tears as she explained how the toddler group had helped her through an unpleasant divorce and that it would have been impossible without it.*

The challenge is having competent, confident Christians in the group and creating the right environment for relaxed informal conversations to take place. As one leader said 'it's hard to get space for anything too deep within the toddler group'.

### 6.5.2 Christian gifts

Another way that toddler groups demonstrated their Christian distinctiveness was to give Christian gifts such as bibles, story or prayer books. These were given on various occasions including birthday presents, in a goody bag at the end of the summer term or to toddlers that were leaving the group for whatever reason.

*We give children's bible to leavers when they go, Jesus Storybook Bible. We've just started using it to tell the stories, so when they leave they are given one and are familiar with it.*

### 6.5.3 Other communication and activities

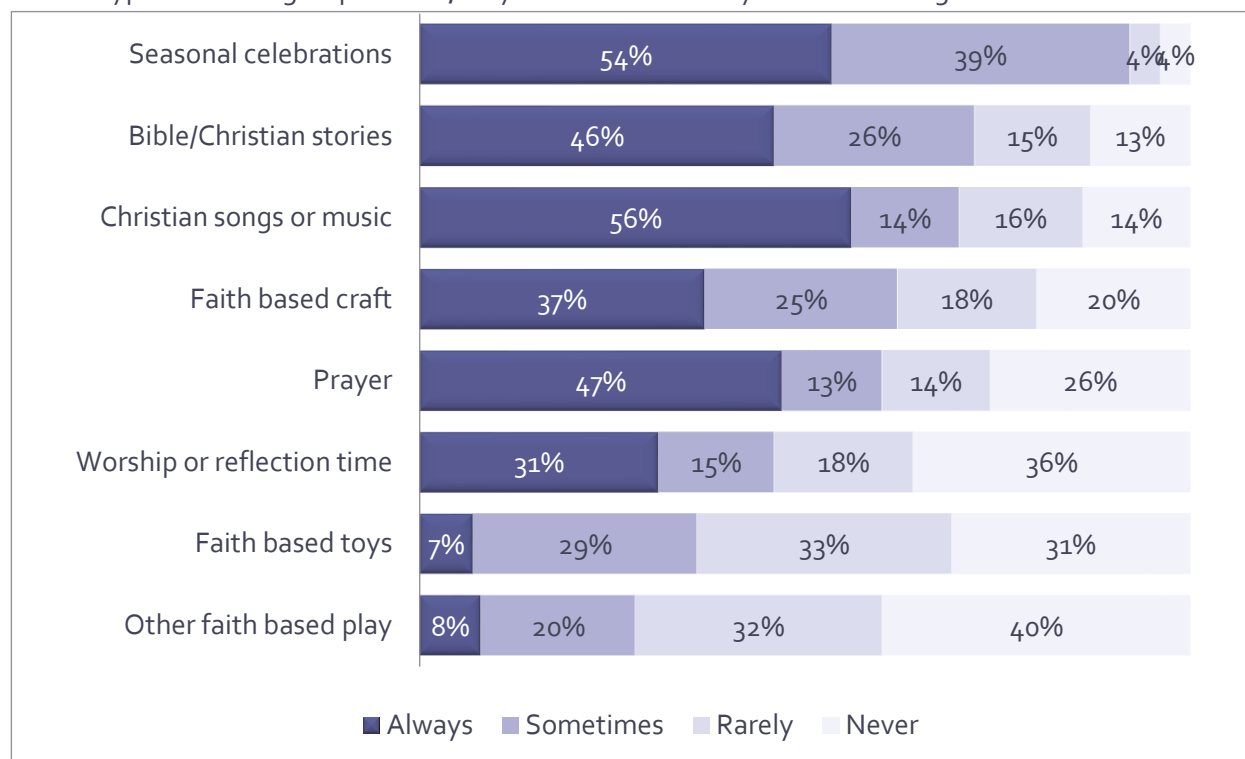
If the toddler leaders are intentional, there are clearly many opportunities to remind users that it is a church run group, both regularly each week and occasionally as special items or as experiments. Here are some other examples from the research:

- Some groups played lively Christian music as people arrived and during the free play time. This helped to create a welcoming atmosphere, particularly for the first arrivals at the group when all is quiet
- In one group a grandmother gave her testimony
- One group was thinking of creating a box for those who had questions about faith but were not confident enough to ask them openly
- Christian toys and books were present at some toddler groups. One vicar had plans to turn a minion doll into a vicar to play with, and teddies with communion egg cups
- Some groups used parachute activities to show Christian distinctiveness

## 6.6 Christian activities: quantitative findings

The following chart gives an idea of what toddler groups are doing to show Christian distinctiveness. The most common was 'seasonal celebrations', but many secular groups would also celebrate Christmas so the detail of the activities would need to be known before concluding that these celebrations were indications of Christian distinctiveness.

Q. At a typical toddler group session, do you have or offer any of the following?



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

## 6.7 Becoming more distinctively Christian

From a research perspective, it was interesting to visit toddler groups that had intentionally changed to become more distinctively Christian. Leaders talked about how they had changed the group and their perspective on the user response. Conversations were also had with users themselves about the changes. Here are some examples.

### 6.7.1 London toddler group

A young church mum took over running the toddler group from an elderly couple who had resisted any spiritual content for the 8-9 years they ran it. There was already a (secular) song time, so she added in a bible story at Christmas. She then carried on in the New Year, using that as a Bible story slot and now also ends the story/song time with a short prayer. She has also introduced a craft activity based on the bible story. The leader is unaware of any negative response from the group, which has a high proportion of childminders.

Here are some comments from users of the group:

*The Bible stories have just been introduced here. We have people of different religions here and it's not a problem at all. No-one is being pushed into anything. The children love the stories. It*

*really doesn't bother anyone, it doesn't offend anyone. If you are from a different culture it's good to hear stories from different faiths.*

*Because it's linked to a church you expect them to bring faith into it. They have only recently started doing that here – I was surprised they didn't do Bible stories before*

*Prayer has been done occasionally recently and everyone joins in.*

*They learn about different faiths at school, so it's OK for them to start learning about the Christian faith at toddler group*

*Although my husband is an atheist, we are very happy for our daughter to be exposed to different faiths and it is useful to know Bible stories as well as learn about other faiths.*

#### 6.7.2 Yorkshire toddler group

A new vicar came to the church to find that a lively toddler group that was not distinctively Christian. A few changes were made:

*We now have a Bible story, a song and time in prayer, but not everybody goes to everything, that's one thing that's different to this group and the other things I've run [happens in separate room] some people opt out, but not many choose not to come through. Going into a separate space gives a different feel to that time.*

Here is a comment from one of the mothers:

*We never used to have the bible story part, but now we have and can choose whether to go to that or not. I want my daughter to go in and listen, and learn a bit about the Christian stories. As long as we are given the choice and are genuinely not discriminated against if we choose not to. It is very acceptable to stay out if you don't want to go*

#### 6.7.3 Welsh toddler group

A Welsh toddler group had gone through major change with the closure of their church and move to an ex-Post Office in the centre of town. They had also decided to become more distinctively Christian and had added on 'Toddler Church' to the group once a month.

*We had a toddler group running and we were wondering how to move it further [become more Christian] and step out a bit and we struggled with that. All the time we've been asking God and He keeps saying just love them and I will do the rest. The rest ... he has opened doors for us bit by bit and it's been remarkable what's happened*

Here are a couple of comments from a mother and grandmother.

*I was a little worried at first that we might be preached at. Actually, sometimes I forget it's a church as it's hardly mentioned. We do toddler church every 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday of the month. There's lunch then a little story. We go to it. It's not imposed. It's like lesson type stuff and teaches kids morals.*

*I started coming here because of toddler church. It is run by a very supportive team, they take time to talk to parents. They offer hospitality, care, love and welcome without prejudice. It's a great model for a toddler group. I'm a Christian myself. There is no hidden agenda, they offer unconditional love and obviously love what they do. ... I was intrigued by toddler church. It starts with lunch where the toddlers gather for a meal. Most people stay for toddler church. It's a place of joy and happiness. Parents have space to talk and share, everyone is welcome. Seeds are being sown here.*

## 6.8 Attitudes towards Christian distinctiveness

### 6.8.1 Expectations of Christian distinctiveness

Practically all of those attending church toddler groups expected some sort of Christian content and had a positive attitude towards it, especially if:

- It was appropriate and engaging for toddlers
- Attitudes were inclusive and not judgemental
- There was no pressure to become a practising Christian
- It helped to educate or guide toddlers

Many toddler group users said that they expected a church run toddler group to show some Christian distinctiveness:

*I would expect the church to be mentioned at a church toddler group, it's in a church.*

*It's in a church [laughter] ... why would you come to a church and have a problem with religion being mentioned? It's like going to a curry house and not having a curry*

*I am a Buddhist, being at a Christian group is not a problem to me. I don't feel like it's imposed, I am welcomed with open arms. I like the Christian parts of the group and take it as a cultural rather than religious experience.*

*I always go to the Bible and prayer part. It's fine, and good to have the story for the children. You come to a church so you expect it.*

In almost every toddler group visit parents/carers referred to the Christian distinctiveness as not being 'in your face' or 'pushy'. This was regardless of the level of Christian distinctiveness, whether it was just a short story or song, or whether the whole group was distinctive in everything that it did. Here are two comments from people that attended a toddler group in a very lively, evangelical church. The group started with Christian songs (including bible story songs), then a bible story was told (interactively, with fuzzy felt and puppets), followed by toddler prayer, then craft associated with the story (which all toddlers were expected to do), more Christian songs then a short time for refreshments and free play. The adults listened to the story and engaged with all the songs too. The group was oversubscribed and had a waiting list.

*We just moved to the area six weeks ago. I'm not a churchgoer or an overly religious person, but it's nice because all the stories have meaning. It's a great opportunity from them to hear the stories. ...They are fun songs. It's not like they are preaching to you, it's fun. If it was pushy I wouldn't come.*

*It's really nice to have the songs and stories, but the Christian side is not in your face. We are not churchgoers but feel it's a positive thing. It's a nice gentle approach here and everyone is so friendly*

Here are some more comments where parents/carers referred to the groups as not being in your face or pushy. The fact that these words were said so many times shows that there is still a negative perception and apprehension about what churches can be like. Their experience of church toddler group shows otherwise. This is a common research finding, where there are negative perceptions of Christians or clergy but positive view of those actually known, or negative perceptions of church services but positive views of those experienced.

*It's not pushy here, the Christian craft is optional. It's not rammed down your throat. It's nice that it has both Christian and other things going on. The kids do listen to the bible stories though, and it's not off-putting at all.*

*They mention what the church is putting on, and introduce themselves as being from the church. There was also an Easter activity. It's a positive thing that it's run by the church, and they have a lot of helpers because of that. They don't push religion at you, there are very dedicated workers.*

*We do song time and stories based on religion. It's fine. It's not over the top, not in your face, just enough.*

*It's not in your face, it's there if you want to join in, you are not pressurised at all. Sometimes we go to story time and sometimes not, it depends on the mood of the kids.*

## 6.8.2 Young families actively seeking Christian content

Some young families actively look for a church toddler group with Christian content as they would like to nurture either their toddlers or their own faith journeys. Some even attend the toddler group as an alternative to 'normal' church as it is more accessible with a young family.

By not including any Christian activities/content, toddler groups risk losing parents/carers who are actively looking for it.

*I'm here because of the Christian focus; I've been to several Christian groups before. This one is dynamic, well run with lots of love and thought. We've made friends here. ... There is a bible story, Christian song and prayer. I value the fact that they try to bring the bible alive for youngsters. It is so important in our secular society. I do believe toddlers pick up something from it.*

*I chose this group because it was close by and I wanted something that was affiliated with the church. It's a lovely setting ... safe and traditional. I can't go to church on a Sunday because of the children, so I feel like I'm still going to church. Before the children came along I was a churchgoer, even if it was very sporadic.*

*Sunday school is not that strong where we are (other church) so it's good for him to come here. Having the Christian input is very important. I want to give him a Christian upbringing. He has been christened and has his own bible and things, his dad has also been confirmed. This playgroup provides a toddler group setting and Christian input, it's a good balance. I prefer to have a balance between the two, not ignoring it but not forcing it either.*

*I love it here, and knew the leader through church. I wanted something that was more than a regular toddler group, something with a Christian ethos. There is good Christian input here, it gives them a bit of grounding. It's good that it is in the church itself.*

### 6.8.3 User apprehension

There is cultural negativity towards the church and religion, and this was prevalent with those attending the church toddler groups. The main concerns were that 'church' might be a) judgmental and b) too pushy or 'in your face'. This apprehension was mentioned in three ways:

- In describing what the current group was not i.e. not pushy, not judgemental
- In describing how they felt about visiting for the first time
- In describing how they felt about the group becoming more distinctively Christian in future

*At first I was a little bit 'ooh' about it being a church group. I was worried it might be pushed at me, when I wasn't ready for it. Then I came along and now I've been baptized and started going to church. I'm interested in getting my son Christened so I was invited along to a Christening service at church and kept going. ... The Christian craft is usually relevant to what's going on in church, and there are Christian songs too ... at the end there are prayer bubbles where we say prayers for people. It's a nice balance of open play and Christian themed, without it being pushed at you. ... From the first time I came I thought the prayer bubbles were a nice touch. I wasn't so sure about the Christian songs, but that's probably because I don't like singing in general....*



*Occasional bible stories are good if they are short. They educated me a little bit, it was a good start for me*

*I moved to the area and started coming to church, then the toddler group. I value that it's a church run group, as my children learn bible stories. There's a good balance here. The story is interactive and there is dancing afterwards. Adding more Christian content might put me off, it depends how it's done*

*They always talk to new people, the leaders do it, and it comes out in conversation that it is run by the church. I didn't have a problem with that even though I'm a non-churchgoer. I would feel welcome whether I as religious or not. ... but if it was more religious I may not come*

*[invited by churchgoing friend to attend] – My expectation was that it would be more churchy and I was worried about that. I expected it to be more structured, although I'm not sure how. Most toddler groups end with songs and stories at the end so I expected this one too as well. They will get the Bible stories at school anyway, and they are good stories. It's really good how they bring the children together at the end.*

*Having a prayer corner might be a bit much, I don't think anyone would use it, it's not that sort of group*

*My cousin has a child and I asked her to come and she said 'I'm not sure about that as I don't go to church or anything. I said, don't worry you will be welcomed. (We try to get along to church occasionally). I don't think the prayer bubble type activities will put my cousin off, everything is explained, and it's always explained why we do particular craft activities. ... I think it's good for children to hear the bible stories. It's not in your face here, it's just right. Children will learn about Christianity at school, this just gives them a bit of insight beforehand*

*I was a little concerned about coming along as I'm not a churchgoer and wondered if it would be a bit hypocritical to come along but you are not judged at all, they are lovely people here. I recommended it to someone outside the area and she comes along now too. She arranges her working week around this so she can come. To me it doesn't feel like it's being pushed at us, the stories are moral stories. I was brought up as Christian and I want to bring my child up with Christian values, and let them make up their own mind later.*

*I was a bit apprehensive as I thought it might be pushy with a hidden agenda, but this is more about community and it's really lovely. The other church group I go to makes a big thing of all the church seasonal activities ... I would have had an issue if someone had told me about that before I went, but being there it was really good, not a problem at all*

*The church is lovely and the ladies in there are very friendly and welcoming. We are unmarried and they made us feel very welcome*

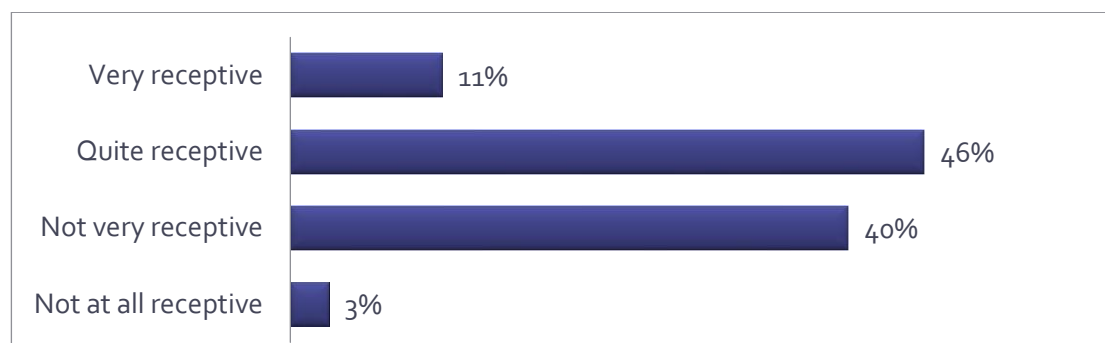
*You are not judged here, it's very friendly and welcoming. They always remember your name*

#### 6.8.4 Apprehension in deprived areas

The research showed that toddler group user and leader apprehension towards Christian distinctiveness was greater in deprived areas. In these areas it was even more essential to build on a strong foundation of loving and serving young families, in order to build trusting relationships. There was evidence in one very deprived area of a toddler group that had launched as being very overtly Christian but had to close due to lack of interest. Here is a comment from someone that tried the group:

*There was one at Gateway church and everything was God and that was OTT, the colouring and everything was about God. ... OTT is when they mention God all the time, the craft activity is God, all the songs are about God. One song is OK and some prayers are OK, but not all the time*

Q. How receptive do you feel parents might be towards a more distinctively Christian toddler group?



### 6.9 The challenges to being distinctively Christian

Toddler group leaders reported little or no resistance to any distinctively Christian content from users. Indeed, the greatest resistance often came from group leaders who were reluctant to change.

#### 6.9.1 Lacking motivation

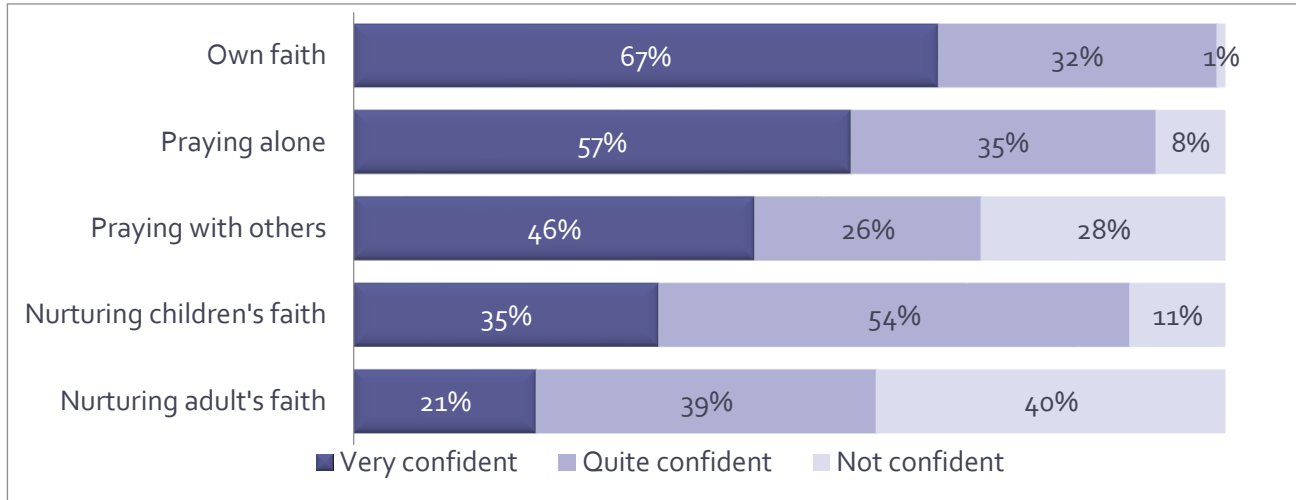
Some toddler group leaders had little or no motivation to make the toddler group distinctively Christian. They were comfortable with loving and serving young families with no vision or desire to do more than that.

#### 6.9.2 Lacking confidence

Some toddler group leaders lacked confidence for the group to become more distinctively Christian:

- lacking confidence to lead the group
- lacking confidence in their own faith
- fearing it would put people off, or that no-one would be interested
- fearing change itself

Q. How confident are you with each of the following? [Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]



### 6.9.3 Not being equipped

Some toddler group leaders were not well equipped to make their groups more distinctively Christian as they lacked knowledge, skill or resource.

Knowledge or skills:

- how to make the group distinctively Christian
- how to nurture the faith of toddlers or adults
- how to build a vision and strategy for the future
- how best to plan or structure the group
- skills such as creativity, story-telling or leading song

Resources:

- People
- Money
- Time for planning, strategy or change

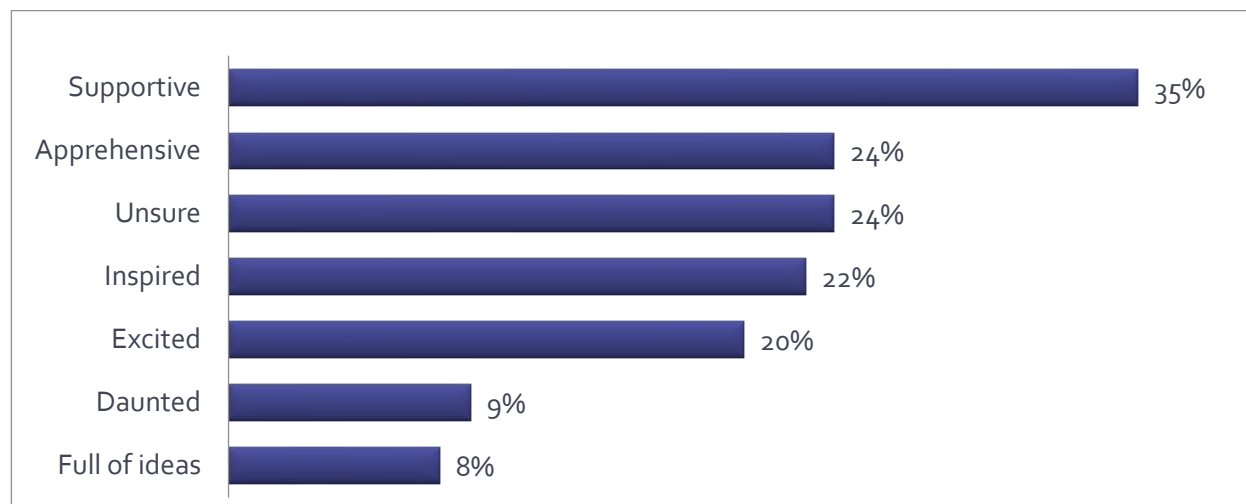
### 6.9.4 Not being supported

Although some toddler groups were well supported, others had very little support from either clergy, the wider church family or other volunteers. Some were being run by a single, unsupported person with help only from those attending the group. In these circumstances it was more difficult to make progress with being distinctively Christian.

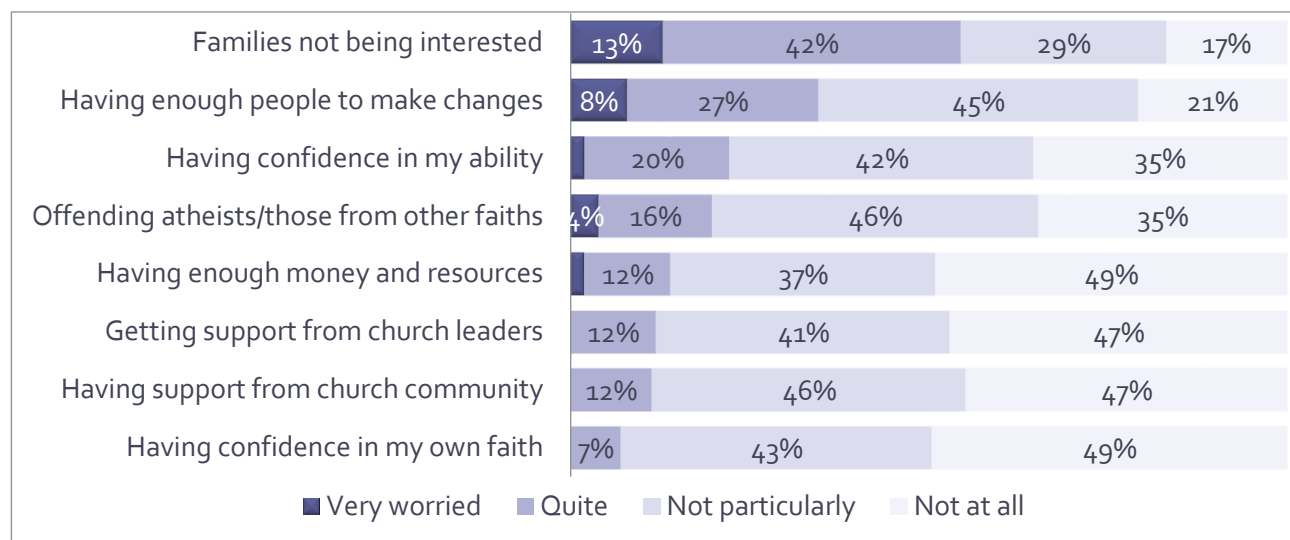
*Church leaders need to keep pastoral oversight over those leading the toddler group. They need a lot of support and nurture, particularly with prayer but also with practical issues.*

## 6.10 Leader's views: quantitative findings

Q. Which of the following describes how you feel about making your toddler group more distinctively Christian?  
[Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]



Q. Thinking about making your toddler group more distinctively Christian, do any of the following worry you?  
[Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]



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## 6.11 The risk of not being distinctively Christian

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There is much opportunity in being distinctively Christian and little risk. However, there is risk in not being distinctively Christian. The research has shown:

- People may well be experiencing or have experienced other church toddler groups that are distinctively Christian. If a group does nothing to show that it is Christian they may be wondering why that is the case.
- Some users actively seek Christian content in a church toddler group and may reject those that do not offer it.
- Having a positive experience of 'church' in a toddler can enhance the image of the wider church

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## 6.12 Recommendations: Being distinctively Christian

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Do at least something to be distinctively Christian. Do not be afraid as it is expected and actively sought after by some. Make sure that:

- The impressions given are that the toddler group and church are inclusive and not all judgemental
- There is no perception of pressure to become a practising Christian, or to believe/behave in any particular way
- Any Christian activities are appropriate and engaging for toddlers

Be visibly Christian:

- Make sure there are visual references to the fact that the group is Christian

Welcome newcomers by making it clear that the toddler group is an important part of the church community:

- Create a welcome pack for new users giving them information about the toddler group, including any Christian content, but also relevant information about the church. This could include information on relevant toddler/family services, baptism/marriage, seasonal services, other community activities, who's who, contact information, how to get help and advice etc. Include a welcome from clergy and other church leaders
- Talk about the church when welcoming newcomers
- Consider other ways the church could welcome newcomers e.g. small gifts, cards, welcome services or social events

Include at least some Christian activities within the toddler group:

- Use the talents/gifts of those available, actively recruit people with talents that are needed (e.g. storytelling, leading songs, craft)
  - Use the 'gathering together' time for Christian activities
-

- Network with others for suggestions on activities and relevant resources, use the diocese for advice and support too
- Use the Christian festivals and other secular festivals/events as stimulus
- Make songs, stories and other activities engaging, relevant and fun for toddlers
- When singing, use simple repetitive songs that will be easily learned and remembered, with prompts for those who do not know the words
- Involve toddlers in simple, engaging prayers
- Use a simple grace before any refreshment time
- Do not be afraid to include or offer short church services

Involve clergy in the group:

- Ideally clergy would be visible and active at every toddler group session, but there should be at least some regular presence

Keep communicating about church/faith and offering invitations:

- Involve competent/confident Christians and create the right environment for intentional but informal conversations
- Share any relevant church news with the toddler group
- Invite the toddler group community to services, events and other activities
- Encourage engagement on social media, where relevant
- Give faith related gifts from the church where appropriate such as birthdays, new births, end of term or children leaving

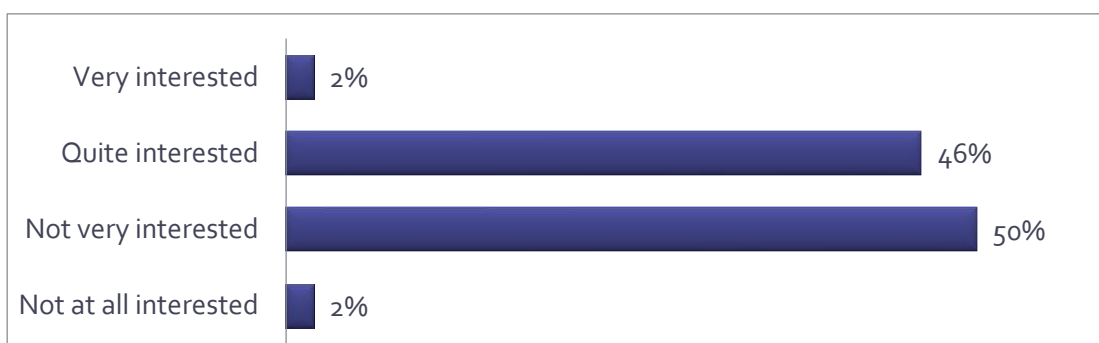
## 7 Faith at home

Research objective: to recommend ways in which church-based Toddler Groups might encourage families to live and share their faith at home.



Encouraging families to share faith at home tended to be passive and reactive rather than proactive, with leaders admitting that this was more of a priority area for churchgoing Christians. However, in the quantitative survey 48% felt that parents/carers would be quite or very interested in nurturing faith at home and only 2% would be not at all interested.

Q. How interested do you feel the parents/carers are in nurturing faith at home?



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

### 7.1.1 Passive and reactive

Toddler group leaders were more likely to be passive or reactive, rather than active, regarding the nurture of faith at home.

*Faith at home? – no, don't know how to. We don't want to put them off, I'm not sure they are ready for it. They take craft away with them though ... Maybe we could learn how to do that, for the future ... We don't do much at home ourselves as the family are not Christians, if I don't do it at home it's difficult to encourage others to do it. ... One or two of them take the song sheets home so that they can sing the songs at home, I'd forgotten, that's doing faith in the home. They asked for them. It's a first step. ... [In response to suggesting that prayer bubbles could be repeated at home] That's a good idea, they could do prayer bubbles at home. An excellent idea. They like the prayer bubbles.*

If toddlers were sufficiently engaged, stimulated or excited by their toddler group then they would be likely to take some of this engagement back to the home environment. To a lesser extent this also applied to parents/carers.

Examples included:

- Singing toddler group songs
- Talking about toddler group people and activities
- Sharing outputs from craft activities
- Praying, saying grace before meals
- Taking ideas from the toddler group to use at home

Some toddler group leaders would respond to those who were interested in nurturing faith in the home by, for example, providing books or children's bibles, either as a gift or to borrow.

### 7.1.2 Active

Some toddler groups were more active in encouraging faith at home. One of the most engaging ways to do this was by using social media, which enabled contact and encouragement through the week whilst at home. Some made active use of Facebook and one used texts to pray for mums. The toddler group most active in helping to nurture faith at home recognised that parents were the primary disciplers of their children. The church strategy was to partner with parents and support and train them in that role, starting with the toddler group.

Examples of actively nurturing faith in the home included:

- Recommending relevant resources for use at home
- Craft activities to do at home
- Craft activities to engage others at home
- Suggesting toddler group activities that could be repeated at home
- Follow-up packs from services and events (rather than from toddler group)
- Giving Christian gifts for birthdays or leaving presents, particularly children's bibles or storybooks
- Teaching parents

*Toddlers learn the family prayer, connect through Facebook – one mum posted a photo of her daughter saying the prayer. We know they also sing Christian songs at home which they've learnt at toddler group. 'One child went to school and told them he went to the 'Jumping for God' playgroup.*

*We talk about it and think quite a bit about it. We encourage them to have things like prayer before the meal, sitting down together, without saying 'you could do this at home'. Also we talk about some of things we do at home, particularly the curate as he has a young family who come to toddler group here. We do it by example rather than by saying 'here's 10 things you can do'. Lots of people do ask us about things.*



*My daughter goes home and sings the songs and does the actions. If I didn't bring her here she wouldn't know anything about God*

There was evidence to show that a few Christian families would welcome more guidance on how to nurture faith in the home.

*The toddler group has given me ideas for things to do at home. I can also buy books here for the children. It's difficult to find resources that are toddler age appropriate ... I pray with my child at home and sing Christian songs [person who rediscovered faith when had child]*

*They do a song (grace) before the food and thank you God at the end. We also go into church for Easter and Christmas for stories and crafts. No-one is put off by that. ... Maybe they could do a little more here. My child is always talking about God at home. She is 4 and had a long chat with the curate, asking lots of questions I can't answer.*

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## 7.2 Recommendations: Faith at home

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- Provide stimulus to encourage faith conversations at home, such as craft activities to share or engage with others at home
  - Encourage 'faith as everyday' activities at toddler group that could easily be repeated at home, particularly prayer activity such as saying grace, thanking God, asking God for help or support
  - Make it easy to repeat toddler group activities at home by, for example, offering parents copies of words to songs or prayers used
  - Give gifts to encourage faith at home, such as storybooks, bibles, prayer books, Christian toys or games
  - Offer or recommend resources that could be used to nurture faith in the home
-

## 8 Links with church strategy and community

Research objective: to recommend practical ways in which church-based Toddler Groups might be more closely linked to their church's strategy and community.

Links between toddler group and the rest of the church varied from being almost non-existent, to the toddler group being viewed as a vibrant part of the church community and strategically important for the future. Where there were strong links the toddler groups were more likely to be thriving whilst those with weaker links were more likely to be struggling.

There are four groups that need to link:

1. Church leaders
2. Toddler group leaders
3. Church community
4. Toddler group community

To enable strong links to be made, it is helpful to consider this engagement pyramid:



### 8.1 Links between church leaders and toddler group leaders

The first step in nurturing links between church leaders and toddler group leaders is to build awareness. At a practical level, if it is not happening already, church leaders should be kept informed of what is happening at and with the toddler groups, and toddler group leaders should be kept informed of what is happening at and with the wider church.

This increasing awareness should lead to both church and toddler group leaders considering how they could best help and support each other – this would be impossible if there was little or no awareness. In turn, this should lead

to occasional engagement, then regular engagement and finally advocacy and shared strategy. Ideally, toddler group leaders would be involved in relevant church strategy and management meetings.

Here is an example from a conversation with a curate which illustrates how increasing awareness and engagement is leading to closer links with the church community and the development of strategy.

*A strategy is forming – both for the church and toddler group. One of our strategic focusses is children and family ministry, and that's partly due to seeing the way toddler group has developed. The toddler group is becoming an archetype of what missional communities might look like for other areas of church and community (e.g. youth, older people etc.). The team functions well together and has a good and developing mission spirituality, inviting parents for prayer, and they are compassionate and earnest in prayer together after each session – praying about what is going on in people's lives. Also, we have a weekly prayer meeting every Friday in the main church and particularly over the last 6 months stories and prayer requests from the toddler group are becoming more prominent. That's partly because the team has had more confidence in sharing that. Some of this is disseminated into the rest of church, and others are hearing about what goes on in the toddler group. We are also hearing about the love and care being given. The toddler leaders go along to weekly Friday church meeting. ... We do feel very much a part of the church family.*

Referring back to the missional opportunities section of this report, if the toddler group is largely focussed on loving and serving young families with little consideration for other opportunities, then it is more likely that it can be run as a fairly autonomous group with responsibility largely resting with the toddler group leader.



However, if the toddler group is intent on maximising more of its missional potential, with aims such as helping to transform the church and transform lives, then it necessarily needs to be more closely linked to the overall church strategy and community.

This cannot be achieved if the church leadership does not understand or wish to embrace the missional potential of the toddler group. Again, the engagement pyramid could be helpful in thinking about how to achieve this practically. To begin with, it is important to build awareness of the missional potential of toddler groups, and encourage churches to consider how they might start to engage with them. Persuasive communication and support from the diocese on this would help, such as providing case histories showing what can be achieved

and giving practical support and ideas to encourage progress.

Here is an example from a conversation with a vicar where he is successfully positioning the toddler group as a congregation within the church, intent on transforming the church and transforming lives. The toddler group is a very important part of the church, and not simply a community outreach project.

*The people in the 'normal' congregations are very aware of the toddler congregation as I talk about it a lot. It used to be known as the tots group, now it's thought of as the tots congregation. That change of name was important, if you change the name it changes the way people think about it. If you keep on calling it a congregation eventually people think of it like that. ... After about a year we got rid of the separate account for the toddler group, so we are paying into the church and they are funding us. That seemed to be important if we were going to regard ourselves as another congregation. That was an important, symbolic change. We still keep some of the money separate, but they handle it for us. It also saved us another job.*

## 8.2 Building engagement between toddler group and church communities

It is important to build awareness of the toddler group and its activities with the church community. Some toddler groups have displays within the church:



*We have a board in the children's area of the priory where we display some of the craft done in the toddler group*

*The rest of church is well aware of the toddler group. We used to have a world map up in the church that showed where everyone in the toddler group comes from, with their names on. ... Church mission statement is 'Welcoming people to meet Jesus'*

Building awareness can lead to people considering whether they could become more involved, then perhaps helping out occasionally or becoming regular helpers. Here is an example of a video being used to build awareness and recruit volunteers:

*We made a video of our toddler group to show in church to encourage people to volunteer, that really helped. We got a couple of men to help out in the kitchen through showing the video. Using a personal approach to churchgoers is really important for volunteer recruitment.*

Some groups communicate regularly through the church magazine or notices:

*One of the leaders is the church warden. The church is very much aware of the toddler group, there is usually an item in the church magazine.*

One magazine article mentioned growth of the toddler group, growth and support of the toddler group team, craft activities (including plants and decorations for the church), a request for home-made cakes and ended like this:

*Thanks to everyone who supports us, including those behind the scenes. We couldn't do it without you.*

At least two groups build awareness and engagement through the Mother's Union:

*We then started to involve MU to do the refreshments and they take news from toddler group back into the church. They have brought their grandchildren along, started to integrate more.*

*The church supports the toddler group. There are around 60 people in church and 16 are involved in toddler group. People come in to help set up and others are on call to help - we like to have at least 6 people here. The vicar is very much behind us as is the mothers union.*

There was also evidence of awareness and engagement building through websites and social media.

Members of the church community should be inspired and encouraged to take an interest in the toddler group and help however they can, depending on the skills and talents on the people. Toddler groups always appreciate prayer but would also welcome more practical support such as being on a rota for refreshments, helping to set up and pack away toys and activities, being present to talk with toddler group users, helping with ideas and/or resources or even mentoring the toddler group leader.

*They support us through prayer. We have 7/8 ladies come on a rota to help out. The church is interested in toddler group, always been supportive. There are five helpers here today, and another four ladies actively help out.*

As well as encouraging the church community to engage with the toddler group, it is also important for the toddler group users to engage with the church community. First, it is essential to build awareness of the church and its activities within the toddler group. There were several examples of this being done within the research, see section 6.4 of this report.

There were examples in the research of toddler group users becoming aware of church services and activities, considering them, and then going along to one or two before engaging more regularly. There was also an example in the research of the toddler group creating their own lent activity to raise money for the church:

*Other things we've done over time are Lenten challenges, but not every year. First time we decided to raise money for the church. Also partly to get the congregation more aware of us as a community (they question why they don't see them on a Sunday). We just say – do you come on a Tuesday? ... Our first Lenten challenge raised over £1000, we did a sponsored pram push, coffee mornings etc. We did presentation in church one Sunday morning.*

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### 8.3 Toddler groups with little support

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Some of the toddler groups visited had little or no support from the church, those that also had just one leader and were struggling.

*The vicar never comes as it is their day off ... there is very little support from anyone at church ... I'm the only leader, and the group closes when I'm not able to be here (which rarely happens). I have asked for help plenty of times from the congregation but no-one comes forward. Even though there are young families at the church.*

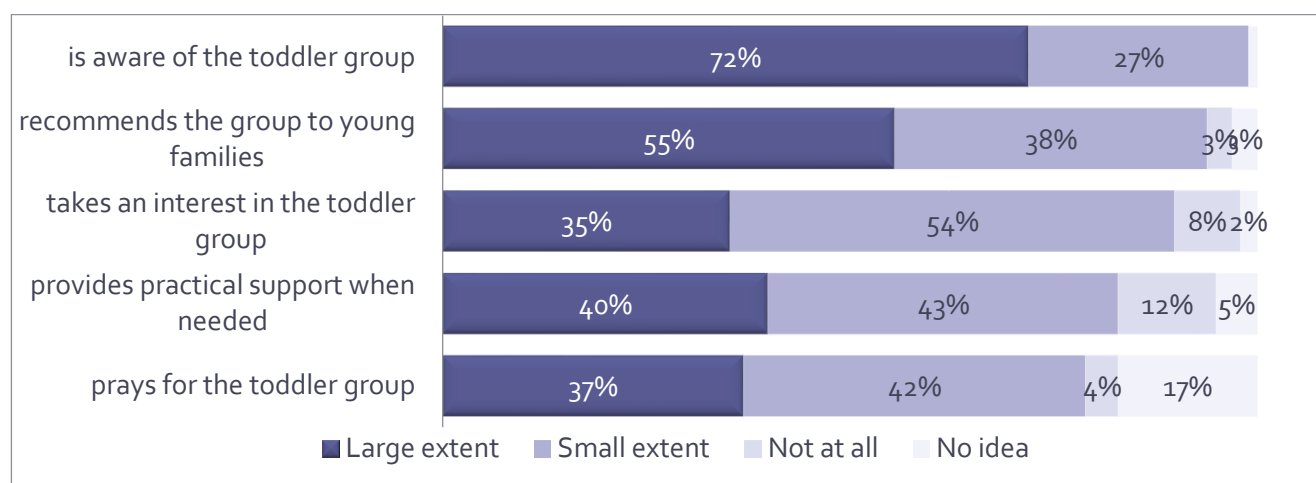
*I desperately need more help from the church, from either younger or older people. I've often asked the church for help but no-one has offered. I could do with help with tea, or with crafts.*

*There used to be news sheets but not any more. It's an inward looking church. ... The vicar never visits, except for perhaps at Easter. It would be good to have visitor from church!*

## 8.4 Quantitative findings

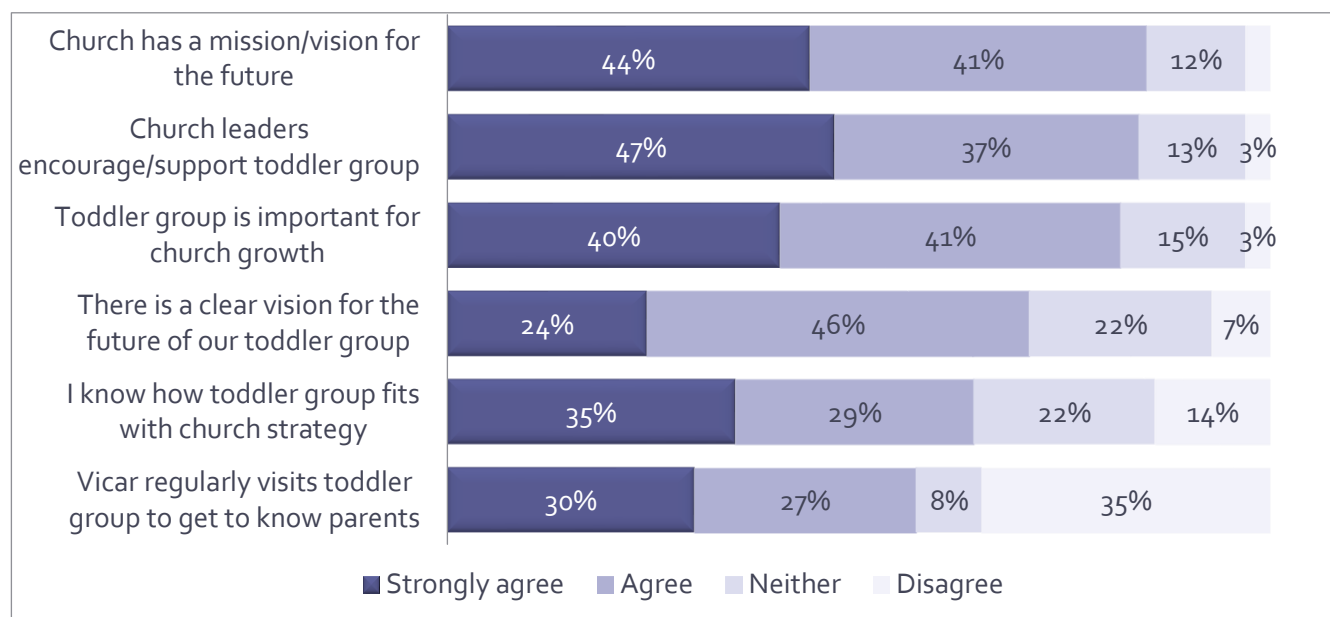
Q To what extent does each of the following apply to the wider church community? [Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]

The church community ...



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following? [Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

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## 8.5 Recommendations: Links with church strategy and community

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Toddler groups should be valued and nurtured as a strategically important part of the church:

- Make sure church leaders (and toddler group leaders) are aware of the missional opportunities of toddler groups
- Ensure that these missional opportunities and implications are understood in the local context and align with overall church strategy
- Involve toddler group leaders in both creating a vision of the future with clear aims, and in developing an intentional strategy for achieving those aims
- Have regular planning and reviews of progress involving both toddler group leaders and church leaders

Build awareness and engagement between toddler group and the rest of the church community:

- Regularly communicate news, activities and events about the toddler group to the church
  - Regularly communicate news, activities and events about the church to the toddler group
  - Offer invitations to each group to engage with the other
  - Make sure the church regularly prays for the toddler group
-



## 9 Support needed

Objective: Recommending ways in which Dioceses could better support church-based Toddler Groups.

Churches need to understand the mission potential of Toddler Groups. They need to be inspired, supported and encouraged to work out what this means in their parishes and to develop a strategy for realising the mission potential. Dioceses could help by:

- providing education and training
- building confidence
- offering practical support and advice
- facilitating networking to share thoughts and ideas
- giving ongoing encouragement

In the research, many toddler group leaders said they would appreciate toddler appropriate ideas and recommended resources for making their groups more distinctively Christian. In particular:

- Books
- Bible links or references
- Songs
- Printable story resources
- Toys
- Ideas for seasonal activities

Some toddler group leaders were also keen to share their ideas with others and suggested using forum or Facebook group. The Church Support Hub would be ideal, if this could be expanded to include toddler groups.

*It would be good to have a place to look for ideas, and have access to resources*

*Occasionally I think it would be interesting to have a network of these type of groups, particularly thinking of people who want to take a step into having a more Christian approach. We would be more than happy to work with them. We have had people come and see us, and see that this is not scary, this is not weird. It's actually quite normal.*

*Church Support Hub, could it be used for toddler groups? That would be brilliant, a bit like mumsnet. It would be good to have somebody to help with more ideas and resources. I know I can ring our person at the diocese but it's not always practical, I haven't always got the time. I like the idea of using Church Support Hub – I usually use Internet to look for ideas, it's more practical. You can take an idea and turn it into something else. Need to get ideas and inspiration.*



*Most of my craft ideas come from Pinterest. I look at what they've done and adapt it. It's really good to see the pictures.*

*We have a lot of what we need but it would be good to have funds to replace the toys, or for more craft materials such as paper and card. It would also be good to have a place to share ideas. We do sometimes struggle with sourcing songs that are good for toddlers, a lot of the worship CDs are quite American.*

*... a forum or email list where we can share what we are doing and hear what other people are doing. It's really good to share ideas. We are starting to work on that in this diocese.*

To improve local networking, some also suggested that it would be useful to know of good groups to visit or offered their own groups for other leaders to visit.

Not all toddler group leaders were aware of who to contact in the diocese and of what current support there was. Clearly, this could be rectified through simple communications. Some leaders suggested that it would be good to have a visit from the diocese to aid communications.

*I'm unaware of what support is available from diocese. It would be good to know who to contact.*

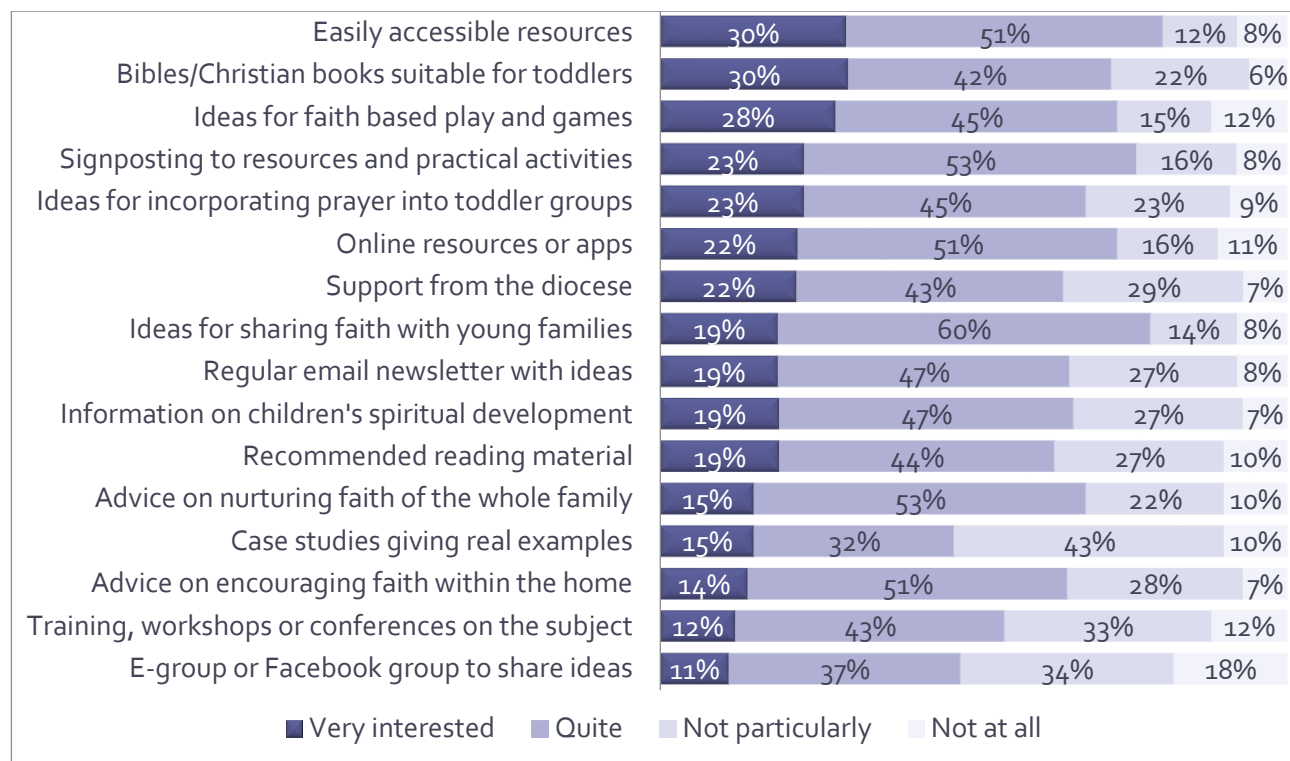
*The CofE is very good with youth etc but not with toddlers*

*It would be good to have support the from diocese, or even a visit*

Some toddler group leaders felt that they could not do more to become more distinctively Christian as they did not have enough people or time. For these groups it would be good if the diocese could recommend ways of making progress without it taking much, if any, extra effort. For example:

- Suggesting music that could be played
- Suggesting songs to sing, with recommended CDs/downloads if needed
- Giving ideas for saying grace before refreshments
- Producing activity packs (physical or virtual) for use in toddler groups, with suggested stories and activities around particular themes. This would be particularly good for seasonal actives
- Providing downloadable resources, e.g. templates for welcome packs, or craft activities
- Suggesting Christian themed toys, games or books
- Providing links to online resources and ideas such as 1277, Godventure, Scripture Union, Care for the Family

Q. Thinking about what might help your toddler group become more distinctively Christian, how interested would you be in each of the following? [Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]



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## 9.1 Recommendations: Support needed

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Toddler group leaders need to be well supported if toddler groups are to progress towards meeting their mission potential. They would benefit from being supported by a range of people, including:

- A team of toddler group helpers
- Clergy and other church leaders
- The wider church community
- People with relevant experience (e.g. leading toddler groups, early years teaching, health visiting)
- Diocese and national Church of England

They need supporting in these ways.

Pastorally:

- Being valued and encouraged, knowing that what they do is an important for the future of the church
- Having their confidence built
- Having their faith nurtured and strengthened
- Knowing that people are praying for them and their toddler group

Practically:

- Being adequately resourced
- Having enough helpers for the group to operate effectively
- Having easy access to a wide range of ideas and further resources
- Being networked with other people to provide ideas and support

Training and educating:

- Being trained in leadership and management
  - Learning about how to be a distinctively Christian toddler group in their local context
  - Being taught how best to discern and use their own talents for the toddler group, and how to identify, harness and nurture the talents of others
  - Learning about faith development in toddlers and how faith can be nurtured
  - Learning how faith can be nurtured in other people
-

## 10 Advice for toddler group leaders

Where appropriate, toddler group leaders were asked what advice they would give to other leaders on how to make their groups more distinctively Christian. The advice included:

1. Pray
2. Trust in God
3. Don't be afraid, church toddler groups can be Christian
4. Be toddler friendly and appropriate
5. Make it clear from the start that it is a Christian group
6. Help people along their faith journey, be sensitive to where people are
7. Make sure toddler group leaders and helpers are nurtured
8. Use the support of other groups within the church e.g. Mother's Union

*Entrust the work to the Lord. Don't feel you are doing it alone. ...Don't take ownership of it. Don't think 'I can't do this, I don't have the skills'*

*People aren't as put off as you'd think they might be. Ramping up the Christian content has had no impact on attendance, or our waiting list!*

*Just do it!*

*The more we've prayed together, the better it has been. We pray before, during and after each session.*

*Aim Christian content at children, and get messages to the adults through that.*

*You need strong Christian leadership for the toddler group, and not to be worried about people getting offended as people don't get offended ... If you are scared of putting people off I'd say that you are more than twice as likely to hook people in by doing God stuff as put them off. They become committed members of your group through the God stuff because that's what makes it unique, that's what makes it special. It's something people really are looking for and non-church toddler groups just can't do it. They can tell stories about winnie the pooh but that becomes boring and repetitive. The bible is HUGE.*

*If your faith is a normal part of your life then it's a short step to making it a normal part of anything you do. If faith is important to you why wouldn't you share it, but without scaring people off? If you do it in the right way they will still come back because they'll miss you, it's about friendships. Get PCC buy in, change them. Make it a thing that's really important.*

*Taste and see that the Lord is good - let your community taste that. Jesus said he came to bring life to the full, so let's have fun and show people that. Jesus is just so much fun. Have fun, be*

*brave with loving God and loving your community. ...Jesus says that in his presence there is fullness and joy. If we are madly in love with Jesus and let Jesus love us, that is only going to attract people. Not in an attractional way when they consume and then go away but attractional in that our souls were designed for that. Let's show them where the well is. Some people will not like that, and that's fine. We are called to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and strength, and to love others. So let's love God and be blatant that it is our love for God that is making us love others. God will do the rest.*

*Don't be frightened, try things out. If the response is not positive then just tone it down a bit but keep going. Introduce things gently. Remember that members of the group will keep changing, so re-introduce things. Make it clear that Christian parts are optional, but most will join in with it, I think because they had the choice to opt out. Introduce bits at a time; we've built up our Christian elements over time. Listen to what parents and grandparents are saying, work with any ideas they suggest. ... We have the relationship quite good now so they are happy to suggest things or way if they want things changing a little – it's their group too. They have a say in it, feel appreciated and valued. ... Just do something, don't be frightened to mention Jesus. Do things that are interactive. Action songs. Kids don't have a problem, it's the parents.*

## 11 Other issues

### 11.1 Baptism

Most toddler group leaders were responsive rather than proactive regarding baptisms. However, it was clear that many parents were asking for the children to be baptised.

*We have many marriages and baptisms from the group*

*Baptism – generally, they mention it first rather than us promoting it. Have had 3 from the group so far.*

*We promote baptism but only have one or two baptised. We enacted a baptism once which was well received.*

*A lot of people ask for baptism ... one family who are becoming a core member of the church (at least the Friday church) we did full immersion for the first time at the church. We thought the children were just about old enough to understand what was going on.*

*We get loads of baptisms for this. We do encourage all those who are getting baptised to come along to this group, and we describe it as one of our congregations. This is very much a congregation. When there is a baptism, usually part of the Sunday service, we introduce them as*

*people from our tots congregation – as they won't know each other. ... we have so many baptisms form here we regularly see them on a Sunday morning, and that is a great joy to the church.*

A few did not actively encourage baptism due to their theology.

*Baptism – It's not something we encourage, but if people ask for baptism then we point them towards the toddler group as a community to join. It's not native to the churchmanship of our evangelical church, the theology of infant baptism is not something we actively engage with.*

*We focus on believers baptism here but will respond if asked for infant/child baptism*

There was some evidence in the research of people getting more involved with the toddler group having had their child baptised, or having been part of a baptism team:

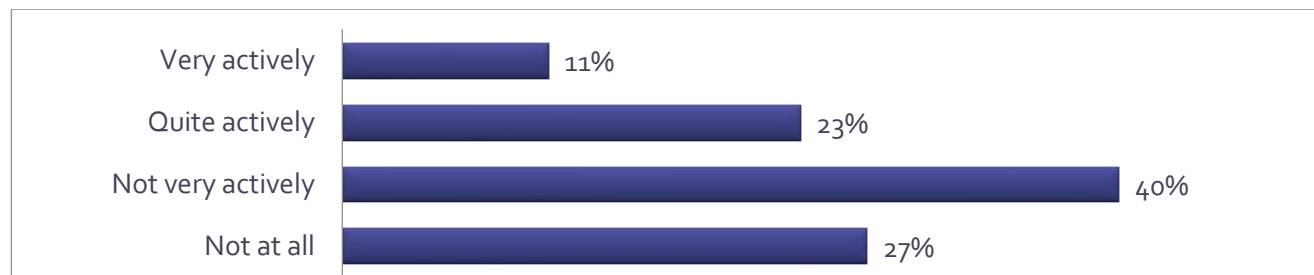
*The christening was here and the vicar recommended coming to this group. I like everything about it and feel very comfortable here. I love the stories and songs with my child – the Christian part is really good. I would recommend it to friends.*

*We have a very structured baptism team here. The baptism team often then get involved in the toddler group, it tends to be that way round. They feel a compulsion to come along here to be with those families who have had a baptism.*

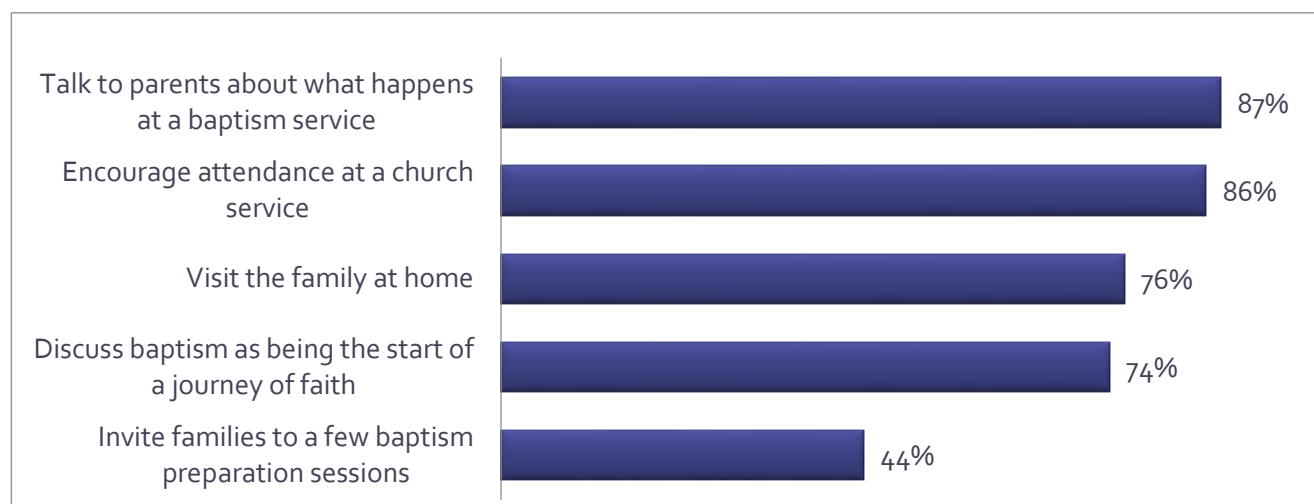


*We have done marriages and baptisms as joint services and Godparents/parents baptised with children. We have a baptism quilt with photos of all those baptised recently – we have 45-50 each year.*

Q How actively do you encourage young families to have their children baptized? [Clergy have been excluded from this analysis]

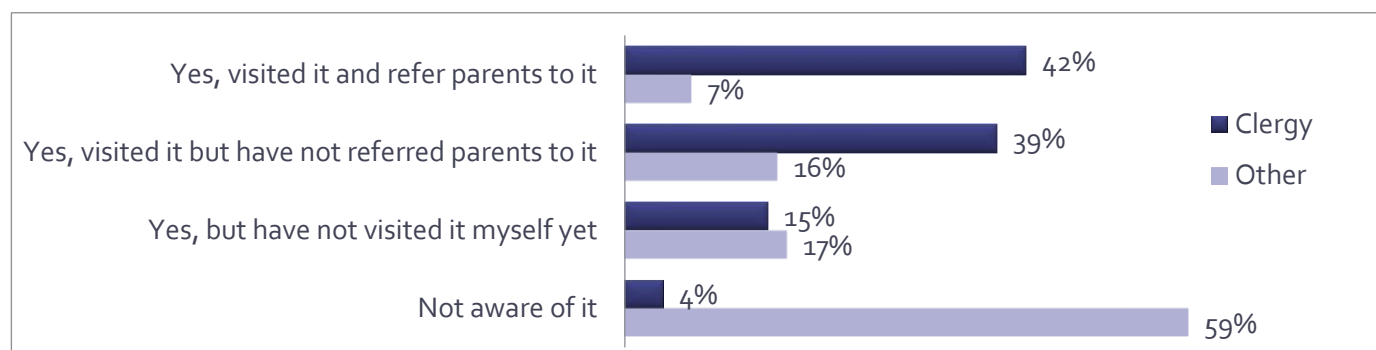


Q Does your church do any of the following to help prepare families for baptism?



Any other comments made on this survey question can be found in Appendix 2.

Q. Are you aware of the Church of England Christenings website? [Clergy and Welsh toddler groups have been excluded from this analysis]





The findings were very different for clergy, where 96% were aware of the CofE Christenings website, and 42% had already referred parents to it (sample of just 26). This may simply reflect responsibilities within the church, with clergy being primarily responsible for baptisms and communications with baptism families.

There was limited awareness of the new CofE Christenings and Church Support Hub resources with toddler group leaders visited. However, this comment from the quantitative survey with toddler group leaders is encouraging:

*As Toddler Coordinator I am taking on a more active role with baptisms since I attended the Baptism Matters evening. I try to attend each baptism to make a connection with the families and we hold an annual Baptism Picnic to invite families back and introduce them to the community and Toddler Praise.*

A few had recently become aware but there had been little active engagement by the time of the research.

*I have seen the CofE project work, been on the funeral day and have been using ideas from it. It's Brilliant. I've used Church Support Hub. Haven't had enough baptisms to really start using the materials for that yet though.*

One of the toddler groups visited was displaying and using the 'Start an Amazing Journey' leaflet.



One of the Welsh toddler groups visited was aware of the CofE project work on baptism, weddings and funerals. They were very impressed with it and specifically mentioned the recent Godparent initiative.

Some churches were confident in their baptism ministry and felt less need to engage with the CofE resources:

*CofE baptism – we have looked at it, but we do our own. We have a very structured baptism team here. The baptism team often then get involved here, it tends to be that way round. They feel a compulsion to come along here to be with those families who have had a baptism.*

## 11.2 Special needs

The quantitative research showed that 25% had toddlers in their groups with special needs. Groups more likely to have special needs toddlers were in urban/suburban more deprived areas. The most common special needs was autism, followed by cerebral palsy and Downs Syndrome.

More details on special needs can be found in the comments in Appendix 2.

## 11.3 Childminders

There are a number of issues relating to childminders worth noting in this report. There was evidence of discrimination against childminders due to these perceived factors, although the research could not confirm whether any of these were actually true:

- They are being paid to look after toddlers and are exploiting free/inexpensive church groups to make their lives easier
- They attend largely to socialise with other childminders and are less interested in spending time with toddlers in their care
- In some areas they can 'take over' the group leaving no room for parents who wish to attend

*... childminders who wanted to just come and dump the children and chat amongst themselves, whereas they have to interact more here. It's more hands on here, they have to get involved.*

*... The old vicar's wife said that childminders couldn't come. Once the vicar changed I asked if we could come back again. There is a lot of discrimination in this area against childminders. The library won't allow childminders to storytime either.*

*The thing I like about this one is that we feel like we belong, it's our toddler group, it has a community feel to it. Some groups are not welcoming of childminders. It's not the organisers that are the problem usually, but the other mums. We have lots of children so we can take over. The vicar here said that local children are welcome whenever – he aimed this at the mums who were not happy [there are now not many mums at the group].*

Childminders are part time, paid carers for children, rather than being family. The main implications are these:

- It is clearly more difficult to build relationships with the family, invite them along to church services or activities, or open a dialogue on issues such as baptism or faith
- Some families may be unhappy or apprehensive about faith content at toddler groups. There are more limited opportunities to allay those fears, and the faith content may cause issues for childminders:

*I looked after one child and the parents said 'I don't want my child singing that God song', but they were a difficult family ... It's rare to have anyone object, and you don't have to join in.*

In one case the child had been read Bible story and then had related colouring in. The childminders was not sure about taking things home with a faith theme in case the parents did not like it. In this instance the childminder asked the child for the colouring (for the childminder's house) and helped the child create something else to take home. The church clearly needs to be sensitive to issues such as these.

More positively, professional childminders often attend toddler groups for many years as they look after successive toddlers. This provides a greater opportunity to build relationships with the church. Childminders also often have particular talents to help them look after toddlers and may agree to use these in the toddler group. In one of the groups visited a childminder often lead the action songs.

Childminders often attend more than one church toddler group, and even messy church, so can be a useful source of information on issues such as Christian distinctiveness and what they find engages children best.

#### 11.4 Toddler group leaders

All toddler group leaders were dedicated, hardworking people, often with relevant experience e.g. ex-teachers, special needs experts, health visitors etc. The age varied considerably, from young mums to those in their 80s. It was the case that the older leaders were less likely to be web competent, which has implications for future communications – both from the diocese to toddler group leaders, between toddler group and church leaders and communication from leaders to the users of toddler groups.

Some toddler groups were led by just one or two whilst others had large teams with up to around 20 people, although not all would be present every week. Those with larger teams could have people allocated to different roles according to their talent and experience: leading, helping with refreshments, welcoming, storytelling, leading songs, administrating, setting up and packing away. Those with larger teams would be better placed to develop their toddler groups – there was evidence that those with larger teams were already engaged in strategy and future planning. If there is a shortage of leaders/helpers mums will help (e.g. in kitchen or with admin.)

*We have 7 or so formal helpers, all at different levels. Plus the leader, vicar and curate. And we have mums who have been coming for some time who are taking over more of leadership type roles. You see them leaping up and doing things. I don't remember the last time we had to stand up and say we need more help. People know it's a thing they might do and that it's important for the church.*

*Our team is very gelled, we work very well together, we all know what to do and what needs doing. We all support each other.*

It was the case that the more dynamic groups were making good use of the gifts and talents of those leading or helping with the group. It may help with recruitment of helpers to look for specific talents, such as storytelling, leading songs or being creative.

## 11.5 Expectations of church toddler groups

People generally have higher expectations of church toddler groups. This is because they know that the people running the group are usually volunteers and not motivated by finance. They also expect church run toddler groups to be better organised, more structured and more hospitable.

*At least you know it's being run properly [as it is being run by the church]*

*It's important to me that it's a church run group – church groups are better run. It's great here.*

*Because it's a church group I think it's much better, because it's organised. You can tell people love running it, it's not just a chore to them*

*It's a good thing that it's a church run group as they have good values.*

*Church run groups are much better ... there is a bit more respect here for parents and tots. There will be no swearing here, for example*

*A church run group would be more friendly and welcoming ... if you are having a hard time for whatever reason then the church may help you*

*That fact that it's a church run group adds warmth to it*

*Churches are very good at craft activities, and they tend to educate children at every age. There's a lot of pressure on children/parents these days and the churches can help*

*The leader is very good and well known in the community as being charitable, helpful and will help you to look after your children. It's a loving environment and I get to meet other people from the village.*

*The leaders are here because they want to be here, to support.*

*People have put time and effort into this group, and there are often matching activities*

*It's well organized, there's a good routine and the children know what is coming and what is expected of them*

As expectations of church groups tend to be higher, there is more opportunity for people to be disappointed if these expectations are not met:

*This group could do with more structure, more educational toys etc. It's a bit sad, a bit tired. It needs more resources. It's not an attractive room. It doesn't attract mums (or dads), just a few childminders.*

## 12 Appendix 1 – Research method and sample

### 12.1 Method

The research involved four stages:

1. Telephone conversations with 5 Diocesan Advisers
2. Online survey of Toddler Group Leaders (115 responses analysed)
3. Face to face qualitative interviews with toddler group leaders and users at 23 toddler groups
4. Online survey of Diocesan Advisers (16 responses)

All the research except the survey of Diocesan Advisers took place in these five dioceses:

- West Yorkshire and the Dales
- Blackburn
- Chelmsford
- Truro
- Monmouth

#### 12.1.1 Telephone conversations with Diocesan Advisers

Qualitative telephone conversations with diocesan advisers took place in May 2016. These conversations were to gain background information for the project, including their views on the main issues, as well as gain lists of toddler groups for the survey and recommendations for toddler groups to visit.

#### 12.1.2 Survey of toddler groups

Diocesan Advisers from the five target dioceses supplied contact details for toddler groups they were aware of. 209 invitations to take part in the online quantitative survey were sent on 31st May 2016. Although 148 people responded, a total of 120 were analysed, after excluding those who were not eligible for the survey or who did not complete the survey.

48% were toddler group leaders, 24% vicars/church leaders and 6% youth or children's workers. 47% had been active in their current role for over 10 years and 39% for less than 5 years. 78% were unpaid. 56% were aged 55 or more. Older respondents tended to be found in Anglo-Catholic churches in more rural areas with smaller toddler groups. Young respondents tended to be found in Charismatic/Evangelical churches in urban/suburban, more deprived areas with larger toddler groups.

The quantitative research showed a typical toddler group to be:

- Run once a week (75%)
- Term time only (78%)
- Mainly mums with some dads, grandparents, other relatives, childminders and other carers.

On average there were 19 toddlers in each group and 16 parents/carers. 46% felt that their group was growing and 47% staying about the same. Those more likely to claim their group was growing were larger groups in urban/suburban, more affluent areas.

Here is more detail on the quantitative sample.

- Churchmanship - 35% traditional, 33% evangelical, 22% broad, 20% Anglo-Catholic, 17% low, 14% charismatic, 8% fresh expression, 4% liberal
- Geography - 47% village or small market town, 28% city or town suburbs, 13% city or town centre
- Local area – 28% quite/very well off, 52% about average, 20% quite/very deprived
- Local ethnicity – 85% mainly white, 14% mixed
- Family focus of church – 18% family focused, 72% family friendly, 11% not particularly family friendly
- Families in regular contact with through toddler group – 13% less than 5, 55% between 5 and 20, 32% more than 20

### 12.1.3 Face to face qualitative interviews

Face to face qualitative interviews were conducted with toddler group leaders and users at 23 toddler groups. The visits started on 6th June in Essex and ended on 15th September in Cornwall.

Although the interviews were based on discussion guides, the nature of the interviews varied depending on a number of factors:

- The size of the group – with smaller groups it was sometimes possible to talk to every user, but only a sample of users at the larger groups
- The structure and length of the group – the interviews with group users largely took place in the unstructured time which varied considerably
- The activities and Christian distinctiveness of the group – the interviews were necessarily adapted to take into account the local situation
- The faith background of group users varied considerably from committed churchgoers, to people of other faiths, de-churched, unchurched and atheists - the interviewers had to be adapted to take this into account
- The availability and experience of group leaders and clergy.

Most of the interviews with group users were one-to-one, but occasionally included pairs or a small group. Most of the interviews with group leaders and clergy were also one-to-one, but occasionally more and even included a lengthy group discussion with a large team.

Some of the interviews with toddler group leaders and clergy were recorded and transcribed. Comprehensive notes were taken for all other interviews. Whilst every effort was made to note people's words verbatim, it was not always possible to capture the precise words. Please bear this in mind when reading the quotes in this report.

#### 12.1.4 Qualitative sample

An effort was made to include as wide a range of churches and toddler groups as possible:

- From small groups with just 5 toddlers to very large groups with over 50 toddlers
- Anglo-Catholic to Evangelical
- Rural to inner city
- Very deprived (bottom 1%) to fairly well off
- New estates with plenty of young families to areas with very few young families
- Modern, well equipped halls to traditional old church spaces
- Groups run by individuals to groups run by teams
- Groups run by young mums to groups run by elderly people
- Totally unstructured groups to almost fully structured groups

Most, but not all, the toddler groups were doing at least something to be distinctively Christian as this was a focus for the research.

The interviews with toddler group users were mainly conducted with mums, but also included dads, grandparents and childminders.

#### 12.1.5 Online survey of Diocesan Advisers

Survey invites were sent to diocesan advisers nationally on 20th July 2016 by Mary Hawes. The questionnaire included a wide range of open-ended questions. 16 responses were received and these responses have been considered qualitatively.

## 13 Appendix 2 – Listing of open-ended comments

### 13.1 Open-ended comments from the toddler group leader survey

What special needs do they have, and what provision do you make for them?.
Autism. We provide a quiet area for their use.
Slow development (prem baby). He still attends the bumps 'n' babies rather than moving onto the carers & toddlers even though he's 2 1/2.
We have a child aged 2 years old who displays autistic traits - he comes with a child minder who is very vigilant in caring for him, and so we do not have to make special provision for him. Our hall is very large, and there is plenty of room for him to find his own space, and feel happy in it. Also, our hall is completely on the flat, and is accessible for anyone with physical difficulties.
Diabetes parent or grandparent deal with the child One child has a special tube inserted for feeding which was visible but as she has had surgery to help with this problem which she had from birth
possible autism. allow him to express himself as he needs to, helping himself to the crayons and tubs to put them into. supporting parents and offering advice.
We currently have one child with a food allergy. We ensure that we give advanced notice to the parents via the childminder of any projects involving food so that the parents can make arrangements to access and provide suitable food products in good time. The childminder is also responsible for giving the child food at refreshment time. All the team of helpers are advised of the situation.
Additional needs is all I will say which we address by close attentive knowledge and understanding of the children through relationship with them and their parents who all appreciate our inclusive approach.
autism. We don't make any special provision but just allow her to be herself. She is a very happy child.
Usually pre diagnosis. We offer support and advice to parents and a listening ear. We provide a friendly welcoming group for anyone whatever back ground.
Mobility, speech and language, fine motor skills - good communication with parents, no extra provision required.
Downs Syndrome, he does not need any special provision at this age.
Autism Shorter activities and favourite toys available.
Cerebral palsy - we try to keep clear pathways amongst the toys and activities to enable him to get around safely
1 child with Downs Syndrome. No special provision required - they join in with the other children with a little more support from mum or gran.
One child who attends is partially deaf. She is always brought to the front during the signing sessions and we demonstrate crafts to her individually.
Unknown condition, toddler can't walk or talk + has limited sight. We provide tactile toys suitable for child, lots of floor space safe for her to roll + music time.
Whilst at present, we have none attending with special needs, we have had babies and children with cerebral palsy or who are severely autistic. They have required no special provision.
We have one young girl who suffers from Aspergers Syndrome, and she does get extra special care and attention from one of the helpers.
Autistic Spectrum Disorder - appropriate surfaces and graphics provided, one to one dedicated companion available if required
We have had children with cerebral palsy, and several 'so-called' hyperactive children and make any special provisions as necessary, and they are always under the supervision of their accompanying adult.



We have two children with complex needs, one uses a wheel chair when she attends the other is able to walk. Both children have delayed cognitive functioning.
Learning needs - more support/one-to-one work
Developmental delay and type 1 diabetes. We don't make any specific provision for them but are aware of their needs, especially making sure they don't eat anything they are not supposed to.
Behavioural - support parent by ensuring they feel welcomed and know they will never be asked to leave etc. Offer distractions and alternative activities for child. Food intolerance - ask parent before giving to child.
Autism. Very little additional provision needed, if feeling overwhelmed there is a quiet space they can sit with parents.
Boy severely disabled at birth, little movement, no sight. he has only been once to date and was in his baby-carrier for the session. We took the lead from his Auntie who brought him, in touching and speaking to him.
We make provision as required.
Child is very young so mother provides specialist feeding.
Learning disabilities- No special provision because we encourage inclusivity. But the individuality of every child is recognised.
Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Deaf
Downs, no additional provision required
Autism
<b>Use this space if you want to say more about your role</b>
I'm helped by eight helpers on a rota.
lay reader
I am also a licensed Reader, leading services and preaching. I am a licensed Pastoral Assistant and a Sunday School teacher.
I work as a volunteer running both a baby song and toddler song class. I am also involved in running Messy Church with others, planning and leading All Age Service and leading assemblies in our two local primary school. I was an early years teacher in a local primary school for many years. My roles within our church are voluntary Not paid work.
I am one of the Lay Readers at my Church. This gives me Licence to preach and lead Services, run various groups and have some level of authority under the Vicars leadership.
I run the toddler group, but also am a leader with the After School Christian Club for children from 4 - 11 years.
I prefer to be a co-ordinator, We are a team of 5 people with a structured programme each week.
Vicar's wife
I am the full time Associate Minister - and one of my roles is having responsibility for children and families.
I attended the group when my children were little and helped out. When the organizer at the time left, I took over shortly after my youngest was born 22yrs ago. I have the NNEB qualification. I have another volunteer who helps me each week.
We run 3 sessions I am the overall coordinator but only run one of the sessions. I am also involved with messy church children's outreach days and our youth group.
I am a retired Reader with PTO.
An interested member of the congregation; a retired teacher, keen to develop work with families in the church community
I am a qualified teacher who has not worked full time for over 10 years. I originally set up the group in conjunction with the vicar and have been running it ever since.
Curate
Two retired infant teachers organise the group with the help of two members of the congregation.

I am the wife of the children youth and community worker.
I am under 18's coordinator and run Sunday morning children's work and an evening youth group, as well as Toddler group
The growth question needs to be aware of the new nursery access impact - it has stayed the same since but not recovered from the loss of the 3 and 4 year olds.
I am new to this role, having taken over from my predecessor at the beginning of the Summer term. Previously, I was a primary school teacher.
Vicar's wife!
I am the Heritage Learning Officer and am employed by the Cathedral but funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of our renovation project. My role is to promote learning and the Cathedral's heritage to all age groups.
I started this group to encourage the community to come together. I plan and coordinate this weekly diverse and multi-cultural group . Every week we do different fun activities for both adults and children, which consists of simple arts and crafts, parachute games ,songs rhyme and story time .
Also a Reader
Curate's wife
I am also a PA and a Sunday School Teacher
Ex-Deputy headteacher always been involved with Church organisations Deputy Church organist.
Retired Churchwarden
I am both the leader of one of the two toddler groups at our church, and the pre-school Sunday school teacher. I am also the chair of governors at the linked primary school
We are church members who volunteer.
Although I am thought of as Leader we have a strong team of committed women.
Although I am the main contact, there are others involved.
I share this role with a member of our local Methodist Church .
Non-Stipendiary Curate
Our group is not a straightforward 'Toddler Group' but is 'Sunday School on a Thursday Morning for the Under Fives and their Grown - Ups'. We are offering a very simple church service for the children and their accompanying adult, who has to remain with the child/children they bring. The children are, therefore, not under our supervision and we simply offer the Bible story, the prayers, the songs and simple activity together with the opportunity for play and fellowship after the service.
I also co-ordinate the baptism team. assist with Children`s Activity group and lead the Education team.
I have been leading the toddler group for over twenty years and have seen quite a few changes but the numbers attending stay about the same. Recently we have had two or three parents/carees saying they (and the children) love to come to the group and that it is 'one of the best in the area'. There is a great group of people of various ages who come on a rota to help. I couldn't do it without them. We have had a smallish number of children come for baptism following (or during) their time attending the toddler group. We are not overtly Christian but the adults who bring the youngsters know all the helpers are Christian and they are aware that they can ask for prayer if needed. We always finish by singing 'Jesus' love is very wonderful'.
I oversee the group leaders, the leaders themselves lead the group
I chair our Children's Committee (which is responsible for organizing activities for children) and am responsible for our tots corner (which is used both on a Sunday and other occasions) and Play and Praise Sessions (once a month activity) and I try to keep the needs of Young families on the Church agenda.
I am just about to embark on further studies, Ministry Training within pastoral work or possibly reader. So at some in the very near time future I will be part of the leadership team.

I lead the team who runs the toddler group on a voluntary basis, but I am also paid by the church to a different, unrelated job.
Co-leading the group is one of my roles as a Licensed Reader. Currently my co-leader is the Curate but, prior to that, we had a (short-contract) paid Children and Young Families' Worker and I led less frequently, mainly mentoring.
My role is unofficial. I am the vicars wife and feel called to this ministry
I also coordinate Messy Church and other ad hoc children's work in our church.
I am the Under Fives leader. I run 5 toddler groups and a 25 place day nursery
The group is parent led, I just happen to coordinate the group and provide a link to the church
Two of us share responsibility for the group. I also organise music in our church and the other leader is also a Sunday School teacher.
I work with another Church member regularly - (I was a Early Years Teacher she a Nursery Nurse and our roles complement one another) - we have a rota of Mothers' Union Members who come in turn as an extra pair of hands (We meet once a month)
I took over the role of leader from the incumbent during the interregnum and the new incumbent did not take it back. That was 16 years ago. I lead worship each week and tell the story most weeks. Clergy tell the story once a month. I also do all the administration/ paperwork. A rota of parents/carers helps with setting up and clearing away and members of Sunday congregation serve refreshments.
I used to teach Sunday school but it closed several years ago due to falling numbers of children. Due to re-open in September.
Reader
I am the Rector. My wife runs the children's work and we work together
<b>Is there anything else that you feel identifies your toddler group as Christian?</b>
Used to invite parents to other things in the church & makes a connecting point for baptism.
The love that we share and encourage
always a prayer and thank you song
The vicar visits at harvest, Christmas and Easter and does songs and a story.
Our Toddler Group has been running for 40 years - always by Christians from the church community. We advertise the fact that it is a church group run by Christians and, each week advertise any children's work running at the church that week, e.g. Messy Church, Who let the Dads out, Christingle, Mothering Sunday.
I always include two songs that talk about Jesus God's love for us. We offer regular prayer for anyone in particular e.g. breast cancer, I Discuss Messy Church planned events which some have attended on a regular basis( we have Messy Church about five times per year. We use the actual church at Christmas Easter and Harvest.
Most of our children are under 3 and we have only recently started doing bible story time and prayers but this is something we hope to grow more.
Presence of active Christians forming relationships with unchurched families
All the helpers are committed church members and try to show God's love as they chat to, help and serve the families involved.
We advertise events going on in the wider church programme such as Christianity Explored, Guest Services, Special Events. At Christmas, and when children leave to go to pre-school/school, we give Christian books as presents.
Giving birthday cards with a verse from the bible in them.
We have a See and know slot every week.
The team of helpers are Christian and are regular communicants at Church. As a group we all go into church to sing and share family prayers. A retired priest currently provides guitar accompaniment for our songs in church. We present the story of the Nativity during December to which family, friends and members of the church congregation are invited.

Donations at this service are given to the local Children's' Hospice. Our time in church is listed as a service on the weekly pew sheet.
I believe Christianity is sometimes better caught than taught. I don't want anyone to feel need to Christian before they can attend. Our Priest tries to come up and visit us each week and mothers will often ask her to baptise their child or children. We have our own special Mothering Sunday and Crib service in the church, which she and I take together. The children are offered a gluing activity each week; my template is pinned to a board. I usually follow a theme I put something simple above which points to God.. I just try to make newcomers welcome, and be there for them in any way I can. One of the girls recently told me there was something special and different about our group, and I hope that is love.
It is held in the church
My toddler group serves as an outreach to our local community. It is used as a means to bring people into the church, become acquainted with the environment and meet people within the church. It is non-Christian activity though faith naturally reveals itself.
It is held in church! The monthly Family Service is advertised/discussed.
We hold a monthly Pram Service for toddlers and their carers and we hold a Teddy Praise Party 3-4 times a year to bring together families who have had their toddlers/preschool during christened at the church
We have a 20/25 minute toddler friendly service each time we meet
invitations to church family activities like Holiday Club or Toddler Praise, links on our Facebook group to church posts
I would describe the group as a play and praise group as we always have a short (15 mins) session where we worship and pray. Most weeks we have a Christian story or activity linked to the church calendar.
For those who attend, it is considered as 'church'
Most of the toddler group happens in the church hall. For 'See & Know' (bible story/activity and songs), we go into the church and sit in the Chancel area. We say a prayer during See & Know and look at a page in the children's bible. We sing a 'Grace' before snacktime.
Leaders willing to talk about their faith with anyone who is interested We invite everyone to our regular church evangelistic events and put on evangelistic events specifically for toddler group parents We regularly offer Christianity explored for toddler parents.
In our book corner we have a selection of bible stories suitable for toddlers. Our helpers are all members of the church and the vicar always visits and chats to the children and adults. We have services in the church at Christmas and Easter. families are invited to other special events going on throughout the year, such as Open the Book performances, Godparent Sunday etc. as well as being made aware of our regular services.
Grace is always said before mid-morning snack. Many of the above are done at a separate Toddler Church which takes place once a month on a different day.
Two thirds of helpers are regular members of the Christian Church that hosts the group.
It takes place in the Parish Hall and we begin with a child friendly hymn, Christian choruses, stories from the Bible and prayers. We have 2 sessions (Easter and Harvest) in the church building plus a Nativity Play in the church.
The toddler group is held in the church hall and the people who help all have a Christian faith and aim to show God's love to all those that attend. We give a Christian book when it is a child's birthday and when they leave.
The families are invited to attend special services and many of the families attend Messy Church
We always promote family activities which are happening in the church through the year such as Christingle, family services, the church bonfire, Christmas and Easter services, celebrations for the jubilee and queens birthday and family trips etc. We try to link in with the CofE primary school on some activities where possible to create familiarity between the toddlers and the school where a lot of them will then go.
It is a pre school service as well as being a toddler group. The first half hour is based around a theme including a prayer, songs and story that have a Christian theme.
The name of our group 'Pray & Play'

We hold services in place of the group at Christmas and Easter in church.
They are encouraged to attend - but only 3 times a year. Easter, Harvest and Christmas. Sadly, they are closing at the end of this term, which I'm very sad about, as I LOVE having them into church.
We encourage families to attend church Family service and families@4. We always have a Christmas service for Toddlers and vicar visits regularly
We are aiming to foster relationships with our Church Aided Primary School to develop faith and encourage young families to come to church. We include Baptism families to help them develop closer links with the Christian community.
Community
Team prayer before each session Prayer for anything brought to our attention during chats with Mums/ Carers Christian songs for little ones at festival times Environment which reflects the work and life of our church and other group activities
Takes place in Church as a service 'Toddler Praise'
As stated under Q10, we are offering a simple child based Christian service.
in the church itself. Involves carers into other church events. information about services etc. Rector visits when able. Visiting clergy for storytime on the rota.
Held in church! As before, the parents, carers are aware that they can ask for prayer if they wish.
all helpers have church/Christian connection. is prayed for and supported by the local church. uses the church building for Christmas service. gives Christian books as gifts to each child. church event details are always shared with mums/carers. if one of the children is to be baptised then one of the leaders tries to attend the service.
Our sessions are held in a church.
The two leaders are Christians and open about their faith. The vicar is a regular visitor and has made strong links between the families and the church. Families are invited to services and other church events. The group often takes part in church events that involve all groups such as making banners for an advent concert and an art festival the church was holding.
It happens in the Church Tots Corner and the helpers are all Church members - the Vicar is supportive as is 1 of our retired Priests ( a good story teller !)
We always recommend our toddler group to baptismal families and this has encouraged others to join. On the other side of the coin, we have encouraged those who attend the toddler group to bring their children for baptism.
The toddler group started in January 2016, we are as a team exploring how to incorporate Christina teaching for toddlers and their parents, this is currently being discussed and planning is in progress.
The people who are involved in running the group are Christian and we always look for opportunities to build relationship and friendship with people, offering to pray for them as appropriate. Many people know that the group is run by 'the church', but we are deliberately not a faith-based toddler group; we see the group as a place to make and establish friendships which might then lead on to invites to other events which have more of a faith focus.
It is in the church's social rooms and sometimes in the church building itself.
We run for one hour once per week and pack in a lot. We start with a singing and bible story time. Then the children play with safe toys and are encourage to do a bible story related craft (related to the story of the week). We always end with 'circle time' which is a reflective prayer session.
1 of our weekly groups is Christian the other 4 aren't
The love and hospitality shown by members of the church that help at the group - the group is a secular group that happens to meet in a church so is seen more as an outreach opportunity
We offer a Christian service suitable for pre-school children, all accompanied by a parent/carers who have to remain with their child/children. We follow a definite 'order of service' including Bible stories, prayer and songs of praise and finish our hour with refreshments, play and fellowship.
Close link with vicar
We have a toddler praise service once a month in church

We do Christian stories and crafts fortnightly and other stuff on the alternate weeks. Have a short service at the end of each term.
We meet in our Church in Tots Corner which I set up approx. 12 years ago for the use of young families during Sunday Eucharist and other Services when needed -( it has a carpet - chairs and table - Soft toys - Jigsaws - Dolls - Lots of Books - Crayons pictures and paper and we can display on the wall)
The session is split between the church and the church hall. We have a 25 minute service in church which is distinctively Christian followed by play time and refreshments in the hall. Christian values are modelled at play time by encouraging sharing, fairness, amicably resolving disputes, saying sorry, showing care and concern for both adults and children, making newcomers welcome. There is no shouting or swearing.
We meet in Church for a short act of worship (prayer, story, song) then go across to the hall for play and refreshments.
<b>Please write down any Christian resources, websites or activities you have found helpful for your toddler group</b>
Toddler bibles. Song 'Mr Cow' is a favourite.
The big bible scripture union
Scripture Union lightlive, sermon4kids
I went to some Salvation Army training with one of my helpers in Leeds and also took two helpers to observe a very successful toddler and baby song group at the Salvation Army in Sale, Cheshire. I purchased some CD's from Australia and New Zealand which are very different to other music I have.
Scripture Union Pinterest Care for the Family Activities: Group parachute
Bubble Prayers
The beginners bible
Christian Union Tiddlywinks series
We are using Scripture Union material which is very old (from 1989 - 96). we have tried newer material but not found these as good as the older ones.
Teddy Horsley Resources Otley Christian Resources Hub
We get crafts from a range of web-sites
The Big Picture Story Bible, The Beginners Bible Pinterest - for craft ideas Colin Buchanan Music
I also help at Messy Church so sometimes use activities we have discussed for that.
See and Know resources, Judith Wigley has given us a lot of advice and support and resources in the past when she was working for the Wakefield diocese.
Eden Christian website for Christian music cds for children. Big Blue Planet song book, Someone's Singing Lord, Merrily to Bethlehem, Carol Gaily Carol, Hymns Old and New.
I generally use my own ideas in the group, although when I occasionally help in Junior Church I see they use Scripture Union.
Pinterest
We visited other groups doing similar work before we started. We use No praise music for Kids? No problem! Kevin Mayhew CDs
Facebook, 127 Make them count,
Mainly home grown resources
This year, we have based our sessions loosely around the 'Play through the Bible' book
Most of our resources are home grown with the help of websites to support craft activities
See & Know - sessions for throughout the year on bible characters, themes, seasons, stories with suggestions for story/ activity, songs, prayers
Scripture union, Blackburn diocese, story telling with dolls/puppets

Roots general website material
Roots
The Baby Bible (Lion), Scripture Union resources, websites for Christian craft (eg Danielle's place)
The team has attended Diocesan events and workshops
Teaching Little ones, Learning about God - Matthias Media Wonderfully Made -Good Book Company
Roots Toddlerific book
Totzone Booklets. Children enjoy choruses with actions and sticking magnetic pictures on our picture board. Also we have a percussion band at the end of the service. They take a colouring picture home which is relevant to the story.
We have extremely experienced Christians who have run previous playgroups in church with a wealth of knowledge of ways to teach toddlers /families about Jesus.
Eden books
Messy Church
Teddy Horsley. Other Bible based stories for children.
Godly Play; using puppets to engage the toddlers with the Christian Faith; sermons4kids.com
The Lion Storyteller Bible On-line searches for craft activities
Wakefield (Diocese) Resource Centre Scripture Union 'Bubbles' Scheme
Church house at Wakefield for resources. Training days led by Diocese. Various Christian websites.
Nothing recently
roots plus other s
Lion first Bible - for bible stories in appropriate and fun language
Over the last few years the Bible Society has produced small seasonal booklets and we have given a booklet to each child at Easter and Christmas celebration sessions.
Tiddlywinks stories and pictures.
The Lion books and Mothers' Union Books and others from Cathedral book shops mostly - I occasionally look on web sites but non appeal to me much (either too American or not my Church preference)
'Tiddlywinks' big books.
Eden books, and generally looking on the internet.
Various craft activities are found or suggested by items seen on the internet eg on Pinterest.
I use a model that I got from another church, St Georges, Leeds, called Play and Pray. They run their group with play and crafts but also with a short bible story/singing time that they call See and Know. It uses simple songs, props and story telling to convey key messages like God loves you, he made you special, he has a plan for your life.
We base our story times on scripture unions tiddlywinks series of the big yellow, green, blue etc. books. Although we do adapt their ideas sometimes to suit the children in our group.
Scripture Union
Scripture Union 'Bubbles' programme Toddlers Bible stories.
Activity village Pinterest
We use the Jesus storybook Bible quite often
Cathedral book Shops you can use many ordinary things found in a variety of 'ordinary shops' including £1 shops
Pebbles Susan Sayers, Godly play for some of stories, Teddy Horsley books, My Very First Bible Stories, DK The Children's Illustrated Bible, Read and Share Devotional, Two Minute Bible Stories, Revised Common Lectionary, My First Find Out About Book series



We base many of our worship sessions on the Tiddlywinks books but I also draw on other people's knowledge and experience as well as my own. I have amassed a large collection of books etc over the years that I use.
Bible Stuff- spiritual teaching for under 5s , J Gaukroger, various booklets produced by Wakefield Diocese, The Big Red, The Big Green books, <a href="http://www.sundayschoolcrafts.com">www.sundayschoolcrafts.com</a> , <a href="http://www.misslink.org">www.misslink.org</a> , <a href="http://ABCjesuslovesme.com">ABCjesuslovesme.com</a>
<b>Please write down any other comments about prayer and your toddler group</b>
Every half-term we have an interactive Bible story and sometimes a prayer follows that. At the end of every session, we have the same action prayer to finish after we have sung a Christian song. The leaders share prayer before the session starts, and we always pray that God will give us the opportunity to come alongside someone who is hurting, and invariably He does!! Offering to pray for that person or situation develops from that. I am a Gideon and I quite often have the opportunity to give someone a New Testament and Psalms.
I always go into church and pray at the communion rail, asking for help, protection and safety when I get there. My helpers and I always pray , me leading, depending on whether people have arrived early, sometimes it is after the session.
One of the best ways I find to engage non practising parents/carers in prayer is through texting or writing prayers and placing on our prayer tree. Most parents/ grandparents have become more receptive to praying through this non-invasive way.
This is done in a fun way guided by our prayer book for children.
The families who come along are nearly all from non-church backgrounds - this affects some of the things we choose to do/not do (as seen above).
We always end our time in church with our Family Prayer.
In the services we have in church, to which most of the children come, I do all these things. If they come to Holy Communion or Junior Church they will also learn to pray. I want this group to be outreach for the church, so don't want to overwhelm those who may need Christ's love the most. I pray for the group and if I pray for the group and leave them in Christ's hands.
Prayer with toddlers is more action based.
Always pray with the children, no specific prayer for adults but will respond if a need arises
We would offer advice on prayer and pray for anyone there if these were requested.
Taking prayer requests is something we have been discussing recently, however this is sometimes difficult to implement due to the small number of volunteers we have running the session compared to the large number of children and adults attending
The Toddler group has a wide range of ages ie From a few weeks old to 3 or 4 years old. It's difficult to assess the needs of such a wide range of ages.
Children are predominately under 1 years of age. They go into nursery at 2-2yrs 6 months. Feedback from grandparents tell us that the children sing the songs back at home. The songs are Christian words to nursery rhymes.
we have a prayer tree which the group can write on the leaves a practical prayer and these are then taken to the service on Sundays we offer to pray for anyone who is ill and always pray to thank God for the food we eat at snack time
We are a mixed team of practising Christian, nominal Christian and other faith women. The committed Christians meet for prayer after each session. Prayer is offered to other individuals as and when the need arises and as the Holy Spirit directs.
It has to be short and appropriate for the occasion - we have a set beginning with prayer - lighting of candles - Bible story - Suitable Hymns then play with activity related to story or season - refreshments and time to chat (this is when you find out sometimes about things which the parents need support with )
This is something I want to incorporate more of but need to establish relationships before I do so.
We ask people to light a candle at times. They may ask for prayer which we would feel happy to offer.



As part of each session we have time (30+ minutes) in the churchyard - 'Forest Church' when we focus and celebrate creation.
It depends what you mean by prayer - we have a simple act of worship to start our session with 3 suitable hymns - story usually new testament - offer a each family a candle and they return it to the candle tray and say a name or other intention for prayer (we then light the candles safety important) we finish with the Grace in a circle - then platy chat and refreshment time.
We say the same prayers each week (thank you prayer for collection, an action prayer, the Lord's Prayer and the Grace) and sometimes add in an extra prayer relevant to the story or pray for a child/adult from the group that is about to go into hospital. The children are encouraged to do the actions for Lord of the Loving Heart, to say Amen at the end of each prayer and to hold hands during the Grace.
All who come at present are 2yrs or under...
<b>Please write in anything else that might encourage you with prayer</b>
I don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable. We pray as leaders before the session, and I am happy with that.
My problem is volunteers! I used to end each session with story time, song time and prayer in a separate room whilst volunteers helped tidy up the room. I am now unable to do this due to the lack of volunteers. As putting away all the tables, toys and equipment is a huge job, this requires the help of the parents but comes at a loss of this group time. Our youth help to set up after church the day before.
We always meet to pray before the session starts and of anyone wants to be prayed for we would willingly do that but otherwise we wouldn't.
I am quite happy using prayer within our group. I am encouraged that some parents have taken on board some of my suggestions.
As the group is Heritage Lottery Funded it can't be used to promote Christianity. It takes place in our classroom rather than in the Cathedral itself. If we moved into the Cathedral I would probably introduce a prayer at the start as that is 'what we do at the Cathedral'.
People who attend our group are multi faith or have no faith at all, we feel we provide a community service
We keep prayers simple. Prayer about the lesson, prayers for the sick etc. and current affairs. Perhaps if we had requests by the group that would help.
I feel the level of prayer is right as it is now
Prayer is always and only offered sensitively as directed by the Holy Spirit.
I feel that what we do is suitable for the kind of group we run - we encourage families to attend messy Church and I also encourage them to come to parish Eucharist on Special Sundays - if there is a problem our Parish clergy are made aware of it and they visit the sessions anyway .
<b>Please write down any other comments you have about baptism and your toddler group families</b>
Planning to do more sessions in preparation. We also invite parents to Alpha.
A good number of Toddler Group families do have their children baptised at the Church. They are required to come for 'welcoming' during an All-Age service soon after the baptism, and then on the anniversary of the baptism, they receive a special 'Praying for you' card.
We invite parents to a baptism preparation class. As a church we have a more open policy than we did ten years ago. Some families come to toddler song or babysong when they have been to baptism preparation.
I have found the Toddler Group to be a gentle introduction to Church for a number of families wanting to find out more about Baptisms.
I don't personally get involved with baptism preparation, this is something done by our Vicar.
Many of our toddler group families go on to have a child baptized and some move on to attending Messy Church or Family Services

Baptism is only appropriate where the parents are committed believers otherwise we encourage thanksgiving services. For those wanting baptism we encourage them to do a Christianity explored course. They make huge promises at baptism and need to believe what they say. It can be seen as something of a superstitious ritual otherwise.
Many families do approach us about baptisms. And we do encourage those families to come to our toddler group as a great way of starting to get involved in the church (and to learn more about the Christian faith). However, as a church we want to families to view baptism as the sign of 'starting on the Christian journey', and so we don't actively promote baptisms at our toddler group, where there are many families who would not see themselves as on that journey at the moment.
One of our Pastoral assistance helps me at Toddler Group so often talks to parents about the process of baptism.
A Baptism Information leaflet is usually placed on the Reception table where parents check in. There are also available copies of the church magazine which has information about baptism. We have in the past when there were older children in the group, held a pretend baptism service with our priest in attendance and the children choosing names.
After our Priest has visited the family one of our Baptism visitors will visit them and talk them through the service. If they have asked for baptism because they have met our Priest when she comes to visit the group I am often asked to be their visitor. This forms a bond with them and a face they recognise when they come to the church for the child's baptism. As part of the information they receive there is a flyer about the Parent and Toddler group and quite a few have joined us through baptism.
Should anyone want to have their child baptised or dedicated, we have a Baptism team that I would pass their contact details on to and they would contact them for further discussion.
Some of our parents have come to us through having a baptism. Some of them have started coming and had the baptism as a result.
As Toddler Coordinator I am taking on a more active role with baptisms since I attended the Baptism Matters evening. I try to attend each baptism to make a connection with the families and we hold an annual Baptism Picnic to invite families back and introduce them to the community and Toddler Praise.
All families who have their children baptised are invited to attend the toddler group. If any of the children are baptised at other churches myself and one of my assistants attend the service and give a card and present on behalf of the group.
We have a baptism preparation team. Regardless of welcome, we rarely see baptismal families returning to church.
Our Vicar has prepared her own 'leaflet' about a Thanksgiving service that I am able to give to new parents, she would follow this up with baptism preparation if that was their wish.
Anyone at toddler group who expresses and interest in baptism is given the vicars contact details and he would then visit them to start with.
All of the above is a new initiative within the church
We have a good number of baptism enquiries. Some of the families attending our toddler group are there because they have enquirer about baptism.
It would be wonderful to encourage more of the families that come to ABC to have their children baptized in church and encourage them to become part of our church family.
All baptism families are informed about the toddler group. Most of those who come to group are church mums.
A lot of the families who attend this Monday group are of different Faiths , predominantly Muslim . It is more about encouraging people to build bridges of friendship and sharing the love of God for people of all faiths and none.
As its a new group we don't yet know where parents are at spiritually, so talking about baptism with them hasn't yet seemed appropriate.
We have a session with the families where we show a film about Baptism which tells simply what it is all about. After the film the parents can ask questions.
I know that our vicar does almost all of the above to prepare families, however none of this is done specifically at the toddler group. Our vicar attends the group for a short time most weeks to say hello to the children and parents, and often talks to parents himself about baptisms etc.
Baptism visits etc. are dealt with by a separate team/clergy members

Parents sometimes ask about baptism at the group
All of our Toddlers have already been baptised.
We would like more involvement from the clergy to visit the group and to meet the Mums in an informal way as an encouragement towards baptism.
At the moment baptisms do not tend to come directly from our Toddler Group.
We have a baptism team who are the members of the Buggy Praise team and we visit each family individually in their own home with the Rector and help at the baptism. Also we do a follow up visit to the family .We promote all the children's groups at this visit.
Mostly rely on the family making the first approach and then talking to family about what's involved. Currently working with a pastoral group at ways to develop links with baptism families after the baptism service.
The statements ticked are relevant to the church but not to the Toddler Group.
The information about Play and Praise sessions are given to the parents when they apply for Baptism and some hear about us and come to our session and we give the information to the Vicar or member of Baptism team - we try to work together.
We have had many recent baptisms of young children, I am aware that our Vicar has a set introduction and discusses with parents the process, we have had a number of children and their parents attend church after their children have been baptised.
I don't have much input into the baptism preparation which is done by the Rector and Curate. I generally attend the baptisms and prepare a card for each child on behalf of our whole church congregation.
I don't actively encourage baptism as I do not feel that is my role but if I am asked by a parent about baptism then I would put them in contact with the appropriate person.
All or most are already baptised
When families enquire about baptism or thanksgiving we encourage them to participate in something at church, at a level they feel comfortable at based on their own level of faith. As a secular group our toddler group is often a first contact point for people to meet and engage with the church family
The Baptism preparation is done in conjunction with messy Church but a few families are now coming and having the Baptism at our Sunday Eucharist
A number of families start coming to the group because they have asked for their child to be baptised and so they are told about the group and encouraged to attend.
Some of our families are already Church members others usually come having found out about us when they come to enquire about Baptism. We always ask new families if their child has been baptised as we give each child in the group a baptism anniversary card during the in Church part of our session (as well as a birthday card which is given during the play part of our session).
We have a new Priest in Charge and I will shortly be involved with baptism visits alongside him. Our Group is so small and parents/grandparents don't come at all regularly - some come once and don't come back - work like baptism is not on our agenda yet!
<b>Please write in any other comments you have about the faith of your toddler group parents</b>
We also encourage them to come along to Messy Church & offer resources there in faith more.
A number of our parents/carers live outside our area or are Roman Catholics. Many travel to the group by car from outside our catchment area. Within our area we deliver a Church magazine full of Christian content every month, and give a copy at Toddler Group to those who live outside the Parish.
They are many and varied. Some have links to our church through their wedding, child's baptism, Messy Church, Festival Services, Christingle or were past Sunday School children or our past Holiday Clubs.
These activities are carried out by many members of the Church.

Nearly all of them are from non-church backgrounds, and so although there is some interest and we try many of the things above, it does seem that the parents still have a long way to go before they would be interested in taking things further.
Most of the parents who attend do not attend church
some parents have asked if they have to come to Church to attend our group. For most it is a group for the children that just happens to be held in a Church Hall. many years ago the Vicar asked everyone once a month to go into the Church for a short bible story during the session. On these dates I noticed the numbers dropped. The current clergy have come into the group a few times to sit with and talk to the parents and we plan to do something more around some festivals.
We encourage parents to attend Messy church which we run once a month on a Saturday afternoon as a way of keeping a link with the families once the children are too old for our toddler group.
Although this is purely an outreach, I ensure that through familiarity with myself that they can talk to me about anything regarding faith. I also encourage them to pick up church based literature as to what is going on plus to join our closed Facebook group which highlights all activities going on in the church regarding children and youth.
All parents are invited/encouraged to attend church social activities
Some of our families are there because of school admissions, and sometimes seem not to be as engaged in faith as others. This has been my first year leading our group and I have seen a change: instead of parents bringing their child to the group the children are bringing the parents
Some parents are interested and some have no interest. Where there is an opening I discuss God and encourage baptism and invite to church or nurture groups.
We don't push faith, but parents know we are from the local church and try to answer all their questions when they arise.
We are already planning to run an enquirers course
We have a group of helpers who provide drinks and biscuits. We try to talk to all new members and hopefully introduce them to someone they can talk to. By showing we care we hope we are demonstrating the love of God.
Our monthly meetings involve a Church/Christian theme
People from different churches attend and also people of other faiths.
We always promote new START courses running in church and encourage parents to attend. We also promote the Sunday school and Sunday services
Following informal conversations with the parents and carers, it is usual that they attend a church or church group somewhere if not in our own parish.
Our group comes from a wide geographical area and although they attend our once a month meeting, they attend their own churches in between and since they are interested enough to come regularly I would think they are involved with their own churches at other times.
The childminder feeds back to parents with photographs about the session. We give Christmas cards, Easter cards and eggs and individual birthday cards from our church. We provide refreshments at no charge
this varies tremendously from active church members to those who show no or little interest.
We are just beginning a Start course throughout July and August, followed by Alpha from Sept - December primarily for the parents:carers of our toddler group
I feel very strongly that a friendly, safe, happy, encouraging environment where it is informal and supportive gives a much more taste of the Christian faith than a lot of preaching and pushing ideas - parents need support and informality and a lots of fun - life is hard today !!! ---- so do we who run the group !
Toddler group parents are invited to come along with their children to 'Café Church' which meets once a month for all age worship.
When I have the opportunities I will share my Christian faith.
We also have started having twice-yearly parties inviting the toddler-group families and those of children baptised during the year. This involves hospitality and activities for both children and adults.

As I am only just starting out with this group, (I have been running it just under a year) I have plans to run a parenting course in September and the church will be running an Alpha course then too and I plan to invite the parents to attend either of these.
We invite the children who are ex members.. older to come to Messy Church and a children's 4 oclock service.
We have a mixture of people, some who would call themselves Christian but don't go to church, others who are atheists but most are somewhere in between
I feel if parents feel comfortable and happy and are in our Church this is a step on the way - I do not preach or think it helpful to do so at the Group - I also see them around and in the local supermarket and we all have a good relationship as do the other helpers and clergy.
Our one regular attender is the grandson of our church warden; All others are/have been sporadic in attendance - hard to get to know them.
We have invited parents in the past to a church parenting course. We have a library of bible story books which parents can borrow to share with their children so that they can become familiar with stories at the same time as their children. We don't have the approach of 'here are resources to use' or 'what does it mean to be a christian?' per se but parents know that the opportunity is there to ask and talk about these aspects.
<b>Please write down any other comments you have about encouraging toddler group families to nurture faith at home</b>
We have an arrangement with the local Christian bookshop who supply books for us to sell at Christmas and Easter during Toddler sessions. When we have a Jesus Storytime, we always send home with each family, a colouring sheet or craft work based on the story.
We have a prayer tree in our church and mention this to our parents and carers but not every week.
As said previously, we have only recently started bringing faith/bible stories into the session. Some of our parents are known to be Christian but others I am not sure about their faith. I want to make sure parents feel welcome regardless of their faith.
In our group this would depend on the parent and them coming to me. Initially they can seem wary that faith is going to be 'shoved down their throats' but over time trust is build as are relationships, Parents will then feel more comfortable to ask questions etc.
Nurturing faith is about growing something that is already there. Therefore we make it our priority to point people to Jesus in the way we behave and speak. Once a parent has come to faith we can encourage them to nurture that at home.
Some of our toddler group come to other church family services where they receive a home link sheet with an activity to do together, something to talk about together and something to pray about together. This is linked with a church group Facebook page - families are encouraged to share what they are doing. It is early days but families are engaging with it
most of my toddler families have little or no active faith but are interested and open to faith but do not want to be pushed at toddler group - we invite them to other family services and socials to develop their faith
At Christmas and Easter we have a travelling story box which we encourage families to explore together, to let them know why we celebrate them.
Parents report that their children expect to say grace at meal times at home because it is done at toddler group
Most of the families pray regularly at home .
Difficult to say as we would befriend parents and discuss faith of appropriate. The group is very varied
Some of our parents are church family members, some have no connections to church. We one member of the team whose role is specifically as an evangelist and has run a course with some of the young Mums on a Sunday morning. Our Toddler sessions are usually very busy though structured.
At the moment we deal predominantly with child-minders and so this provides a different dynamic.
If anyone enquires we follow it up but we don't force our faith. Actions speak louder than words.

the way forward may be to have colourful handouts to give to families for them to read at home + the books given to each child for the family to read together at home.
If people wanted support, advice or encouragement we would actively give it, or would discuss it if we felt there was an interest that hadn't been mentioned to us directly.
Celebrating Baptism anniversaries as well as birthdays and enjoying the festivals of the Church's year
I think that the children themselves often carry what they've experienced back to the home and prompt questions and comments, making the adults think about their faith.
This is another aspect I want to work on!
As a group we actively encourage the children to take their Christian crafts home and show/discuss them with other members of their families. We also give gifts of Christian books at Easter and Christmas and a children's bible to our leavers to encourage them to continue to learn about God with their families at home.
I think learning by example and being there at times of stress for them - sharing children's books about Jesus - sending Baptism and Baptism anniversary cards and they get ideas (if they want them) from our opening worship
We give small booklets occasionally for parents to read with children and do if asked lend books to families to read with their children or sometimes suggest books they may like to buy for themselves.
We encourage parents to show children that living with Jesus is like breathing, talking, laughing etc, a very natural, happy experience which is not confined to church on a Sunday
<b>Please use this space to add any other comments about the relationship between the church community and toddler group</b>
Our church outreach (all ages not just with toddlers) struggles to connect with the church community including families that are part of that.
Of the ladies who help in the kitchen every week at the group, the youngest is 33 and the eldest 87 - and she has been helping since she retired as a school cook. We could not run without the help we receive from church members in setting up, serving refreshments and clearing away.
We have people who support us by baking for us for each of our sessions. The church allows us to use the £2.00 fees per child for resources. We give any money left over back to church but it is a not for profit run group.
We have been very Blessed at my Church by Church members from the onset of the Group 3 years ago and continue to be so.
The church community is supportive - though only a small number are actively involved.
I think the group is seen as just something that a member of the church runs on behalf of the Church, not necessarily as something to teach about God and faith.
The church community are interested in the group, offering toys, attending the Nativity presentation in December and enquiring about current projects. They like to observe artwork produced by the children.
I have always enjoyed the full support of everyone in our church. Practically and financially.
mothers union provide food for Christmas, end of term party and come along and organise it all
I find that it is very difficult to get volunteers - usually because toddler groups run during working hours, but also because those who do volunteer are very busy doing lots of other things within the church.
The toddler group service takes place in the church building and ladies from the MU provide refreshments for us. We put up displays in the building and the group is advertised on the weekly pew slip. We invite personally any families with young children who come to the Sunday service as well as baptism families. The group is advertised on the church noticeboard.
The group is run and hosted by a team from the church supported by the church mums all of whom are committed Christians. It is jointly or priority to reach out to non-Christian families
The group began as parents an alternative to coming to the BCP holy communion service to sign in for school. To begin with the group followed BCP morning prayer. Over the last 12 months it has been more accessible.
The Mothers' Union is a great support to our group.

This group is an interest to most people because of the building of trust between the wider Muslim community and the church.
We have a Messy Church one Tuesday a month and a small number of our toddler families attend. Most of the children go on to the Church School Nursery when they reach 3 years.
It includes all ages, we have helpers who are older which is really nice for the young families
Toddlers is very much part of the churches ministry
We always have a display of our activities in the Parish Centre so that the church family knows that we exist and what we are doing.
Mothers Union help do the refreshments. The PCC receive a report every 2 months.
very positive links here
Congregation very supportive and take an interest. They encourage the group to get involved with church projects, and send invitations to services. The Christingle is very popular. As mentioned before, the vicar has created a strong link to the church and I feel baptisms have increased because of this. We have also seen a wedding and marriage blessing.
They know it is there because it is in the Church pew sheet - a few respond if we need anything but most don't think it is anything to do with them ! ( but it's nice that some people do it)
It has been very difficult to get support from those who attend our church, we have had a couple of volunteers but it was not appropriate for them to continue as they were not accepting of the Toddler groups ethos. I am still trying to recruit some more volunteers' from the church at this current time.
All our helpers are drawn from our church community. We do include prayer for the children's work in general on various occasions.
It is getting better. I think they need to see the group for themselves because those who do are wholly positive and recommend it to others.
I found the previous question difficult to answer as the church supports and encourages us in many ways and by many people including the lay reader and the Verger but I'm not sure how interested the wider church community is. Our group is midweek so is supported by a small group of volunteers. Our vicar is very supportive and regularly visits the group he also occasionally talks about the groups during services and encourages prayers for us.
We advertise it well - they see (if they look!) things on our display board - I try to keep what we do in the vision of the Mothers Union - ( a few MU Members knit toys or other things for me) - I am an MU member myself
Members of the church community help with refreshments each week
Some Church members are very supportive of the group and will help out if needed, these tend to be those with children/grandchildren who are or have been members of the group.
Our group runs under the auspices of and by Mothers' Union and thereby sees that a group for toddlers exists and grows in the church family. We constantly try to show that our group is still part of the church family even though it meets not on a Sunday.
<b>Please use this space to add any other comments about the relationship between the church leadership and the toddler group</b>
Our vicar is also a chaplain at the University so only attends our group very occasionally.
Having entered an Interregnum 6 months ago, the vision and strategy of the church has become somewhat fuzzy. It is difficult to clearly state what the future vision for the group will be without a clear leadership. There is a general feeling of 'treading water' at the present time.
The church leadership was involved in setting the group up and is still involved in running it.
We have talked about how best to add a more religious connection between the two.
the vicar plays an active part every week telling bible story talking to families that might need help



The vicar encourages families to attend but rarely comes himself. We invite him to come and present books when a child leaves to attend nursery or school. He does have a service at another of our parish churches at the same time but there is about half an hour afterwards when he does occasionally visit us.
The vicar cannot be involved in every type of ministry within our church but we are a strong capable leadership team who are accountable to the children and youth worker who regularly visits the group.
I lead the group and I am part of the Church leadership. The future is to see if future leadership will come from some present parents - as long as they don't go back to work
As vicar I started the group and went regularly - recently I have passed it on to a child minder and reduced my involvement; but I should have been there more because it is important as part of the growth strategy for the church - I have to attend the other church toddler group at the same time though as I now have 2 churches.
Our toddler group is changing as I will shortly be leaving; the parents will be running it themselves with support from church members.
The vicar is very support and all the parents now know him.
Vicar doesn't visit group as it is his day off on the day we hold it.
Our church does not have a 'vision' or plan for the future, this is not seen as a way forward by the clergy, who expect ideas to come for growth through leadership team meetings. Transformational plans have been shelved.
The church is currently implementing the LYCIG course.
the group is mainly pastoral support for families that may feel isolated.
The group is prayed for regularly by the Leaders of the church. The church is being challenged with regard to a strategy which is slowly emerging. This is happening due to our monthly Toddler Church sessions which began 10 months ago.
Although the toddler group is a way to reach families, for the church to make contact with them and in some cases introduce them to the church, first and foremost the group is a way for the church to serve the community - those of all faiths and none. We are providing a meeting place for families to meet together, make new friends, support one another etc. In this way they are also becoming a greater part of our community. However it is also a place where there is opportunity for faith to develop or grow in a way that probably wouldn't occur in a secular group.
I have put agree about the church leaders but it is only some of them
The leaders and vicar see the toddlers group as very important and are looking at ways that we can support families into the life of the church and faith.
Our church has a prominent physical position in the town and, being of historical interest, many visitors. We aim to have an open, welcoming approach to all-comers. We provide a play area in church for regular and visiting children and in this area we display information about - and work done at -- our toddler group and monthly family services.
We are currently in a vacancy but previous vicar did try to visit the group regularly
The parish Deacon helps quite often, the Vicar is usually at the end of term services and occasionally pops in at other times
It is supported - but my team just get on with it!
The story is told by a member of the clergy once a month. A member of the clergy attends most weeks and the first part of the session takes place in the church.
The Clergy are very supportive of my role as leader of the group.
<b>Please write in any other thoughts you have on your toddler group becoming more distinctively Christian</b>
As our little ones are mainly babies at the moment I think we do enough regarding Christianity.
As stated we do offer a toddler church in which a bible story is told creatively and with participation for children, songs and prayers.
at the minute the group fulfils its original aims and objectives. would be open to looking at ways to make it more Christian but these would have to be carefully and prayerfully thought through. at the moment the



group provides families a safe place to meet for fellowship and support within the context of a prayerful leadership team and supportive local church.
Attendance by Church leaders would help.
Because many are of mixed faith's not many would be interested in more christian input. We see it as a service to the community
Becoming a more distinctive Christian group is a future vision. However, in a realistic world we have much further to travel with our group, so the importance for me is to continue building relationships with this community and meeting them where they are. Giving them this confidence is the biggest growth point for the group.
I am quite happy with this side of the group - and I'm happy for those of no faith to come and I wouldn't push Church on to them - let them catch it like a cold - example stronger than words.
I believe our group is run by Christians to share the love of God by actions not words
I don't see it needs to be more distinctively Christian
I think it already is and has a good balance. What is lacking are stronger links with the church community.
I think our group is already distinctively christian
I think our group is already quite distinctively Christian, so some of the above things may not apply.
I think the Christian input we have is adequate for the one hour that the group meet.
I think the toddler group I am involved with is Christian through and through. We also have another toddler group that meets on church premises. It began life as a church group and was distinctively Christian but now is not so. I am due to speak to the current leaders about how we can address this.
I think there needs to be a careful balance between the group being distinctively Christian (which I believe our church's is) and putting some parents off attending because the approach is heavy-handed. We feel that our aim is to sow the seeds of interest and some knowledge of our faith with this age group and their carers. Nowadays one cannot assume that parents have a 'working knowledge' of Christianity, though many grandparents have.
I think we hit the right balance and have good strategies in place for encouraging parents to church and on our christianity explored courses
I worry about putting people off, at present we have a good attendance and they at least see our example of how to be a Christian and may take notice of something while on the premises.
I would be very concerned about parents/careers leaving what is. at present a very happy, thriving group.
I would embrace the group becoming more Christian, I find this daunting but at the same time exciting.
It already is a distinctly Christian group and the balance is right as it is considering the mix of families which attend. Every session includes prayer and Christian/worship songs.
It was set up as an outreach project for the community, to meet the needs of the community and form a positive link with our church.
Other groups who meet in the town (in other churches) seem to have no Christian input - mothers seem to just want somewhere to let the children "run about" and don't like structure. We are already distinctive, and they don't seem to like or want it. - help?
Our group has always been a Christian based group. The whole meeting and activities are based on our Christian faith. We are definitely not simply a toddler group or a playgroup, although we always include free play and fellowship after our service.
Our group is already distinctively Christian, so it's really a matter of trying to keep things fresh and being open to new ideas.

Our group is already offering a Christian children's service rather than being a straightforward "Toddler Group".
Our group is distinctively Christian already and that is our vision.
Our group is run in a community room not at church where the main mission is to enable the community to support one another so I don't think the original remit was ever to make it a .distinctively Christian group
Our group is totally Christian based with, as stated earlier, a programme which includes Christian action songs, prayer, bible based story (or a story with a Christian meaning) and a related craft.
Our group is very distinctively Christian - I sometimes wonder if we are accessible enough to those of no faith
Our toddler group [Monday School] is Christian and is recognised as such by the parents who come. We begin each session with play in the church meeting room and take the children into the church itself for singing and Bible stories. The group is known locally as part of the worshipping community at our church. We invite the parents to be involved in worship and church social activities.
Our toddler group is a 'first contact' type of group. It has been running for over 30 years as a community toddler group (rather than a distinctly Christian one), and we would not be interested in changing the way the current group runs - it is primarily for making friendships and connections (a Laurence Singlehurst Sowing 1 type environment). We are however thinking of starting a new fortnightly group which is much more faith-focused and would anticipate that some of our current families would be interested in coming to that one. There would be some crossover in terms of team and families which would help with that and we're excited about what could happen there.
Our toddler group is part of a distinctive vision for the formation of Christian hearts and minds from Age 0 through to maturity in the church. We provide opportunities for nurture at every stage. We simply love people and show that they are loved by God.
Our toddler group was originally started many years ago by a group of mum's with young children who were all Church members and who wanted a more 'Child friendly' service than the regular Sunday morning worship so has always had a distinctly Christian base.
Some of the parents / carers disappear before the end of the session when we have singing etc. Although we advertise ourselves as a group run by Christians, I fear that if we added more Christian content to our group sessions, there are carers who would stay away completely. We have always led the group with a quiet Christian presence, which has been appreciated and respected by those who attend.
The first part of the session is held in church and comprises a Christian service geared mainly towards toddlers and the story and comments about it during the rest of the service endeavour to speak to the adults present too. During the notices, families are informed about other services that they might find of interest e.g. Messy Church, All Age worship service and Mothering Sunday. All families also receive a newsletter twice a year with all special and regular services noted. The children (min age 12 months) are also encouraged to take part in our Nativity play. All newcomers are introduced another family before they leave church so they can accompany them to church hall. The second part of session is in church hall with toys and refreshments and this is an opportune time to model care, concern and managing any disagreements e.g. between children, in a non confrontational way. Given the above, it is difficult to see how the group might become more distinctively Christian.
The group is a "work in progress" Christian elements are shared through craft and 1-1 conversations
I feel that as a group we already have a very distinctive Christian ethos and our parents appreciate and embrace this, it is why many of them (Christian, other faith or no faith) choose to come and bring their children to our group because we teach about good Christian values that are shared. We would be interested

in ideas for games/play activities that are more Christian and fresh ideas about where to get some newer resources.

The toddler group is often the first point of contact for families with the church. Some of them may choose to form a deeper relationship with the church. Others would stop coming if the group became too overtly Christian. Previous attempts to make the group more distinctively Christian have not met with a good response from the group. It works well to keep the group very low key, but offer other things for interested families to move into.

The way I have organised my ministry is more like a step stone programme - this toddler group is more focused on bringing predominantly secular families and getting them through the church doors - and feeling comfortable! We then have other programmes for them to attend that will introduce Christianity in an age appropriate way. Each programme gets a little more Christian based moving towards regular church attendance etc. I do think that churches need to offer predominantly secular outreaches in order to attract people into the church first.

There are other distinctively Christian toddler groups in the area which have thrived for decades, which offer a mixture of play, reading and songs. The group I belong to is specifically a singing/music group and whilst we have free time at the end with refreshments, time to play and talk, the songs etc are exactly the same each week, in the same order etc. Introducing change of any kind would have to be well thought through first.

Think this is a nice idea but would stress that this did not deter non believers or people from other faiths.

This group is a purely music/singing group that is aimed at toddlers. It is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and so can't promote Christianity. It brings families to the Cathedral and to the Cathedral café. These families may go on to take part in other activities that the Education Department has organised or progress to Messy Cathedral sessions or the Sunday School that are Christian based and organised by the Cathedral. It may also encourage some children in the future to consider joining the choir.

This is a new group and a present none of the families/carers are active church going christians. I feel that it is important that we should be seen as a christian group but at the same time not being so overt and forceful as to drive people away.

This is something we've discussed add a leadership team and we think we have the right balance. The bible is taught every week, conversations talk of Jesus, people are invited to church and to church events and we attempt to help people with their needs.

We are already a distinctively Christian group. It was one of our main aims when setting up the group as we did not want to be just another toddler group. Our sessions are for play and praise and the children and carers who attend seem to enjoy the Christian ethos.

We are always keen to explore new ideas around how we can share our faith with the children and parents who attend.

We have a very mixed group of people from all walks of life - Seeing them come to church for 'special services' that we hold is very encouraging - we have found that people start to come to our Family services and progress from there. We try not to scare them off but gently guide them to come to our services.

We have been discussing the possibility of bible stories within the group for those who are interested and would like to encourage those who are interested in nurturing their faith or investigating an interest in faith, however while the group is an opportunity to share our faith and introduce people to the church community it is a service to the whole community (somewhere families can meet together) and not principally a way to grow church numbers.

We hold our toddler group in a privately owned play gym, whilst we sing, pray and read bible stories, others in the space or our wider community do not always know of our presence - we would like to raise that presence, thereby raising awareness that we are a distinctively Christian toddler group.

We set out with the definite policy of not using any Christian literature or resources in our group. We feel that all the parents know that we are Christians by the fact that we talk about our involvement in our respective churches, and by our actions.

We try to show our Christian faith in a low-key, loving way by showing that we care and are interested in the toddlers and their carers. At Christmas and Easter it is easier to be more distinctive.

We wouldn't look to make this group more distinctly Christian. It's target it the non Christian families and we offer other groups and activities which are designed to nurture faith of young families more.

Why should it be more distinctively Christian ?

You need more support from the congregation than I can expect to receive from my current congregation but things are gradually improving

**Please use this space to write any other comments relating to this project**

All of the volunteers have a wealth of experience in early years and children's work. They come along to serve their local community and to love them. All of the volunteers are regular members of the church. As a paid member of staff, I would state that this group is effective, as it supports parents/carers emotional/practical needs. The families are aware that volunteers come along because of their faith and their wish to serve others. This group, although not distinctively Christian in teaching the word of God, certainly shows the love of God to all who attend. This group is safe/secure place for the families who attend. I have led many early years stay and plays for The Red Balloon Family, in my role as a paid families worker and this group is certainly the most effective in sharing the love God by welcoming/nurturing/supporting those who attend. This group is a small family. Myself and the volunteers have co led "distinctively Christian" projects and are able to do so should the need arise

Before agreeing had not fully realised it was so focussed on prayer

Having only been in post for a short time, I am still getting to know the families at our playgroup, so I have answered questions about them the best I can at this stage. We have two sessions; morning and afternoon. The figures I gave relating to numbers of children etc refer to total numbers. Generally, the morning is busier than the afternoon.

I am always open to ideas for my group and general ideas for toddler groups and their families.

I feel strongly that if you provide a safe, happy, supportive, stimulating environment for the families they respond - to me taking time in planning and setting up - being ready for the group - welcoming everyone - having a listening ear if needed - all this is what being a Christian is and is what toddler group is about

I have answered these questions with regard to the toddler groups that we run in our church. These contain little Christian content. But we also run two Toddler Praise sessions which are distinctively Christian, and incorporate pray, worship, bible stories and encourage families in their faith. These are also attended by non church going families. And three years ago we ran an Alpha course specifically for these young mums, which then became a home group, and this groups continues to meet with young children welcome, and new families join us all the time.

I need to prioritise and the toddlers may not be the best use of my time, it is good for promoting baptisms but to grow families faith I would prefer to follow up the Baptism families with specific invitations to church and make services and enquirers courses suitable for them.

I would like to know the aim of the project and what you hope to get out of it ?
It will be good to see the results of the project as we don't have any contact with other toddler groups.
One difficulty we come across when encouraging baptism families to attend the toddler sessions is that many parents now work full-time or, if part-time, usually on the day on which our group is held! I expect this is the same in most areas (except those with high unemployment rates).
One of the 'spin offs' from setting up our group has been encouraging some parents/carers through specific difficulties.
Our group is distinctly Christian
Our toddler group meets on a monthly basis, your alternatives in one of the first questions didn't seem to offer this.
Some Questions were hard to answer - we meet in Church and Faith at this stage is caught not taught - but I always encourage moving onwards carefully
Start over summer, Alpha Autumn and winter. We are looking how to create a tea time group for when the children go into school, thereby keeping the relationships going, whilst continuing to engage with families and their journey of faith.
The group could run more regularly or elsewhere in the Benefice if lay people were to appreciate the importance of faith based toddler groups and were willing to take on leadership. At the moment I run it with the support of my husband (vicar's wife) and volunteers from church who will make the tea but not lead. Parents take it in turns to prepare the craft so sometimes it is more faith based than at other times, though I always try to make a link.
The group is already a faith-based group. The resources we have we source ourselves. We feel confident enough to maintain what we started and do our best to encourage a Christian approach to life.
Very happy for other groups wanting to set up a see and know session to come along and see how our group runs.
Very interesting doing the form as it has made me think more about what we do and do not do within the toddler group.
We are only in our third term - had some very bad comments at the beginning about being "too strict" (all we had was some structure) and one lady spread bad reports - we have never recovered - mothers seem to follow each other and not make their own minds up.
We have had special needs children who joined in with everything we do. Our children are mainly babies or under 3s so we do not take part in craft work. I will look at the CofE Christening Website now that I am aware of it.
Whilst nurturing faith in young families is important non faith based groups can offer valuable opportunities to simply make the contacts with people and demonstrate faith in action from there conversations may happen and faith may grow - these groups should not be underestimated
Why wouldn't churches want their toddler groups to be distinctively Christian?

### 13.2 Open-ended comments from Diocesan Adviser survey

<b>Please give some examples of how toddler groups are distinctively Christian in your diocese; we are particularly interested in good practice and ideas to share with others.</b>
They share a Bible story, including an opportunity for prayer in some way and talk about Jesus

Ethos and input from clergy on weekly basis Songs, stories and crafts Bible based play resources Christian adults available to share faith story with parents
I am the leader of Toddler Groups run in an Independent Evangelical Church so my answers may not be statistically valid for your research. In our introductory Toddler Group brochure the first thing we say is that all the team members are Christian. We read Bible stories [not exclusively] in our story time, we sing some Christian songs. We have prayer cards which parents can fill in with requests which we pray for in our prayer meeting. We encourage team members to 'always be prepared to give a reason for the hope within'. We encourage significant conversations, We have Christian books in our lending library on parenting, relationships ..... Several years ago I researched Toddler Groups, with a view to finding out how effective they are in reaching out to non-Christians - if you're interested it can be found at <a href="http://www.emmanuel.co.uk/learn/resources">www.emmanuel.co.uk/learn/resources</a>
Bible story time, bible themed crafts, prayer corner, faith based toys, inviting families to other events offered by the church, making toddler group members feel like part of the church family.
A group that meets for coffee and cake, followed by songs, parachute games, a short message and then an opportunity to socialise, visit a prayer room which has activities for both children and their carers. A group that meets for coffee/croissants/muffins followed by either opting to go out to a focused session for adults (Nooma video, how my story compares to Christian story, questions discussion, time of prayer listening for adults). Their children remain with trained carers in Hall until parents rejoin. Or can opt to remain with children in Main Hall and interact with others including trained carers looking after children.
Pre school Praise - takes place in church with amongst the usual play & crafts, pray, Bible teaching etc Toddler group which takes place in the church (they move the pews!) with a song and prayer at the end - this is purposely low key as a first contact initiative.
toddler church/praise toddler groups run on a story, praise, prayer, sharing food type model where as other less formal groups input christian values, stories, songs etc. offer pastoral support for parents
Often have a bible story for storytime , use songs with a Christian message as part of standard repertoire, finish with a prayer/blessing. Advertise church events, link in with or have as part of a toddler praise service.
Some are advertised as such ,are run by church members , have activities related to faith and spirituality , have the vicar involved regularly.Have a prayer corner or similar .
The volunteers are church workers. Some groups welcome families from the local community that do not attend church services, this is the only contact some families have with church. There is a desire to be a supportive and caring community in a Christian ethos and environment.
Knowing people by name; excellent telling of Bible stories; visiting of parents; good Christian songs; optional joining in of Christian material so people can opt out; some are free of charge so anyone can come; where groups are full, one or two have the policy of saving a couple of spaces for those new to the area recognizing the parents may be lonely; giving of non-cringy Christian material; vicar plays an active role and is well-known; invitations to other church events especially Messy Church;
Toddler group is called Wriggle Worship - very much linked to the church - local priest is very active in leading it; others have a very short (10 mins) act of worship within the group time and a Biblical theme each week. Some always use a Bible story at storytime.
In the traditional sense of being 'distinctively Christian' , many of the toddler groups stop mid-way or towards the end to have a time when there is a bible story read, one or two simple Christian songs sung and often a short prayer. Some who have a 'snack' as part of their time together will say a simple grace before eating. I am not convinced that these are as effective at sharing the gospel as the ability of the Christian team to form relationships with those attending, both children and carers.



This is an interesting question. I have put 4 in the boxes. In general the groups are a fantastic meeting place that provide a distinctly warm, friendly and supportive atmosphere. This is very much in line with the teachings of the Christian faith. However, in regards to quantifiable content perhaps the occasional song and craft activity.

Invitations to play are overtly linked to Bible stories. Song time is filled with Christian rhymes and action songs. Prayers are said. Attendees are continuously invited to participate in the life of the church. Activities are based on a bible story or theme or Christian Festival. The Team plan, study scripture and pray together. Leaders talk to the adults and children about their faith and church life. Clergy are intentional in attending make themselves available to talk.

Run by members of the church, Used as an outreach by church members to tap into the community, the use of Bible stories, praying for families etc, using "Care for the family" material's.

**What do you feel are the main barriers for toddler groups to becoming more distinctively Christian?**

Lack of confidence in the leaders

Support from church family, volunteers, clergy Worry that it will put people off if too Christian

Disinterest of parents, lack of support from the rest of the Church

Worried that being 'Christian' will put people off. Not sure HOW to be distinctively Christian. Don't have the resources (people, money or creative).

Main barriers are trying to introduce a faith aspect(where before there has been none). Need to set up with definite 'we do what it says on the tin' ethos. Parents and carers will vote with their feet and ignore 'optional' sessions(a softly softly approach to those trying to introduce more Christian content). Important to train up those volunteering to work with the toddler group, so they can have intentional conversations and feel confident to do so. Lack of planning and a definite structure can also mean the Christian ethos can be undermined.

Some groups have become less so over the years and just use the building which make sit difficult to add a distinctively Christian aspect - some have actively resisted such attempts.

Fear on the part of leaders that it will put people off. So therefore lack of confidence in leaders.

Fear ! very busy ,successful groups are very frightened of putting people off by talking "Church!" or simply making the change and including something spiritual .They also don't actually make the time to ask people what they would like or if they would be offended or put off by Christian input!

Many people think that faith is personal and they find it very difficult to articulate and share their faith in a informal way.

The attitude of the leadership of the Church and unimportance given to toddler groups by the clergy rather than seeing toddler groups being the most missional activity that a church puts on. On each visit to a church it would be helpful if a bishop/archdeacon asked the clergy: Do you have a toddler group? Do you go to it, invest time and resources into it? And later followed up the conversation. Some clergy are reluctant to come to/run toddler groups as they feel are not good at communicating with families or children so selecting clergy with good social skills and training them to tell stories as part of their preaching training would help; Not seeing toddlers/babies as spiritual beings; The relative unimportance given to very young children's work especially toddlers and babies: very few under-fives advisers in the country; The lack of vision of some toddler group leaders: we've always done it this way approach. Feeling fearful that being distinctively Christian may put people off coming; The absence of a missionary mindset; Different parts of a city/country would have different attitudes towards Christianity depending on the faith base of the area and so there's no one right way to be

distinctively Christian, so the barrier here is not knowing what distinctively Christian would look like. This makes Question 4 impossible to answer as receptivity would vary from parish to parish. Also in many places it is childminders not parents who bring toddlers along and much depends on what they feel comfortable with; Lack of resources both in terms of people and money and so group leaders are so busy setting up and running a group that they don't have time to talk to people and make relationships with people. This problem is increasing as the number of volunteers is dropping. The lack of training in skills such as story-telling and not knowing what is available. The willingness of church leaders/ toddler group leaders to try out new things and allow people to take risk

Lack of confidence that carers want a 'God slot', lack of confidence in their own abilities to lead a Biblically based session by the leaders.

Volunteers being under confident in their own faith.

I think if done appropriately there is nothing to stop this happening. Perhaps a small amount of suspicion but if the relationship is already there then I would hope that trust has been built enough to explore this.

Fear . In some cases leaders have "inherited" a group from a none Christian leader and are not confident enough to change it and how it works . Often leaders do not feel confident enough to share their own faith, or they feel that by doing this it puts people off attending . The issue of multi faith families attending groups , "How far can we go in promoting our faith?"

**Please write down ideas you have for how toddler groups could become more distinctively Christian**

Offering Christian prayer

Membership of 1277 Facebook page, toddler group prayer networks in local area Clear vision, ethos and mission supported by PCC & clergy

Praying before, during and after the group. Following a programme where the session includes a simple bible story, faith based games / craft / other activities. Having faith based toys and books available. Take home sheets with ideas on how families can explore what they have heard at home. Singing Christian songs with the children / having Christian songs playing in the background. Encouraging families to come to other church events. Signposting to other Christian outreach where appropriate - church run babysitting bank or CAP.

Set up with a Christian ethos in the first place Becoming more Christian-a linked story/craft/song/prayer activity with a programme agreed for the term eg:children in the bible or animals (Daniel Lion's Den/Elijah and the Raven, Noah's Ark) Training of volunteers so everyone can have intentional conversations

Introducing accessible prayer and songs; Meeting in the sanctuary; volunteers from church;

introducing play opportunities and resources for free play that reflect christian values volunteers to be clear as to their missional purpose and be confident to speak to parents about their own faith

Timeline I think would be most helpful (obviously people join it at the point they have got to.Build the confidence of the leaders in what they are doing first or even open their eyes to the possibilities, then supply training / resources to help , then in parallel start talking about faith in families followed by training and resources.

1.Firstly good Communication ! Get the whole church on-board with the idea &concept , far too often Toddler groups are seen as being nothing to do with church life or the mission of the church .This is a first step in for many people and this is where it needs to begin ,a gentle introduction to faith . Think through clearly your aim for the group , what are your core values , and then communicate this to those that attend by doing things that show this . 2. Get the clergy on-board also, make them realise the importance of the group and encourage them to come whenever possible and meet the people that attend 3. Include spiritual activities that link to both the church year and the secular calendar through the use of crafts and activities . 3. Offer to



pray for people , mums going in hospital to have a baby , a short prayer at the end of a weekly session 4. Create a simple multi sensory prayer /quiet area 5. Tell Bible stories/or secular stories with a Christian message 6. Use Christian songs 7. Use Festival times to explain (simply) the Christian message behind them

Be open and honest - talk about the whole life of the church, (inc: baptisms and confirmation, holy communion, study and prayer) Create a place of prayer or quiet reflection, use a bible stories and sing Christian songs. Welcome and value everyone. Teach different Christian principles. Show hospitality and invite parents and carers to other suitable events and services. Be encouraging and actively listen to the children, parents and carers and respond appropriately.

More Christian young parents coming to toddler groups and making friends with others. As many parents work these day and are tired this isn't easy. More Saturday toddler groups may be a good idea. Telling Bible stories excellently, with excellent and audible songs can be good. Being up front that this will happen. Raising the bar on the behaviour of parents when Bible stories are told - rude to chat through them - not a good example to children about to start school. Some people advocate Bible-based toys for children to play with. I think encouraging children to be creative and enjoying the mess is good. Welcoming everyone by name and saying goodbye to everyone. Having enough helpers so that those who come can be engaged in conversation. Encouraging those who come to feel part of a group to which they can contribute. Training people in active listening. Accepting children with additional needs or having groups especially for them.

When starting out make it clear that it is a faith based toddler group; have a Biblical theme/use Christian values as a theme for each session, use prayer at the beginning and end of the session, use simple action worship songs regularly, give the families that attend a simple booklet to take home to use at home with the action songs used in the group, simple prayers and ideas of when to use them - ie at mealtimes, bedtime, out walking, some simple interactive prayers ideas and websites/apps to use for further home use.

Having a mission statement so that everyone on the team knows what you are aiming for and whether they can contribute to this vision by committing more than just 'turning up to pour the squash'.

I think it is about training and supporting those that lead the groups to be more openly intentional about what they do on behalf of the church. If a leader is correctly supported and trained then integrating more of the Christian faith comes a great deal easier.

Its about helping people to show good Christian hospitality , not being too "in your face" with faith , but sharing it in a gentle none threatening way . A way that makes people feel comfortable and importantly have faith and trust in both you as a person and as a group. Good relationship building has to be the key in all that happens. We can be a distinctly more Christian group simply by how we act , what we offer and who we are .

### **Thinking about church growth and Christian discipleship, what do you feel are the greatest opportunities with toddler groups**

Making links with families who do not usually attend church

Modelling Christian faith that is inclusive and welcoming that can meet people where they are on their journey and walk beside them

Helping parents to question the foundations of their family life.

Meeting with people who might not otherwise have any contact with the church.

Helping young families to develop spirituality in their children supported by ideas Parenting courses/and or support with behaviour management (especially for first time parents) Developing links with the local church in a relevant way

Chatting, getting to know people; invitation to other events (if people show an interest- it's ok to just be there for people and offer a service to the community); baptism requests; wedding requests

some of our toddler groups are church in their own right and should be recognised as such like messy church one of highest users of our church buildings in diocese is under 5's, they are already coming into our churches and so there are great opportunities to come alongside families

Building relationships , showing care, offering opportunities to get together to discover the bible/prayer either as toddler group or for parents. Making connections at this stage is hugely important opening links to Baptism , links into church community , familiarity with church building , building sense of community within Christian context.

Welcome and the fact that we are meeting children at the youngest age , connecting with families when they need it most, building relationships introducing them to Christian Hospitality .The issue around Baptism and how we connect and follow up .

Modelling good practice and encouraging parents and carers to use at home. Faith in the home is really important. Helping families grow and learn together. Baptism and future care and support. Transition links to schools - pastoral visits to school - assemblies

I think that toddler groups have huge potential in terms of church growth and discipleship but, like Messy Church, a slow process and not necessarily measurable in terms of getting people to join Sunday church, Alpha or other groups. In terms of welcoming people of all backgrounds and faiths into church they have great value. Parents (usually mothers) may have a small baby in their arms and are open to wondering about the meaning of life and changing their priorities. It's about investing time and love into relationships without an agenda - showing the unconditional love of God. Toddler groups are often considered failures because few people come to Sunday church. If they do come what do they find? Shh-free church or people glaring. Encouraged to feel part of things or stuck in a back row or a back room with nothing or little to do?

Building on the interest sparked from families exploring baptism, invite them to the toddler group - helping families to keep the promises made at baptism. Allowing baptisms within the toddler group - it is their 'church'. Have an active baptism follow up team.

I don't believe many families with Under 5s will be convinced to start attending a Sunday morning. It is vital to create groups that are, or become, church which are physically in the same place as toddler group, similar time but different day, with similar toys/snacks etc but contain the elements of church. Toddler group members will be invited to this and the desire to attend will be greater than coming to a Sunday service and the barriers will be less

Providing a safe, warm, welcoming place for friendship and being with people that does not cost the earth! I have 2 young children and the role of Toddler groups are so important not only for the child's development but also for the support that they can offer to parents who are tired physically and emotionally. I have been supported so much by the people who run these groups be through a bit of advice, a kind word or a cup of tea that I have not had to make myself!

Welcome & Relationships & Trust !! if we don't have this how can we expect them to want to come /be involved in church and want to know more .

**Please give some examples of how toddler groups are using their opportunities for church growth or Christian discipleship; we are particularly interested in good practice and ideas to share with others.**

All baptism families are invited to attend the toddler group

Welcoming baptism families as a follow up to baptism Inviting toddler group families to messy church Encouraging church members to develop their own discipleship by volunteering at toddler group Welcoming toddler group families as members of church family rather than an add on mid week activity

We run a variety of parenting courses, and some parents who complete these may go on to do Christianity Explored etc Informal authentic friendships leading to personal witness
Families from toddler groups becoming members of Messy Churches. Dads and toddler groups (as well as mums and toddler groups), to reach out to men in the community.
People finding a place they can just come and be; opportunity to lessen feelings of isolation; inviting people along to events held as part of a mission week; inviting people to Messy Church; making an effort to build relationships through baptism.
All saints highams park started with toddler group stay and play, from that grew little church a separate group that includes songs, activities and exploring stories from the Bible. the same people who run this run sunday school and some families have started attending sunday mornings as well
Parents and carers invited to bible studies with crèche, developing opportunities to still meet once children go to school, offering parenting classes, deliberately forming links across all that the church offers (families are so likely to have other children who are older - are we deliberately advertising all the church can offer? Not forgetting men and fathers . Linking in with and advertising Messy church, church beach trips, faith and family sessions , grandparent sessions etc
A very successful toddler church has gone on to develop a cafe style church to meet the needs of the families , they also encourage families to attend a Start course for those families having their children baptised.
Setting up Messy Churches as a possible next step. Messy Church, of course, is church in its own right and not an event or a bridge to Sunday church. Parenting classes, invitations to major festivals, Bible study groups, Alpha. Giving out Psalm 139 or ideas on praying with babies and toddlers; using the new CoE baptism material; offering sessions on Questions that Children Ask, Death of Granny, Baptism or Thanksgiving; offering English classes for speakers of other languages. Best of all getting church parents to come along and make genuine friends.
It's not rocket science! They open their doors, put the kettle on and put the toys out. They advertise most effectively through 'word of mouth'. The churches that do really well also then intentionally develop discipleship opportunities outside of the group, be that a crib service, baptism preparation, an adults discipleship group etc
A toddler church has now grown so big , they have developed into a Café style church to meet a need for the families attending .The welcome received here is second to none and the vicar is especially hands on with the groups and the children/families .
<b>What do you feel are the main barriers for toddler groups in using the opportunities they have for church growth or Christian discipleship?</b>
lack of leaders
Lack of Confidence, access to resources, not feeling valued as a significant missional opportunity
Lack of support from the wider church
The misconception that people will be put off by church groups that are distinctively Christian. As the amount of hours of government funded childcare increases, it is possible that there will be a decline in the number of people using toddler groups in the future.
Lack of vision Lack of confidence/training Lack of leadership
I'm not sure they should be used for church growth and discipleship but hopefully this will become part of some people's journey. I think if people think we are just trying to convert them for numbers then that becomes a barrier. I think it can be difficult to disciple people because often we want to them to come to

something else which for whatever reason is not a convenient time. It might be that there are family/ life pressures that can be a barrier.

often it seems like the toddler group is a separate entity to the church even though it is run by the church. sometimes churches don't seem to value toddler groups are real discipleship opportunities. many churches seem to focus more on youth and older children. often the people running the toddler group are young mums themselves and sometime they are new to faith so don't yet have the confidence or knowledge

Again, lack of confidence in leaders and the lack of Christian leaders , so often toddler groups were started by mums from church but as their children grow up and they hand over to any willing volunteer the "Christian" element is diluted in favour of the "keeping it going". Often PCC's have lost connection with toddler groups for the same reason , and the sense of this being a vital mission field is completely missed. Sadly some clergy don't see it as part of their remit as it has always run so are happy to leave well alone.

Sadly often the church itself ! Too often the incumbents do not see the potential in such groups and don't encourage or empower these groups to move forward The group does not connect with the church and the group leaders themselves are not equipped to address these issues or in some cases have the confidence .

Mainly it is the lack of time and not enough volunteers. There is little pastoral support. This is a challenging ministry and it is undervalued by some.

Lack of people, resources, taking toddler groups for granted and low expectations. Clergy not seeing the importance of toddler groups. Over-busy lives so parents don't have the time to invest in relationships. Not knowing what the possibilities might be. The most creative people not running toddler groups.

Lack of people to run the group/baptism follow up/leadership

The vision and the practicalities end with running the toddler group not in providing the 5-10 additional steps that need to be put in place to help toddler families on their Christian discipleship. Capacity of people's time volunteering and lack on vision are the main barriers.

Perhaps a lack of understanding or confidence in seeing these groups as a means of ministering to people and the things that this simple ministry of presence and support can achieve. If Toddler Groups were valued more within the churches wider mission and the relational approach to mission was more understood then they would not be so 'under the radar'. We need to celebrate these groups more. I am pleased this work is going on as I hope it will be the start of something new in order to educate and inspire our churches on this kind of work and its opportunities for incarnational ministry.

Sometimes a lack of actual involvement from the church itself, so often an incumbent has very little or often nothing at all to do with a toddler group and it is not seen to be part of the bigger picture of church and its mission.

**Please write down ideas you have for how toddler groups could make the most of the opportunities they have**

Share ideas and experiences and prayer with other local group leaders to be encouraged to give it a go

Being exceptionally welcoming, ideally having people there whose primary role is to get to know the families and to walk alongside them so they start to feel a sense of belonging. Being excited about what else is going on at the church - enthusiasm is caught, not taught!

Offer opportunities for the adults to chat further or deeper by incorporating a Bible study or discussion/teaching group that runs alongside the toddler group; genuinely getting to know people and opening opportunities for dialogue; holding extra events at appropriate times; considering holding a service at a time that is more suitable for families or adding services at times of festival; having themes just as in junior church.

churches should ensure that toddler group is an important part of their mission not an add on and treat it and its leaders as such leaders need to be valued and be really clear as to the mission and aim of the group and the church church leaders need to take an active role in these groups
(in no particular order). Ensure name relates to church. Is it easy to find on the church website or is it buried somewhere. Are the clergy regular visitors? Are they regularly prayed for in sunday morning services, How is it linked to Baptisms ? If families turn up on a sunday morning or at Messy Church / 4.00 pm service will they recognize anybody? Has the church offered a budget to buy some Christian story books (new and clean!) What do you give when children leave (moving on equivalent for starting school?) etc
Ensure the group is included in any mission planning or vision setting of the church . Have regular meeting s with the church leadership , to look at how connections can be made ensure you are not seen as a stand alone independent group .That you need the prayerful support and help of the whole church .
Keep the wider church update with what is happening. Ask for help. Talk about their ministry. Share good practice and link up with other groups
Loose leaf A5 file that can be added to - with action songs, prayers used in group. As a new prayer/song is introduced a new sheet is given for their folder. Involve the parents in the leadership of the group even though they may not be committed Christians - yet! involve them in the planning and preparation of sessions, use Open the Book team to present stories, invitations to suitable services in and outside church.
Involve the church, Deanery and Diocese more. Make sure that they tell people what they are doing and how they are doing it.
Make better connections with other church groups so there is a follow on process for the children & parents .Offer courses for parents that are helpful and useful , do transition into school or nursery style services . encourage church congregations to understand the importance of this work ,to pray for the group regularly .
<b>Please give any examples of how toddler groups foster faith and spiritual growth in the home; we are particularly interested in good practice and ideas to share with others.</b>
Play/story/activity bags for families to borrow
Books in the lending library, focussed parenting courses, helping parents recognise the importance of spirituality in a child's life
Giving out faith based take home activities.
Producing a prayer booklet that suggest ways of praying together; making and taking away aids to prayer
i think this is something that a lot of the groups i am aware of struggle with. the nature of my role often means that the groups i am asked to visit are struggling so i dont always get tot see the ones who are doing this well
Take home sheet with ideas - usually from a tots praise rather than a toddler group. Offer Christian parenting groups (or ones with a +ian module) By inviting to church activities based around faith & family (but these are still few and far between).
SADLY I have seen very little evidence of this happening .
This is an area for development.
Some have take away sheets or encourage prayer in the holidays. Some give away books and bibles. Natural friendships and relationships are important here. Having paid workers who also attend church could be important and they provide continuity over the years.
The most I have seen is a lending library where families can borrow toddler bible books and story books.
The Pray away bags

<b>What do you feel are the main barriers for toddler groups in encouraging faith in the home?</b>
lack of resources
Lack of knowledge, understanding or confidence around faith development in the family and with very young children
Parental ignorance and disinterest
People are so busy trying to get what actually happens during the group right that they don't have the time and resources to think about how to encourage faith in the home. Also find that toddler group leaders are very stretched either because they have young children themselves, or because they have other roles within the church, so again, there is the issue of finding time to incorporate this.
Lack of knowledge about the opportunities and ideas in the leaders Lack of time and capacity to pursue different avenues
The mis/pre conceptions a lot of people have about what this means; good/accessible material; being afraid of scaring people away.
lack of ideas of how to do this or confidence that parents would be open to this
grrr - Lack of confidence in leaders
Lack of resources , knowledge , experience of the leaders .Feel they will frighten people away , too much trouble !
There are several I am aware of; Lack of funding, very little training or support, communication issues - volunteers are not always comfortable doing this - not sure how to approach this aspect, there are resources available but people are not always confident in using or promoting them, the vision and aim of the groups often the groups do not set out to do this as part of what they do, volunteers are few and these groups often have enough to organise.
I don't think the church in general is good at encouraging faith in homes even for Christian families. Lack of confidence in expressing one's own faith - I think that the Mark Greene LICC sessions on Life on the Frontline could be used. Not being able to see other people 'do' faith in the home - it's part of who we are. Many people who attend toddler groups aren't Christian or aren't interested. So building long-term relationships with people because we like them is crucial.
Parents not having the habit of regular prayer and Bible reading - it is some thing that great granny did! Some leaders of toddler groups don't want to appear too pushy as they fear they will lose the parents good will, lack of ideas and knowledge of resources available (and don't wish to admit it).
Resources and ideas.
Again lack of knowledge and confidence from leaders and parents , this is a new area for most .
<b>Please write down ideas you have for how toddler groups could do more to foster faith and spiritual growth in the home</b>
Need more understanding and access to resources first
Easy to use resources that are available to pick up and go.
Employ a dedicated Under 5s adviser



Providing seasonal prayer booklets with different suggestions, activities (not necessarily daily as people often find that difficult); providing ideas of how faith and spiritual growth might be encouraged through everyday activities eg chatting whilst eating or thinking about nature when in the park.
firstly building relationships with the parents, parents faith needs to be fostered first, especially if not church families. cant expect parents with no knowledge or experience of faith at home to be able to foster their children's faith. parents need to be confident and volunteers need to have resources and experience to support
Simple takeaway activities sheet , a short prayer to take away ,pray away bags , story bags to borrow , have a lending library of Christian storybooks , a question and answer time , or anonymous question box , where answers could be posted on a Bulletin board .Leaflets and hand-out's on different aspects of the Christian faith for parents .
Develop a vision and ethos that encourages faith and spirituality. Ask a member of the clergy team to come along and support their work and chat to the group. Provide take home leaflets - include a story with questions to ponder with a related creative prayer idea. Use social networks - closed group - offering encouragement - share links to useful websites for ideas and activities to use at home.
Christian families having relationships with others. More, better and jargon-free stories and other resources to give away. carrying on in the holidays so that relationships can continue having meet-ups on other days so that partners and siblings can attend having Alpha and parenting courses with a creche.
Lots of support in the group, people to show 'how it can be done', use websites and apps in group, people to talk about 'how they did it'. Dioceses to have more under Fives specialists to help in this.
Its about creating simple fun ways to do this , not heavy and intimidating .Simple leaflets or things like the "Pray away" bag , little booklets , a different takeaway sheet each week with a couple of very simple easy ideas which a church could easily print off and be cost effective . Have a very simple prayer corner for children/families to use and maybe things they could borrow from that. We created a simple prayer area using a large garden umbrella dressed in floaty fabrics with some prayer ideas in it and also it gives a chance for some quite space ,It enables children to be seen but also allows them some space there are two teddies called "Holy" and "Spirit" these are used to cuddle when the children are praying and can be taken home . We have created a prayer sensory basket for families to borrow of the week .
<b>Please give any examples of how toddler groups are working with their churches towards a common goal; we are particularly interested in good practice and ideas to share with others.</b>
Support of Church Dads for the Who let the dads out sessions, advertising Holiday clubs, family services etc
Using the toddler groups as a tool to strengthen church / school links (e.g. advertising the toddler group in school, and advertising the school at the toddler group, sharing resources with the school).
The establishment of Pre school Praise which the PCC/whole church were informed about, took onboard together. A church where the church has to be reordered every week so the group can happen - a team comes in the night before to do this then the following evening to put everything back.
st marys loughton, all saints highams park and st johns langdon hills are all good examples of churches that have a common goal and toddler group, alpha, pre-school, sunday church are all part of this. knowing the local area and trying to meet the needs of the local people is a good starting point. st marys also runs a food bank and groups for older children, youth, older people. all the churches 'activities' being in sync and working towards a common goal needs to be an expectation of the leadership to be really successful
Awareness is growing and churches are coming to see the need for this
The toddler church mentioned earlier in the questionnaire .

One toddler group runs weekly during term time and once a month has Toddler Church afterwards, lunch is provided for those that choose to stay, the church gathers in the worship space for a dramatized story, a short reflection and prayer.

Where key leaders, especially clergy are participate actively and enjoy welcoming new people. Where toddler groups are given a high profile.

A toddler church is now involved in a café church , families are invited to attend a " Start" course on Christian basics .The vicar goes in and chats informally about Baptism .

**What do you feel are the main barriers that hinder toddler groups and their churches working together more closely?**

Poor communication leading to disparity in mission or no mission

Lack of recognition that Toddler Groups have immense potential for outreach

Often toddler groups are forgotten because then run during the week and there is a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Churches need to recognise the opportunities for outreach that the toddler groups offer and make sure this is valued. Often if the clergy do not have a 'heart' for children's work (or work with under 5's) then they sometimes underestimate the potential of the toddler groups in growing the church.

Lack of vision/capacity in leaders of churches/toddler groups

It can be difficult if a incumbent comes into a situation with a long standing group that has grown away from the church; people often don't value a particular ministry if they don't see it as relevant to themselves; PCC/churches have sometimes been happy to let someone get on and do it without keeping the links alive.

sometimes over time the helpers end up not being church members sometimes the church leadership do not recognise the value of the toddler group the toddler group helpers sometimes dont feel values for the important work they are doing sometimes its just a communication thing and the church dont know what the toddler group do and vica versa

There is a lack of connection , few people see the benefits in such a group , even supposed Christian leaders of groups I have found are often reluctant to share their faith or even say they go to church ! Also the issue of the child minders who attend the groups and use it purely to amuse children and scoff at any Christian input , making it difficult for those leading the groups .Sadly paid child-minders are often a very disruptive element indeed .

Toddler groups run during the week and the main services are on a Sunday. Having the people available during the week most people are in work. There is a reluctance to change. The lack of provision in church and some of the traditional services does not make families feel very welcome.

I think I've answered this elsewhere. Churches not seeing toddler groups of strategic importance fundamentally. Not valuing families or seeing that the church is there primarily for the benefit of others. Not understanding the pressures of family life today and that family life has changed for all the reasons that 'Mission-shaped church' said 12 years ago. And it's got worse.

The 'we don't see them in church on Sunday' mentality and when they do come to church - the 'tutting' brigade when they are noisy. Lack of reporting at PCC/APCM.

It is almost exclusively seen as an outreach activity which continues for years and years. If one or two families make it over to the Sunday congregation it is deemed worth doing or it simply stays as a way of 'serving' the community. The main barrier is the opportunity to create disciples is not seen by church leaders or the congregations.

Often they are simply seen as a babysitting /cup of tea and a chat groups !! Very little potential is see in them as being part of the wider church or how important they are , far too often they are seen as an add on .I don't



see mentions of them on church notice sheets either for prayer or the activities that are happening. In some cases the church is to blame in some cases its the leaders themselves .

**Please write down ideas you have for how toddler groups could work better with their churches**

Toddler groups genuinely valued by PCC & clergy as important part of church mission. Church to approach toddler group to get better understanding of what they are doing and the support they need

Support from church leadership in raising the profile of Toddler Groups amongst the whole Church

Better communication with the churches - instead of quietly getting on with it, remembering to share the good things are happening, asking the church to pray for the group regularly, reporting regularly to the PCC on what the group is getting up to.

Toddler group leader should report to PCC once a year at least and be consulted any changes to buildings

It has to be seen as part of whole church ministry; churches should make an effort to be informed about the group and regularly pray for those attending and the leaders; leaders should be commissioned annually.

talk to each other find a common goal church leadership support this goal in practical ways

From the outset , decide what your want to do but do this in conjunction with your church leadership , do not go it alone ensure that you communicate the vision and take everyone along with you .Lack of communication breeds fear and that causes problems. Have a real clarity for the group is this something simply for a cup of tea and a chat or is it to spread the gospel ? Have regular meeting with the church leadership ensure your group is always on the prayer list , perhaps have leader on the PCC .Send regular reports/updates to the PCC .Have a focused Sunday service on the toddler group followed by a lunch or an afternoon tea? Have people pray for individual families or children "Prayer grannies" maybe older people cannot help in the group but they can Pray! Invite families to other festival services keep good lines of communication open .Clergy to visit the group

Feedback - share with the wider church about what is happening. Take photographs, with permission, to display ask for help and support.

The leaders could be valued highly, their views regularly sought and offers of help given. There could be more groups on a Saturday like 'Who let the Dads out' so that others who work all week could participate. Clergy, the PCC and other leaders need to make the effort to attend them and engage, not take them for granted. Sunday provision for 3s and unders needs to be overhauled and made excellent so that when young families attend church there is a wonderful welcome awaiting them and a non shhh-free congregation!

Regular intergenerational events/services when everyone is learning together.

More congregations getting involved and building relationships with the families attending. Perhaps 'adopting a granny' scheme or similar so families know they are loved and cared for generally by the congregation but also specifically through one member.

It needs to come from the top so Diocese need to step up to the mark and help show the importance of these groups as being part of growth for the church .If we can connect with families at this stage we have far more chance of them becoming involved in church life . So "Moving on" services , Christmas services etc all short and informal could be held in the churches , any documentation coming from diocese could include Toddler groups in statics etc .Better training for leaders to equip them in working with the church and being more proactive in asking to be involved !

**Please give any examples of how toddler groups are supported by your diocese; we are particularly interested in good practice and ideas to share with others.**

Specific training events plus workshops at wider training days
Regular newsletter aimed at under 5's workers, participation and daily prayers (tweeted) during National Month of Prayer for toddler groups, early years adviser available for phone, email & face to face support on request
Recently had a 'Why Under 5's Count' conference with appropriate speakers and a choice of workshops. Partnered with ROOTs to offer 'Tending Tiny Disciples' training. Under 5's adviser in post, although only working 1 day per week therefore would be more effective if had more hours. Under 5's Adviser delivered presentation on church toddler groups to Primary Heads and Clergy at 'Heads and Incumbents' conference. Under 5's Adviser attends termly networking meetings at various venues throughout the diocese to offer advice and support. New resources shared via website / newsletter. Diocesan events organised which are suitable to invite toddler group families to, so that they can feel part of the wider church family. Under 5's adviser offers 1:1 support to parishes where requested.
Inclusion of ideas for Under 5s in training for Authorised Lay Ministry for Children's Ministers Ideas included in Core Skills Course Inclusion of Seminars aimed at those working in Under 5s for bi annual training day Inclusion of needs of under 5s when discussing strategy with churches
I am relatively new in post so in the process of trying to map where groups are, learn about the different contexts then hopefully create a network through which people can share best practice etc. We are involved in 2 resource days in the NW in the autumn at which there will be an element of good practice workshops.
Sparrows Early Years Network is a network for all under 5's workers in the diocese (pre-school, nursery, toddler groups & Sunday creche/groups) anyone can join, free to sign up, receive a termly newsletter of ideas, news, training and networking opportunities. I offer over the phone and email support and advice for groups and will visit groups upon request for more in depth support
We regularly provide training events on different elements of working with under 5's both in church and in toddlers . From this we have gone on to develop a closed email group of those working in this area to be able to ask questions and share information with each other This group also attend regular meet ups for friendship and support . We have invited Care for the family to lead training in this area also we have consulted with groups on the issue of "Welcome" to families.
In the diocese there has been storytelling, puppetry and Claymation workshops. Godly Play training. Training has also included Liturgy and Play with Carolyn Pritchard. The Messy Church meet up provided creative ideas for prayer. A recent event included ideas for quiet time and space, art and drama to encourage those involved with developing the spirituality of children and young people.
Children's work day conference had a session on toddler groups. Day conferences are advertised. Children's spirituality courses are offered Early years mission adviser available for advice, visits and encouragement.
Discipleship Project Officer as part of a larger remit, supports parishes who are setting up toddler groups as part of their longer term strategy. A better idea would be to have a specialist working at least half time to have the time to proactively to go out and encourage, support and grow the numbers of Christian toddler groups through out the diocese. this person would also work on ensuring better links with the congregations for prayer support as well as practical support.
We have dealt with the issue of under 5's areas in church through training , we have looked at storytelling , sensory boxes/bags etc we encourage people to come to training we offer .We run a child friendly church award scheme of which one of the criteria is the issue of under 5's and the church .This highlights the importance of this work and enables churches to address this with the support of the Diocese. I have created a closed email group of those working with under5s and who have attended the training we have provided .

through this they support and share ideas with each other .This came about as a result of them wanting to meet together and support each other .
<b>What do you feel are the main barriers for your diocese giving better support to toddler groups?</b>
Lack of officer time
Time, very large diocese, one part time Early years adviser
Under 5's adviser is only employed for 1 day per week, so would ideally be employed for more hours so they could support more parishes.
Lack of capacity
Still getting to know the area; finding out where they are; people haven't thought of asking for support.
time, there are more than 600 churches in the diocese covering 1500 square miles, many churches have some form of under 5's work in the form of toddler group, preschool or sunday groups. I have 2 days a week to support them
Lack of a dedicated under 5's worker , not fully appreciating the importance of this work
Communication - there needs to be a dialogue between what the diocese can provide and how this relates to the needs of the individuals that require support.
Lack of awareness of how strategically important they are. Taking them for granted. Poor resources Lack of money put into them the poor cousin to youthgroups feeling that there is little fruit in terms of new people turning up on Sundays from toddler groups
Lack of finance to employ a specialist (current post holder has only .25 time for 0 - 11years!)
As Children's Work Adviser, I rarely get invited or asked to help toddler groups unless they are new ones setting up. (Twice in 8 years). I think many have run for years and don't think they need advice or support. I have no database of where or if churches are running toddler groups. When I sent out my own survey to all clergy to help with this survey, I got 1 response from over 500 churches in our Dioceses. The main barrier is the Dioceses (and therefore my) lack of knowledge about groups that exist.
no under 5s specialist employed, however we do have volunteers with specialism in this area who are active in supporting .
<b>Please write down ideas you have for how toddler groups could be better supported by your diocese</b>
A specific under 5s officer
Support is available if accessed through network and adviser. Website could be better with resources available on it
Creating own resources for toddler groups as well as directing people to resources already available. Continuing to offer training relevant to toddler group leaders. Having the staff to be able to offer more 1:1 support and bespoke training.
Networking; building up relevant resources; pointing people in the right direction for further support.
some easy downloadable resources churches/groups supporting each other in local networks is the best way i have found to gain support and share ideas. i have started to encourage this with the national month of prayer for toddler groups in June but the take up from groups was poor. i imagine that the volunteers are busy people
Employ the above.

A network of leaders - perhaps a meet up or conference could be arranged for the toddler groups that often work in isolation and create more opportunities to listen and to share ideas and good practice. Providing help and support where needed.
ploughing money and resources into under 3s training clergy to communicate with children removing the requirement for people to attend certain churches to get into church schools. Relationships between young parents are so important especially between church parents and others. Encourage parents to attend their own church toddler group.
Part time/full time specialist employed to instigate and support Under fives in toddler groups and church contexts including multigenerational ideas
<b>Please give any examples of how toddler groups are supported by the Church of England/Church in Wales</b>
Visits, support with specific areas, training, setting up a new group,
By funding this research!
this research is a great start. most of the children's support is aimed at school age children, it is very hard to find books, stories, resources for under 3's
Some churches allocate a small budget to help fund this work.
I don't know
1277 website and Facebook pages, Going for Growth website
1277 network ,
<b>Please write down any ideas you have for how toddler groups could be better supported by the Church of England/Church in Wales</b>
Raising the profile of toddler groups so that church leaders understand the potential and importance of the groups. Offering appropriate training and producing resources.
Giving opportunity for resource events in the NW
promoting the great value of groups to bishops to filter down to clergy encouraging diocese to focus on under 5's alongside children and youth
Raising the profile and contribution of these groups. Link in with Local Authorities and other agencies to become part of wider multi disciplinary care and support for families. Ensure that these groups are registered with the DDE to develop transition links with schools.
I think that national initiatives don't really work so well as each area of the country is different. I think diocesan support is more important. I think that all bishops and archdeacons need to ask each parish they visit whether there is a toddler group. If not, why not. If there is, do clergy make it a priority to attend them. If not, they should. Bishops should visit more toddler groups and read stories at them. Ordinands need to be told that toddler groups are key to church growth and that they must go. Clergy selection conferences should have criteria which includes being able to communicate to parents and toddlers.
By raising the profile and importance of this work , perhaps through a marketing campaign, article in church times ,
<b>What is your role, and what responsibility do you have with regard to toddler groups in your diocese?</b>
Children's missionary - expected to support toddler groups and provide training
Supportive

Leader of an individual Toddler Group
Diocesan Adviser for Children's Work (Under 5's)
Support and training/visits
Children's Work Officer - supporting groups
early years adviser my responsibilities are: Provide support for those involved in Christian mission with younger children and their parents, promoting a high standard of practice across the Diocese Develop a network of younger children's workers to provide peer support, resources and signpost to training.
Diocesan Children & families ministry adviser
Children and Families missionary
I work as a Children, Youth & Families Ministry Advisor in Monmouth. My role is part-time and I work in the South Wales Valley areas of our diocese. I work alongside two other colleagues, one covers the rural areas and the other covers the city areas. Our role is to support and advise, equip and enable others to engage in mission and ministry. We are able to support and advise toddler groups in our areas and provide them with support. As a team we are also able to provide training.
I am the Early Years Mission Adviser . My role is to encourage the setting up of new toddler groups and to encourage existing ones to be more missional,.
Discipleship Project Officer - support parishes running and setting up toddler groups as much as time allows. Use newsletters to promote good practice and promote resources available, setting up some resource pages on the diocesan website.
My role is to provide support and training for any work churches are doing with 0-11s so toddler groups fall into this category. Unfortunately, I've never had much uptake from Toddler leaders and I don't know that any of my information about what I offer ever reaches them.