

Playgroup

Can be

Missional

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And to the many Christians involved in playgroup

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Playgroup can be Missional

INTRODUCTION

I have worked as coordinator of Early Childhood ministries for the Baptist Union of Victoria for 5 years. Most of my work is in supporting and resourcing Baptist playgroups. I work with more than 85 Baptist churches that run playgroup. Each church runs between 1 and 9 playgroup sessions each week with 8 to 20 families enrolled in each session. Within Victoria alone, it has been estimated that around 600 churches run playgroup each week. I have a sincere passion for playgroup and believe through this program a total culture group – the family- can be introduced to Jesus.

MY VISION IS

For community families to come into a relationship with Jesus through playgroup ministry

This vision gets me out of bed every morning and keeps me focused at all times. Welcome to my world.

Within this paper I will make reference to three of the teams I work with:

- Baptist Early Childhood Team (BECT) – This volunteer team, support our Baptist Churches and the Early Childhood Coordinator. Traditionally this team comprised of adults who had early childhood qualifications and/or extensive experience with playgroup.
- Christian Playgroup Network (CPN) – An interdenominational group with the executive comprising key playgroup people from different denominations. This team was established to link and support Christian playgroup leaders.
- Evangelism Victoria (EV) – The Baptist Union evangelism team of which I am part.

PLAYGROUP IS

Playgroup is a group experience where young children aged nought (0) to five (5) and their parents, usually mothers, meet together once a week for mutual enrichment, to play, to learn, to make friends and to have fun together. Every playgroup is different because it reflects the individuality of its group members.

Playgroup as we know it, is unique to Australia.

As Kaye Plowman, President of the Christian Playgroup Network (CPN) states:

“The National Agenda for Early Childhood 2003 states that parents find playgroups very helpful. This is because they not only offer play-based learning and socialisation, but also peer support and positive modelling.

The Agenda also notes that a good start from birth means recognising that child wellbeing is closely linked to their parents’ wellbeing and that parents do their job best when they are well informed and supported.

Childhood programs are most effective when they support parents’ active participation in the children’s early learning and development as well as provide regular, consistent opportunities for guided interactions and play with other children.

For many parents, playgroups provide this information and support. The added value is that babies, toddlers and young children also benefit from playgroups as they are regularly exposed to new learning opportunities and socialisation through play. More than 150,000 children regularly attend playgroups Australia wide.”

For a long time churches and leaders have focused their playgroups on children and the program and while there is no doubt that the program is very important for children, there needs to be more awareness of the needs playgroup can meet for parents. Parents are often attracted to playgroup because of the program for their children, but they also experience support, encouragement, and acceptance for themselves. This is a God given

environment for “friendship evangelism” as relationships are often the life beat of playgroup. People are coming into a relationship with Jesus as they see it lived out before them. We need to get to know and accept community people by:

- getting alongside them
- showing love
- caring for
- listening to and
- showing interest in them

I would just like to make the point that the people coming into a relationship with Jesus are being loved into the kingdom. People are drawn because they see Jesus in the Christians involved in playgroup. This is happening through friendships and relationships. Grace is coming before truth.

The story so far

Recently I have reflected on what I have discovered over the past five years. I have observed that there is a general sense amongst the Baptist community that this ministry is geared to the care and development of children and to a lesser extent towards parents. However, if we focussed more on parents, more people would come to know and follow Jesus.

I do not want to forget the importance of playgroup for children, but I believe their needs to be more awareness of the adults who bring their children to playgroup each week. This would enforce the vision of the Baptist Union of Victoria, which states “We help Victorian Baptists to share the love of Jesus with everyone”.

I hope it will be helpful to share my journey.

Within a very short time of starting work with the Baptist Union of Victoria I started questioning the apparent lack of understanding, awareness or indeed interest in playgroup ministry. I was regularly being told that more families were coming to playgroup each week than attending church on a Sunday. Balanced with this was the realisation that the potential of playgroup being missional was mostly not recognised.

It was around this time that I seriously began to search out playgroups that were being intentional in mission. At that time I discovered the normal Christian playgroup consisted of one Christian leader, one Christian helper and 20 community families. One of the first obstacles I came across was around the issue of success. My observation was that the numbers attending playgroup clearly decided “success” by most churches. In other words the bigger the group the more successful it was seen to be. When I started asking questions about how playgroup was impacting adults for Jesus, the responses included statements like “we are here to sow seeds”. I sincerely began to wonder what that meant, and dare I say it; have come to believe it is often an easy way out. Please don’t misunderstand me. Seeds can be sown at playgroup, but so too can adults come to know the Lord.

In visiting Christian playgroups around our state I noted prayerfully what I have come to refer to as the principles to playgroup being missional:

1. Where faithful prayer is considered to be a vital and integral part of the playgroup, it’s ministry and outreach is effective and successful.
2. The playgroup is seen by the church as part of its total ministry and is supported by its leadership. Not only initial, but also ongoing encouragement is given to all those involved.
3. Having a committed person who is passionate about playgroup as a ministry and can build a team around them.
4. The fact does remain that Christian playgroups are different to community playgroups. It is important and helpful for churches to explore questions, which relate to the differences between community and Christian playgroups. For example:

What is a Christian playgroup?

A Christian playgroup is a recognized ministry of an individual church. It may have Christian content in the program e.g. Christian books are read, Christian songs are sung, craft activities have a Christian basis.

Why are we different?

Christian playgroups are leader led. The leader is a Christian from the church, or sometimes she/he may be from another church. Most Christian playgroups ask little help of the community families in the running of the playgroup and the program is planned and organised by Christians from the church. Secular families simply come and enjoy. Christian playgroups have a strong Christian ethos.

Why offer a Christian playgroup?

Playgroup is attracting many community families into the church building. It not only meets a need in local communities, but also gives a platform for Christian people to share their Christian faith and give support to young families as they bring up children in today's society. Many churches now recognize playgroup as the church program that is bringing in the most unchurched people each week. When we look at the different ministries of our churches, playgroup is the one ministry that brings many community people with little or no church background into our church each week. It has actually been said by some churches that each week more families come to playgroup than to church.

Is there any difference between us and the local community playgroup down the road?

Christian playgroups are different to secular playgroups. They are:

- Led by Christians
 - Supported by child free adults
 - An environment where community families can be potentially cared for
 - Providing a program where community families can simply arrive and enjoy playgroup
 - Possibly offering a Christian program e.g. songs, books, activities
 - Fostering a Christian ethos
5. A mission statement, in line with the vision of the church has been developed in conjunction with church leadership.
 6. Interaction happens when the number of adults is small enough to foster relationships. We (BECT) recommend 8 to 12 adults. This number includes Christians and all leaders.
 7. Meaningful relationships are developing when a significant number of Christians, including child-free adults are involved in the group.
 8. Playgroup leaders and helpers include a variety of ages, with or without children, men or women.
 9. Friendship evangelism is proving to be more effective in outreach than the Christian curriculum model. Relationships are the key, not the program.
 10. Regular visits to a playgroup session by someone from the church leadership team.
 11. Informing all families of the Christian perspective of the playgroup shows integrity. This is being done verbally and in all written information.
 12. Bridge building activities, which link the playgroup families and the church families together at organized functions.
 13. Calling on willing church people to help when playgroup families are in need.
 14. Where a playgroup leader (or their spouse) is part of the church leadership team there is a raised playgroup profile.

15. Caring and sharing is the heart of playgroup ministry. E.g. celebrating children's and adult's birthdays, a meal provided, flowers and gifts, intentionally connecting people with similar interests (taking advantage of natural friendships).
16. Church people are being appointed to the playgroup leadership team whose specific responsibilities are pastoral care, evangelism, communication and special events.
17. Where the church community is continually updated about playgroup information, there is increased interest, involvement and prayer.

This list is not exhaustive and it includes principles that are currently being successfully used in many Baptist church playgroups to bring people into a relationship with Jesus. As a result of this I have encouraged Christian playgroups to prayerfully implement them.

Without a doubt two of the most challenging principles are points six (6) and seven (7);

Most of our playgroups have a large number of community families and one or two Christians attending. If the key is relationships, how is it possible to foster relationships between community and Christian if the Christians aren't there? How do we challenge the idea that success equals numbers attending? How do we change the thinking of churches from the income playgroup brings in to the families attending? How do we transition playgroups to being missional? How do we encourage our churches to see that we need Christians who have a passion for the adults, as well as the children involved in this ministry? These are some of the questions I do not have the answers for.

In training and speaking to churches I, and more recently others, began to speak about these points. Looking back I can clearly see how confronting and challenging this list was to hear. Most Christian playgroups exhibited very few of these key points. It also challenged the people involved to realise that the adults coming to playgroup were significant also. It was after one such training session that Moolap Baptist, (who I will profile later) decided to re look at how they were doing playgroup.

As the message started to get out, I waited to see what would happen. Would a church take on these points? Would churches start to recognise the missional potential? Would more playgroup families come to know the Lord?

Two years ago I was invited to Sydney to speak at an interdenominational playgroup conference. The two organising churches were Cronulla Baptist and Kingsway Church of Christ. It was at that time that I met Yvette Wynne from Kingsway Church of Christ, and discovered a playgroup that truly had a focus on mission to the adults in playgroup. Over a 5-year period more than 30 women and men plus family members have come to know Jesus. Kingsway's playgroup journey has been helpful in showing us principles and helping us learn and explore relevant issues. For example who comes to playgroup? Why do they come? Are they spiritually open? Is a Christian playgroup different from a community playgroup? What are the differences? My intention is not to set Kingsway up as a model to copy, nor is it to duplicate Kingsway but to explore the principles of a missional playgroup. Every Christian playgroup should be, and is individual, reflecting the community it is in.

My journey with Yvette led me down an interesting path. I discovered through Yvette that many of the adults coming to playgroup are "soft hearted" and open to the gospel. In many cases God is ahead of us. How wonderful is that! This simple truth has opened a whole new world to the Christians involved in playgroup. We (BECT) have now started training on discernment. It has been exciting to come out of a training session and hear leaders saying things like " Now I know ...Sue... is soft hearted".

It was earlier this year I started to come to the realisation that even with all this positive activity happening it still appears not as many people are coming to know Jesus through playgroup as there could be. I began to wonder why and from observation and discussion I have come to what I think are some important discoveries. They are:

- Some myths about playgroups (Appendix 1);
- A number of obstacles that inhibit a more productive and effective ministry

The list of myths (Appendix 1) shows those myths that have been damaging to playgroup. If playgroup:

1. Is only for families with young children;
2. Is only a program for children;
3. Can only impact those who have some Christian awareness;
4. Has to be run by mothers;
5. Is a short-term ministry; and
6. Only has Christians involved who have a love of children.

Then I believe this restricts the missional potential greatly.

I have also come up with a list of fourteen (14) points that I have observed as obstacles to playgroup being missional:

1. Playgroups often appear to “sit alone” with the church and church leadership having little input, involvement or understanding of this ministry

I have given a lot of thought to this issue. I wonder if it may be because they can often be independent i.e. led by capable people, not needing funding because playgroup is self funded

2. Playgroups have not had a history of impacting on the lives of the people involved for Jesus.

I agree with his statement but believe we now know enough to change things.

3. Community families coming to playgroup will see the connection between what we do i.e. the caring and supporting and the reason we do this i.e. our faith in Jesus

I have learnt through the testimonies I have heard that people often do see us as caring and supporting but although they may even state “there is something different about you”, they will also say they didn’t connect that difference in us to Jesus.

4. Christians don’t have secular friends

This is very challenging and concerning, but is a fact with many Christians I meet.

5. Christians don’t know how to and/ or don’t want to make friends of the community families.

6. Christians don’t want their children associating with community children

7. It isn’t my job

I have often been told by playgroup leaders “It is not my job to convert them. I run the program, the leadership needs to do the rest”

8. Apathy

It appears to me at times that there is no awareness or desire to evangelise community playgroup families. Do our church people have a passion for the lost?

9. Size of church

Comments like “I came to this church because I like the size of it. I don’t want it to grow bigger”

10. Team

Playgroup needs adults who love children, adults who love adults and adults who love both. An obstacle can exist if a church chooses to support one model of leadership. It has been extremely exciting for me to hear of churches that are choosing to empower Christians who have a passion for evangelism into playgroup ministry

11. The program

I have discovered that many playgroup people believe the way we show/share our Christian faith is through the program i.e. Christian songs, books and activities. I believe, as a friend says "you find Jesus in people not in a craft activity". Many will actually say, "I can do the Christian program, but I can't do the friendship stuff."

12. A lack of awareness and understanding of how we (Christians) are perceived by non-Christians

13. We often seem to wear "masks" with each other and try to present a picture of "everything is fine with me and my family"

If we can't be real with each other, how can we be real with the people we meet and befriend?

14. Our Christian language

Are most Christians even aware we speak a different language, and in particular the Christian words we use often have no meaning to a community person.

I found this task very difficult, and was consistently in prayer about what I was seeing and hearing. It is interesting to note that I have become aware of many of these myths and obstacles, as I have been told about them mostly as reasons as to why mission can't and doesn't happen.

It was Ron Buckland who I am studying under who first challenged me to develop this list. At the time I was probably thinking something like. "If we can recognise the myths and obstacles with Gods help we can start to address this list." Again my list is not exhaustive, but weighs very heavily with me. I am sure this list is not just relevant to the playgroup ministry in our churches. I decided to "test the waters:" and so recently I asked a playgroup coordinator to list the obstacles to playgroup being missional as she saw it. She came up with many of the points I have come up with. This was both reassuring and confronting. I would like to include her introduction and conclusion, to give you insight into the heart of not one, but I believe many adults involved in playgroup ministry. She has given me permission to include part of her work anonymously. This leader knew I would be speaking to you today and I believe much of what she says is directed at you:

Introduction part of letter

When our Lord Jesus was here He said and did many amazing things. He was, after all, here to change the world for all time. Amongst all that He said there are 2 statements that I find particularly pertinent for playgroup.

1: Go and make disciples of all the nations (Matt.28: 19a).

2: The harvest is truly plentiful, but the labourers are few. (Matt.9: 37).

It is difficult to actually lay down the obstacles in evangelising in playgroup because it appears to be a criticism of our churches and the leaders who teach us, because we live in a culture that relies very heavily on the teaching from the pulpit. Therefore before I start I want to apologize in advance because I don't want to criticise but I do want to try and resolve important issues so that playgroup can be an effective tool for God, otherwise I have to ask myself how much longer can I go on in this ministry, no matter how precious it is.

Conclusion to letter

This, more than anything else is what distresses me. Are we so self-centred that we have forgotten how much God loves the world, and how desperately He wants relationship with them? Many of our churched mums have grown up in the church and have no idea how difficult life is without a loving God walking beside you through difficulties, and quite frankly, they don't care.

So Heather, here are our blockages. I wish I had the answers for them, but just as the sin of the world is Self, so it is in the church, and only a revelation from God to the leadership so they can teach it can change that.

At times it is hard to share the burden of these wonderful leaders, who so passionately share my vision, but then I remind myself how much harder it is for them to walk the road they do. Playgroup missional people feel the burden heavily. At times walking into a playgroup can be a tough physical and emotional experience. If we feel the burden for these community families, how much more must God feel it? Part of the challenge is that many Christian playgroups see themselves as offering a “nice program for pre-schoolers of the community”. I know God’s purpose for playgroup is much bigger than this.

I am looking for ways in which these OBSTACLES AND MYTHS can be addressed and hopefully overcome and I would be interested in your input on this.

The principles to playgroup being missional have been instrumental in many of the testimonies I have heard from community people who have come into a relationship with Jesus through playgroup. I am also encouraged by the increasing number of churches of all denominations who are not only seeing the impact possible but also actively working towards having a stronger focus on friendship evangelism.

So where am I now, where are we (BECT, CPN, EV) now. We have come to realise that playgroup can be missional, but there is a lot to be done in order for our playgroups to become missional. Three exciting happenings for us are:

- Next week we have the first gathering of Baptist Victorian playgroup leaders who have a passion and focus for their playgroup to be missional.
- EV has developed a workshop entitled “Grace Unleashed”. This is a seminar we run in individual Baptist churches. Part of this workshop is a presentation on playgroup as missional.
- We are planning training, a networking day to look at the multiple levels of playgroup being missional. The day will cover such things as:
 - Keys to playgroup being missional
 - Discernment in playgroup
 - Blocks and myths
 - How do we take the next step

In regard to this last sub-point “How do we take the next step “ I would like to comment.

One consistently made comment is “I am here to sow seeds”, but I wonder and ask “ what if you are the person God has placed in the path of this person to introduce him/her to Jesus.” The second comment is around another common response “God can be found in the glass of water I give, or the Christian craft I organise”. I have learnt through the testimonies I have heard that most community people do not connect what we do to God in a significant way. I have heard comments like “ I thought it was her hormones” and “There’s something different about her (playgroup Christian) that I was attracted to and wanted but I didn’t know what it was”. I have discovered that although essential, the caring and sharing is not enough. At some stage Jesus needs to come into the conversation. I have also discovered this is seen to be impossible for many people involved in playgroup ministry. What do we do with this challenge?

MISSIONAL PLAYGROUPS

At the same time I have also identified some of the characteristics of groups that are being effective in seeing people come into a relationship with Jesus. These can be shared as part of the answer to the obstacles and myths just mentioned.

I would know like to give you an overview profile of three churches. You will find the extended version of each of these church profiles as an appendix

Eltham Baptist, Melbourne, Victoria	- Appendix 2
Kingsway Community Church, Sydney, N.S.W.	- Appendix 3
Moolap Baptist, Geelong, Victoria	- Appendix 4

Example 1: Eltham Baptist (Victoria)

Around 13 years ago one of the women from Eltham Baptist was encouraged by her Pastor to start a playgroup. The playgroup started with four (4) women from the church and four (4) women from the community. The emphasis of the playgroup was on friendship. Of that first group the four (4) community mums came to know the Lord. It was then decided this was a good model to run with and so the pattern was set. Today Eltham runs six (6) playgroups with four (4) community mums/dads and four (4) Christian men/women in each group.

Raelene is one of the adults who has come to know the Lord through Eltham Baptist playgroup. I have met Raelene and she shares her testimony as part of the Playgroup presentation for the "Grace Unleashed" workshop run by EV.

Raelene talks openly of coming along to playgroup with her bottle of Prozac and her two (2) pre school children. It was because of the relationship that developed with the "A team" as Raelene came to think of three (3) Christians involved in playgroup that Raelene first experienced "unconditional love". A two-year journey led her from no awareness of God to a decision to become a follower of Jesus

Example 2: Kingsway Community Church (Church of Christ, Sydney)

Kingsway is the first Christian playgroup I had contact with who started because two (2) women in the church had a passion to connect with women in the community. From day one the focus was on the women who came to playgroup. The children and program was the means to get them there, and not the main focus. A sentence I have heard Yvette say many times is " Instead of spending two (2) hours preparing the craft activity why not spend two (2) hours having a cup of coffee with one of the playgroup mums." This is a radical thought for most involved in playgroup. As Yvette also says " The only Christian content we have in our playgroups are US, the people! The Christian leaders bring Jesus to them and He gives life, love and hope to hurting and lonely women."

I will finish my session with part of a video from Kingsway. This video shows snippets of a number of testimonies from adults who have come to know the Lord through Playgroup. To read the testimony of Elizabeth refer to Appendix 5. Elizabeth came to know our Lord through relationships developed at playgroup.

I believe Kingsway is an example of a missional playgroup. I hope you can begin to comprehend the significance of playgroup ministry, if God willing, the focus move to the adults involved.

Example 3: Moolap Baptist (Victoria)

In early 2001 after attending a workshop where I had spoken on the 17 principles (Appendix 3) Moolap Baptist through the then Playgroup coordinator Jennifer Van Groningen decided to transition their 3 large playgroups to 5 smaller playgroups. The playgroups are now coordinated by Georgina, an amazing lady who has a passion for the adults coming to playgroup.

Mark Roberts grew up in a Christian family, but very deliberately turned his back on God around the age of 16-17. Mark talks about marrying a lady who came from a Christian family also, and that this was a factor in them getting together

Mark is a playgroup Dad, and again it was through getting to know three (3) Christians who attended his playgroup session he decided to come back to God. Mark's testimony is included in Appendix 6.

IN SUMMARY

I appreciate that my heart may appear to be overly “evangelistic”. That is not my intention. What I long for is that part of the philosophy or aim of the ministry of playgroup includes the desire and working intentionally towards people having an opportunity to enter a relationship with Jesus. I am sure, as well, that we would all agree that the parents who raise the most balanced, healthy and Christ open children are themselves living a relationship with Jesus. They are seeking to live their lives and model Christ-like faith, values and ethics.

Seeing I am sharing my heart, while I am glad that we have an interest in developing new models and contexts for ministry I think that we should be careful that we don't forget ministry to a large sector of our population. I am referring to the culture group of families and children.

Playgroup is a significant and important ministry with a huge potential to speak into the lives of families. My prayer is that as churches start to look seriously at this ministry, and start to address the obstacles and myths that are “stumbling blocks” that we will begin to see many lives brought into the kingdom through playgroup ministry.

APPENDIX 1

Myths

1. That playgroup can only happen if we have young families in our church.

My observation is that the key is a passionate person with a heart for playgroup.

2. That leadership of playgroup is only for the mums with young children in our church.

This is a damaging myth. If leadership is left only to this group they will often burn out.

3. This is a short-term ministry

Another damaging myth. Again I have consistently observed that the passionate person will often continue in this ministry for a long time.

It is also my observation that people who are thinking "short term" think differently about ministry compared with those who see it as "long term"

4. This ministry is predominately about a program for children

This ministry is about relationships between adults. What happens with the children is and should be important, but what is happening with the adults is critical.

5. The Christians involved need to have a passion for children

Yes and no. It is important that there are people who are part of this ministry who do have a love for children, but we also need Christians who have a love for the adults. Often in our playgroups this second group is missing.

6. That people coming to know the Lord have God, church or Christians in their background

Although some do I have discovered that most don't and that infact the majority of adults coming to playgroup have no God, church or Christian background. It is also interesting to note that God is working in these people before we Christians come along. Through testimonies I have discovered some of this group do acknowledge a former "God awareness", although others only realise it was God after coming to know Him.

APPENDIX 2

Eltham Baptist, Melbourne, Victoria

Church profile

The churches mission statement is "to build relationships with God and people": That is; us with God, us with each other and us with mankind (those not in relationship with God).

The church is seen to exist for the community of believers within it and to represent God within the community.

The church believes it is not by accident that we are born in this day and age and live where we do. They believe God shapes them to fulfil His greater purpose.

Evangelism and playgroup

- Work with likeminded people & form a team
- Agree to love God, each other & 'others'
- Define your mission, vision, purpose
- Develop a structure/basic program/set of guidelines/boundaries
- Pray intentionally & be disciplined (the HS does the convicting)
- Balance the number of Christians & 'others' in your group
- Keep the group number small enough for everyone to interact (approx 12 adults max)
- Know that kindness speaks loudest!
- Remember that people matter more than programs - respect where they are at
- Christian content is unnecessary - people already know that they are attending a church sponsored event
- Putting time into people & keeping structure basic impacts relationships
- Be advocates for families, know names, remember details & include them in some way
- Earn the right to present Jesus - Is He recognised in you? Are you a genuine friend? - Admit your own struggles!
- Be spiritual-pray and be practical-respond to need & celebrations
- Drip Gods love/ways into there lives
- Spend more time in contact: phone call, meet for coffee, invite to your place
- Use simple language to speak of your faith, prayer, church & the goodness of God
- Have a planned opportunity for 'others' who want to investigate faith
- Know how you will involve them when they choose (give responsibility) or refuse (keep on loving)

Playgroup testimony – Raelene

Raelene was a single mum at 18; she was the youngest of four girls. Her dad was 21 when she was born and really wanted a boy

She felt lost and lonely She lost her best friend to drug addiction. Raelene was struggling in her marriage, had been thru IVF, and had a near death experience. She suffered from clinical depression. Her career had stopped. Raelene has 3 children and states she arrived at playgroup with Jack and Holly and a bottle of Prozac. She was struggling to keep living.

And in fact now believes she was psychically, emotionally and spiritually dead. Although on the outside every thing looked in control, her children were in designer cloths (matching of course) her lipstick was always applied, her hair was sleek and stylish. Raelene's house was spick and span but "don't look to close you may see a tear in my eye." says Raelene

Raelene met the A team (as she came to think of them) at playgroup. Three ladies that showed her a love and acceptance she had never experienced before.

The things they did for her

Gave her a birthday party, brought her meals, listened, they were always available to her; they never made her feel like she was a burden. They had her in their house at the most inconvenient times. Raelene says for about 2 years they loved and accepted her just how she was, warts and all.

About the A team

They loved each other, never were they heard to gossip. They had 8 children between them, one child with Cystic Fibrosis.

Raelene shares

"Over a 2-year period we had some lunches together and briefly talked about God, but their was never any pressure, I didn't know what Baptist meant as I had no religious upbringing except for my early primary school days where I went to RE and I invited the brothers home for Sunday lunch and they came. My earthly father is proud to be an atheist."

"How did I get to church? Jack was invited to sing on stage at church. We came in the wrong door but were made to feel so welcome. We were offered coffee after church. The people loved each other. I told my husband Joe that I wanted what they have got and I just had to find out what it was.

After that I felt like I was in Intensive care. What was intensive care like for me, someone new to the kingdom of God? It was - BSF (Bible Study Fellowship), Christianity Explained, interceding through prayer, love, hanging with Christians, being plugged in, time and the best example was Jesus and then it was branching out. What was it I saw? It was Jesus love for me through them, Jesus acceptance of me, Jesus grace for me. I praise God for their obedience, as I may never have known what it feels like to really be alive and simply not just be breathing. I was 33 years old when I met with God. He saved my life and pulled me from the pit but I can see as I look back over the years he was walking beside me all the time. Gods timing is perfect.

Raelene's life now

I'm alive, my now 22-year-old son is getting thru drug addiction, and my Dad and a friend are both in prison. My sister has been set free from addictions and is now a Christian. My husband is a Christian and deacon. I am involved in youth ministry etc

Matthew 28 verses 18,19,20 The Great Commission

Then Jesus came and he said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the father and the son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."

APPENDIX 3

Kingsway Community Church

Yvette shares

How did our playgroup become evangelistic?

When my friend and I first started playgroup it was initially to meet the needs of mothers suffering isolation, as I had done. At this time I was a very junior Christian with little bible knowledge, with no experience in ministry.

Very soon (a few weeks) after we had started I became aware that the purpose of this group was not about a club of mothers but about seeing them come into a loving relationship with Jesus. The reason for this shift in focus was knowing that I wanted more for these mothers, I didn't want them to just have a 'chat' and a break but I wanted their lives to be seriously and radically changed by the transforming power of God as I had been. We couldn't possibly meet all the needs of these hurting and isolated people. But Jesus could! So it was quite by accident that we became evangelistic.

After this my frustration started to grow as after 2 years of serving and loving there was just one mother saved.

I remember crying as nobody had come to know Jesus, and it wasn't uncommon for me to say 'we need an evangelist here.'

So God didn't bring an evangelist magically on the doorstep. Bummer!

What He did do was build me up. I realized that there was a huge difference in me doing something for God and God working through me to speak out and help others.

This is where the big change came and as God spoke through me it was His power and His words that brought truth and life to the mothers at playgroup.

The only Christian content we have in our playgroups is US, the people! The Christian leaders bring Jesus to them and He gives life, love and hope to hurting and lonely women.

In summary, if people are getting saved in playgroups it's because leaders are personally sharing Jesus one on one-it's not program or event related.

If you have female evangelists, skilled in personal evangelism get them into your church if you do not have this luxury in your church, fear not, in our situation God raised me up from scratch without help from others and now there are a small handful of evangelists seeing over 30 women come to know Christ in 6 years.

Playgroup testimony - Elizabeth

Elizabeth shares

The first time I attended Playgroup at Kingsway Community Church I felt my life was like a huge jigsaw puzzle with many missing pieces and I could not find the correct piece to fit the empty space.

My son Andre had a wonderful time at playgroup and still does over a year later, playing with the other children, art and craft, singing songs and making

The mothers at the playgroup as soon as I arrived were not only helpful but also extremely welcoming. On a Tuesday in May 2003 I had a conversation with a lady called Yvette, one of many conversations we would have together. I believe to this day that our Lord new the struggles I was to overcome in the next year and not only supplied me with my family support but also the support of Kingsway Community Church and the mothers I was to meet in playgroup.

APPENDIX 4

Moolap Baptist, Victoria

Georgina shares

Moolap Baptist Playgroup Progression and Changes.

- Moolap Baptist Church came into being in Jan 2000, being the amalgamation of Leopold Baptist & Fenwick Memorial East Geelong Baptist Church. Fenwick had 3 playgroup sessions, Leopold had no playgroup, being a much older congregation
- The playgroup had always been missional; its vision was to be a bridge between the church and community. Its focus was more to the children, with the hope to get children involved in church activities, eg Kids Club, Sunday school and the parents would follow.
- Registrations were on a “first come first served” basis.
- In 2001 each session had on average 20 families, in total there were 62 families (92 children). Twelve of those families were church attendees.
- Playgroup was held in the hall, which meant packing up and putting away all tables, chairs, mats and toys each week. This was a HUGE job, which added to the workload of planning and running a program as well as trying to get to know the parents.
- In March 2001 a group of playgroup leaders and the co-ordinator Jennifer Van Groningen attended a workshop run by BECT (Baptist Early Childhood Team) and were challenged about the way they ran their program and how effective were they in fulfilling their missional statement in reaching the un-churched. Were they so busy with the mechanisms of the program i.e.: setting up, organizing craft etc. that they had no time to develop meaningful relationships? By now the focus had shifted from the children to the parents and caregivers. This workshop brought in a number of changes in term 3.
- **A/** The venue moved to the rear of the building where the Sunday pre-school program was held. This minimized the amount of setting up and putting away. It also made the hall available for a range of new activities for adults.
- **B/** The size and number of sessions changed from 3 large groups, to 5 smaller groups of 12 families. The number of churched families was spread through the groups so all Christians, not just those in leadership, could do relationship building.
- In 2002 registration acceptance changed. Recognizing that meaningful relationships took time to develop and that God had sent particular families to Moolap for a season, existing families would be given first option of returning to their same group. Then existing families needing to change days, **then** new families to playgroup would be offered the remaining places after new church families (who would hopefully be trained into leadership roles).
- 2003 we held a luncheon for our churched play groupers and invited Heather Karrasch. She encouraged us that we all had a calling to friendship evangelism, whether we had an official position at playgroup or not.
- 2004 the co-ordinator felt that playgroup was not a children’s ministry but a mission since our focus was actually parents of children. The way was made open to change the portfolio we were covered by to “mission” after doing 40 Days of Purpose. Hopefully this will change the church’s perception of playgroup and we can get more involvement from others, particularly adults with older children who would not attend playgroup. Not only is it easier to talk without a toddler wanting your attention, these adults are a great source of encouragement because they have come out the other side of parenting pre-schoolers.

Playgroup Testimony - Mark

My Life by Mark Roberts

January 25, 2004

I was more fortunate than most, in that I was brought up in a loving Christian home, I went to a Christian Primary School, attended church and youth group weekly and went on Christian school holiday camps. When I reached my teens, I didn't have any real desire to follow Christ or to behave like a follower of Christ. Yet when I was with Christian people I acted like a Christian, and when I was with my classmates and friends, I was far from a Godly person. Which was quite hypocritical, as I was a youth group and camp leader for a number of years.

I never made a full commitment to Christ because I knew I would have to change my ways, so at about 16-17 years of age I chose not to change, I wanted to be one of the boys, so I stopped attending all church related activities.

For the next 12-13 years I lived my life my own way. Making sport the utmost important thing in my life, closely followed by socializing and drinking with my mates. It was also very important for me to be like by everyone and to be popular. I always had to have the biggest and best parties, always had to have the best story to tell, I liked to win everything I participated in.

I never considered myself to be a bad person; I was quite considerate towards others, polite, caring and a giving person. But deep down I knew that as long I got what I wanted, then I was OK.

Even after getting married, I still put my wants and desires before my family's needs on many occasions. There's no doubt I have been very selfish and unfair especially to my wife and family.

I now know that God has a purpose for my life.

Firstly he allowed me to meet my beautiful wife, who comes from a similar background to myself. When we met, neither of us were going to church, but the fact that we had both come from church upbringings was an important part of the reason why we got together. I also know He has been protecting me as from an early age I have had a few near mishaps that could have ended a lot worse than they did.

- When I was 4 years old, I was run over by a car. I was lucky to only have a couple of weeks in hospital with a broken leg and fractured skull.
- At 17, I had a motorbike accident when a car knocked me down to the bitumen; I was fortunate to require only about 30 stitches to my elbow and knee.
- When I was 18, I fell off a Ute doing about 60 km/hour whilst out spotlighting, with a loaded shotgun in my hands. I walked away with a broken nose, a swollen knee and no skin on my face. The gun never discharged and I was fine.
- I've crashed 3 cars whilst drink driving. Once I caused about \$5500 damage to a mates brand new Ute, and in all the accidents I went off the road where there were no trees. And not in any of these accidents did I end up with a scratch on me.

So He planned all along that I would end up here today.

Even up to probably mid last year, I don't think I was any closer to the Lord than any part of my life thus far, yet one Sunday in August last year, I decided to go to church with my wife Karen.

I think I only came because I had been going to Playgroup at Moolap Baptist for a while and had got to know a few ladies who attended church there. So between my wife and the ladies I had met, and the fact that my children needed some positive influences in their lives, I decided to come along.

Not only have the women in playgroup helped me to strengthen my existing faith; I always believed in God, I prayed on occasion and did not normally attend church. However now I attend bible study weekly church and pray frequently. The women have also listened, encouraged and my son has made wonderful friends. These missing pieces in my life jigsaw puzzle have now been filled.

It was definitely the day God had planned for me to go to church for the first time of my own accord for almost 13 year, because John van Gronigan spoke about his time as chaplain with the Australian Boomers Basketball Team and the Western Bulldogs (AFL). Being a sport nut, I really enjoyed it, so the next week I decided that church wasn't that bad after all and went again.

Since that time, I've attended church almost every week.

I had a strong feeling of presence that God wanted me to make a commitment, but I felt that I wasn't ready to make the step, as I knew many things in my life weren't "Christian" like. So before I would make a commitment, I tried to correct a few things – swearing, lying, being selfish, immoral thoughts, and getting drunk. But I found that by myself, I wasn't able to correct my ways.

After a couple of moving testimonies here at church, the first by Allan Parker-Benton, the second by Ron Ellis, I had a strong overwhelming feeling that I had to put my faith in the Lord and let Him be the guide of my life.

That day was November 9th, 2003.

To say I was emotional was an understatement, for anyone who had heard Ron's testimony would have found it as moving as I did, and I prayed a silent prayer and took the Lord into my life. I was overjoyed.

And since that day, with the help of the Lord, I certainly have been able to change many things in my life, I have almost stopped swearing, I'm not as selfish, I'm a lot more considerate towards other and many other aspects in my life have changed, and it all has to do with the fact that I'm learning to have the Lord at the centre of my life.

It has been hard at times to keep on the straight and narrow, and I've found that to have a daily quiet time, to pray and read my Bible, is the best way for me to keep the Lord in my thoughts and to have Him guide me. I find the days that I haven't prayed with Him are the days when I'm a lot more likely to slip up and go back to my old ways.

I know that with the Lord's guidance, the continued help of my family, my friends and my church family I will someday achieve what God had planned for me. And that by living my life for Christ, I might be able to show other that to have God at the centre of your life is the only way to go.

If you're considering it is hard to live life by your own accord, I would ask you to consider taking the Lord into your life, as since I have, it has given my life a lot more guidance and satisfaction and certainly made it easier to even get through the daily grind. Remember Willpower. You provide the Will, God provides the Power.

To finish up, I would like to say thank you to a few people. Firstly my wife, Karen, for all her love and support. My family who never gave up on me over the last 13 odd years. My Mum and Dad have told me on many occasions that they prayed for me daily over this period. I also have a couple of great friends who have stuck with me through many things over a long time.

And lastly, but certainly not least, there a 3 special ladies who are involved in the fabulous Playgroup program at Moolap Baptist Church, that through them being themselves and having God shine through their lives, I was able to find my way back to the Lord. So to Nikki Welsh, Jenny Polley and Georgie Allen, thank you

