



St David's Can Be a Child-Friendly Place

Rev Andrew M Clarke

I vividly remember my first Sunday at St David's ten years ago when I came from Bendigo to "preach for the call".

Simone and I were very interested in moving to Tasmania, but we decided to visit Toowoomba to see if the Lord wanted us here. We immediately felt at home in the Charge, and we deeply value being part of this church family.

We are always grateful for the interest and support that so many have shown in our work with foster care. And so I feel a bit strange writing this pastoral letter about promoting family-friendliness.

On the one hand, we have found St David's to be extremely family-friendly; however, on the other hand, many have not had that experience, and I would be failing as your minister if I didn't convey that with love and respect.

On that first day in 2005 I was interviewed by the Selection Committee, and a key concern that was put to me was the need to reach out to more families.

I have sought to promote this by including children's talks in services, supporting the Sunday School, starting a youth group, and pastoring families. Simone has played a key role behind the scenes engaging with mums and their children.

We have seen something like twenty families come and go over the past decade.

Why do they leave?

The number one reason is that they have not been integrated into the church community. They have not reached that point where they feel included and at home and have built lasting relationships.

Parents with young children are most comfortable at the rear of the church, and if there isn't room they are left out in the foyer.

By morning tea time, children are ready to move. But the hall is not an appropriate place for them to play, and they cannot be monitored easily outside.

And so for many families their experience of coming to St David's has been an awkward time even trying to get past the glass doors into the service, followed by another awkward time managing children at morning tea.

No matter how much the parents may like the service and agree with the preaching, and no matter how much their children may benefit from the Sunday School, the stressfulness of these factors means that church is not a pleasant experience.

They never really get to know many (if any) people, and in the end they understandably go where they can be comfortable and find lasting connections.

So, what can we do?

There are two key solutions to these challenges.

1. Child-Friendly Seating

For years the Session has been appealing to people to move forward in the church building in order to provide space at the back for families.

We are deeply grateful to those who have responded, even moving into the transepts on the sides.

If we were to have a modest Sunday School of say 20 children, that could mean ten families totaling about 40 people. If this were ever to become a reality, the entire back half of the church (five pews on each side) would be required to accommodate them.

But as long as we struggle to keep even one or two pews free, and sometimes have three families out in the foyer (without heating or cooling or enough seating), we are giving families the message that they are not welcome here.

Years ago a disabled access was provided at the church office door, which provides a level-ground pathway from the car park all the way into the

worship area. What would happen if we locked that door and said such people were not welcome?

A new person asked me recently, "Why do you have mission reports about Christians who have gone to the other side of the world to serve the Lord, when people here won't move a few pews to help out a family?"

2. Child-Friendly Space

If we are able to achieve this ideal of making adequate seating available for families in the service, I believe that God will bring them. He will honour our willingness to love them and accommodate them and include them.

And yet this is just the first step.

Being in the church service fosters our personal and shared relationship with the Lord. It is the fellowship afterwards that promotes relationships with each other. We must aim to make it possible for families to stay.

To facilitate this we need a space where children can be safe – where they are not running around in the hall or in the car park.

Following encouragement from the Session, a lengthy investigation has been carried out by the Committee of Management into providing a safe play area.

The Committee has a double interest in this project. It is tasked with implementing, where possible, the Session's goals, and it is also responsible to ensure the safety of children on the property at all times.

For these reasons, the Committee resolved at its meeting on 18 August to construct a safe play area.

This will consist of a set of doors leading through the back (eastern) wall of the Sunday School room on to a large deck. Off the deck there will be a fenced play area.

Drawings of this project will be available soon, so that everyone can see the plan.

The existing rainwater tanks will be moved to the southern side of the hall.

This new area will provide an indoor/outdoor facility for the Sunday School. During morning tea, parents – and hopefully others too – can sit on the deck to supervise children and get to know each other.

By accommodating families in church services and during morning tea, we can provide the context for Christian ministry and friendship that will strengthen and grow our congregation.

Answering Objections

"In my day children sat still and silent in church. Families were not given preferential seating at the back."

In times past children also sat in school for hours on end, day after day. Now young children have very active classrooms with a whole range of modes for learning.

The only place where they are kept quiet and still for half an hour is in church prior to Sunday School (and for the entire service during school holidays).

We need to support families as they seek to train their children in church by giving them less conspicuous seating at the back.

"In my day children didn't need playgrounds at church."

In previous generations churches didn't have morning tea after the service, and so there wasn't an added time for parents to supervise children.

Also, there were no cushions on pews or air-conditioners or microphones. Should we remove all these things? Or should we consider not only our own comforts but those of families as well?

"The church can't afford it."

The Committee of Management carefully oversees every dollar of the church's budget. It has determined that it is responsible to spend the \$10,000 that the new safe play area will cost in view of existing reserves.

Indeed, if we do not invest in outreach in order to grow the congregation and increase our income, the offerings will continue to stagnate or decrease. In other words, we cannot afford not to invest in this way.

If we were to gain just three committed families, this project would "pay for itself" in a year. In fact, it can be expected to pay for itself many times over if we are able to provide a holistic family-friendly environment both in the service and afterwards.

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14)



As a toddler in the early 1970s Andrew sat next to a baby named Simone in the back pew of Bayside Baptist Church.

They have been married since 2001, have a daughter, and to date have parented ten foster children – all of whom have been warmly welcomed at St David's.