

THE HISTORY OF SAINT MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS SUNDAY SCHOOL



It is perhaps significant that at the time of writing this potted history of children ministry at St Michael's, the wider church community is also reflecting on how best to adapt their engagement with children in light of the current Covid19 situation and all the physical and social restrictions that encompasses. The Coronavirus hiatus on life as we knew it has given chance to pause, consider and rethink our approach. The recent and timely appointment of Clover Summers to the newly created role of Children's Ministry Leader is a first step for St Michael's into holistically viewing what we as a church can offer children and families in this strange new world we find ourselves in.

Historically, our children's work has been fairly traditional; a shorter service for families with younger, generally pre-school aged children, a Sunday School mainly for primary age which takes place alongside and yet for the most part segregated from the main 10am service and then special children's events throughout the year coinciding with key celebrations in the Christian calendar. The sudden and unprecedented need to adapt to people not being allowed to meet up physically during lockdown has meant a radical rethink of provision, especially for children.

My involvement with the children's work at St Michael's began not long after first arriving here having spontaneously followed the donkey one fateful Palm Sunday 20 years ago! The Sunday School, at the time, was headed up by Stella Houlder, during Fr Joe Hawes' incumbency, and took place in the Old Vestry, for those who still remember it, with its single toilet and no hot water. Prior to Stella's leadership, legend has it that Joan Blackburn, still fondly remembered by those lucky enough to have been in her care, led the children's activities for some 35 years. I was approached to take over the running when I was expecting our first child, which seemed as good a time as any to take up the reins knowing my own young family would benefit. I was fortunate to inherit a well-established group of parents, using the 'Living Stones' resources which followed the lectionary although considerable time was needed to practically adapt this to fit our wide age range. This was resolved when Debbie Goldberg, the headteacher of St Michael's Montessori Nursery, generously offered to lead a separate group and alphabet-based programme for the youngest children which she did with care, competence and commitment for several years. We were also fortunate to have

Franziska Rüsing, on a gap year in Barnes from her native Germany, leading a group for the older children. With the guidance of Fr Paul Holland, we put together a calendar of monthly themes and the Sunday School flourished in spite of needing to move to the church hall, and sometimes even to the Vicarage garden, while building work went on to create the Community Centre.

Numbers increased yet there was very limited movement from the 11.30am Family Mass to the 10am service and Sunday School. This may be in part due to the transient nature of this area; many families with young children move away when they outgrow the small Little Chelsea houses which form a majority of this parish's homes, but also once children reached a certain age and had been baptised, families often stopped coming to church altogether. It was decided, in order to encourage children (and their parents) to progress to the 10am service, that there would be no family service on the last Sunday of the month. This made little actual impact but subsequently Fr Stephen Stavrou's introduction of the monthly All Age service in its place has been far more successful in gradually building up more crossover and intergenerational worship in church. Other aspects that Fr Stephen has established have also helped develop more continuity of provision, such as the annual lunch for the families of children baptised in recent years and Confirmation preparation classes done 'in-house' (with the popular sleep-over in church!).

Typically, the age when children move to Secondary education is a big drop-off point for many as homework and sports take over the weekends. Harry Hobson, who took over the running from me after 11 years was instrumental in aiding this continuity by helping to maintain contact with those young confirmands and alongside the vicar, organising youth group style meet-ups. He and Sunday School stalwart, Carole Seaton kept the children's work going through a period of rather sparse parental involvement and managed to gradually rebuild a core team of enough volunteers for it to become a collective parent-led team, guided by Fr Stephen. This model was just a few months into working well when the global pandemic hit us locally. Never before, in living history, has anything had such an effect on the life of the church. While the vicar's lockdown Zoom sessions for families offered an online opportunity for children still to see each other virtually, pray and learn together, it cannot replace the sense of community and belonging coming to and being part of St Michael's offers. And so it is, with this in mind, the church now ponders about how to move forward in its children's ministry at this crucial time.

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