

Re-Imagining Church in NSW and the ACT

Report on the Godly Play, Messy Church and Playgroups Project

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December 2013

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Uniting Mission and Education 2012-2013

The specific project outcomes are an attachment to this document. The first three outcomes regarding Godly Play, Messy Church and Playgroups have been completed, and this report is the final outcome.

Project Outcome 4

That the findings from this work be analysed and written in a report for the next Synod with recommendations for sustainability and a way forward.

(The three identified practices of Messy Church, Godly Play and playgroups share a common starting point of generous hospitality leading to intentional community. All require commitment and leadership to be sustainable; all benefit from their inclusion into the local church community.)

This outcome will be achieved:

- through liaison with the UME team, including NCLS to gather data
- through finding the common practices and evaluating their relative merits
- through identifying strategies to encourage and sustain these ministries
- through a report with short and long-term recommendations

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Introduction

For the past two years I have promoted and supported the development of playgroups, Godly Play and Messy Church within the Synod of NSW and the ACT. This work has had regional, national and international implications. I have researched these ministries, working with local congregations, presbyteries, other synods and other denominations. I have read and written resources, articles and papers, attended forums and conferences, coordinated events, provided training and consulted widely with congregations and individuals. I have sought to share as much information as possible by the above strategies and through the use of internet websites and social media.

The following report is the culmination of two years of work and reflection about these issues at a time when the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT is grappling with the reality of diminishing numbers and shrinking financial resources. So this is a good time to be re-imagining what the Uniting Church might look like in the future. It is a good time to be discerning God's heart for the Uniting Church.

What If?

What if church worship isn't on Sunday mornings?

What if adults could themselves express the flexibility, humility and patience they require of children in worship?

What if instead of sending children off to be educated or entertained, they were involved in worship as insiders not outsiders?

What if churches invested as much energy inviting children into the faith community that is currently invested into seeking new adult members?

What if we assume that children (and families) have the same claim on space, ritual, style, resources and content of worship as adults?

Messy Church, Godly Play and playgroups ask the above questions and re-imagine what it is to be church.

What's happening?

In contemporary Australia there is a blurring between adults and children with regard to Christian literacy. In a post-Christian culture we can no longer assume biblical or Christian language literacy among adults. As Jerome Berryman notes in *The Spiritual Guidance of Children* : "Many adults are unclear themselves about the scope of Christian language as a system and the uniqueness of how its sacred stories, parables, liturgical action and contemplative silence are integrated into a way of speaking and living ... the primary function of this language domain is to make *existential* meaning ..."

Most parents would rather not talk about spiritual matters with their children. Even many Christian parents leave 'faith talk' to church groups, to grandparents or to faith schools. The church is asking : what can we do to equip parents and leaders? There is no clear answer, no 'formula'. First we need to acknowledge that much of our current practice isn't helpful and has been harmful. We need to discern God's heart for children and be open to new paradigms, or maybe very ancient ones.

What is it we *want* to pass on? We seem to have successfully passed on a culture of niceness, social conformity, a sense of entitlement, a respect for education, time, work and money. Is this what we *intended* to pass on?

The church loses credibility as the people of God when we become enculturated with the values of our society and no longer embody a different way of being. The church leaves itself open to ridicule when we offer trite answers to complex issues. How do we grapple with existential issues ourselves and provide a framework for young people to do so?

What does the Bible and history tell us about faith in God? It is a journey in which God is an active participant. There are things we can and should do, but we also trust God to go before us, beside us and after us in the lives of children and young people. Multiple verses in Deuteronomy tell us to talk to our children, spend time *every day* with them sharing stories of faith.

The issue for many families is *time*. Our lives here on earth with others are finite. Time is important. Parents have limited time with their children. Is talk about God worth spending time with your children? Do you have time to pray? These questions are linked and related to our priorities every day.

The key for families is *love*. Faith is shared in safe, loving relationships, whether in church groups or families. So it isn't enough to pass on information. People can know a lot about the Bible and God and Christian history and theology and still walk away. The experience of the transforming power of love is not so easy to reject or dispute.

So what are practical actions churches can take to become more loving, nurturing faith communities where faith is freely talked about and shared, and where children are included in faith conversations? Jesus simplified the ten commandments to loving God and loving others. Paul said without love we are noisy but ineffective. So being a loving community is critically important. This should mean the fruits of the Spirit are visible in our churches and families; love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. Loving communities are places where children are welcomed and safe. Destructive gossip, judgement, bullying, treating people as problems and valuing buildings, money, music or tradition above people; these are not conducive to faith nurture.

We are called by God as His people to love people as they are, unconditionally. Children are not always easy, nice, predictable or cute. They come from broken families, blended families, hurting families and drifting families. This isn't new; the Bible from Genesis on is filled with gritty stories about dysfunctional families. We shouldn't ask or expect children to be happy all of the time in our programs. Their responses to us and the stories of faith we share may be surprising. A child may be devastated at the loss of life in the story of Noah and the flood, and not feel like singing a happy song. We should be alert to recognise the feelings of powerlessness of even the most spoilt or toughest children when they have to move house or their parents split up. We can't 'fix' things for these children. There aren't easy answers. But we can stand by them and love them and connect them with the God who loves them.

As churches we also need to be realistic about the pressures on families and children, and recognise there have been huge social changes in the past 30 years which have created new pressures. Maternity leave, social media, technological change, mobility, family law, fly in/fly out workers, Sunday sport, weekend trading and

restructured education systems have provided benefits but also created new pressures. We may mourn the passing of the faith tradition to say 'grace' before sharing a meal, but many families rarely eat a meal together! Sunday morning may be the only time in the week they are together, and not surprisingly they choose to do something less stressful than attend an early worship service and be separated again.

Churches can be intentionally counter-cultural. It seems that in our society everyone is separated into 'consumer groups' from babies and toddlers to school age, tweenagers, youth, Gen Y, Gen X, baby-boomers, seniors, ethnic groupings and language groups. From schools to sports groups, Scout groups and for entertainment purposes we are separated by age. But the different ages have a lot to gain by being together. Families are naturally created of different age groups. The artificial separation of age groups has created suspicion, selfishness and generation gaps.

A few years ago when I was coordinating a baby playgroup for new mothers, I discovered the importance of intergenerational contact. I had arranged a number of experiences for the group including a visit from the local librarian to talk about reading with babies, a *Kindermusik* leader to share a baby music session, a first-aid for babies session and so on. When at the end of eight weeks I asked the group to share what had been most helpful to them as new mothers, they said they had enjoyed all the various experiences but unanimously agreed that an unplanned visit by four older women had been the highlight. I had almost forgotten the time following a Ladies' Fellowship lunch, when four of the women who helped at another playgroup I ran, had popped in unexpectedly "just to see the babies". They had stayed no longer than ten minutes, talking with the young women, admiring their babies, sharing a few anecdotes before heading home. But that visit had held great significance for the young women, who had felt valued and validated as new mothers. They were delighted that some older, grandmotherly women had taken time to visit them, affirm their ability to care for their babies and be encouraging about the parenting journey they had started. On reflection I realised the intergenerational contact that is a part of church life is no longer part of many people's experience, and that people miss it and need it.

Churches can be multi-generational communities, providing safe places for young and old, where people are valued, known by name and accepted as they are. Places where people have time to listen and don't judge or gossip. Churches can offer a different world-view, one that contrasts with the selfish, consumer world families and their children inhabit. We can demonstrate a world view shaped by faith in God.

It seems many churches have inadvertently idolised children and families, seeing them in business terms as good for growth. Children and families have been targeted by churches, with programs designed to lure them in and prop up aging congregations. We have also idolised a good education, an influential job, a beautiful home, a prestige car ... and in doing so have not been qualitatively different to the secular world. The results are evident in the generations who have left their Christian upbringing behind and abandon interest in the church if not their faith in God.

God has not abandoned them and their spiritual hunger is often revealed in their search for meaning. The world of consumerism preoccupied with the market economy offers no answers to deep human questions: "Who am I? Why am I here? Why must I die?" Even children ask these questions and our Sunday school curricula rarely allow for deep existential exploration. A church survey in the UK "The Marches Chronicles" by Peter Privett published in 2000, reveals the sad insight that every child surveyed said a variation of this theme: Adults never listen or take us seriously, and usually laugh at us.

As churches we can take seriously the search for meaning and offer to share our authentic faith journeys. We can use *Godly Play* to wonder together about parables, sacred stories and our liturgical action. We can intentionally offer all age gatherings and worship. *Messy Church* is one way of exploring all-age worship and repairing our relationship with families. We can teach children the Christian language we inherited and the faith practices that have sustained the people of God over thousands of years. We can do this best by living the faith practices of worship, prayer, fasting, hospitality, communion, baptism, Bible study, singing, tithing, silent meditation and sharing in community. We can stop laughing at children and finding them amusing when they share their thoughts and take them and their gifts seriously and find ways to nurture and encourage their faith.

The absence of children and their families from many UCA congregations is impoverishing them. We have failed to articulate clearly a vision for nurturing children's spiritual formation or recognise the failure of 'info-tainment' programs and methods that have led to the loss of generations. We have failed to respond compassionately to the changes in society that are impacting on families. We urgently need to take seriously Jesus' call to welcome children and to share our rich spiritual heritage in ways that can be transforming to the whole church.

What now?

There are many Uniting Churches that are experimenting with new ways and fresh expressions of church. The three practices I have identified have been tried with varying success over the past three years. A summary of the three practices and their relative strengths and weaknesses follows.

Godly Play

Godly Play is a Montessori method of telling Bible stories, developed by Jerome Berryman, using parables, sacred stories and liturgical lessons about religious traditions using simple, natural materials. Godly Play is used extensively with adults and children in many settings, from schools to hospitals, churches to aged care facilities. It invites the listener to connect faith stories with personal experience through wondering questions and open-ended response. Godly Play can be a way of preparing children or new Christians to join the worship life of their congregations as they experience sacred stories, symbols and rites and encounter the religious language associated with worship within the context of our faith tradition.

Attempts to make the Bible more accessible to children are often made on the assumption that neither the Bible nor children have profound spiritual depth. The stories are often reduced to a simple message or morality tale. Jerome Berryman's approach takes both the Bible and children more seriously through the use of oral storytelling from the heart (no book) using accessible language. The stories, words, gestures and materials are carefully chosen. The delivery is slow and deliberate, allowing children time to fully enter the story. A time of wondering and response is part of every session, time for shared reflection and personal reflection. Children are respected and empowered to wrestle with the existential issues of identity, freedom, death and meaning. This avoids an intellectual exercise about knowing more than others and encourages space to learn to love God and others.

In NSW and the ACT Godly Play has been used by many denominations in many churches, Sunday schools, kids' clubs, Messy Churches, schools and aged care facilities. There have been more than one hundred people trained as storytellers in NSW alone. The counter-intuitive nature of Godly Play makes change difficult. It is necessary to trust the process of Godly Play and too often this is curtailed because of time limitations, space or money. However in environments where the process of Godly Play is honoured, the response from the teachers, ministry agents, chaplains, adults and children has been transformative.

Jerome Berryman's theological themes of blessing and play are core concepts around which to organise thinking and practice in children's ministry. Godly Play is extensively researched and theologically robust. It fits into the UCA ethos being respectful, non-coercive and ecumenical. But Godly Play is not 'easy', quick or cheap. It requires commitment by a whole community to radically transform their thinking about children. It requires secure space and materials and people willing to be trained. For these reasons it is most successful where it is strategically implemented and supported by a local network.

Messy Church

Messy Church is a phenomenon that has taken most by surprise. Churches experimenting with Messy Church are surprised at the simplicity of the premise and how many families come and keep returning. Families who come are surprised at how much they enjoy coming to church, exploring faith stories, being creative, having fun, worshipping and eating together. They are experiencing real Christian hospitality and fellowship, but importantly the people of God are strengthening their faith through action.

Messy Church began in 2004 with a simple question: "How can our small church reach the many families in our community?" And so began a journey of discovery and the birth of Messy Church, shaping worship, learning and fellowship around the needs of families with children. Messy Church was created for those *outside* the church, and became church *for* them, *not* a stepping stone to Sunday morning church.

There are now thousands of Messy Churches all around the world in most denominations. A typical Australian Messy Church meets monthly and includes a flexible, relaxed arrival time; an activity-based learning time, a short but explicit time of worship with story, music and prayers and finishes with a sit-down meal for all. Key values which define Messy Church are Christ-centredness, creativity and joyful all-age celebration in a spirit of

generous, inclusive hospitality.

Starting a Messy Church is relatively quick, easy and cheap for a church. It can be done quickly because the 'formula' including the name and logo is already available through the website, DVD and books, and it is easy to adapt it to your context. Most churches do not need to purchase anything new, as the facilities including halls, kitchens and toilets are there and existing tables and chairs, craft materials and crockery are available. Therefore the only costs are new Messy Church signage and some additional craft materials and food.

A key consideration when starting a Messy Church is a leadership team. A core team of three or four people need to lead the creation of a Messy Church. It is not something that should be taken on by one person, although it may be the enthusiasm of one person who acts as a catalyst and gathers a team around them. There is a lot of work involved in each Messy Church and the tasks are best divided. A core team will usually do the planning and divide the work into areas like welcoming, cooking, crafts and leading worship. A larger team will then be assigned to pray, cook, shop, promote and whatever else is needed. It might be different people with a variety of gifts each month. Not everyone needs to be at Messy Church as many tasks can be done beforehand. This can be an opportunity to invite people with different skills and gifts to be involved. Men's Sheds and Craft Groups are often very helpful to Messy Church leaders.

Messy Church needs a leadership team who spend time praying, listening to God and reflecting on their local community's needs. The leaders also need to be intentional about communicating effectively with the wider church congregation and maintaining strong links. It needs to be seen as another congregation alongside the existing congregation, each one seeking to worship and serve God.

There is no doubt that running a Messy Church once a month is a large commitment and a lot of work. Starting something new is always risky and can create friction with other groups in the church. These issues need to be managed sensitively and prayerfully. Unrealistic expectations that families from Messy Church will begin attending 'proper' Sunday morning worship need to be addressed. Everyone must understand the missional nature of Messy Church and value it as a new congregation for people with different needs. Leadership burnout common in churches and particularly in children's and family ministries. Everyone involved needs encouragement and support through being part of a functioning team. When a team is actively doing something new and hopeful, something that is fun and life-giving, this sustains and grows the congregation. The rewards of launching a Messy Church are a whole new group of people exploring their faith in family groups, lots of fun and laughter, many generations learning and worshipping together and churches generously blessing their local communities.

The UCA has led the way in the NSW and the ACT with support and encouragement of Messy Churches in many local congregations. The ethos of creativity, generational diversity, celebration and generosity that are key to Messy Church fits with many UCA congregations and has enabled new life and fresh expressions of worship. Beth Barnett says of Messy Church "We trust the power of the Bible to form and transform us as disciples, not through trite, three-point talks ... but through the strong weaving of story and community and senses." When Messy Church is embedded in the missional strategy of the church and has strong leadership and teamwork, it provides for strengthening and growth as well as developing new strengths and leaders of all ages.

Playgroups

All playgroups run by churches are a form of children's ministry *whether it is intentional or not*. Playgroups are an opportunity for churches to demonstrate generous hospitality to strangers. Through the service we offer to others God's spirit can be seen and felt. This is more powerful than words. Providing a safe, welcoming community space to families with young children on a week day morning enriches the lives of families and the local community. This is a good thing but how do we deepen friendships, open conversations about God and begin to disciple these families?

Moving from a passive to an active role in playgroups is the beginning. Some playgroups are hosted by a church but no one from the church attends or takes an interest. Some playgroups pay rent to meet at the church but no one from the church attends or takes an interest. Uniting Churches need to get to know their own playgroups. Historically churches were at the heart of community life, part of the social fabric, respected and powerful. That is no longer the case and we must work hard to be seen as trustworthy especially in our interactions with children. Churches can struggle to make themselves relevant to families with young children.

A well run playgroup in which the church is invested through prayer, volunteers and leadership is one way of building a bridge into the community as part of a strategic plan. Playgroups are unregulated, low cost, grass-roots community development. A playgroup that attracts a range of diverse families and can provide community networking and support across cultural groups and age groups will create community cohesion. If a team of trained volunteers take an interest in the families then conversations about God and everything else will arise naturally and there will be many opportunities to deepen relationships and invite people to baptisms, Easter, Christmas and other worship services and church events.

A troubling issue arises: if people choose to come to church at other times, can a warm welcome be assured? Are we doing well by the children and families who already attend church? Do our actions on Sundays match our words? Is there a troubling dis-connect between what a congregation promises at the baptism of a child and what that congregation actually practices with children and families and what theological understandings underpin this? Karl Rahner described childhood as 'an abiding reality', suggesting we should grow into it not out of it. If we are to advocate for children we must value them as more than a means to an end. Is our practice congruent with what we think we believe in the UCA?

These questions are necessary because the church is not starting from a position of neutrality. Many people bear emotional and spiritual scars from previous encounters with churches. For many people outside of the church, it takes considerable courage to enter a church building, whether for playgroup or worship. An off-hand greeting or a failure to accommodate children, an expectation to sing or participate in playgroup or worship could mean they will never return. Our interactions are under close scrutiny.

People are seeking genuine hospitality. Small acts of respect, kindness and welcome are potent and far reaching. When we eat together or even just share a coffee, it expresses mutuality, recognition and acceptance. There is a deep human need to feel welcomed, so when we make an effort to learn people's names and genuinely offer hospitality to them and their young children there is a profound reciprocal response. Offering people good food and coffee communicates welcome and acceptance and this can include the preparation, the sharing of time and the cleaning up afterwards. It's so simple it's often overlooked. It was the pattern of Jesus' ministry.

Parents are tired of being told what they need to do to be good parents; they want to *experience* what it feels like to *enjoy* parenting. And that's what playgroup offers – an environment in which parents are encouraged and supported to play successfully and have fun with their children. A play-based program offers a non-threatening way to work with families, setting them up for success, and setting up children for positive behaviour in an environment that encourages cooperative play and successful social interactions. A local network of people at different stages of life with whom to share the joys and sorrows of parenthood helps parents gain perspective and wisdom. The church can be this network if we invest in the families God brings to us. Playgroup is a start but churches can provide so much more. The playgroup model can offer a new way of partnering with families that combines recognition of parents as the primary influence on children's social and spiritual development while providing for children as fully human spiritual beings with gifts as well as vulnerabilities.

All playgroups can be loving demonstrations of God's care for children and build bridges into the local community. Many churches provide large, open community-based playgroups and would like to see the families that attend playgroup on a week day morning also attend worship on a Sunday. God is working in people's lives through playgroup and in effect playgroup becomes church for these families. Many are seeking spiritually, but are not ready to come into a church worship service. A creative solution is to retain the established community playgroup on one morning a week and develop a Christian playgroup on another, with a name and publicity that signifies it as an alternative gathering which includes child-friendly worship experiences. This creates a non-coercive stepping stone to deeper engagement in the life of the church for these families.

Playgroups should be seen as a gift to churches that enable us to relate to local families and help us understand the choices they make. The parents who come to playgroup are from Gen X and Gen Y, with their millennial children. We need to change the way we relate to them. These parents are not just wanting advice about feeding a fussy toddler or which school is best, although they are seeking that information. But they want more ... they are seeking to explore a framework of meaning within which their parenting makes existential sense. They are on a spiritual journey which we can share if we are alert to the possibilities.

Recommendations

The UCA is experiencing a time of profound change in structures, technology and relationships. Much work has already been done at regional and national levels to find new ways to resource the work of the church. The new Educational Resourcing Network will have as its primary task 'the provision of resources for theological reflection and ways of growing practical and spiritual ministry capacity across the Synod.' Synod 2013 Meeting Minutes 8 resolved to "reaffirm the core responsibilities of Presbyteries are to extend pastoral oversight, strategic missional direction, resourcing and formation of lay and ordained leadership for mission and ministry within its congregations." Synod 2013 also noted "...the need for support and resourcing for Presbyteries to be given high priority in the work of the Synod" and "increased desire and practice in sharing resources across Presbyteries".

The Synod of NSW and the ACT is already in contact with many thousands of families, not only through congregational life, but through Special Religious Education, Uniting Care Children's Services and Uniting Church Schools. This influence on the lives of thousands of children and their parents is immense. What brings us together? Our shared commitment to Jesus Christ and God's mission, our shared concern for children and we all come with different gifts of wisdom and experience that could be shared. Thought should be given to developing a cohesive strategy of working together to support the work each agency is doing and build on the many strengths inherent in the structures and the people. The ability of the Synod to advocate for children and families in public policy forums would be strengthened as would the identity of the UCA in NSW and the ACT.

Craig Mitchell's National Research Project 'Christian Education in the Uniting Church' for National Assembly confirms key learnings including the need for 'a broader range of approaches, strategies and settings' and recognition that 'Christian education is both a distinctive area of ministry yet also embedded in the formal and informal learning that takes place in worship, community life and mission service.' He also notes that within the UCA Christian education should 'reflect our theology and ethos as a church' and we should 'pay particular attention to passing on the faith to the next generations' which requires commitment. The context of faith education means paying attention to the ways in which people explore their spirituality in everyday life and attends to learning cross-culturally.

This National Research Project report clarifies the roles of Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly in terms of strategies and structures and services that each provide and are responsible for, but notes the lack of collaborative approach 'to resource the educational priorities that are deemed vital to the identity of the UCA'. Craig Mitchell's proposals include many specific recommendations about Assembly's role in casting a cohesive, refreshed vision of Christian education, developing resources, restructuring committees and improving communication. Nowhere in the proposals are children explicitly named, although they are implicitly included in the term 'multi-generational community of faith' and the mention of schools policy. While I agree it is important to include children within the broader community of faith, unless they are specifically named they become invisible to decision makers. First peoples, multicultural groups are specifically named, and these groups also include children. Children in the UCA have no voice and no vote at meetings.

The lack of children's and families' ministry training opportunities in UCA theological colleges contrasts with the number of positions vacant advertised for these roles around Australia. Through my work consulting with churches it is clear many ministry agents are struggling with how to begin to reverse the decline of the Sunday school model or find new ways of intentionally relating to children and families, and the employment of 'someone with experience with children' is seen as a solution.

The National Church Life Survey statistics show the loss of children in congregations in the UCA in NSW and ACT is dramatic, from an attendance estimate of 6,217 children under 15 in 2001 down to 3,599 children under 15 in 2011. However this figure does not include statistics for non-Sunday morning attendance at other worship services or playgroups, kids' clubs etc. To gain perspective, almost 10,000 children are attending UCA schools daily. The dis-satisfaction with church experience in the NSW and ACT is concerning, particularly in the under 12 group surveyed, as it is almost double the dis-satisfaction rate nationally in the UCA.

The sense of grief and loss experienced by many people in congregations reflected in these statistics should be acknowledged and addressed. At the same time new strategies and a hopeful vision should be shared. Positive stories of congregations that are reversing the loss of children and building thriving new ministries like Messy Church should be showcased. Ministry agents, lay and ordained, need more information, training and resources to lead congregations in making changes that will bring about growth and stronger ties with their communities.

I suggest the keys to moving forward will be relationships, forming intentional faith communities, generous hospitality; this will take imagination, time and creative skills for churches to move from a program-driven style to counter-cultural models that grow organically from the community and the Spirit. At the same time all younger generations and many from older generations now access information online. The UCA in NSW and the ACT has lagged behind in equipping ministry agents to use the internet and social media to communicate with their communities and stay in touch with children, youth and families.

Although most would agree that churches should love, care for and support children, our actions reveal a lack of commitment to children and a narrow understanding of children. We will need to appreciate children's strengths and weaknesses, their capacity as spiritual beings, to understand the complexities of families and adult-child relationships and take a range of approaches to faith formation. Leaders and decision-makers will need to be skilful and wise in order to steer the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT in ways that are innovative and helpful.

Short term

- ask presbyteries to audit their churches for what is working with children and families
- share good news using social media and other media
- be alert, notice what is working and nurture it
- audit of websites of all churches and Presbyteries
- build regional networks, including ecumenical networks around playgroups, Messy Church and Godly Play which could also include SRE
- 'join the dots' by combining strategies and networks around SRE, Safe Churches training, playgroups and Messy Church. Provide baptism information to playgroup families. Invite playgroup and SRE families to Messy Church. Find the links and keep making the connections; this makes it easier for families in the community to find the UCA and strengthens UCA identity as family-friendly
- offer specific training eg *How to start a Messy Church, Core Godly Play training, How to start or grow a playgroup, How to coordinate Children's and Families Ministry, SRE, Safe Churches, Baptism ministry with families, Creating and maintaining a website* etc
- empower churches to be UCA advocates for children and families at a local and regional level
- strategic liaison with organisations like Playgroup NSW and ACT Playgroups, Children's Week NSW Committee, the Children's Ministry Network national and state and membership of ARACY will raise the profile of the UCA and enable strategic advocacy in the public forum

Longer term

- children's and families ministry should not be marginalised but central to who we are as the UCA
- fresh baptism and communion resources should be made available so that families having contact with the UCA through playgroups, schools, Messy Church or Godly Play can have information about the sacraments that is clear, relevant and reflects contemporary practices in the UCA
- new thinking and research about child theology and theologies of childhood should be part of theological training. Without a clear foundation for theologies of childhood and child theologies we lack insight and perspective when thinking about children, our commitment to them and our responses to them
- all clergy and office-bearers in the UCA should be able to advocate for children in their community
- all UCA churches and Presbyteries should have current, active websites to showcase their work
- all churches should be assisted to consider starting or growing a playgroup
- all churches should be assisted to consider starting or growing a Messy Church
- Godly Play core training should be available to all UCA ministry agents and Uniting Care pastoral workers like chaplains
- Ministry of Pastor roles need clarifying and strengthening at congregational, Presbytery and Synod levels
- local and regional ministry networks should be created, supported and encouraged
- regional events that showcase the UCA's children's and families ministry supported and encouraged
- UCA schools should be included in Synod conversation and strategy around children and families
- Uniting Care Children's Services should be included in Synod conversation and strategy around children and families

Notes and Bibliography

Some of the material included in this report has been included in other writing I have done, particularly the articles for Australian Leadership Magazine (Mediacom)
Christian Playgroups: Building Bridges from Playgroup to Children's Ministry (Volume 2 Issue 6)
Messy Beginnings Lead to Messy Blessings (Volume 5 Issue 3)
Thoughts on Talking with Children about Faith (Volume 5 Issue 4)

Books which have shaped and challenged my thinking in these areas are too numerous to mention. The books below are important texts to help to think about this work.

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Andrew Sheldon <http://godlyplay.org.au/the-children-will-now-leave.pdf>

For more information about Godly Play www.godlyplay.org.au

For more information about Messy Church www.messychurch.org.uk

For more information about playgroups <http://sa.uca.org.au/cfm/ministry-leaders/playgroups> and <http://childrensministry.org.au/2009/10/10-reasons-why-every-church-should-have-a-playgroup/>

Appendix

Job description for project

National Research Project Report on Christian Education in the UCA

NCLS data

Job Description for 2 year project with triple focus :

Godly Play, Messy Church and Playgroups

- It will be important to build on the existing work done over the past three years
- Two years is a short time frame and discipline will be needed to resist expanding the project to unrealistic outcomes
- It will be important to have clear, achievable outcomes
- There are local, regional, state and national implications in this work
- This project should not be seen in isolation from other ministry areas within the team
- A range of strategies could be considered in this project, including research, working with local congregations, presbyteries, other synods, other denominations, writing resources, providing training, coordinating events and attending conferences
- This project should enable some 'joining of dots' for individuals and congregations involved in children's and family ministry
- It will be important to consider and provide for sustainability into the future

Project Outcome 1:

That Godly Play continues to be encouraged by the UCA as an appropriate children's ministry methodology. But further, that it is widely demonstrated and made available to clergy, chaplains and lay people in leadership as a means of exploring spirituality and faith practices.

How?

- Through maintaining the Godly Play Room and website
- Through regular demonstrations and training and ongoing training provided using the Godly Play Room at the CFM
- Through attending the National Conference in Adelaide in July 2012 and maintaining strong links with the Godly Play network nationally and internationally (International Godly Play Conference in September 2012 in Germany?)

- Through attending the Godly Play Trainers Course in Denver in January 2012 to enable gain accreditation from the International Godly Play Foundation to become a trainer
- Through liaising with others in the team
- Through making training available to specified groups as requested, including UAICC and Presbyteries

Project Outcome 2:

That Messy Church continues to be encouraged in the UCA as a *Fresh Expression of Church* and a means of deepening relationships with those at the ‘messy edges’ of churches.

(In the context that Messy Church in Australia is ‘new’ but in the UK, Europe, Canada and New Zealand it is encouraging thousands of churches to missional ministry and has resulted in hundreds of thousands of families considering themselves part of a church and beginning to explore their faith and in the process change the churches)

How?

- Through promoting the Messy Church books and values widely
- Through encouraging churches who are exploring or experimenting with Messy Church
- Through providing forums for discussion about Messy Church and regional gatherings like ‘Messy Fiestas’ or conferences
- Through liaising with the team and other Synods to identify good ideas and practices and share them (attending ChYNC)
- Through attending the Messy Church Roundtable in Oxford in September 2012

Project Outcome 3:

That playgroups be promoted to churches as missional ministry to their local communities.

How?

- Through consultation with local churches to identify opportunities for playgroups
- Through provision of support and materials for playgroup coordinators
- Through training and events to encourage playgroup coordinators, including ecumenical collaboration
- Through liaison with the team and other Synods to identify good ideas and practices and share them (attending Children and Youth National Coalition meetings)
- Through a website (childrensministry.org.au)

Project Outcome 4:

That the findings from this work be analysed and written in a report for the next Synod with recommendations for sustainability and a way forward.

(The three identified practices of Messy Church, Godly Play and playgroups share a common starting point of generous hospitality leading to intentional community. All require commitment and leadership to be sustainable; all benefit from their inclusion into the local church community)

How?

- Through liaison with the team, including NCLS to gather data
- Through finding the common practices of the three areas and evaluating their relative merits
- Through identifying strategies to encourage and sustain these ministries
- Through a report to Synod with short and long term recommendations

