

A PROBLEM SHARED

STRUGGLES IN SUNDAY SCHOOL



(Left to right: Steve, Jo, Viv, Paul)

A group of parents with special needs children have started to attend our church, which I am delighted about. However, the Sunday children's groups have struggled to accommodate them. The children shout and talk throughout services, which is upsetting older worshippers in particular. How do we resolve the situation without offending or rejecting these new members?

SC: You've got to see this as an amazing opportunity to be able to explore what your values are and see them outworked. As a church, do we really exist simply for ourselves?

There are four groups of people to consider here: the children coming in, the parents, the church members both young and old, and the people involved in the children's work. This is an opportunity to work with each of those groups and to re-shape how we do church in light of the people that are there.

Figuring this out will involve really open, honest conversations. What are realistic expectations when we gather together for worship? How can we help these children to succeed? Sometimes, we destine our children to fail in the context of our gatherings. But we need to ask how we can create a really positive experience for them in church. What needs to change in order to make church accessible to everyone?

This page tackles pastoral and relationship issues. If you have something you would like our panel to discuss, email lucinda.vanderhart@premier.org.uk

PAW: There may be an interesting presupposition here: that these people have come to learn from us. But the reality, of course, is that we are going to learn from them. How you deal with the issues of special needs also raises an intriguing question about how we understand the church experience. As soon as members of the congregation start to complain, you're into the

whole customer experience thing. But this is not like having the misfortune of sitting next to a screaming baby on an overnight flight to America. We need to step back and consider: if the Church really is an *agape* community, then this meeting is not about me, it's about you.

It's about us preferring each other. It's not just about me coming to a meeting in order to get blessed, it's me coming to a meeting and asking: what can I do here to be a blessing?

In order to find a solution, we need to ask what would have happened if this was one of our family members who had special needs. How would we manage it? Somebody would help the children and create space for everybody else. The whole concept of church life is

that it has to be inclusive. Inclusion means that nobody is excluded.

JC: Don't be afraid to talk to the parents. They are going to know what their children need, and will have the resources to help you with this education process. It's not just the church leader that has the responsibility to try to resolve this situation; allow it to create conversations that enable parents to start talking about how they've engaged with their children, what they've learnt about humanity and how they reconcile their faith in this situation.

VT: I would also take very seriously the spiritual development of the older people who are struggling here. Ask them: what is the journey you are on with this? We all need to keep on growing, and as we get older, we have no choice but to adjust to what is going on around us. There are all sorts of adjustments to be made. Ensure that you pastor the older people. You may be 83, but you could live another 10 to 15 years; so let's all get with the programme.

STEVE CLIFFORD is general director of the Evangelical Alliance

JO COX is the learning and development coordinator for the London region of the Methodist Church

VIV THOMAS is honorary teaching pastor at St Paul's, Hammersmith

PAUL ANDERSON-WALSH is the senior elder of the International Gospel Church in North-West London and founder of The Grace Project

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