



make them count

National Network of Church-based Toddler Groups

1277 National Month of Prayer for Toddler Groups

Church Service Ideas compiled by Rev Andrew Ginn, Baptist minister of Bunyan Baptist Church www.bunyan.org.uk and member of the 1277 Steering Group

Whilst church services vary across different traditions, denominations and styles, there are some common ingredients as we gather in Jesus name. This short list of suggestions is intended to provoke thoughts or ideas, which could be adapted and made suitable for each context, as we pray for God's Kingdom to come, through the vital ministries of toddler groups.

Background: 'From a little seed'

The 1277 National Month of Prayer (NMOP) for toddler group ministries will take place in June 2019. This year's theme is '**From a little seed**' with Matthew 13:31-32 (The Parable of the Mustard Seed) as the keynote scripture. This annual prayer focus encourages churches to pray for the work of their toddler groups as they reach out to serve the needs of families in the local community.

Introduction and preparation:

With a service that is focussing on praying for toddler groups, or a specific toddler group, it might be helpful to consider inviting toddler group teams and attenders to the service, in the weeks before the service, as well as publicising the service's focus ahead of time for regular service attenders, so they know what to expect!

At the start of your gathered worship, you could explain something of your church's / congregation's support for (a) toddler group(s), and why this service will have a focus on praying for toddler groups. You can find lots of great reason to pray for Toddler Groups here:

http://www.going4growth.com/downloads/Toddler_Booklet.pdf

The service could be opened with a reading from Scripture and prayers:

- Psalm 8
- Matthew 18 v 1-4

Songs

Whilst each church has their own set of known songs and in-house worship style, there are some songs that lend themselves to the NMOP prayer theme, which could be used during the service:

Faith As Small As A Mustard Seed: Doug Horley; © 1999 Thankyou Music (Admin. by Integrity Music)

Immortal, Invisible: Walter Chalmers Smith. (Especially verse 3)

Your Love Is Amazing: Brenton Brown & Brian Doerksen; Copyright © 2000 Vineyard Songs (UK/Eire)/Adm. by CopyCare (Especially verse 2)

King Of Heaven: Jason Ingram Paul Baloche; © 2010 So Essential Tunes Spirit Nashville Three Integrity Worship Music Leadworship Songs Spirit Nashville Three

Build Your Kingdom Here: Rend Collective © 2011 Thankyou Music

Service Content:

These suggestions can be adapted for use in a short whole church/ all age talk, or as a part of sermon, that consider the NMOP Theme “From a little seed”.

Growing: Using a range of clothing for different ages (e.g. new-born baby-grow, 3 year old’s sleep suit, teenage novelty onesie, adult work overalls) ask the congregation which they might fit into. You could invite 4 volunteers to try on different outfits, with the wrong sized being given out initially (e.g. small teenager in adult overalls, adult with a baby grow covering a hand...) and reflect on how we all grow, in lots of different way. Invite people to suggest ways, e.g.

- Taller
- Stronger
- More clever/ intelligent
- Experience and wisdom
- skills

Explain that while growing taller and becoming cleverer is really important, it’s really important that we grow in our relationship with God too... and we can do that by being friends with Jesus. Jesus welcomes us to be friends whatever age we are... and he tells his friends off when they forget that means children too (Matthew 18 v 1-10). In fact, Jesus says some of the smallest things can be the most important in God’s Kingdom: read Matthew 13 v 31-32 and think about how Christian toddler groups can help people of all ages grow in their friendship with Jesus.

Seeds: Think about small things that can make a big difference, or be very important. For example, you could bring the batteries from a television remote or drop a little bit of food colouring into a large (transparent) jug of water. If people look unconvinced, you could ask them to walk with a tiny stone in their shoe, or if they’ve ever tried sleeping with a mosquito nearby. Even tiny things, things as small as a comma, can make all the difference (e.g. you could put “let’s eat grandpa” or “let’s eat, grandpa” up on a screen or flip chart). That little comma, as tiny as it is, makes all the difference. Jesus said something similar; that comma is about the same size as a mustard seed: read Matthew 13 v 31-32.

God's likes growing things – things like the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5 v 22), and things like justice, righteousness, mercy. They can start tiny, but become huge! A tiny bits of love and kindness can start a “grace cascade”, where more and more people show more and more love and kindness!

It takes a tiny bit of faith to make a start though: to go first in showing someone some love of kindness. Elsewhere, Jesus says it only takes a tiny mustard seed of faith (Matthew 17 v 20) to make a start. That tiny seed of action can grow into something huge! Let's pray for and support the ministry of toddler groups, who do so well going first in showing love and kindness to local families.

Tiny things: Mix in some mustard seeds with a few others seeds. See how many of the seeds can be identified by members of the congregation. So many seeds look like nothing at all... but they can turn into something wonderful when they grow. Jesus said something similar: Read Matthew 13: 31-32. Using a mustard seed to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says “It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants”.

Jesus is saying that tiny things can be very important... and that's true of people as well as seeds! Have a look at how Greta Thunberg (aged 16) is changing the world, or see how God used Samuel (1 Samuel 3) or Josiah (2 Kings 22). A really good way to tell which seeds are which, is to help them grow! Look after them with love and care... Toddler groups are full of people who are tiny, and very important to God and all His people. Let's pray for toddler groups, as they help children grow! Whether they become the largest mustard plant in the garden, or a sunflowers, oak tree or grape vines! Let's look after all children God entrusts to our care, and let's help them all grow to reach their potential!

Ideas: Having an idea can change everything. Gather a list of “family phrases/ golden rules” or Wise Saying, or ask the congregation to share some of their own. Ideally preparing in advance, you could ask one or two more elderly members of the congregation to share a life lesson that they wished they learnt earlier (e.g. “be grateful for what you've got”, or “time with loved ones really matters”). Following which, you could talk about those small ideas can grow and become very important (e.g. someone got the idea that so-and-so loves them, and now they've been married for 50 years!). Introducing Matthew 13, explain that Jesus told a story about scattering seeds, and how the farmer in the story threw the seed everywhere! That seeds in the story could be seen as picture language for a friendship with God. The seed goes everywhere: everyone is invited to be God's friend.

Following on to Matthew 13 v 31-32, explain how the seed of God's love can grow... and grow... and grow, until it becomes the most important thing in life. For Christians, we know how wonderful it is to know God loves us – we'd never want to be without the knowledge of that love. Explain that showing people God's love – scattering seed – is a really important part of church life. Christian toddler groups can sow the seed of God's love at a very early age: that children will grow up knowing that they are loved by God... so let's pray for toddler groups!

What really Matters: Read Matthew 13 v 31-32. Jesus is saying that even the most important things can start out very small. Reflect for your church and congregation: What is the most important thing? You could give some example of things that are not the most important things (e.g. right clothing, good hair, salaries, exam results...) One of the major themes of Jesus' ministry was teaching people and showing people the Kingdom of God. Whilst Jesus did lots of very big impressive things to show people the Kingdom of God, in this passage, he reminds his friends that the little things are really important too. Jesus tells us that serving people (especially in John 13) is a vital way to show people what God's Kingdom is like. Ultimately we see what God's Kingdom is like in Jesus' death and resurrection, with all the power and love of God's Kingdom demonstrated in that incredible selfless

act of love and service (Mark 10:45). Think about toddler groups, and how they exist to serve children and their adults. Not only are these tiny children (and their adults) of huge importance to God, but so are the acts of service that accompany toddler groups: sharing tea, making friends, being a listening ear, providing a food parcel, remembering someone name. Explain that in God's Kingdom, these are the really important things. Share some stories from toddler group leader or attenders - or check the 1277.org Facebook page to find more stories – of how the love and acceptance found at a toddler group may have changed a family life. Offer the challenge that we as Church have a lot to learn about how to be the Kingdom of God from toddler groups. As we encourage and support toddler groups in their ministry, we need to prayer for them, and all whom they serve.

Prayer Activities:

A part of the NMOP, it of course makes sense to pray in the service for toddlers groups. The following suggestions can be adapted as appropriate to suit a congregation:

For a specific toddler group or a local toddler groups: Contact the leaders of the toddler groups in the days or weeks before the service to ask for to ask for any specific prayer requests (and you could even report back to them afterwards that you've prayed for them!)

Pray for toddler group Leaders: Invite them to the service, ask them to share something of what they do, and to describe their prayer requests, then pray for them.

Commission toddlers group leaders and teams: Either using liturgy, extemporary prayer, the laying on of hands, or a biblical blessing, Toddler Group leaders and the whole team (kitchen, welcomers, craft producers, chat-ers... etc.) can be prayed for, as they love and serve to those who attend.

Use Toddler Groups toys: If the congregation that's meeting has a toddler group, you could use some of their toys as props for prayer, placing 3 or 4 items at the front, with 3 or 4 people of different ages praying for different things represented by the toys: e.g.

- Play house: that everyone would feel safe and at home at the toddler group
- Play food/ play kitchen: That families who are in need who attend would be well cared for
- A car/ ride on toy: for children/ families who have been through the toddler group and now moved on
- A Children's Bible/ examples of a toddler groups prayer craft activity: that the families who attend would grow in their knowledge and love of God
- A favourite toy/ game/ puzzle: for the relationship between all team and attenders, that it would be special

Give Thanks: Invite a few stories from parents or children who attend/ have attended a toddler group, as a way into giving thanks for all God does through toddler groups.

List of Names: Without sharing any contact information (e.g. just a list of first names, or slips of paper with a first name on each) share the names of people (adults and children) who attend your churches toddler group. With a few moments of quiet, or all out-loud at the same time, pray blessings, peace and the love of God over a name and their family. Invite people to keep on praying for that name over the coming weeks.

Closing the service

Hopefully as a part of the service, attenders will have become more aware of the importance of Toddler Groups. It might be appropriate to have some suggested “next steps” lined up, in conversation with a local toddler group leader, which could be shared towards the end of the service, including:

- Other NMOP opportunities either locally at other churches, or that you are providing
- Ongoing pastoral/ prayer support for leaders, team and attenders
- Providing support outside of the group (e.g. craft prep, baking, finances)
- Providing back room help during the group (e.g. kitchen, tidying)
- Providing help during the group by supporting attenders of all ages to access the group
- Deliberately including toddler group families in other bit of church provision

It may be appropriate to have the toddler group leader standing by after the service, a signup sheet made available, for people to declare an interest.