

Report for Synod Resources Committee

1. Introduction

I joined Welwyn Garden City URC in Feb 2015, for the post advertised as Children, Families and Youthworker, and I call myself Community and Families Worker which title works better for teenagers and the local council. It's a full time role, and for the first 5 years included 50% time spent on Interfaith to run a project for providing faith visitors to schools in support of Religious Education (RE). Interfaith work is now less than 10%, and includes being on Herts County SACRE (RE committee), our local Interfaith group and some occasional work with the council e.g. Holocaust Memorial Day events. This report covers work with the church only – as it's quite a lot to read and I can report on Interfaith separately if of interest.

Before COVID, our work discipling families into faith was building steadily; our Saturday worship for families including the youngest was busy, and we had begun a second service monthly aimed at families, as part of a 'two-tier' Sunday morning with FamilyWorship at 10am (FW@10) and the traditional worship shunted to 11am (from 10.30). The overall strategy has been a 'pipeline' of activities drawing families nearer to the Sunday congregation, which is mainly elderly, currently 30 to 40 people most weeks. The church initially expressed their aim as 'to see children on Sundays again'. Since 2018 I have been allowed to lead occasional All Age Worship services in the Sunday 10.30 am slot. These have attracted some of our families and been enjoyed by many of the older folk too.

Since COVID, we are engaging with small numbers of young families, and have managed to maintain some participation from families who were previously drawn in, with children now aged 10 to 17. We have a new Friday Night Programme aimed at these 'older' families and have just re-started the two-tier monthly approach on Sundays at the suggestion of our new minister who started recently after two years of Vacancy.

Over the years, seeds of the gospel have been sown, many families have made friends with each other at our groups and events, many have been prayed for, many have worshipped, and a few have joined in with the Sunday traditional congregation and junior church (now named Young People's Church as there is usually at least one teen present). Families have moved into the area, and moved on out of the area, children have grown up, and some of the volunteers I met at the start are now with the Lord. And I have led numerous worship events in many different styles, as I love to do! It's quite a challenge to report on nine years of work and many initiatives are not mentioned here, but I hope what follows covers the main strands and will be of use to the Resources Committee. If anything needs clarification, do email queries to wendy.lidgate@outlook.com or text me on 07904 517384.

My personal background is project management in The City after a first degree in theology, and then as a part-time management consultant whilst our children were growing up. I began preaching with the methodists at age 20, and have served in 7 different methodist circuits, sat on multiple methodist committees, helped in larger methodist churches with junior churches, youthclubs, toddler groups, messy church and always led lots of All Age Worship. I have also been a regular worshipper in charismatic Anglican churches and been an occasional Sunday afternoon chaplain at St Albans Cathedral. In 2011, I began my first full-time paid Christian outreach-worker post with St Johns methodist church in Potters Bar. I had an existing network of contacts in Christian work when I arrived at WGCURC, and developed local relationships with others, too. Since COVID I have done less proactive networking, but tend to know who is around if needed.

2. Factors affecting families in WGCURC

WGC has a growing population, including migrant families from many continents, with very high employment. In most of the households I meet, both parents are working full-time but not necessarily 9 to 5 as patterns of work are varied. They are keen to do the best for their children, with extra-curricular sport and dancing and music, Cubs and Brownies, and birthday parties etc. We are near the railway station with journeys to Kings Cross less than 30 minutes, so some are London commuters. Many families move from London to WGC with their young family, then move further afield just a few years later to buy a house or upgrade to a larger one. Conversations at Babygroup frequently feature plans for returning to work after maternity leave and childcare options, and I meet many grandparents involved in childcare at Chatter and Tots toddler group.

A small number of families have been particularly affected by financial pressures, and the town is well set with family support charities and food banks, warm space initiatives and a proactive borough council.

As parents have plenty of chores and obligations, few attend every session of any activity, but from their perspective attending several times a year could be 'often' and certainly sufficient to feel they belong. Every year, the figures of children belonging to our church submitted through the annual return have been based on those Under 18s who have attended 6 or more events/services with faith content during the year.

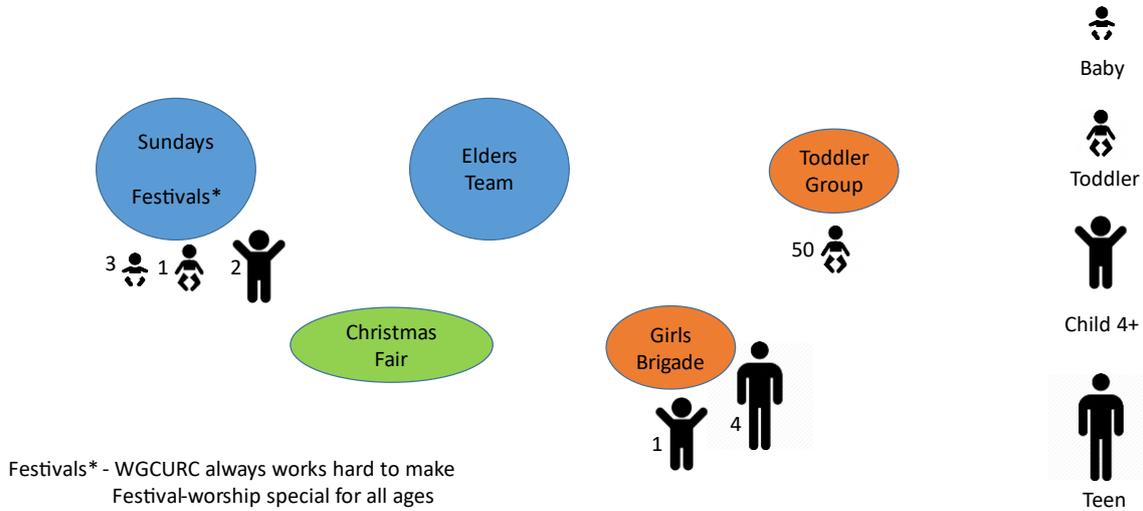
3. Longstay congregation and situation in 2015. The church has a very loving congregation on Sunday mornings, with attendance 30 to 40 adults drawn from an overall number approaching 100, including a majority in their seventies and eighties. Our main pianist is now 91. Pastoral care for Sunday attendees is done diligently. In 2015, WGCURC had a very busy Toddler group on Thursdays, but Junior Church had not met for two years, and a small Youth Club had disbanded 18 months previously. The youth club members had moved on, and we also closed the remnants of a mid-week Girls Brigade whose leader had been waiting to retire. *(The 4 teenage Brigaders had no other connections with the URC and were anyway receiving Sunday discipleship from a methodist church in nearby Hatfield. The leader was a member of a nearby baptist church. No URC church members wanted to volunteer to help me reposition this group).*

At the same time as I started at WGCURC, a couple newly arrived from India decided to join the church with their 3 year-old; a church member in her thirties had recently given birth to twins; and two boys from toddler group had been baptised in church and the family were staying in touch with the minister. The Christmas Fair had long been popular with toddler group families. During 2015, I was usually to be found at the back of the Worship space on Sunday mornings, in the newly set-up Childrens' Corner, telling a bible story for the 3 year-old and any grandchildren or occasional visitors who happened to be along.

In mid 2015, WGCURC received a grant for Mission, employing a part-time Mission Developer from Sept 2015, and many church volunteers focussed on outreach to people recovering from homelessness/addictions/mental health challenges, along with support to the elderly membership. Mission included some provision of gifts to the needy, and rationalising the busy hall-hire to focus on Well-Being, including third party welfare organisations e.g. Homestart and Womens Refuge meetings. The church has a great site opposite Sainsburys.

In this context, the focus of my work has been sowing faith into families rather than welfare, although I have often been a listening ear and occasional link in the chain for practical support to families in financial and relational difficulty.

Childrenswork at WGCURC 2014



4. Our CYF Strategy and Overview between 2015 and March 2020

We agreed to build on the toddler-age contact with families, and set up our ‘Pipeline’ of activities to draw families nearer to faith. I inherited Baby Group from the NCT; and started fortnightly Breakfast Church on Saturdays based on Messy Church principles with toys for the youngest.

The longstay congregation kept saying they wanted ‘to see children again on Sundays’ so the aim of our strategy became ‘to make WGCURC Child-Friendly’ (see our statement summarising what Child-Friendly could look like, based on structured conversations with 6 church members and the minister. Pages 16-17). Our approach was summarised as:

“We are building up a cohort of young families some of whom we hope to retain as the children get older, and establishing ongoing recruitment through our ‘pipeline’ of activities and relationship building.

We are developing approaches to discipling families into mature christian faith – the parents, the children, and the family unit together (which increases the likelihood of children developing faith into adulthood).”

I soon wanted to encourage a regular Sunday attendee – the church secretary’s 8 year old grand daughter, besides a volunteer who loves doing arts and crafts with children but didn’t want to come on Saturdays and be around pre-schoolers. Some of the families I met had school-age children, so we held a Holiday Club morning or two each half-term for ages 5 to 11 from 2015 to 2020, sometimes with 3 children and sometimes with 10. We borrowed materials from various sources and I also write content.

We also held some social events – e.g. Big Garden Birdwatch, summer BBQ’s and play dates – to both encourage community across the church and advertise Breakfast Church.

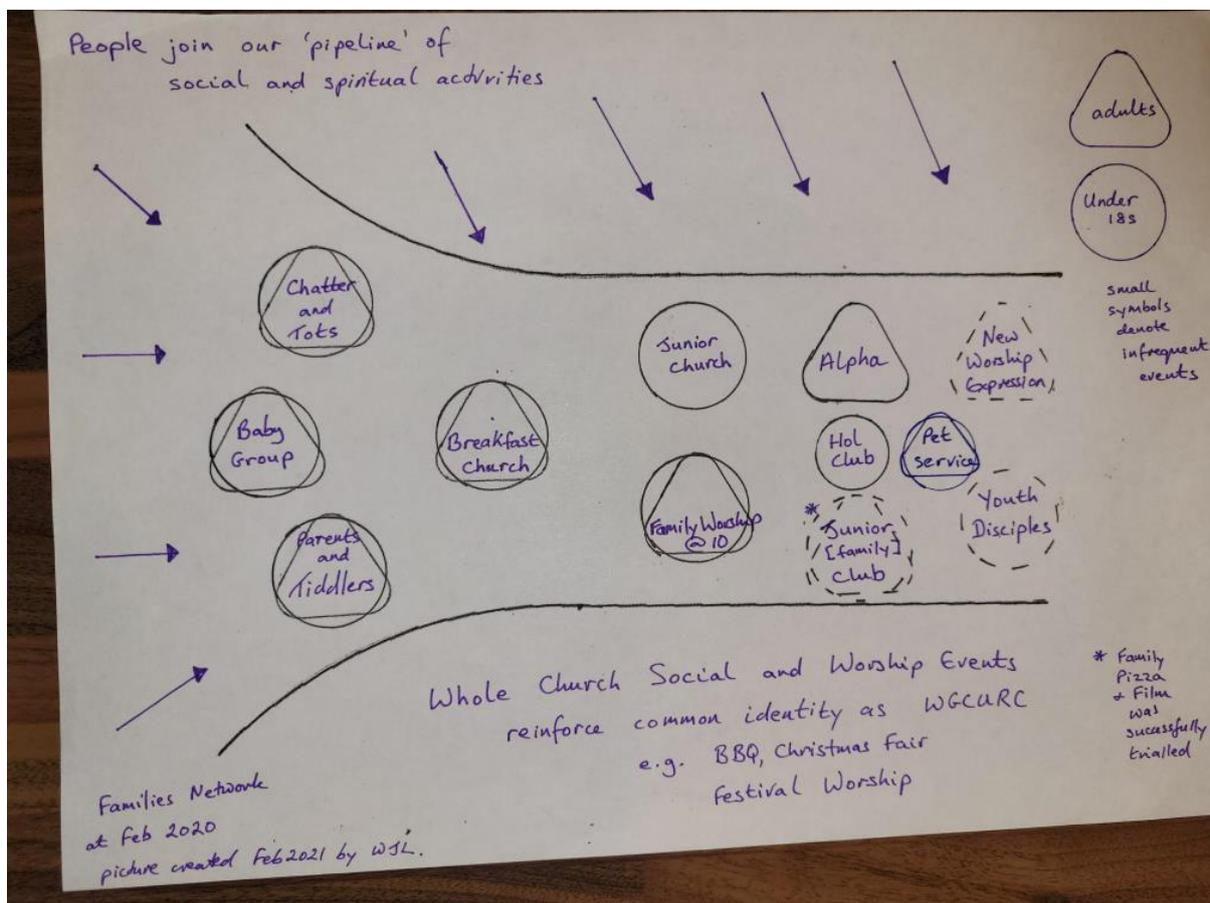
We began, in 2017, a fortnightly Friday afternoon toddler group called Parents and Tiddlers in response to Mums who requested it (as sometimes free on Fridays).

I first ran the Young Families Christmas Special in 2016, as the Carols by Candlelight was not suitable for children under 5 (in fact very unsafe!!). The Special is a simple carol service including 'Little Donkey' and 'Twinkle twinkle little star' and 'Here we go up to Bethlehem', with the Christmas Story woven in, with a verse here and there from O Come All Ye Faithful and We Three Kings and a couple of lively modern carols on the big TV. We corral the little people with chairs so we can have a few candles lit at the front, and include craft and play activities after with refreshments. In 2016 this began with 31 people attending. In 2019 attendance was 58.

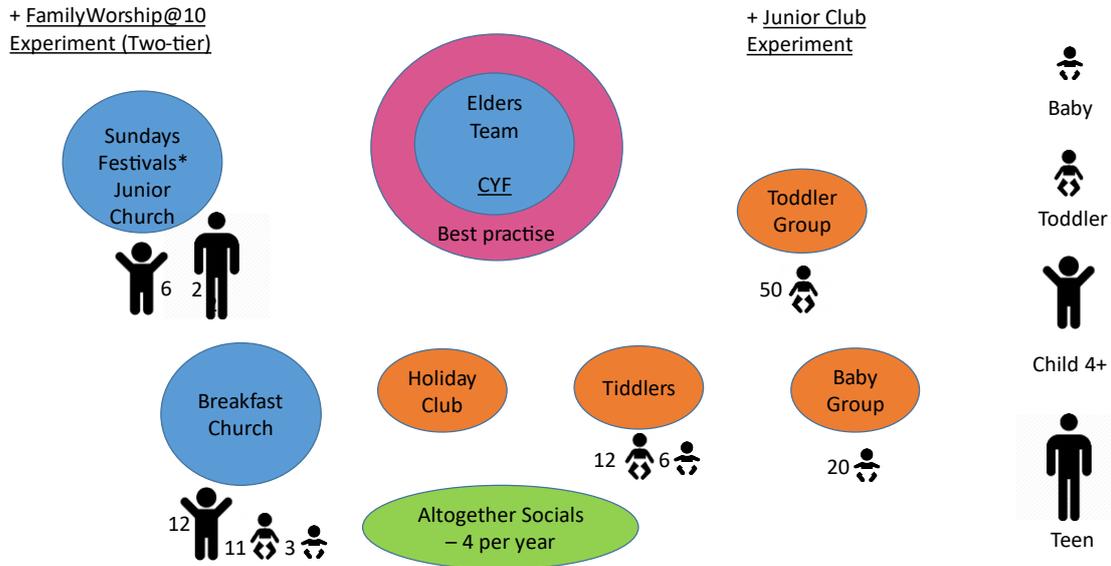
During 2018 and 2019 we experimented with a couple of filmnights showing The Miracle Maker and Moses Prince of Egypt.

We discussed starting a youth club or junior club several times, but the volunteering is insufficient, so the only events where we have been responsible for children without their parents are the Holiday Club, and Junior Church as part of the traditional worship on Sunday mornings.

Please see our 'pipeline picture' from 2019, with aspirations in dotted lines e.g. a regular club.



Childrenswork at WGCURC Spring 2019



5. Breakfast church

Breakfast church has been a highlight. We began with lots of arts and crafts and a help-yourself breakfast bar, before a 15 minute gathered worship time with child-friendly bible story and ways of praying, a song for little ones with the tambourine and song videos on the big TV with actions. It developed with more toys and less craft, bacon sandwiches, and outdoor play and worship in warmer weather. (This church has a big garden. They are no longer planning to build houses on it to finance the renovation of the halls as was being pursued between 2016 and 2018). Most of the families we had met through Babygroup, or the toddler groups, and as they grew a little older the gathered worship extended to 25 or 30 minutes including more dialogue and drama.

It may be of use to see how attendance built up numerically:

May 2015 to April 2016	met 17 times, averaging 4.4 families Including 2 helpers, we were on average 16.9 people
May 2016 to April 2017	met 19 times, averaging 3.5 families – 13.5 people
May 2017 to August 2017	met 7 times, averaging 5.7 families – 19.9 people
Sep 2017 to August 2018	met 18 times averaging 6.2 families – 21.7 people
Sep 2018 to Feb 2019	met 20 times, averaging 9.1 families – 32.8 people
Mar 2019 to Feb 2020	met 20 times, averaging 8 families – 29 people

The largest Breakfast Church congregation in 2019 was on Oct 20th with 42 people, 12 families. Then in January 2020 we had a session with 13 families, at 46 people. I wrote in the annual report in Feb 2020 'thanks to our loyal band of church hosts: Philip and Sandra, Wale and Margaret, and Janet and John,' two of whom were usually present at each session. And they commented about the spiritual atmosphere which had developed sometime in 2018. Previously, some of the parents chatted at the back during the gathered worship, or popped to Sainsburys opposite. But the Holy Spirit did something, as suddenly all the adults were engaged

with the worship as well as youngsters aged 0 to 13, and we had extra parents rushing back from Sainsburys in order to meet up with the rest of their family and all join in the singing and story! (extra parents not included in the attendance figures)

In 2019, numbers reduced slightly as two of the older families started to attend our new Sunday venture FW@10 instead!

Up until March 2020, 41 different families had been part of Breakfast Church, plus 12 others who attended only once. And in addition, 4 teenage grandchildren of Sunday worshippers volunteered with us towards their Duke of Edinburgh Award (all boys!)

6. COVID experience

Partially furloughed, I had time to experiment with videos, zoom, and do more on facebook. So we continued with Breakfast Church, Junior Church, FW@10, and a weekly 'coffee-time' for young families most of the way through COVID. Only a few participated on zoom but with great appreciation. As restrictions eased, Babygroup was possible in the large hall with each parent/baby on their own mat a metre or more from the next; Junior Church became possible in the garden distanced around a long table, with parents chatting nearby in a circle of distanced chairs, though the parents gradually joined in the sessions. And FW@10 began meeting long before the main church service, by designating each family to stay at their own table distanced from the rest. What developed at the week-ends was a long outdoor session on many Saturdays and many Sundays, where the youngsters would play all age football with me and some Dads, little ones at the play equipment, Mums chatting nearby, and there would be teaching/worship as a break in the middle. It was great fellowship and one family said, "you have made this our 2nd home" which was wonderful!

Of course children grow older, the family timetable changes with the school year, and parents' working arrangements move on too....

During COVID I shared in leading Alpha, on zoom, with 2 volunteers and the Mission Developer, and we were a group of 13 including most of the Church Elders. I had been paving the way for Alpha for 3 years. Then I also hosted the Bible Society's introductory course on zoom as a follow-on group.

7. Post-COVID

The zoom worship for the Sunday morning congregation during COVID was a big success. People returned but gradually to in-person church, and some people still attend by zoom. The Elders meeting wanted Sundays to be as simple as possible so instead of FW@10, I led a worship/teaching session at 10.30 in the other hall from January 2022 in parallel to traditional worship on some Sundays: these were attended by a couple of families and a couple of the young teens whose parents were in the traditional service.

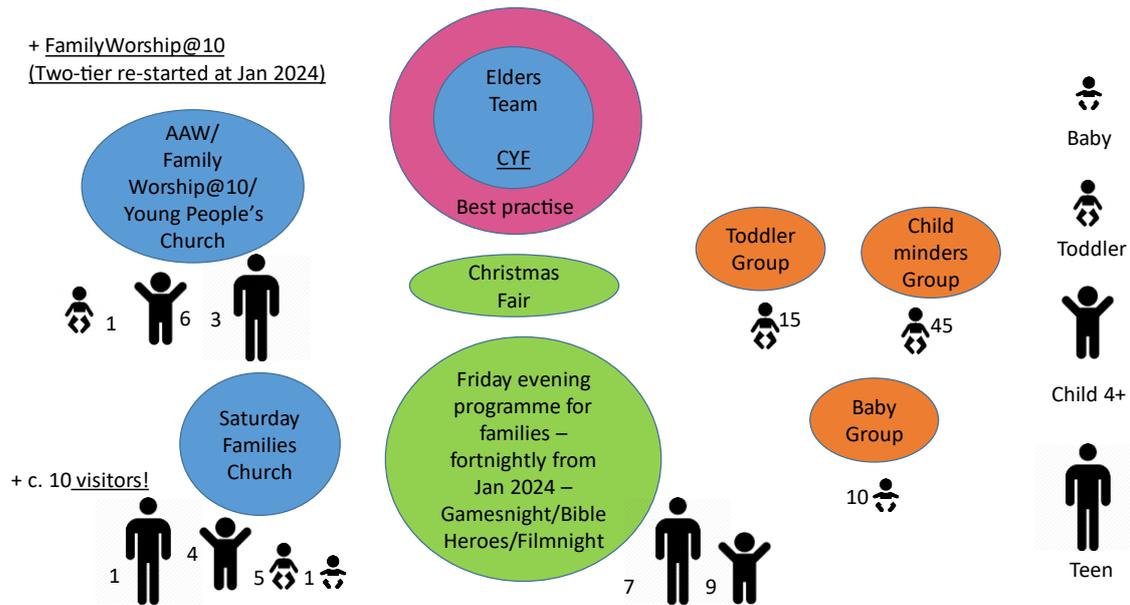
September 2021 also saw the retirement of our minister, and the church was in Vacancy for two whole years, during which I have led Sunday worship and preached on many occasions, traditional preaching style besides All Age. In partnership with the Mission Developer (whose post ended in August 2023) I have led termly Pet

Services (I absolutely love blessing pets and some grandchildren in their 20s have been attending), and we also launched a Sunday afternoon Worship Café twice a term with up to date worship songs as a balance to the very traditional hymns being used by visiting preachers on Sunday mornings. I have assembled three singers and a guitar player for music rehearsals to lead the worship songs (I play piano) and we enjoy ourselves! We also led a modern carol in Carols by Candlelight in Dec 2022 and 2023, and two 11 year-olds sang with us in 2022.

After COVID, we cautiously resumed some more of our CYF activities face to face. Chatter and Tots recommenced in November 2021. Due to concerns over the density of people in the hall, I encouraged our childminders to bring their children on a different day. This enables them to deliver some curriculum, with 12 to 15 childminders and up to 40 children, and they seem glad for me to tell a Christian story once or twice a term. Our Chatter and Tots for parents and grandparents has a much cosier feel now only 8 to 15 families come, and this has been welcomed by our two grandma volunteers. The children are mainly under 2.5, reflecting the increasing childcare provision from the government. Babygroup continues as before, with the ongoing challenge of re-seeding a new cohort every few months because most of the women return to work after just a year's maternity leave.

Saturday Families Church recommenced in January 2022 at the later time of 10.30am, with mid-morning snacks, the gathered worship usually starting at Noon. Most of the previous families are a little older, only two are participating much on Saturdays but we have seen most of the others occasionally (except those who moved away). We are beginning to build a new cohort and have some toddlers and 3 to 4 year-olds so everything is aimed more for these younger ones, with stuff in reserve in case older ones turn up. We had 3 families with older children on the first Saturday in January 2024 (dancing classes etc. resumed the 2nd week) and then 3 different families with younger children at the next session! The volunteers observe that the children feel really comfortable – owning the space and asking for their favourite toys and activities and snacks. Parents are participating with enthusiasm in the gathered worship.

Childrenswork at WGCURC Spring 2024



The largest session of Saturday Families Church had 8 families on the same day, 3 to 5 is more usual. 15 different families have been attending since COVID, plus 4 others who only tried once. During the COVID era, WGCURC built a coffee bar at the back of the Main Hall (used for Sunday worship) and that's also where we have a Children's Corner and store ride-on toys. So it works well to now host all of our Saturday session in this revamped space, particularly as 3 of the volunteers have retired from helping. With the general shortage of volunteers, all of my groups are advertised as 'Self-help' and the first attendees must get out equipment, although this probably feels less welcoming for any new family arriving at the advertised time. I operate 'slow start' for all our sessions and family worship as families are busy and sometimes chaotic: you are never late – just join in when you arrive.

We advertised Holiday Club mornings again in 2023, but the only interested family couldn't make the days our halls were free. (Most of our current hall hirers do not break in half-term). And most families need a full day of childcare.

At the Young Families Christmas Special in 2023, attendance was 25.

During 2022, several people asked for a Games evening in the garden in summer, as they missed the COVID-era long afternoons. Games were a big success! And we held another filmnight for families. I also wanted to try an intergenerational bibletime as an experiment, which went well, and is now called Bible Heroes at a family's suggestion. So in 2023 we had a number of Friday evenings with a family event, including trying some indoor games gathered around tables. The games are mainly run by two volunteers including a parent. This has led to a Friday Night Programme this spring-term 2024, with events fortnightly (Bible Heroes/Gamesnight in rotation with a film at the end of term). We have been glad to see several of our 'old friends' from Breakfast Church at games and films, along with some of the Sunday families, and thrilled that three children have brought school friends with them. However, no single family manages to come as often as fortnightly, so

although twenty children have attended and may come again, attendance on any night is much lower. Age range? 5 to 17 plus parents. Parents seem pleased to see each other and to join in. And our skillset honed at Holiday Clubs is well used. Bible Heroes has begun small and will take a while to find its cohort.

I have also led Alpha Course twice more, on zoom, in the past two years – just because people contacted me to do it, though they are not (yet) joining our congregation. Thanks to the church volunteers who enjoy alpha.

At the invitation of our new minister, Rev Martyn Needs, FW@10 is back monthly since January 2024 and he is attending with his family, and giving a short talk in place of the Monkey Puppet. This feels hopeful.

8. The Sunday experience – ie. What the longstay congregation asks about

We began to offer junior church in the second hall from 2016, mainly myself leading supported by 3 volunteers who had previous junior church experience when any of them were available. This has often been one, two or three children, often five or six, ranging in age from 3 to 15 and often including at least one with special needs. And for two years (2016 to 2018) we were joined by a blended family with 7 children: 4 who came most weeks, plus an additional 3 every couple of months. I also supported a new volunteer in his forties to lead sometimes over 3 years but then he became a Church Elder and no longer has time. For around 3 years we operated 'upside down' with the youngsters starting in junior church, and joining the main congregation for the last 10 minutes of their worship to share what we had made/learned/been doing and experience a song altogether. At other times junior church has often started in the service. The minister requested the children stay out during the whole of communion Sunday worship. The highest attendance was 13 on the day in 2019 when I invited a therapy dog along – everyone showed up on the same day! Leading these sessions has been challenging as you never know who might be there, and we have included several children with special needs. Roots material is helpful to prepare for all ages and flex on the day – much time is wasted prepping content never used. A lot of my role is 'trying to get two families who might like each other along on the same day'. Since 2021, we call the session Young People's Church as it often includes a teen or two. There is just the one (original) volunteer who prepares sessions when I am absent. I tried involving a retired RE teacher who volunteered from our Tuesday Coffee morning, with limited success.

From 2015 to 2017, the minister led a monthly All Age Worship service, but the families did not often attend (to the disappointment of the Elders Meeting), so there were rarely more than two youngsters present and sometimes none. This service developed a community-style, with conversations and light-hearted talks in place of preaching and creative ways of praying sharing people's news, and more chorus-type music than hymns. This was well suited to some of the adults attending the mid-week Community Café launched by the Mission worker. During 2018, I was allowed to lead several All Age Worship services for which we tried hard to invite families from our pipeline and recent baptisms and offered food afterwards – Summer BBQ,

Harvest lunch etc.. Over the year, 23 different Under-18s attended at least once, older people did not dislike the services as Elders had expected, and I developed a Questionnaire to consult the congregation about experimenting with Two-tier arrangements. And so in January 2019 monthly FamilyWorship@10 was born, followed by 11am traditional worship, with activities for families from 11am in the other hall. Everyone could 'see' each other over coffeetime at 10.40. When we consulted with a 2nd questionnaire 6 months later, feedback was positive. 11am worship had become very traditional which some senior members enjoyed.

FW@10 used the big TV for worship songs, provided table seating and optional doodle/sticking-type activities for kids who need to fidget, visual aids and interactive story-telling, creative ways of praying, a memory verse, a quiz, and the Sunday Monkey puppet's awkward questions (and jokes) for discipleship learning. The aim was to provide an easy 'stepping-stone into Sunday' for unchurched families or those from Saturdays whose children had progressed into junior school. Several senior people came from the Sunday congregation and joined in with the families, so it was well balanced for ages, and three families from Saturdays were enabled to get to know four from Sundays. I chose the Puppet talk (for unchurched parents besides children) to gently encourage listening to the speaker in church in line with the main listening-to-the-leader style at WGCURC...The Monkey's big questions challenge all ages. And from 11am, families used collage materials working together to create a poster about the story, plus games or icing biscuits or outdoor play.

During the Vacancy, visiting preachers were very traditional in style. The home-grown Worship Team Sunday has also become more traditional with rare use of visual aids nor modern songs any more. It's all about listening to the readings, prayers and sermon and notices and singing hymns from pre-1950. Nothing to see. Whilst we are engaging the families on Friday evenings, the actual attendance from families on general Sundays has reduced. Of course, it's a small cohort who are all experiencing the next stages of school and family-life so the traditional nature of worship might be incidental, but I suspect it doesn't appeal much to their parents.

I led All Age Worship for everyone in 2022 for Palm Sunday, Queen's Jubilee, and Harvest, and in 2023 for Palm Sunday, Pentecost, Harvest and Christmas Eve, with good attendance from our families. Young People's Church have been joining the main congregation at the end of the service for Holy Communion since October 2021, and I worked with both our authorised leaders to include an All Age style Communion during the year. Also, I led a baptism service in June 2023 in partnership with a URC preacher to actually baptise the child* including 30 minutes All Age worship, with a congregation near 80, and a very evangelistic preach, which encouraged everyone, so they said. I knew the baptism family from Babygroup.

We welcomed our new minister and his family in September, and they chose the manse in Harpenden. We have agreed to revisit the vision for Family-Friendly in discussion with the families, and FW@10 is back at the minister's instigation. So far, general Sundays are sticking in the very traditional vein.

* URC has declined to make me a church member, nor train me to deliver communion nor baptisms. The stated reason is being a methodist preacher.?

9. Next I have a funded year left, so once the minister has completed his first 6 months I shall probably have another go at badgering for more Sunday All Age Worship. Most families do not want to split up on arrival at church – parents and children have been separated all week. Neither do they want to stay in church if the children are bored. WGCURC has now experienced several families where both parents preferred to come out to junior church with their children than to stay in with the older adults and the listening challenge. There has been no pipeline of junior church leaders coming through, so far: few working parents could offer to help more than once a month at most and their plans can change at short notice. But if the services were to contain a good All Age 20 minutes, then afterwards the children could do crafts etc. quietly if needed. And the family would have worshipped together and have some shared experience to chat about later.

All Age section: including accessible songs, prayers and a talk or story or video or dialogue which engages people of all ages and something to touch/see/do. No boredom.

The Elders meeting has twice previously committed to a regular All Age section on general Sunday mornings, but it has petered out within a few weeks. I have modelled numerous all age techniques for WGCURC on many occasions, with very positive feedback, but no URC leaders have gone for it. But it's just a skillset that can be learned...as we did over many years, and repeatedly, in the methodist Local Preachers' meetings I was part of, keeping up with our Continuing Professional Development...and helped preachers to be honest about their skillset so if they couldn't do the All Age section, another worship leader could lead that part of the service. I have offered to lead this section at WGCURC on some Sundays before junior church, but that hasn't happened. And all age prayers and talk suggestions in Roots are available to preachers, aren't they?

A few pen pictures - please check with me if you want to share any of these more widely than the committee

A family with boys aged 1 and 2 stayed in touch with the minister after baptism and began attending Breakfast Church regularly when the boys were 3 and 4. Both parents work fulltime. They attended Sunday all age events , and a few general Sundays, coming out to junior church with their boys. After a couple of years they stopped attending for a whole year – Mum was pregnant – then they rejoined with their baby daughter. Both parents are natural youth leaders and were great getting involved with the children during COVID week-end afternoons. However, they could not find dates to commit to volunteering. They were very regular at FW@10 besides Saturdays. In September 2021 they announced they were joining 2 football teams – one for each son – and wouldn't be back til May. I visited them several times, but they have not yet returned to any of our events. Other families miss them.

Janet and John fostered a baby for a year in 2016, after Janet's retirement from working in pre-school. They are charismatics from WGC's large warehouse church. She enjoyed Babygroup and made friends with the Mums, so after the adoption, she helped me launch Parents and Tiddlers. Janet and John were soon helping at Breakfast Church as their church mainly operates on Sundays. After an issue with their church, they joined WGCURC in 2018 and have helped to run Alpha – they have led over a dozen alpha courses previously! In

2022, John retired and became an Elder and ten of the youngsters came to see him make his promises. They both sing with a gospel choir which helps with their worship-life, and they also now sing in our emerging Music Group where I am able to incorporate some of their song suggestions. Janet has also preached on a few occasions, and they both help with Worship Team Sundays. They help with Saturday Church monthly, and Gamesnights. And I am blessed in the weekly zoom biblegroup they lead.

Iv came to see Babygroup during her first pregnancy, but didn't manage to bring her twins along until they were 4 months as she had post-natal depression. They were baptised in WGCURC as one year-olds and regular at Chatter and Tots. The whole family came occasionally to worship on Saturdays and All Age Sundays once the boys reached 4, just making the >6 faith-filled events per year for the annual count. Iv launched a business mentoring pregnant Mums to head off depression, and gave some free classes at Babygroup. During COVID, Iv enjoyed zoom alpha course with our church members and professed her Christian faith – she never had the chance to join a church before. I sometimes helped play with the boys during her 2nd pregnancy as we emerged from COVID. Then in November 2021, they relocated to Scotland with her husband's job. She has started a Babygroup in their Scottish town!

In. works part-time running her own business, and brought both her daughters to Chatter and Tots and then Breakfast Church. She volunteered for a year at Chatter and Tots. Dad came to the gathered worship time sometimes, too, and to socials. He works in The City. When the family relocated to the south coast in 2018, they paid professionals to move their wonderful swing/slide set to our church garden, where it is still well-used.

D. and her husband arrived with their large blended family in 2016, and transferred their URC membership from a north London church. Mum worked as an out-of-hours GP on Saturday nights, a 12 hour shift, so she gladly used to hand the children into junior church. The 2 year old kept us on our toes! After 2.5 years, they moved elsewhere in Herts to secure a secondary school place for their daughter, and transferred their URC membership again.

In Feb 2022, M and his wife B brought their two year-old to worship on Sundays, amusing her in the Children's Corner, and transferred their URC membership from Cambridge. They soon started attending Saturdays, too. Expecting their 2nd child imminently, they enjoy FW@10 and now bring their daughter out to Young Peoples Church on general Sundays, both coming with her. They have previously been junior church leaders and expect to serve again when their children are in school.

(The above are the only 2 families who have come to us with previous URC experience.)

S. came to Babygroup with her daughter, and was glad to bring her 5 year-old boy to Holiday Club. After a year or so, they became regular at Breakfast Church. Once the girl turned 3, she also brought her often on Sundays whilst her son and husband were at rugby. Since COVID, she has a new management job, and attends Sundays just a couple of times a term, and they are busy elsewhere on Saturday mornings, but attend some Friday nights. Husband and son both enjoyed our Jubilee special All Age worship. S. is our parent rep on the CYF Steering group meeting a couple of times a year to reflect and plan ahead.

At Easter 2017 we experimented with an Easter craft morning for families, which engaged 7 volunteer helpers – the largest number ever! We advertised widely and prepped lots of materials. Only one family showed up – who recognised me from a town-centre interfaith stall. Deflated helpers! However, both parents began bringing the 2 year-old to Chatter and Tots, as Dad works evenings/ early mornings and the whole family became regular at Breakfast Church: son in junior school and elder daughter at a secondary school for

youngsters with special needs. Mum helped for a year at Chatter and Tots when the youngest started school. I provided some pastoral care over issues with school. The whole family attended various All Age Worship events, COVID garden experiences, and a couple of general Sundays – but the parents haven't stuck on Sundays. However, this past year the 17 year- old is volunteering on Saturdays and at Thursday Social Club for the elderly, and attending church (including Young People's church) every week. Our Saturday helper Wale is a probation officer and I can see his mentoring skills in action when they are serving together. She loves being part of our fellowship independent from her parents. She is allowed to escort her 9 year old sister to our evening events which works well. We keep in touch with the teen boy who enjoys football and has turned up to gamesnight occasionally. All three youngsters have taken part in drama in all age events which they enjoy.

And what of the 3 year old from India? He has been our most frequent young attendee on Sundays, and his parents have led a bible group, volunteered with technology, and HR advice, and in 2020 became church elders. They are less interested in All Age events, but helped to launch Film evenings, and the son writes on any sign-in sheet that he is in the Tech Team. He recently moved to an academic-style secondary school, with loads of homework, and Dad has a work contract abroad to finance school, so suddenly they are retired from Eldership and we miss their son in Young People's Church. He is meeting me soon on a Saturday afternoon in a coffee shop whilst Mum does the shopping, a dog-friendly café as he likes my puppy. And he aims to attend sometime on a Friday.



Children at church





Summer games



Film night 2022



Pets 2023



Me in Dec 2022



**Breakfast Church Dads
enjoying church garden in 2018**

Family-friendly Statement: finalised on July 21st 2016 after discussion by Church Meeting

1. We intend for children to look forward to coming to WGCURC, to feel confident and able to be themselves among us. We will provide a range of christian-themed activities suitable for children with different interests and abilities, and will foster an inclusive environment where they can make friends with other children and with adults who will model faith for them. Children will learn about God and Jesus here, become familiar with the bible, be encouraged to develop their own relationship with Jesus, and be able to worship in child-like ways, through games and songs, with visual aids and movement and wonder. They will also have opportunities to undertake acts of service, and to develop and use their own spiritual gifts in the life of our church. Those children who enjoy it may get involved in drama/stories and other aspects of worship-leading. We will celebrate children's creativity, putting their art and crafts, prayers and thoughts on display. We hope children will be encouraged to have ideas which are acted upon and we hope to consult children on aspects of church life which affect them. We hope that through their participation in our community, children will feel better supported and equipped to flourish in school, at home and in other areas of their lives.
2. We are aware of the poor record for retaining children across traditional churches of all major denominations in the past 50 years and desire to be more creative and intentional in our ministry so that more children may develop a life-long faith. We understand that children will not be able to participate in many of the activities of adults until they are adults – because they will not yet have developed the requisite abilities (reading, listening, vocabulary, theological concepts, fine motor skills etc.). We want to avoid children feeling bored, to make our church life specifically relevant to children and to plan ahead to keep engaging them as they grow up. We will try to avoid children being present at events they cannot relate to, responding to improve their experience if this occurs.
3. We accept that family life these days is diverse, and that children experience an array of childcare situations. We intend to offer children opportunities to worship and learn alongside parents and other family members, and to benefit from the company of the older and younger generations. We also want children to behave respectfully towards older church members, and to be able sometimes to keep quiet for short periods.
4. We intend to be strong in our approach to safety, safe-guarding and ability to offer a listening ear and prayer support to children and their parents in times of stress.

Parents

5. We are aware of the role parents play in modelling faith and worship for the youngest, and will support parents in encouraging their children to worship and believe. We will provide for families to worship together, and will also give parents a quiet space to

worship knowing their children are cared for nearby. Ideally, parents will feel equipped by us to raise their children as Christians.

6. We hope parents joining WGCURC will feel accepted for who they are, irrespective of their parenting-style, and supported in their discipleship for themselves and the whole family. We want them to belong here and feel validated in their self-esteem, encouraged to develop and use their own spiritual gifts in the life of the church.
7. We aim to make it easy for families to join in by catering for their needs at appropriate events, signalling to them what to expect in advance, and not inviting them to events at which they might struggle. We (*will*) foster a culture which is welcoming and hospitable towards families and not judgmental.
8. We hope parents will make friends at church, including with others at a similar life stage.

Wider congregation

9. We intend our church to take seriously the biblical command to teach the faith to the next generation, and expect our church to keep the needs of families and children in balance with other priorities. We hope the whole church will embrace a culture conducive to strong safe-guarding and hospitality towards children. We hope that adults in the wider church will learn and receive encouragement from the faith and spirituality of our families.

What differences will we see?

10. When our church is more child-friendly, there will be more activities helping to develop Christian faith in children and more children involved in them. This will hopefully be supported by social/developmental activities as we are able to provide them.
11. There will be more families actively engaged in the life of the church, their parents participating regularly in worship, discipleship activities and offering service through the church. There will be good relationships between families, supporting each other.
12. Ideally, we might also offer more social support for families under stress. From past experience, support for children with special needs might be most relevant *at WGCURC*.