



# THE CHURCH AND BOYS

MAKING THE CONNECTION

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# Introduction

Since writing my Grove booklet *Boys, God and the Church* (Grove, 2007) on the subject of boys and the church, which forms the basis of some of the thinking behind this resource, I have become increasingly aware that there is a problem that's simply not going away: the church is not always an ideal place for boys to be, to grow and to thrive. I have had hundreds of conversations and email exchanges with church group leaders, parents and Christian leaders who see that there's a problem but don't know what to do about it. Is it 'just them?' they ask.

Having been raised in a 'Christian home' many years ago, I was in the habit of attending church, and I benefited greatly from an all-male Boys' Brigade that taught me and helped me in ways that have become apparent only as I have grown older. But in church itself, and particularly the main morning services, I can still remember being bewildered by the ladies who wore hats, the flower arrangements, and some of the new songs—or 'choruses', as they were then known—that seemed just a little wet!

I work with a great many churches and, despite a few exceptions, the majority of children engaged in church activities, whether that's Messy Church or Sunday groups, are girls. Peter Brierley has researched church trends for many years. *Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers* (Christian Research, 2002) identifies that girls are more likely to go to church than boys. Looking at adult gender trends in *Religious*

*Trends* (2005), he suggests that, at the current rate, men will be a rare sight in the church by 2028. Boys are not going to church in great numbers, and men are not, either.

The ideas and suggestions in this book are principally about working with boys aged around four through to about eleven. Later in the book we look at how we can help boys to move towards manhood. Throughout, there are suggestions for children's groups that will work just as well with youth groups and groups of male teenagers and young men.

The focus is on this age group for three reasons. First, boys learn what it means to be a boy at an early age, and the first few years at nursery and school are key to their development and learning. Second, all the evidence suggests that it is in this age range that boys who do attend church and church-based activities tend to leave because there's not enough to keep them connected. Third, if we can keep boys up to the age of eleven or so, getting them involved and integrated into church life with a vibrant peer group, we are much more likely to keep them through their teenage years. If they form the right habits and learn the right things with the right role models, we will have succeeded and they will have been blessed.

I can do nothing but accept that this book is based on a generalisation! In order to look at gender differences, we have to begin with what comes to our minds as the 'general rule' of what a boy may be like. As you read through the first two chapters and then look at all the practical suggestions, you may well have in mind one or two boys who do not fit the pattern that is assumed. You may also be thinking of a few girls who do fit these descriptions. I know, as a parent of boys and a worker with more than 30 years' experience of children and young people, that not all boys are sporty,

not all are into aggressive activities and games, and not all find it difficult to be quiet or sit still without being forced or conditioned to do so. Likewise, not all girls are into things that are pink and fluffy, not all like quiet and arty activities, and not all are compliant and easy to manage. But the majority of boys will be helped by some of the ideas here, and the majority of boys is what this book is concerned with: it's about reaching them, supporting them and keeping them as full and active Christians, contributing effectively to the life of the church. If some or even many of these suggestions work equally well with girls, in mixed groups or in groups that separate boys and girls, then all the better. Try them and see!

There are always exceptions to the rule. Even as things stand (and the same has been true throughout the history of the church), some boys do make it through to adulthood in the church, and many go on to be great evangelists, leaders, and men who give practical support to congregations. The ideas and suggestions collected here offer some hope and assistance to those who want to see a better gender balance in our churches, who want to see boys grow in faith and move towards, as the Boys' Brigade puts it, 'true Christian manliness'.

Where does all this leave girls? I am not advocating that the church should focus on boys at the expense of girls, or should ignore the unique differences that girls bring to a group, to the church and, in time, to church leadership. But I would suggest, without being complacent, that the needs of girls can be and are addressed in other ways within the church. We know that current provisions for children's groups, in terms of ideas and resources and the activities that churches run, are generally more attractive to girls than

boys. As we will see later, this may have something to do with the reality that by far the majority of those working with children in a church context are women, who naturally understand the needs of girls well. In terms of 'reaching' girls from the fringes of our church communities, the church does not do a great job, but it is a better job than we do for boys.

There is also something about the physical environment of many churches that may make them more attractive to most girls than to most boys, whether it's the colours, the decorations or the ubiquitous flowers. I recently visited a very modern new-build church where the main worship space had no stained-glass windows, no icons, no banners and no artwork. It had the feel of a secular concert venue—except for the two ornate wrought-iron stands with elaborate flower arrangements that flanked the stage. Not all girls like flowers, but I would venture to suggest that more girls like them than boys do.

There is a place for taking time out with girls and doing activities that are tailored for the needs of most girls, where they can concentrate on those things without the irritation, as they may see it, of having boys around. We will look later at the potential advantages and disadvantages of splitting groups along gender lines, but there can be no harm in setting aside some times when girls can concentrate on the issues that are relevant to them, and boys likewise, separate from each other.

Ultimately, whether doing things together or separately, girls as well as boys can benefit when a little more thought is given to the kind of activities and teaching programmes provided, to meet the gender styles and qualities of both male and female.



## Chapter 3

# Working with boys

In later chapters, we will look at some specific details of what to do with boys in worship, prayer, and so on. Underlying all we do, though, are some basic ideas that will make working with boys a little easier.

## Boys at an early age

If we are to help the boys in our churches grow successfully into Christian men, we need to include them in the activities of the church from the earliest point on.

You will have heard what the Jesuits say: ‘Give me the boy until he is seven, and I will give you the man.’ We know that boys develop rapidly and begin to change, aged 4–5, when testosterone becomes particularly evident in them, so we also know that they are beginning to be formed into men even at that young age. Psychologist Sami Timimi wrote a book called *Naughty Boys* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), exploring the influences on boys. He identified that Western society encourages children to engage in antisocial behaviour, and that the influences become embedded early on.

Here are some things we can do to promote the inclusion of boys more successfully.

- Talk about the importance of work with young children. Some churches may consider work in the crèche or

preschool to be simply child-minding, of no spiritual or social consequence. Yet we know that, as young minds are being formed, they are open to the influences of their environment. Therefore, through the use of simple repeated Bible stories, songs with some spiritual input and a caring Christian environment, young children will pick up the atmosphere and will become changed by it.

- Encourage men to work with young children. As we know, this is a difficult issue. Many men do not think that work with babies and toddlers has anything to do with them, and some parents may not be willing to see men working with their young children. Yet little boys need to have men around them in all areas of their lives in order to understand that what they do is normal, not only for children but for men too.
- Remember that boys are different. In a room full of toddlers, it is easy to see them all as a 'group' and not as lots of individuals. If we keep in the back of our minds that boys are indeed different from girls, we will naturally provide a varied programme that will appeal to the boys' sense of energy and activity, and we will also recognise and understand some of their more aggressive and antisocial behaviour.

## **Programme planning for boys**

Whatever resources we have available in our churches, there are some basic principles that need to be followed when we use our material to plan a programme for the session.

Remember that boys need opportunities to be physically

active and to 'let off steam', particularly if they are coming to the session straight from having to be quiet and conform in the main church service. This active time need only be short and focused, although in some church environments it may not be practical, due to space and noise restrictions. If possible, it can be helpful to give boys the opportunity to go outside and get some fresh air for a few minutes. Before church, see if the boys, and any girls who choose to, could meet for a few minutes and play some active games before calming down for the beginning of the service.

Many children's workers like to think that they are good at telling stories, and will ramble on for rather too long. This is fine for a few boys who may be good auditory learners, but, for those who need activity and action in order to learn, it will lead to boredom and disconnection. Each section of the programme needs to be short enough to offer variety while also providing some depth. Avoid doing anything that lasts longer than ten minutes, and, within that time period, offer occasional opportunities to pause, breathe in deeply and stretch.

We do not want to undermine the valid and valuable teaching that God made us all and loves us all, but we also want to recognise those boys who have particular skills and talents. In some communities, the very thought of saying to a child that they are a winner is offensive, as it means that other children are by definition losers. In our work with boys, we need to be careful not to reinforce negative self-image or make the sessions testosterone-filled challenges, but there is a place for a bit of competition and recognition of success in races, games, quizzes, and so on. Boys enjoy being winners.

Check your programme to make sure there is a variety of

activities that will engage both boys and girls. These activities could include games, role play, drama, craft, singing, movement, active prayers and team or pairs work, as well as other elements.

Plan some sessions where you throw out all the plans and do something entirely different—remembering that boys with particular needs, particularly Asperger's syndrome and autism, will appreciate having a bit of warning that this is going to happen. You could bring in a speaker or a drama group, do some graffiti (where allowed), go for a walk, visit the children's work in another local church, play some games on some open land or the local park, do a whole session singing worship songs, or just play lots of games. This will help the boys who like variety and a mix of inputs, and will give everyone a different experience.

## **Materials that work with boys**

If you are looking for really successful material for boys, you will be aware of a problem with the materials that are currently published for use with children in church settings. This problem is a bit of a vicious circle. The majority of the children in our churches and church groups are girls. Publishers tend to produce materials that best suit the majority market, in order to keep the product selling and therefore viable—so boys are not encouraged to join or stay in our churches and church groups.

Some church children's groups meet in rooms, halls, kitchens, lobbies, vestries, bell towers or cupboards (yes, I have seen them all!) that provide little room for moving around, and where the 'main' church can easily hear what

is going on and be disturbed by it. Users of the published materials can be fairly hard to please, and will make it clear in feedback if there are too many physical or noisy activities to suit their groups and the physical environments in which they work.

Most adult volunteers (perhaps up to 90 per cent) who work with children are women, and they are the 'gatekeepers' for the type of materials purchased. They are likely to be attracted to materials designed in a way that appeals to them, and are also likely to want materials including activities that are more girl-friendly and less boisterous.

Much of the material, even in children's Bibles, avoids the more challenging, bloody or unpleasant parts of scripture, focusing instead on the 'nice', palatable sections. For instance, the story of Noah's ark is often used because it provides the opportunity for great artwork. Rarely, if ever, do we find materials that take the story further, where Noah disobeys God, gets drunk, and so on.

The design of Christian literature for children is more attractive to girls than to boys. Most girls like to see pastel colours and rounded shapes, whereas most boys would rather have primary colours and angular design. Publishers of secular comics and magazines for children have huge research budgets and are able to make products that hit the target market perfectly. Those publications clearly prove the point about design.

All of these factors mean that children's group resources tend to be less suitable for boys. This is a real challenge for hard-pressed, very busy but also very dedicated volunteers who feel called to work with our children. They need to use materials in which ideas are provided for them and some of the preparation is already done.

In order to rebalance the materials we use and the activities we do with our groups, we need to follow a few simple steps, seeking out resources that will work better for boys.

- Boys generally prefer to follow stories through comic versions with little text to read, where the vivid pictures give visual clues to what the words are communicating. There are now some excellent visual Bibles, comics that tell the Christmas and Easter stories, and similar products that should be introduced in order to help boys engage with scripture.
- Boys enjoy challenge and competition, and those who are into video games and quests will be attracted to materials such as the *Guardians of Ancora* game. *Guardians of Ancora* has been developed by Scripture Union in England and Wales to provide a positive, challenging game based on biblical stories. Boys can join in, become a character, fight and overcome challenges and move up levels in very much the same way as they would in the less wholesome or helpful secular equivalents. *Guardians of Ancora* describes itself on its website (<http://guardiansofancora.com>) as ‘a world-class tablet game for 8- to 11-year-olds offering an amazing virtual world and an immersive interactive experience of Bible stories’, and is simply great for boys.

Look at all the materials and resources your church has available for boys, and spend some time comparing them with equivalent secular resources and materials. Then consider how you can make small changes, introducing a little more activity or better visuals, to bring them closer to the needs of boys.

Ask the children what they think of the booklets, pictures

and other materials you use. Invite them to talk freely about what they most enjoy and what they enjoy less. Children are likely to give you the answers they think you are seeking, so be careful not to lead them in the way you want their responses to go. Don't be afraid to 'go with the flow'. Boys can make suggestions that you are not expecting or ask questions that take the whole session in different directions. Girls, of course, may do the same, but are more inclined to go along with whatever the leader is suggesting or doing.

Plan your programme with a focus on both practical and active elements, as well as spiritual content. Some groups can be dominated by work to be done on 'art activities'. Sticking and colouring, with lots of glitter, is likely to bore boys more quickly than it bores girls.

Think about how your materials communicate Jesus. If the programme tends to focus more on the lovely things Jesus said and did, and less on the reality of the fight, his walk to death and his fully human experience of pain, boys will be less attracted to their Saviour.

## **Boys need boundaries**

Boys are likely to push the boundaries of your patience and planning. They will fidget, fight, make stupid noises at the wrong times, behave badly, and generally test their leaders to the limits. Of course, those who volunteer to work with children in a church setting do not want to spend all their time trying to keep order or implementing rules, and the children who come do not want to attend an over-regimented session. On the other hand, less secure children and those who prefer some sense of order, particularly girls, will feel disturbed if boundaries are not implemented. Ultimately, the

gospel message deserves to be listened to, as do those who are called to communicate it.

The following suggestions are likely to work equally well with boys as with girls, and will help the group to settle into learning together.

As boys are less able to see and interpret non-verbal signs of communication, such as a stare, a glance or a frown, it is necessary to make clear when you are not satisfied with the behaviour that is going on around you. This will need to be communicated both by your expressions and by what you say. Develop an action or activity that is clear and reminds all the children, including the boys, that it is time to pay attention, to stop or to listen. Avoid using a whistle: children are far more valuable than sheep or sheepdogs! Here are a few possibilities:

- Hold your hands high in the air and clap twice, expecting the group to mirror your action.
- Use a short burst of a familiar piece of music, worship song or pop song to attract the attention of the children.
- Count down from five, and wait at the end until all of the children have stopped and looked in your direction.
- Develop a chant based on the name of the group. Get the children to help you do this, as that will encourage a level of commitment to taking part and doing what is expected. The chant can be shouted, said, whispered, and so on, so that the children get used to being loud and being quiet together.
- Use a percussion instrument to tap out a short rhythm, with the children being expected to reply with the same



rhythm. This can be repeated until all of the children have stopped what they are doing and are looking to you for guidance.

Create a set of rules that should be followed by all members of the group. Explore with them what behaviour, language and attitudes they consider to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Then work on a set of ground rules that are displayed and referred to regularly. The 'rules' or 'guidelines' should focus on the positive rather than the negative. Try to keep the number to a maximum of around five, so that they can easily be remembered. Here are some examples that you may wish to use:

- We will always listen to the leaders and each other when we are talking and praying.
- We will keep everyone else safe by not hurting them or causing harm.
- We will help each other to have fun, and not stop others from enjoying themselves.
- We will look after all the good things we have, including each other.
- We will learn something new by taking part and helping others to take part.
- We will be lively, creative, and quiet at the right times.

The children's 'ownership' of these guidelines will be very important, as group members who have contributed to their development are much more likely to follow them. It also follows that the group will, in their own ways, show their

frustration or disappointment to those children who don't conform.

Make sure that the boys in particular are reminded of the consequences of poor behaviour. This means that there needs to be a set procedure for those children who do not behave appropriately, and some level of agreement and parity in the way things are dealt with by the leaders. Children are very adept at spotting the cracks in any rules, and will easily work out and exploit the situation if a leader is considered to be 'soft' and easy to mess around. Despite the way we might see it, boys do not thrive in an anarchic setting where there are no rules and no boundaries. They thrive when they can explore and express themselves within defined boundaries.

Nip difficult situations in the bud by spotting boys who will trigger poor behaviour in others, or keeping apart those who find it hard not to fight each other. Simply by having leaders sitting with the children and interacting with them, many behavioural problems can be prevented. To have a leader sitting between two boys who wind each other up diffuses the situation.

Remember that children will forget rules over a long period of time, so it's worth revisiting them occasionally and doing some additional work on them to check that they are still relevant and meet the changing needs of the group. This is a particularly helpful thing to do at the start of a new year when you may have some new children joining the group.

Never speak or shout over the children. Make it clear, by waiting, that you want them to hear and respond to what you are saying. Once you have done the chant, hand-clap, or whatever else is done to draw attention, simply wait patiently for the children to stop what they are doing, to look, and to listen. Then talk calmly while lowering your

voice and glancing around to make sure that all the children are listening hard. This may take a little while for the children to get used to, and leaders may be tempted to jump in and start talking even if there are a few children who have not yet stopped. Stick at it, because, once it has become a habit, it makes the whole group work better together.

Speaking or shouting over children has three negative consequences. First, the children know that they can carry on doing what they choose to do, without regard for you or for the other children in the group. Second, it represents a loss of the authority and respect that you are encouraging the children to have for you. Third, the general volume and noise made by the boys in particular will increase as your volume increases, resulting in too much noise, complaints from the 'adult' congregation next door, and headaches all round.

If you have consistent behavioural challenges with a number of boys, you need to go through a process to discover what the issues may be. First, find out whether the boys who are struggling to behave have got other significant issues in their lives that may be affecting their behaviour. Second, take a careful and critical look at the programme you are delivering, considering whether there is enough variety, activity and creativity to keep the boys engaged. Try to reflect on the points in the session that went well for the group and for those boys, and the times when things went awry. Work out whether you can avoid those times or do things differently in order to keep the boys more engaged. Third, start to work through your behaviour sanctions, which may include involving parents. Do not be afraid to ask a child not to attend if all else has failed and the disruption being caused is proving damaging to the other children and to the leaders.

## **Boys need adult interaction**

There are some things that most boys enjoy and most girls don't. Boys enjoy really poor jokes, horror stories and useless facts and figures. They like to discuss football and the latest heroes of the game. As they move into adolescence, boys may want to talk through issues about the obvious vocal and physical changes they are going through, and their attitudes to girls may be changing. It is really important that, from time to time, leaders make space in the programme for boys to talk these things through with each other and with leaders, and to listen to what others have to say.

Boys have things they can teach us! Group leaders should show an interest in the things that the boys are into outside church, whether it's video games, the latest card collection craze, sports, model making, fishing, or whatever. If a leader is willing to listen and learn, it shows boys that we are all learning together. It helps with the trust and bonding process between boy and man, and will make them much more likely to listen to what we have to say when we talk about our faith and what we believe.

Allow boys to open up about the issues that they face in their lives. This is not easy to do, and will not be easy for the boys in the group until they are sure they have a supportive peer group around them and leaders who genuinely want to know and want to help. Boys may need reminding that there is a great deal of strength in knowing yourself well enough to recognise that you have issues, and being willing to admit it and get some guidance. Leaders can help with this by sharing a little of what happened to them as children (as long as this doesn't become an ageist rant, along the lines of 'When I was your age... You lot don't know you're born!') Boys will

appreciate men who are willing to share their challenges and be open about what they have faced in the past.

Be aware that boys will not always be willing to raise the subjects that are on their mind, so some help from leaders may be needed. Talk with boys as appropriate about the cultural pressures in the world and society that they face, including materialism, the pressure to succeed, financial pressures, bereavement, pornography, sexuality and relationships. This can be done by looking at the headlines in the paper or on the news, or simply raising a subject and seeing where it goes. Try to help boys to understand their world from a biblical point of view, and give them the skills to look to the Bible to seek answers and support.

## **Special needs and boys**

One of the most exciting and intriguing things about God's creative power is that he made us all different, with our individual needs. However, there are some diagnosed 'special needs' that have a significant effect on the way some boys behave, respond socially and take in information, which we need to consider briefly.

We may have our own views on some of these issues. We may think that some unwelcome behaviour is because of 'bad parenting' or some other social reason. Whatever our personal views, we need to take what we are told seriously, and do all we can, as servants of God, to help the boys in our care.

More boys have some of the more common and obvious special needs than girls. It is thought that up to five times more boys than girls are diagnosed as being somewhere on the autism spectrum. One form of autism is Asperger's

