

Caroline Montgomery



Refresh

Introducing adults
to faith through
toddler groups

Includes 33 thoughts for the day



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Introduction

Refresh is a fun and effective way to build meaningful and purposeful relationships with parents and carers in your community. It's stay-and-play turned on its head; the children have fun, but we focus on refreshing the adults with time to talk, fresh coffee, pastries and, most importantly, our key ingredient: a five-minute thought for the day where we share something of God in a gentle, relevant and accessible way. The adults feel like it's *their* morning: a place where they are welcomed, encouraged and refreshed, that is also fun for their little ones. Our guests include parents, carers, grandparents, nannies and childminders.

I'm pleased to be writing this book because Refresh has been such a blessing to the families in our community and we have had the joy of journeying alongside many who have now found Jesus for themselves. I am excited to share all about it with you and give you the resources to run your own Refresh!

The Refresh model is straightforward and proven to work. It could be used in a large or small setting; the model works regardless of size. I would encourage you to try it in your setting, it is such a joy to see how God meets with the parents and carers in the community. We have seen much fruit from our Refresh Café. Families who previously were not part of church have started coming along on Sundays; many have become Christians, and their journeys all began with Refresh. You can read some testimonies in chapter 4.

There are numerous groups for parents and carers to attend with their little ones, but most, if not all, are completely focused on the children and there is little or nothing offered specifically for the adults. Even those run by churches often centre their activities totally around the children. It is also true that most of the families coming to these groups

are from the wider community and are not part of any church. As Christians, we need to find a way to connect with these families, welcome, love and support them and show them that God loves them. We have found Refresh to be an excellent way to do all this.

My heart and purpose for writing this book is to encourage and equip you to grow your own Refresh ministry in your church; to create a space in the week where families are welcomed, where the children are happy and where you can invest in refreshing the adults physically, emotionally and, most importantly, spiritually. You can do this with a five-minute Christian thought for the day that shares something of God with them.

Whatever your church situation and space, I suggest that it is possible to create an environment that is safe and fun for the children, while at the same time operating principally as a welcoming space for the adults. This book shows you how to run Refresh in your setting and includes 33 thoughts for the day for you to use. These can be used straight off the page, or you can adapt them using your own examples and stories, but there are enough to take you through the academic year.

My prayer is that your community will be blessed and strengthened through the transformational love of God and will experience amazing new testimonies of faith such as we have seen through pioneering Refresh Café, in Jesus' name.





about
Refresh



The vision for Refresh

It's wonderful to have a morning where the focus is on me being refreshed!

Refresh attendee

Our vision for Refresh was to create a space where families, particularly the adults, would be welcomed, encouraged and refreshed, and where they might experience something of God's love for them in a space that is also suitable and fun for their little ones.

In this chapter I'm going to look at how Refresh came about and the key elements that make up its DNA. I will describe the journey we went on as we felt challenged to move from the more traditional style of church toddler groups, which we had run in the past, to a model which focuses on the adults and is more intentional about connecting with them spiritually.

In the beginning

Our church had a strong history of running well-attended toddler groups, but God began to challenge us to engage with the children's adult carers in a more overtly spiritual way and that led us on a path to start Refresh. This is how Refresh was born.

I was helping at our church's popular and very busy stay-and-play group when during one session, in conversation with a parent, I said something about being part of St Stephen's Church, to which they responded,

‘Oh, I hadn’t realised this was anything to do with church. I thought this group just used the building!’ That comment went right to my spirit; it broke my heart to think that many of our guests came every week but hadn’t connected what we offered with Jesus in any way at all. Of course, there were team who shared their stories and significant conversations and friendships grew out of that group. I don’t want to dismiss any of those or belittle those experiences, but it challenged me to wonder if there was a way we could be more intentional as a team. Could we have a prevailing atmosphere and climate of being open to spiritual conversations in a way that would be natural and easy to do without it being cringy or difficult for the team if they didn’t see themselves as natural evangelists? There is a chapter on team later in the book where I will unpack this more and look at the variety of roles that team members can play.

There are many wonderful toddler groups and stay-and-play groups run by churches and they do a fantastic job. Most of these naturally have the children as the focus, but I sensed the Lord saying he also wanted to meet the adults in this space. It is a significant season in adults’ lives when they are available to come along to church-run daytime toddler groups and are often also open to spiritual refreshment.

Becoming a parent or being a carer of little ones tends to cause us to experience strong emotions. I believe God wants to meet with these adults in this season. Those early years with young children are such a key time in people’s lives, especially if they are beginning parenting, and along with the overwhelming feelings of joy and love that they experience for their little ones, there’s also the exhaustion, loneliness, isolation and even anger. And I would suggest there is a significant openness to spiritual things, as they explore or re-explore the big questions of life and what they believe. They may be on maternity or paternity leave and returning to work soon, a stay-at-home parent, or be someone who helps provide childcare.

I also really wanted to make a place where they could be introduced to God. The question on my heart for all the young families and particularly the parents/carers was: 'How can I help them meet Jesus?' I wanted the new space to be somewhere the families would be welcomed, encouraged and refreshed; somewhere they might experience something of God's love for them; somewhere the team could draw alongside, befriend, laugh and even cry with them. I wanted to be able to create a space to nurture the whole person – physical, emotional and spiritual – recognising that each of these areas impacts the others and that together they are key to a person feeling whole.

We all need to be nurtured and encouraged, and mums, dads and carers in these crucial first few years need it even more. They are tired, exhausted even, and often overwhelmed by their new role of parenting with all the changes that come with that. I felt that we needed a space where the adults could be nurtured and refreshed to strengthen them and equip them to care for and parent their children and hold their family together. I believe that if we can refresh the parents and carers, we can have a positive impact on how their family will function. If we strengthen the adult, we strengthen the family.

In a stay-and-play group, there is a limited window of opportunity to connect with these adults. I wanted to create a space that would make the most of that and show them something of God's love for them while we had the privilege of hosting them.

A 'Refreshed' model

This started me thinking about how we might connect more deeply and significantly with the adults coming into our church building for the toddler groups week after week and share something of our faith without putting them off. As I prayed about this over a few weeks, a number of Bible verses came into my mind, which I believe were from the Lord. We know that he has a heart for all who are lost and don't know him. The

Bible is a story of how God wants to draw everyone back to himself and bring redemption and restoration. We each have a role to play in this and I began to see that the Lord was calling me to be part of something new in this area.

Various scriptures inspired, encouraged and challenged me as I thought about how we could do things differently to reach all these adults coming into church for midweek playgroups. I hope you will see the journey the Lord brought me on as I considered these scriptures. And perhaps these verses might inspire, encourage and challenge you too.

The first significant verse that impacted my thinking was **2 Kings 7:9**: ‘Then they said to each other, “What we’re doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves.”’ If we had the cure for cancer, we wouldn’t invite families into church to be friendly and kind but not tell them about the cure we had. We would want to share that good news with them and show them how to access it. In the same way, we know the power of God in our lives and we recognise that he is the Lord who loves us and has saved us – that is most definitely good news worth sharing, and in fact, we must share it.

The Lord says in **Jeremiah 31:25**: ‘I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.’ My sense was that God wanted to refresh these parents and carers as they came through our doors, so that they might leave in a different state physically, emotionally and most importantly spiritually.

Isaiah 55:1: ‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.’ Any community of Christians forming a church has a responsibility and calling to welcome the thirsty. In my experience, parents and caregivers are spiritually thirsty and looking for refreshment.

Then **Isaiah 61:1–3** came to mind:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... to comfort all who mourn... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.

This is a prophecy from the Old Testament, speaking of Jesus. We are Jesus' hands and feet on this earth, and as we only have one life, let's embrace all God wants to give us to reach out to those who don't know him and live with eternity in mind.

I was mindful that I couldn't do this in my own strength, no matter how well everything was organised or how great the team. It was for God to equip, sustain the vision and bless the outworking of the ministry. I believed this was God's anointing, his calling and his ministry. He was inviting us to play our part in it, which is an honour, a privilege and a great responsibility that none of us would ever want to take lightly.

Psalm 127:1-2: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for he grants sleep to those he loves.' I also recognised that it was the Lord's work that he had called me to join in with. For any of us, our labour is in vain if it isn't his ministry with us helping, as opposed to 'my ministry' done in his name. I needed to ensure that I allowed God to be in the driving seat and not in the back seat!

As well as reflecting on these scriptures, I spent a lot of time talking with parents and chatting ideas through with patient friends. I wanted to make sure the new model had the right elements to enable our adult guests to hear about, and hopefully encounter, God. I prayed about it all a great deal, including with good friends who walked with me

through all the dreaming and planning. Their input was invaluable, and I couldn't have progressed without them. God provided those friends around me in that season to support and guide me.

Refresh's vision

As a result of the above verses, many conversations and prayers, the vision for Refresh emerged with some distinct, key elements. These are:

Physical refreshment – we would have a simple café area offering tea, coffee, pastries and satsumas, alongside beakers of water and squash and biscuits for the children.

Emotional refreshment – we would have a team of people present to get alongside, encourage and chat to the adults.

Spiritual refreshment – we would give a five-minute gentle Christian thought for the day communicating an aspect of God's love in a relevant and accessible way. We would have a Bible verse each week and would offer to pray for our guests.

— Physical refreshment

We are physical beings with emotions and a spirit. The physical element is obviously important, and I think we understood that even more when during the Covid pandemic we were physically separated from each other. It was so hard not being with those we love, and we weren't able to meet together with friends or have community and belonging, all of which are significant in helping us thrive.

Nourishment and comfort are two key elements to meeting our physical needs, so it was important to create a space where the adults felt physically comfortable. We set up a relaxed café space with adult-sized chairs and tables, hot drinks and pastries. This offered the adults a chance to sit down, even if only for a few minutes, and enjoy a lovely tea or coffee

made for them by someone else. When the children are young, their physical needs usually take priority and our own take second place and are often forgotten. To offer the parents something special for them may seem simple but the impact is huge.

— Emotional refreshment

The emotional needs of parents of young ones are significant and varied! They often experience a rollercoaster of emotions and mood swings, with wonderful highs and dark lows. They have the elation of their new child and may experience overwhelming feelings of love for them, but they also have the free-fall lows where their self-esteem takes a dive and they may question who they are.

Parents often feel isolated and lonely, especially as they may be living a long way from any family who could support them. When our children were young, we moved to Tokyo for three years and then to Kuala Lumpur for three years. I have many happy memories of that time, but it was also a time when I felt most isolated and lonely. I was a very long way from family and friends and desperately missed having any support or any sense of community or belonging.

Parenthood brings huge lifestyle changes and there will be an inevitable and significant shift in how parents live and who they see each day.

But it's not just parents who can feel isolated and lonely. Childminders, nannies, au pairs and other caregivers can too. It can be an intense time looking after babies and children, and the adults may really miss having conversations with, and being in the company of, other adults.

— Spiritual refreshment

We are also very much spiritual beings, who are searching for, or at least wanting, meaning and belonging. So offering a short thought for the day might go some way to meeting their spiritual hunger with something wholesome from God. This is the key component that is

rarely a part of regular stay-and-play groups or toddler groups, but as churches we can offer this.

I sensed that God wanted to meet these adults at this time, in this particular season of their lives. They might only be bringing children to daytime groups for a few months and then either return to work or the children would move on to nursery or school. So it is important to connect with them and build friendships during this phase. It is possibly our best window of opportunity to introduce them to Jesus.

Resources for thought for the day

When I started to look for material for the thoughts for the day, I struggled to find anything suitable. Everything I came across was often too heavily Christian and aimed at established believers. At the other end of the scale, there is a lot of 'wishy-washy' sayings and self-help, fridge-magnet-style thoughts. There was very little available that I felt would be appropriate for our parents and caregivers/guests. I wanted something definitely biblical yet gentle and accessible to our families who don't yet know God. I wanted to offer some wholesome spiritual food that would feed and challenge our guests. It needed to be particularly relevant to the lives of these adults in the season that they are in.

I searched the internet, YouTube and bookshops, but still didn't find what I felt would be the right thoughts for the day.

As the first term of 13 weeks approached, I was anxious about finding 13 different thoughts! I believed God wanted me to start Refresh, so now I prayed, 'Please, Lord, lead me to the right material. I'm stuck, and I need to prepare for this term. There are 13 weeks, so I need 13 thoughts.' I went to bed worried, and it took me a while to fall asleep. An hour later, I woke up with so many ideas in my head I had to write them down immediately! They came to me in the form of pictures or short phrases which I jotted down in the notebook next to my bed. I said,

‘Thank you, Lord!’ and went back to sleep. When I woke in the morning, I looked at those outline thoughts written down in the night, and as I counted them, I was amazed to find there were 13! It was exactly the number we needed for the first term. I felt so encouraged and affirmed that this was indeed what God wanted me to do.

This reminded me to rely on God more, so I purposely spent time with him, allowing the Holy Spirit to inspire me and give me the words that would be right for the particular guests we would host: mums, dads, grandparents, nannies and childminders.

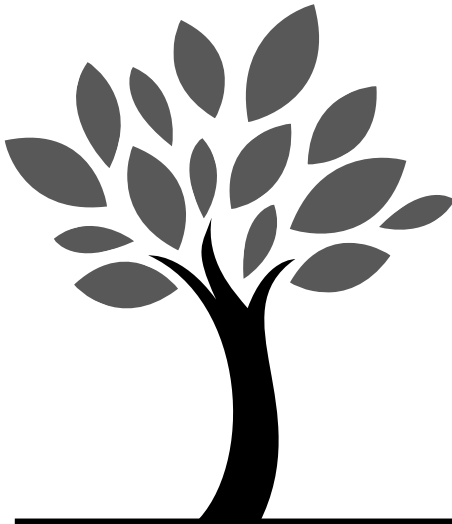
I started thinking of verses that I felt would speak to our guests, that we could use at some stage. I collected poems and pictures and put them all in a file so I had a stock of potential material that we could use.

Around this time, a volunteer team member for one of the young families groups I was leading suggested I speak to a lady who had run lots of parenting courses and had also trained as a counsellor and led quiet days with mini thoughts. I contacted this woman and she was so pleased to talk to me. She and her husband were about to move from a large house to a flat and she needed to cull all her files – resources she had collected over the many years for her work. She said the timing couldn’t have been better as she had just got everything out to look through and invited me over to help myself to whatever I thought might be useful. It was such a gift! I shared the vision for Refresh, and she really liked the ideas and plans, which was such an encouragement to me personally.

In the next chapters I will unpack what Refresh looks like, how we set up, how each session runs and of course the all-important thought for the day.



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What if you could easily engage with your local community and invite them into a space that is welcoming but also gently introduces them to God? Where life is real, and you can share your faith in a very natural way, without feeling uneasy?

Refresh Café is a fun and effective way to build fruitful relationships with parents and carers in your community. It's stay-and-play turned on its head: the children have fun, but we focus on refreshing the adults with time to talk, fresh coffee, pastries and most importantly our key ingredient: a five-minute 'thought for the day' where we share something of God in a gentle, relevant and accessible way. All this in a welcoming play space for the children.

This book shows you how to set up and run **Refresh**, and includes over 30 'thoughts for the day' to use in your setting.



Caroline Montgomery is the pioneer of Refresh. Formerly Families Pastor at St Stephen's Church, Twickenham, she has been married to Richard for 35 years and they have three grown-up sons. She enjoys walking, going to the gym, knitting and having coffee with friends.

'A warm, inspiring and practical guide to a simple and effective way that churches can welcome and support parents and carers.'

Helen Lock, Playtime Coordinator, Care for the Family

