

3

ORGANISING AN ALL-AGE SERVICE

By this stage in the proceedings, we are clear on why we have All-Age Services (ch. 1). We have also begun considering how to run them, beginning with taking the Bible seriously (ch. 2). We have worked hard at the passage and we have our Big Idea.

Now what?

In this chapter we're going to consider how to turn that Big Idea into a fully-fledged successful All-Age Service.

Success isn't always easy to identify but, with an All-Age Service, success can be gauged with one very simple question: are we keeping the Bible the 'main thing'?

Some of the most apparently 'successful' All-Age Services fall down on this question because some other element in the service overwhelms the Big Idea of the Bible passage. After the service members of the church family might come up to you and say, 'Great service this morning!' and all they will take away is the image of the pastor filling his face with chocolate cake or trampolining throughout the talk!

Our aim is that everyone leaves with the Big Idea of the Bible passage ringing in their ears. That means that they have clearly heard God speak, and that equates to success. Every part of the process of planning, running and evaluating All-Age Services needs to be tied together by keeping the Word of God at the centre. That may sound like an evangelical cliché, but it is all too easy to run with a good idea rather than run with the Bible.

The rest of this chapter will help us to keep the Bible the main thing.

Planning to plan All-Age Services

If you're not already running All-Age Services, the first question is: 'how often will we have one?' As we've already said, you could make a case for having a weekly All-Age Service but, given that they can be fairly resource-intensive, it may be best to begin with one every quarter and build from there to something like monthly.

Let's assume you have a monthly All-Age Service. The next thing to consider is where it fits in the teaching programme. Is there a separate curriculum for the All-Age Services (so that the regular sermon series is put on hold once each month)? Or do we follow the adult sermon series, or the children's groups curriculum? (There is more on this discussion on pages 27-28.)

All-Age Services can require a lot of resources. As a church you need to plan to dedicate those resources in order to run successful services. Without the appropriate investment of time and people, your All-Age Services will most likely end up being a cringey version of a normal Sunday Service. A church of any size can run All-Age Services, but you need to be realistic about the resource cost and commit to meeting that cost, possibly at the expense of other things you're doing as a church.

One resource you will almost certainly need, is a team to plan individual All-Age Services. It needn't be a huge team with a representative from every age group in your church, although a spread of ages is desirable. The most important consideration is that the team is creative and works effectively together. It will be responsible for producing a clear and achievable plan for the next All-Age Service, which in turn could additionally involve others from the church family in a practical way. People within the team principally need to

generate ideas in a creative and practical way that will ensure the Bible is taught well.

An absolute must is that the person who will be giving the talk will be part of this team. They will need to have done much of the work on the passage in advance of the meeting. That way, they can take the lead in keeping the Bible central and steering people back to what needs to be taught. They have power of veto! If an idea is generally true but isn't really going with the thrust of the passage, it's their job to bring things back on track. If the service is to be led by a different person, they need to be at this meeting too.

A team like this presents a great opportunity to train people in how to handle the word of God well. It doesn't need to be made up of theologians – just people with a servant heart who are eager to sit under the authority of Scripture.

The frequency of services, where they fit in your teaching programme and the allocation of resources are part of your wider planning for church life.

We're now going to focus in on the nitty-gritty of actually putting an All-Age Service together.

Putting an All-Age Service together

Your planning team will likely need to meet each month, well in advance of the next All-Age Service. We have found that it works best if the meeting to plan next month's service is in the week immediately after this month's. That will allow maximum time for preparation.

The single most important requirement for this meeting is that the person who will be giving the talk at next month's All-Age Service has done the hard work of understanding the passage that the service will teach. The ideal may be for the All-Age Service planning team to meet for a Bible Study on the passage before they then meet to plan the service, but in most settings

that's not a realistic expectation. At the very least, team members should have read the passage a few times before the meeting in order to familiarize themselves with what will be taught.

Then at the planning meeting, after prayer together, the preacher leads a 10-minute mini Bible study to explain how he arrived at the Big Idea of the Bible passage. This is the point to set the direction of the service plan by getting everyone clear on the Big Idea of the passage: this is what we want to teach.

At this point, 'the Big Idea' now needs to suggest 'the Big Image'. Sometimes we've called this 'the gimmick'! We're talking about the controlling metaphor that is suggested by the Big Idea that will be a very clear way of teaching the Big Idea in a way that is immediately understandable, and will prove to be memorable. The Big Image must be under control. We've found that it is easy at this point to get carried away with creatively ludicrous thoughts! Keep asking: what is the image that this idea focuses on?

It may be that the preacher comes to the planning team meeting with both the Big Idea and the Big Image. Or it can be that the planning group work on this together. Either way, it is absolutely crucial that the Big Idea determines the Big Image. If there is any lack of clarity about the Big Idea, then the planning meeting will be derailed as everyone searches for a Big Image without understanding the Big Idea of the passage: the Image will be in the driving seat rather than the Bible.

The Big Image will serve as the principle motif in the service. The search for this image is where the rule, 'no idea is a bad idea' needs to apply. (Of course, it may be that 'bad' ideas are suggested but you don't want to stifle creativity at this point!)

The Big Image may well be suggested in the passage itself. For example, an All-Age Service on 1 Peter 2:9-10 might use the Big Image of 'light and dark'. Or the Big Image may be alluded to in the way that the Big Idea is phrased. For example, the Big Idea of Mark 2:1-12 (on page 32) might suggest something about

showing or demonstrating something that is otherwise hidden. You need an open conversation where anything goes and no proposal is too big, too silly, too weird, too messy, too crazy etc. as you hone in on the right image to carry the teaching.

Let's turn to an actual Bible passage for an example. This was part of a two-term series going through Romans in the adult sermons. The passage for next month's All-Age Service is Romans 8:28-30. The conversation at the planning team meeting might go something like this:

Preacher: OK. The Big Idea I've arrived at is this: God is at work through all the ups and downs of life to bring you to glory. (*He then explains his thinking*). So, what should our Big Image be?

Rick: Well, there are lots of things linked together in these verses. We could do something with an enormous chain?

Sue: A daisy chain? Or what about a paper chain? We could put key words on the bits of paper we link together ... and decorate them!

Preacher: Well ... there is a chain in the passage, but that's not really the Big Idea. Could we have something to do with the ups and downs of life?

Rick: What about doing the whole service as a sort of News programme? With happy news stories and sad news stories?

Alison: We could use the ITV News at Ten theme tune!

Sue: Or, we could play a game of Snakes and Ladders? ... A giant game of Snakes and Ladders!

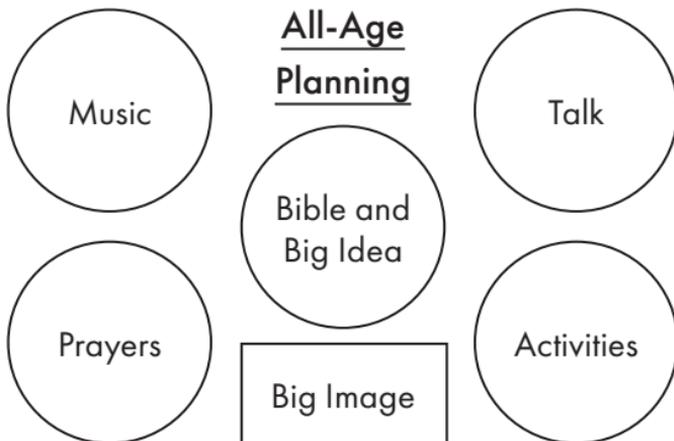
Nicholas (a pragmatist): We'd have to make sure we're covered for Health and Safety if we're working at height ... and if we're handling snakes!

Fun meeting, eh? I hope you get the idea. It may take some work to settle on a Big Image that works well, but it is time well spent. It could be the case that the Big Image only appears during the talk, but the aim is that this image infuses the whole of the service.

In fact, this planning team meeting did end up producing a huge Snakes and Ladders board (roughly 7m square), painted in very bright colours, that filled the floor in the middle of the congregation, who were (unusually) seated on all four sides of it.

This service on Romans 8:28-30 might well become known as the Snakes and Ladders service in the history of the church in which it was done – but of course, it's far more important that people understand why the Snakes and Ladders image was used. And that needs reinforcing throughout the service.

With a Big Idea and Big Image agreed upon, it's time to think about the overall shape of the service and some ideas to potentially include with the talk. Something I've found helpful is to have a planning sheet to aid the process. Below is an example of the kind of thing that might work (see large scale version on page 138):



Avoid making the All-Age Service so different that it loses any sense of continuity with other Sundays. A sense of disconnect