

Starting and running a Christian group in school

Big plans

What comes to mind when you hear the words 'school Christian group'? Probably everything from 'Holy Huddle' and 'God Squad' to 'Oh no, I've got nothing prepared!' ... and everything in between: crazy games, fun, mess, misfits, powerful, lively, noisy, 'salt and light' and 'Thank you God!'

How you responded probably depends on your own experience of Christian groups in school. Perhaps you have fond memories of being a pupil in such a group at school; meeting with other Christian pupils to encourage each other and helping to reach out to your friends. Maybe, today, as a Christian member of staff you are currently in the throes of running a group with all the accompanying joys and hassles.

Why are the school misfits made to feel so welcome?

Well, it would appear that exciting times are ahead and that the school Christian group is far from ready to lie down and go quietly. In fact, Scripture Union has big plans to ensure that viable groups exist in our schools for years to come. Much work is currently taking place to develop a range of tools and resources for both primary and secondary school groups.

Why bother?

This is often the key question asked by teachers when faced with the challenge of running a group. Amidst all the other things that need doing, surely running a lunchtime or after-school club is just a 'bridge too far' or 'beyond the call of duty'. For some, that may well be the case. But, for many others, catching a vision for how God can use His people in a school can be the springboard to really exciting things. So what is that vision? Who and what does God want His people to be? A quick look at three key Bible passages will help us answer these questions.



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Matthew 5:13-16 (salt and light) states that God's people make a difference. Christians can stop the rot – bringing out the flavour and goodness in a school community; shedding light into dark places; pointing people to the one true Light that can set them free and help them find hope in the arms of their loving Heavenly Father.

1 Peter 2:9-12 (a royal priesthood of God's own people) reminds us that we should demonstrate kingdom values. As a 'royal priesthood', Christians can stand in the gap – helping their friends discover a relationship with God. They can also intercede for those they rub shoulders with day by day. As 'people belonging to God', Christians should encourage one another to 'declare God's praises' in real and relevant ways. Did you notice the corporate dimension to all this? When believers are 'united' and 'work together' to bring glory and honour to God, wonderful things start to happen. But how can these things happen if Christian staff and pupils are not meeting together in some shape or form?

2 Corinthians 5:18-6:1 (Christ's ambassadors) says God's people have been given an awesome message of reconciliation. Doing this alone – without the support, encouragement, prayer and accountability of the other Christians in the school – seems an impossible task. However, doing it together – empowered by the Holy Spirit – is a whole different proposition.

Getting started

Whenever Christians working in education live out their calling to be 'salt and light', a 'royal priesthood' and 'Christ's ambassadors', God seems to move most powerfully. Why are the school misfits made to feel so welcome? Why would a young person in Year 13 have time for a timid youngster new to the school in Year 7? Why would a group of

Why would a group of young people be involved in a humble act of service?

young people be involved in a humble act of service? Why would they risk humiliation and ridicule by taking an assembly to tell other people about the real meaning of Easter? Why is a lunchtime club packed with so many youngsters that the local youth worker is thinking about starting a second club? Why? Because God is at work – in and through His people – as they work together.

Having caught the vision, the next question that is often asked is 'How do I get started?' Here is a helpful checklist: seven Ps to bear in mind when starting a school Christian group.

1. Prayer

The obvious starting point, but so easily overlooked. Praying for God's leading, equipping and anointing has to be the best place to start.

2. People

Who are the people that God has placed in – and around – the school? Do the other Christian pupils and members of staff share the vision for the group? If not, then share your vision with them. Are there other people in local churches who could come in and help set up and run the group? Many groups in primary schools are supported by parents who are able to give up a few hours a week to help out. What about involving a local youth/children's worker?

I continue to be amazed at the dedication and commitment of these young people

3. Permission

Any club or group running in a school must have the permission of the relevant people. Approaching them with some clear aims and some well-reasoned arguments will go a long way towards being well received. Don't forget to mention who else will be involved and check what clearance they will need.

4. Priorities

Why is the group going to meet? Who is the group for? Groups come in all shapes and sizes and being clear at the outset what you are aiming at is really important. Some groups meet for fellowship, encouragement and support. Others are places where those with little or no church background can begin to find out about Jesus and learn of His



love for them. Having clear, shared aims means that those involved have realistic expectations of what the group is about.

5. Programme

This will depend on the aims of your group. As with all activities with children and young people, make sure you include plenty of variety and take account of different learning styles. Having a plan for a term/half-term is a great way to achieve this. When you plan, take account of the amount of time and space, and number of helpers, available.

6. Protection

As with any new venture for the kingdom of God, opposition is bound to come from a variety of sources. Remember to respond with love, grace, humility and prayer.

7. Publicity

Having decided what you are going to do, finally consider how you are going to let people know about it. Try to use the normal channels of communication within the school – posters, announcements, notes in registers, assemblies, etc. Letting the local churches know can also mean they can pray for you and can encourage the children/young people they know to attend.

Help is at hand

Scripture Union has been involved in supporting Christian groups in schools for many decades, and is still able to offer a range of resources that anyone running a group will find helpful.

SUPA (Scripture Union Primary Aged) Clubs are now resourced through a termly CD ROM containing session outlines and materials. A team of Scripture Union specialists works hard to ensure

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that these high quality resources provide a fun way for children to encounter God as they engage with the Bible.

For secondary school Christian groups, Scripture Union produces the *re:source* CD ROM and website. The CD ROM has over 200 meeting outlines. Leaders can choose outlines aimed at either the 11–14 or 14+ age range. All resources are accessible to young people from a mainly church background (MCB) and those from a limited church background (LCB). The website has new meeting outlines each month, usually linked to a current issue or time of the year, e.g. Christmas, Easter, Hallowe’en, exams, Valentine’s Day, etc. There is also the facility to sign up for a monthly newsletter containing top tips, news of the current outlines and other useful resources.

Both SUPA Club and *re:source* can be accessed from the schools pages of the Scripture Union website (www.scriptureunion.org.uk/schools). Here you’ll also find lots of other useful articles, resources and links for anyone wanting to see the kingdom of God grow in their school.

As mentioned earlier, Scripture Union has exciting plans to ensure the future expansion and growth of school Christian groups. The vision for supporting secondary groups can be summed up as follows:

- Christian groups are a representation of Christ, as they act as ‘salt’ in, and ‘light’ to, the school community.
- Young people are actively involved in all aspects of leadership. These leaders are empowered, resourced and trained.
- Christian groups are involved in serving their school communities.
- Networks of leaders are established for support and training.
- Diversity exists between Christian groups – some are mainly for Christian young people, others are places where young people can begin to find out about the Christian faith.

Dedication and commitment

You’ll notice that there is a strong emphasis on training group leaders. This is quite deliberate and something that I have been developing for the last couple of years. It came to my attention that there were many very keen, enthusiastic young people

leading groups in schools. However, many of them had no training at all and it was sometimes a case of the blind leading the blind. In the last two years I have run four training events for young people who are leading, or who may do so in the future. Over 60 young people have attended the training, either for a day in the half-term holidays or for a series of Friday evenings. I continue to be amazed at the dedication and commitment of these young people who want to meet together and witness to their friends.

The course content covers everything from biblical perspectives on leadership through to practical sessions on group dynamics, preparing and leading a Bible study, leadership styles, programme planning, being a servant community in school, etc.

God is at work – in and through His people – as they work together

So key is the training of young leaders to Scripture Union’s vision for school groups that a similar training course to the one described will soon be available for use around the country. The aim of the training is to equip leaders with the knowledge and skills they need. For more details, visit: www.scriptureunion.org.uk/re-source

In conclusion

When God’s people catch a vision for who He wants them to be and how He wants them to live, they usually discover there is a strong corporate dimension to this calling. Meeting together with other Christians in a school community is often a natural outworking of this vision. Starting and running a Christian group in a school is not easy, but it can be incredibly rewarding to see young lives impacted and changed by Jesus.

■ Geoff Brown

