

CONTENTS

Dear Parents.....	1
Jesus is.....	1
Religions of the World.....	2
Jesus wants all of me.....	2
Children's Prayers.....	3
In Synergy.....	3
Memorizing Bible Verses.....	4
Ellen White on Children.....	4
Teens Devotional.....	5
Questions & Answers.....	5
Activity Report.....	6-10
Keep in Mind.....	11
Intergenerational Worship.....	12



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Jesus is... not the reason for the season

Isaiah 9 states, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And we read in Luke 2, "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." For all people, to you, for us, to us; we are the reason for the season, not Jesus. Jesus came for you, for everyone that has ever been and for everyone who will ever be. You are the reason for the season, you are the reason for Christmas. Enjoy Christmas, after all you are the reason for the manger.

<https://rejoicecommunitychurch.org/jesus-is-not-the-reason-for-the-season/>

Dear Parents with young children in church

You are doing something really, really important. I know it's not easy. I see you with your arms overflowing, and I know you came to church already tired. Parenting is tiring. Really tiring.

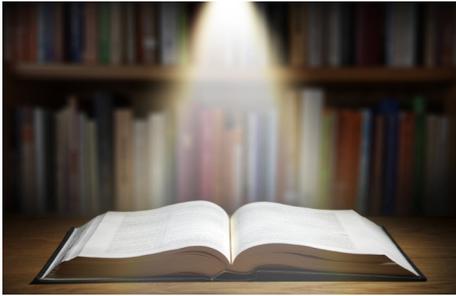
I watch you bounce and sway trying to keep the baby quiet, juggling the infant car seat and the diaper bag as you find a seat. I see you wince as your child cries. I see you anxiously pull things out of your bag of tricks to try to quiet them.

And I see you with your toddler and your preschooler. I watch you cringe when your little girl asks an innocent question in a voice that might not be an inside voice let alone a church whisper. I hear the exasperation in your voice as you beg your child to just sit, to be quiet as you feel everyone's eyes on you. Not everyone is looking, but I know it feels that way.

I know you're wondering, is this worth it? Why do I bother? I know you often leave church more exhausted than fulfilled. But what you are doing is so important.

When you are here, the church is filled with a joyful noise. When you are here, the Body of Christ is more fully present. When you are here, we are reminded that this worship thing we do isn't about bible study or personal, quiet contemplation but coming together to worship as a community where all are welcome, where we share in the Word and Sacrament together. When you are here, I have hope that these pews won't be empty in 10 years when your kids are old enough to sit quietly and behave in worship. I know that they are learning how and why we worship now, before it's too late. They are learning that worship is important.

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD



HOLY TEXTS

Some religions have several holy texts. They contain stories and lessons to give guidelines for life.

Buddhism

Buddhists have many holy books, of which the most important one is the *Tripitaka*. It contains the lessons of Buddha, among them the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Judaism

The Jewish holy book is written in Hebrew, and contains three parts, of which the *Torah* is the most important one. It is written on scrolls and tells the story of the people of Israel. You can find the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses in the *Torah*.

Sikhism

The most important text is the *guru Granth Sahib*. It contains hymns and traditions. The Sikh have great respect of this book and wash their hands before they touch it.

Taoism

There are hundreds of holy texts, mainly written in Chinese. The most known is the *Tao Te King*.

Christianity

The holy book of Christians is the Bible, consisting of two parts: the Old and the New Testament. The Old Testament is practically identical to the Jewish Bible, while the New Testament tells the story of Jesus and his life.

Hinduism

There are many holy books, containing stories, prayers, hymns and poems. Hindus often have a preferred story or prayer.

Islam

The holy book of Muslims is the Koran. It is written in Arab and contains the words God spoke to Mohammed.

From: Brown, A. & Langley, A.: *Les Religions du Monde expliquées aux enfants*. Hachette Livre, France, 1999

I see them learning. In the midst of the cries, whines, and giggles, in the midst of the crinkling of pretzel bags and the growing pile of crumbs, I see a little girl who insists on going two pews up to share peace with someone she's never met. I hear a little boy slurping (quite loudly) every last drop of his communion wine out of the cup, determined not to miss a drop of Jesus. I watch a child excitedly color a cross and point to the one in the front of the sanctuary. I hear the echoes of "Amen's" just a few seconds after the rest of the community says it together. I watch a boy just learning to read try to sound out the words in the worship book or count his way to Hymn 672. Even on weeks when I can't see my own children learning because, well, it's one of those mornings, I can see your children learning.

I know how hard it is to do what you're doing, but I want you to know it matters. It matters to me. It matters to my children to not be alone in the pew. It matters to the congregation to know that families care about faith, to see young people... and even on those weeks when you can't see the little moments, it matters to your children.

It matters that they learn that worship is what we do as a community of faith, that everyone is welcome, that their wor-

ship matters. When we teach children that their worship matters, we teach them that they are enough right here and right now as members of the church community. They don't need to wait until they can believe, pray or worship a certain way to be welcome here, and I know adults who are still looking to be shown that. It matters that children learn that they are an integral part of this church, that their prayers, their songs, and even their badly (or perfectly-timed, depending on who you ask) cries and whines are a joyful noise because it means they are present.

I know it's hard, but thank you for what you do when you bring your children to church. Please know that your family — with all of its noise, struggle, commotion, and joy — are not simply tolerated, you are a vital part of the community gathered in worship. •

written by Jamie Brusehoff

www.huffingtonpost.com/jamie-bruesehoff/parents-kids-church_b_3909085.html

This post, suggested by Emi Staneva, originally appeared on I Am Totally *That* Mom: <http://iamtotallythatmom.blogspot.com/2013/05/dear-parents-with-young-children-in.html>

Emi Staneva
Bulgarian Union
CHM Director



JESUS

wants all of me

Dirt Doll

In order to create plants, animals, and stars, God simply spoke and everything... WHOOSH... appeared out of nowhere. But when God created man, he used His own hands and formed every little part of the human body. Do you know what material God used to make man? He used dust. That's right, dirt. I even think that, unlike how the other

creatures were created, God didn't say anything while He created man. He must have shaped that dirt in silence, deep in concentration.

With the same dedication that God created the very first man, God also made you. You are special, and God also has a special plan for your life.

"Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground."

Genesis 2:7

From: Ferreira de Oliveira, S.: *Talking with God*. Editorial Safeliz, Madrid, Spain, 2015

PRAYER OF CRISTINA

Dear Jesus,
You are a genius. When you invented the snow, did you know that one day, we could use it for skiing?

From: "Caro Gesù, potresti cambiare il sapore agli asparagi? 100 nuove letterine dei bambini a Gesù". Sonzogno Editore, Milano, 2007

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IN SYNERGY

Special Holiday Celebration for Families with Children

The idea of Holiday Celebration for families was born a few years ago during a discussion of projects that would benefit families in the Adventist churches in Sofia (Bulgaria) as well as people who have spiritual interests but do not attend worship. We have decided that many of the believers want to find friends who are like-minded, both for themselves and for their children. The safe environment where to educate and entertain children is a real investment for the future stage of their life - adolescence. That's why we set ourselves the goal of building a net of families through regular meetings to turn into family traditions.

The first celebration was organized in 2014. We chose to do it in spring, during Easter holidays on the countryside. There was a huge interest; about 100 children came. The feedback was great. People gave the feedback that they were impressed by the decor, the pleasant atmosphere in the hall, the Bible stories, the delicious treats. And their children spent a long time talking excitedly about the experience together.

Our first experience showed that we were on the right track and we continued to organize those special celebration days over the years. Typically, the program includes reenacting of Bible stories through a scenery or puppet theater and a host of interactive activities. Parents and children have to play together, learn a song together, knead a dough, and

make a painting to take home. The format we organize the event proved to be very appropriate - presenting news and general activities where children are divided into teams. We set the events during the most popular Christian holidays - Easter and Christmas, Thanksgiving, and we chose biblical themes - Creation, Old Testament stories, important episodes of the life of Jesus. We divide the children in two shifts adapting to the capacity of the room. The attendance does not decrease, but increases with time - about 110 children, accompanied by one or both parents, friends, older brothers and sisters. The number of children whose parents do not attend a church is on average about 20. The words of parental gratitude, smiling faces and bright children's eyes are our greatest satisfaction. Bringing Biblical messages and displaying Christian values in an attractive way tailored to childhood imagination and thinking is highly valued by people who seek good education for their children. So, little by little, these Holiday Celebrations have become a tradition, and we have had nine of them so far.

The last celebration, organized for Thanksgiving Day - November 2018 - was attended by Linda Koh, Children's Minis-



tries Director of the General Conference, and Elsa Cozzi, CHM director of the Inter-European Division, who is a frequent guest during these events. The children's celebration in Sofia is combined with a Saturday training for people who work with children in our churches, so the next day they can see a practical application, in addition to the theoretical part.

As a team of volunteers (youths and adults from local churches) and employees (pastors and heads of departments to the church), we see the meaning and result of our work. Interestingly, by raising the Christian values, we can be useful and influence society for the better.

These Special Family Celebrations also have an official Facebook page "Faithful Families" that you can visit, browse for more information and enjoy.

(For additional photos see p. 10.)

Teodora Nikolova

Bulgarian Union

Chief editor of Adventist Magazine "Christian Thought"



MEMORIZING BIBLE VERSES

Around the home: Mirror verses

Supplies:

- wipe off markers or lipstick
- old cloth or paper towel for wiping the words off the mirror

Instructions:

1. Write a verse on a mirror that everyone uses. Use a wipe off marker or lipstick.
2. Take turns wiping off one word each day. By the time the verse has disappeared, everyone should have learned the verse.

Other ideas

- Use a chalkboard and chalk instead of a mirror.
- Use children's soap crayons and write on the tiles in a bathroom. One word could be wiped off each time someone has a bath.



From: Holford K. *100 creative ways 2 learn memory verses*. With permission from GC CHM

SPECIAL NEED MINISTRIES

Just for you

About 90 percent of pregnant women who learn that their unborn child has Down syndrome choose to have an abortion. This is a staggering statistic. Until 2007, only women 35 years of age or older were routinely screened for an extra copy of chromosome 21. Now, with the new recommendation from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, physicians offer screening for Down syndrome to women of all ages.

Dr. Kathy McReynolds, a Christian bioethicist and the Director of Academic Studies at the Christian Institute on Disability, says, "This recommendation reveals an enormous, negative misunderstanding concerning what a disability might mean for a child and a family. In fact, parents of children with Down syndrome are coming together to provide a better appreciation of what it means to raise these special children."

Will you consider joining these parents in their goal



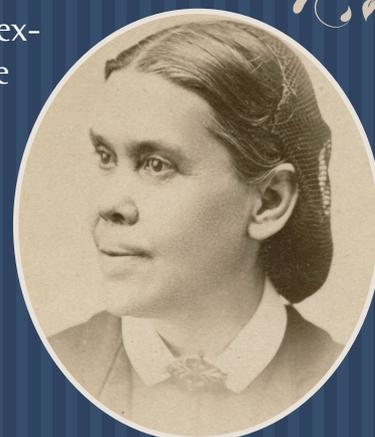
to be a positive voice for children with Down syndrome—and for all children with special needs?

*Dear God,
Open our hearts to see the value of one child's influence in a church. Please give us courage to speak up for life because you created all life in your image. Thank you, that as we support families affected by disability, we are drawn closer to your heart, and we reveal your love to the world.
In Jesus' name, amen.*

From: Verbal, P. *Special Needs Ministry for Children*. Group Publishing, Loveland, USA, 2012

Let the church take a special care of the lambs of the flock, exerting every influence in their power to win the love of the children and to bind them to the truth. Ministers and church members should second the efforts of parents to lead the children into safe paths. The Lord is calling for the youth, for He would make them His helpers to do good service under His banner.

The Adventist Home, p. 358



The Case of the Secret Santa



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Info Splat

Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth, Michigan, is the world's largest Christmas store. Movie star John Wayne ordered a Santa suit by phone from Bronner's in 1976.

Incredi-Biblical

"But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Matthew 6:3, 4

People who lived in Kansas City (USA) between 1979 and 2006 never knew when their Christmas might turn out to be a little extra-special.

For 27 years a Secret Santa roamed the streets of Kansas City in the weeks before Christmas, handing out \$20, \$50, and even \$100 bills to anyone who looked like they could use a little extra money. Over the years the man dressed as Santa, who traveled the

streets without letting anyone know his true identity, gave away about \$1.4 million.

Christmas 2006 was Larry Dean Stewart's last chance to play Santa. For the first time the wealthy man dropped his disguise and let people know who he really was—an ordinary Christian who'd grown up poor and wanted to share with others the blessings God had given him. Mr. Stewart had cancer, and knew it might be his last chance to share his form of Christmas kindness. He also wanted to make it clear that although he wore a red suit, his true loyalty was to Jesus Christ, who'd inspired him to give to others.

Larry Dean Stewart died in January 2007, just a few weeks after giving out his final Christmas gifts. "Part of my daily prayer was, 'Lord, let me be a better servant,' " he said before he died. "I had no idea this is what He had in mind, but I'm happy. I'm so thrilled that He is able to use me in this way."

React now!

Is there any act of kindness you could do secretly for someone? A gift you could give anonymously?

From: Bockmann, M. et al.: *Elasti-Brain. 365 Devotions to Stretch your Mind and Shape your Faith*. Review and Herald Publishing Ass., Hagerstown, MD, USA, 2008

SECRETS FROM THE TREASURE CHEST



Is it good to celebrate Christmas?

– Joshua, 11

In Joshua's question, he mentioned some rather unpleasant rituals some say were connected to the Christmas tree's first use. He also reminded us that Jesus wasn't even born in December.

Many people refuse to celebrate Christmas for a variety of reasons. I honor their dedication to their beliefs and respect their wishes to not be included in such things as gift-giving, holiday parties, and so on. And I hope they'll be just as respectful to my desire to remember the birth of Jesus in the way and time I choose.

Satan has done a pretty good job of tainting all celebrations having to do with God. One the day we remember Christ's resurrection, kids are running

around millions of backyards looking for bunny eggs. And buried somewhere under all the tinsel and wrapping paper, credit card receipts and brightly colored greeting cards hides the image of a Baby lying in a manger.

Is it good to give gifts? Sure. Is it good to look for eggs in the backyard? Why not? But when these fun activities leave us little time to think of the *real* reason for Christmas and Easter—Christ's birth, death and resurrection—that's bad.

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise

the Lord your God. ... Be careful that you do not forget the Lord" (*Deuteronomy 8:10, 11, NIV*). Enjoy the fun, but remember the reasons.



©Shutterstock.com

From: Mills, C.: *Secrets from the Treasure Chest. Questions Kids ask about Life*. Review and Herald Publishing Ass., Hagerstown, MD, USA, 1996



ACTIVITY REPORT



News from the Bulgarian Union

Children's Conference

On Sabbath, at the beginning of the first Summer month when the Summer holidays of the youngest students has already started, we are all gathered in the town of Pazardzhik to set off a sea journey. Well, it's true that there is only a river in Pazardzhik, and no sea, but it is not a hindrance to our adventure spirit. We are about a hundred explorers, and we start off. Our captain's name is Samo, and he will lead us on the route of the apostles Peter and Paul.

Our first stop is Caesarea. Here is Peter, in prison, chained between two Roman soldiers. We are also being chained in a small dark room. But suddenly a bright light shines upon us and Peter, and an angel of God sets us free. Everything is so incredible that the apostle keeps thinking that he is dreaming. But he realizes everything is true, eventually. Because God's word is true. And all of us are firmly convinced about that at the end of the game.

So, our journey goes on. We have a chained man on our ship but he doesn't look like a criminal at all. He is traveling to Rome, to see Caesar, for to be justly judged. His name is Paul. He is a very noble man, and most of all he likes to speak about Jesus and God's love. We believe we'll have a nice weather but suddenly the sky darkens, and a terrible storm arises. The sea waves toss our ship to and fro, and we are all terrified but one person. Guess who. Yes, the prisoner Paul. He encourages and comforts us. He tells us that God has told him personally that all of us will survive. He even tells us to have a little snack because we are very close to the shore, and we will need all our strengths to swim in a while. Yes, we learn a very important lesson from Paul – that God's Word comforts us.

Unfortunately, our ship wrecks in the storm but we all survive exactly how Paul has predicted. Now we are on the Island of Malta along with him. Here we have a very surprising experience. We light a fire to get warm and dry our clothes, and while Paul is throwing wood into it, he is bitten by a poisonous snake. But nothing happens to him! He doesn't even swell! We all are surprised. We didn't know that God's Word can also surprise us. Now we are surprised again, we

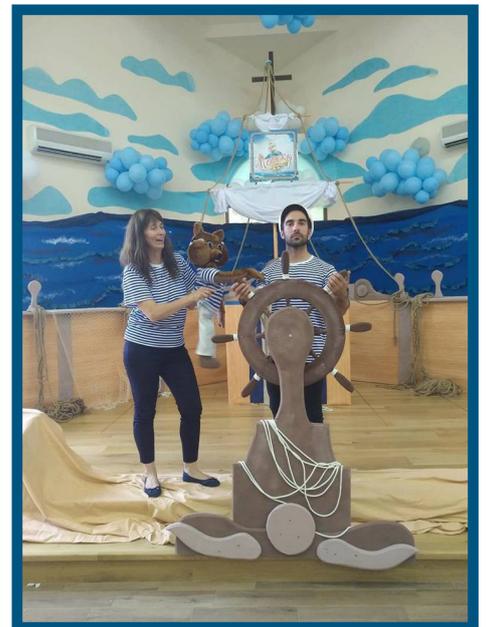
open our Bibles, and a colourful butterfly flies out of it. No, the Bible is not a boring book, not at all!

Our last stop is Jerusalem. In front of the Temple's gates a very unfortunate man is sitting. He can't walk, and all money he has is the one that people give him as a charity. Now two men stop by him, and start talking to him. One of them looks very familiar to us. Yes, it's Peter! He is along with his friend John. Both of them are not rich men, and don't have much money but say to the crippled man something very interesting, "We are telling you in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up, and go!" Oh, miracle! The man really stands up on his feet! This will change his life for sure. Yes, God's Word changes lives, no doubt. Here we make an experiment with water that changes into something completely else – the same what happens with people who read the Bible.

When our journey is over, our friend Elsa Cozzi gives us gifts – Bibles with... surprises. We know, they will surprise us with something new and inspiring every time we open them. We believe God can do it.

Good bye to the next Children Conference in 2019!

Stevan Stevanov
Bulgarian Union
Pastor of the SDA church in
Pazardzhik





ACTIVITY REPORT



News from the Bulgarian Union





ACTIVITY REPORT



News from the Bulgarian Union

The Gift of Gratitude

A Christmas Festival for the Family

Christmas is a very special time of the year. We get the chance to break away from the daily routine and focus on our relationship with God and the people we love. It is also a great time to reach out and share the beautiful gospel of love, hope and mercy.

That is why on December 15 in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria, we organized a charity event for the families of the city. They were invited to join a celebration which combined a wonderful Christmas message with an important cause serving the needs of the community. The event was dedicated to gratitude and included a charity auction raising money for Stara Zagora's "Mother and Baby" social services. Everyone was encouraged to bring handmade resources like festive treats and decorations which were "auctioned" to support the organization working with mothers in risk of abandoning their babies.

But this is not the only good news about the event. The Christmas fest offered a diverse program which included crafts, songs, communication and some good food for though. The main message discussed Christ's precious gift to humanity and the role of gratitude in our everyday life. When hardships bring sadness in our hearts it can be hard to remember the blessing that we still have. The inspirational talk by Vladimir Krumov (preacher and pathfinders' mentor) was an important reminder that we have received a priceless gift of life, love and redemption. Therefore, it is now our turn to give back and express our gratitude not through words but through actions.

The Christmas Festival was attended by families with children from Stara Zagora and provided a great opportunity for sharing the wonderful story of Christ's birth. The whole event was titled "Thank You" because in Bulgarian this verb consists of the words "good" and "give". The idea is that because we are so thankful, we are also ready to give and share the good things that we have received.

The participants were encouraged to appreciate what they have in their lives right now. Everyone was invited to

write it down on a big board and then express it more personally by addressing a Christmas card to someone that they are thankful for. The families were given a chance to spend some quality time together by making festive decorations for a charity bazaar which took place the next day. Once again all the proceeds were collected for the "Mother and Baby" social services.

Though sharing those Christmas activities and conversations the Pathfinder Club of Stara Zagora reached the hearts of children and parents alike. The young volunteers from the local church were happy to invest their time in preparing decorations, songs and workshops for the guests. Everyone became witness of how the best way to celebrate Christmas really is through giving to others. The great gift of Christ's love was shared among families and visitors, and the festival managed to spread both a valuable Christian message and a happy celebration of the Holiday.

Gergana Stoeva





ACTIVITY REPORT



News from the Bulgarian Union

"Find the Present"

A Christmas Game

The Church Planting Team in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria organized a Christmas Game called "Find the Present" this year. The game was situated at the diggings of Augusta Trayana, an ancient Roman city. The children could authentically experience the time when our Saviour was born.

All children were divided in teams of six, and every team received a map of the stations they had to visit. At every station they played an exciting game, and had to answer a question concerning the birth of Jesus. After giving the right answer, they were given two letters, parts of the password key to the Present. There was also a library with Scripture "scrolls" where the children could read the Christmas story as it was written by Matthew and Luke. There they discovered the answers of the questions they didn't know.

Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem because of the census ordered by Caesar August. So, at the first station children had to count how many people were in the pictures - how many of them were blond, how many of them had blue eyes, how many wore hats, glasses, had beards, or mustaches. In Jesus' days, only men were counted but we counted women, too. The question that had to be answered was, "Who ordered the census?" Children visited the library where a polite librarian helped them to find the answer.

At the next station children had to discover which presents the Wise Men brought to Jesus.

While looking for the Present, they met King Herod who had heard about the Newborn King but didn't know where to find Him. Children had to solve a crossword puzzle for to find the right place.

After that, they encountered the Wise Men coming from the East who excitedly showed them the constellations, and explained them that a new, unknown star had appeared in the sky.

Children had to find out the lyrics of the angels' song, and to learn at least one Christmas song.

Then they met the shepherds who taught them how to light a shepherd fire.

When children got very tired of run-

ning and playing, every one of them was given a small Arab bread with hummus by the householder who told them that all hotels of the town were booked out, and he had to shelter a family at his barn.

Short after that, the children encountered Roman legionnaires who showed them how the soldiers of the Empire were trained in those days.

After the children had gathered all letters, they put together the following password key, "Born To Save". They cited the password to a Wise Man, and he led them to Mary and Joseph in the barn, explaining them that Jesus was the real Present given to us from Heaven.

We had a very unpromising weather forecast but we prepared everything with faith in our hearts. It was a heavy rain during the whole day on Saturday. On Sunday morning, it was cloudy but not raining. While setting up the stations, there was even a little sunshine. God gave us, indeed, a wonderful day, and more than 100 children found out about the most important Present for Christmas.

Emi Staneva
Bulgarian Union
CHM Director

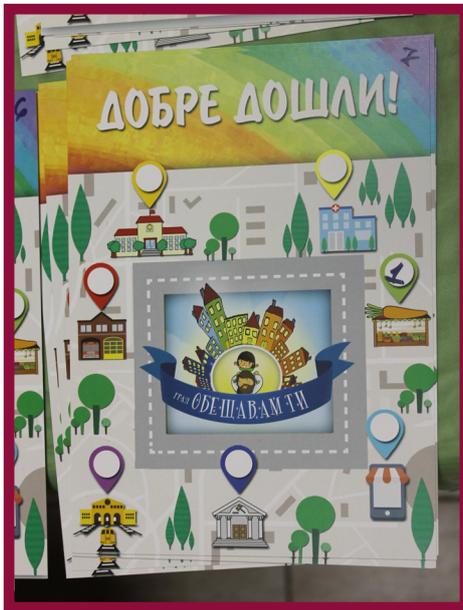




ACTIVITY REPORT



News from the Bulgarian Union (cont. from page 3)



Keep in Mind

SAVE THE DATE!

2019

INTERMINISTRIES SUMMIT
Children's Ministries • Family Ministries • Women's Ministries

PEOPLE 7.0

Forward together



SAVE THE DATE

LIGNANO SABBIA DORO
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18-22
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Sample for an Intergenerational Worship Service

Gifted!

Scripture Reading

Read "The Parable of the Talents" from Luke 19:11-26. Invite a group of teenagers or young people to mime the characters in the parable while it's being read, or to act it out with a king, servants and a narrator.

Illustration

Wrap a collection of gift boxes and make large labels to stick on the side of each box that will face the congregation. On each label write the name of a different spiritual gift from Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12. Stack them up so that everyone can see them. Explain that these are the special gifts that God has given to your local church. But He's given them all to different people! Hand them out to different people in the congregation. Then ask questions like "What would happen if the people holding the gifts didn't want to use them, and didn't want to share them with others? What effect would it have on our local church? What would happen if everyone who had a gift opened it up and shared it with everyone else?"

Intergenerational Connection

Invite people to find someone of a different generation and tell them about one of the best presents they were given, and why it was so special.

Telling the Bible Story

Retell the parable in a fresh new way. You need four characters - a father, a teenage son about 16, a daughter about 12, and a younger boy about 8. You will also need to find and gift-wrap 8 useful woodwork tools, such as a hammer, saw, pliers, screwdrivers, etc. plus some nails, and some pieces of wood; 4 useful kitchen tools, such as a bowl, wooden spoon, apron, bread pan, and a bag of flour; also wrap a small garden spade and a packet of tomato seeds in one gift package. Make one large box for a power tool and one for a kitchen mixer. You can just stick pictures on the outside of an ordinary box, and then wrap them up.

A father has to go away for a while, so he calls his three children and gives each one stack of presents. The eldest one, a

teenage boy, is given 10 gifts—the 8 different tools, the nails and the wood, each separately wrapped—let the younger children help to open them, but be sure they do so safely as tools can be heavy and sharp. The daughter is given 5 kitchen items—again, let the younger children help her to open them. The youngest son is given 1 package.

The older son looks at his gifts, excitedly, and wonders what to do. Invite everyone to suggest what he could do with these gifts that would help his family and other people. Then the daughter looks at her gifts, excitedly, and wonders what she can do. Again, invite everyone to suggest how she could use these gifts to bless her family and other people. When the youngest son sees what his brother and sister were given, he thinks he will just have another boring present. He doesn't bother to open it—he just hides it under his bed. You could set up a camp bed to illustrate this if you wish.

Show the brother and sister making things with their gifts, both for their home, and to sell to others. Show examples of simple woodwork and loaves of homemade bread. They can even "sell" them to people you have prepared in the congregation, and receive large pretend coins—he collects 20 coins and she collects 10 coins.

Then their father comes home and he's delighted to see what they have done! He admires the woodwork and gives his son a brand new power tool! He tastes the delicious bread and gives his daughter a brand new food mixer. Then he asks his youngest son to bring some nice tomatoes from the garden for him to eat with the bread. But there aren't any nice tomatoes. Father is concerned, because he gave him the seeds and a spade. Finally the son remembers the package under his bed. He and his father are sad that he didn't open the present and grow the tomatoes. But dad understands that he's young and he needs some help, so they go out together to learn how to plant the seeds in the garden.

Then ask some questions and invite people of all ages to respond. Accept every answer warmly.

- Who do you think the father represents?

- Who do the children represent?
- What do their presents represent?
- What do you like best about the story?
- What's the most important message in the story for you?
- What gifts has God given you, and how are you using them?

Closing Activity/Benediction

Give each person a large gift tag. Ask them to find someone who knows them quite well — children can go to their parents or accompanying adults. In pairs, write on each other's gift tags: "I thank God for the gift of ... that I see in your life." Insert the name of the gift into the tag. Return the tags to their owners. Say a prayer of blessing/benediction, blessing each person's gifts and asking God to help them to use them to share His love with others.

Take-Away Activity

Give each person a small tube of sweets, or other treat in a sturdy container that can be used to collect money. Invite them to collect enough coins to fill their tube and then bring it back to church next week. Give the collected "gifts" to a special project that will bless others in your community, or buy a chicken or goat for a family in the third world, to gift them with the ability to earn a living.

Optional Activities

- Invite people to bring an object that represents one of the gifts that God has given to them. Arrange them on a large table and encourage people to wonder which gift each object represents, and also who might have that gift.
- Give each person a sheet of paper. Ask them to find a partner, or let them sit with their families, or make a group with the people along their row. Once in groups, invite them to make a symbolic/pretended present out of the sheet of paper to give to the person on their right. They must try to give them something really special that will make them happy. Allow 5-7 minutes for them to make and give their paper presents. They can also explain why they chose to make that specific gift.

From: Holford, K.: *Altogether Wonderful. Exploring Intergenerational Worship*. With permission from GC CHM



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