



STARS

Beginning the journey

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My child's name is.....

He/she was baptised at St John's church
on.....



THE REASON WHY

Even in today's so-called "secular" society, there are still many parents who want their children to be baptised (or "christened") or to be dedicated in a special church service.

Families want the opportunity to get together and celebrate the precious gift, which is this child. They also want to give the child every possible chance of a happy life and asking for God's blessing on this child is part of their commitment to their baby's wellbeing.

Baptism has been used as a sign of welcome and reception into the Christian community from the very beginning. One of the last things Jesus said to his followers was *"Go now and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the world."* (Matthew 28 vv 19-20)

Just as the wedding ceremony is only the start of a marriage, so the Baptism or Dedication service is only the start of a Christian upbringing. If Baptism is really going to make a difference to your child's life, then the promises made on that day need to be kept faithfully.

So the Parents promise:

Do you believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, maker of heaven and earth, redeemer of the world, giver of life?

I do

Do you promise, trusting in God's grace, that you will teach your child the faith of the Christian Gospel and bring him/her up in the worship and life of the Christian church?

I do



And the people of the church promise:

Do you as members of Christ's church and trusting in God's grace, promise to pray for this child, to provide the teaching of the Christian Gospel and to encourage him/her in faith by your words, by your love and by your example?

We do

The promises sound reasonable enough but keeping them is not so easy as it sounds! There will be questions you cannot answer, commitment that you find hard to keep, issues that you find difficult to deal with. Do not be misled by pictures of serene and endlessly smiling "Christian families!" No-one finds it easy to give their child a Christian upbringing but it is a most precious gift and opportunity for your child.

There are also parents who, even though they do not bring their child for baptism or dedication, still decide, at some stage in their child's life, that they want them to experience the life and worship of a church community and to be encouraged in faith.

This booklet is for all of you, whenever you feel that you want your child to have a Christian upbringing. As a church community we take seriously our commitment to nurture and encourage children in the Christian faith. And we know that you, as parents, need all the help and support you can get.

God bless you, as you start the journey of faith with your child.

With love from the members of St John's Church.



WHAT MAKES A CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING?

In many ways, a Christian upbringing is no different from any other caring upbringing. Children need to be loved unconditionally, for who they are, and not for what they do (or don't do!) They need praise and encouragement; they need parents who will spend time with them, and who will foster their interests. They need to know they are valued, and to have good role models, who will show them how to live. A Christian upbringing adds a further dimension to parenting; we want our children to come to know God, to experience God's love in their lives, and to become part of God's church. So what is needed?

Teach your children to pray

It's not as difficult as it sounds! Prayer doesn't have to be formal, with 'religious' words, and complicated sentences; prayer doesn't have to be done at a particular time or in a particular place, although many people like to pray at the beginning and end of the day. Prayer leads us into a relationship with God; perhaps you can encourage your child to talk to God in the same way he or she would talk to a loved family member or friend.

When we pray, we are both talking to God, and listening for what God has to say to us. We can say "thank you", we can say "sorry", we can say "please", and we can praise God for what we see around us (including other people). Even very young children can be encouraged to pray for themselves. They get excited about the most ordinary things, such as a Christmas bauble, the rain, or the recycling; help them to think about what that bauble represents (the Christmas story, when Jesus was born), how the rain helps things to grow, and the men who collect our recycling, helping us to look after God's world.



Tell your children Bible stories

The Bible is a great story-book. It is full of adventure stories, love stories, stories about the past and the future. Above all, the Bible tells the story of God's work in the world; the story of God's love for his people, and the story of Jesus, God's son, who came to earth to help us how to live as God wants us to. Let your children see that you read the Bible for yourself – don't let it simply be a 'special' book that sits, unread, on a shelf! There are plenty of age-appropriate versions of the Bible and many books of Bible stories available. There are also some of the most important stories for Christians in the accompanying booklet.

Demonstrate that your faith is important to you.

Sometimes adults can find it difficult to model their faith. We feel embarrassed when it comes to talking about it, and so we tend not to discuss it or show how important it is to us. Faith doesn't have to be 'showy'; let your children know that you pray when decisions have to be made, "I asked God what I/we should do"; talk naturally about thanking God for good things, "Wow – look at that rainbow – I think that's something to thank God for"; show them that you enjoy going to church on Sunday. Everyone, including children, can have a faith that is special to them; lead by example, and let your children grow in theirs.

Encourage them to relate their faith to the everyday

Faith isn't just for Sundays! The way we choose to live our lives influences everything we do; help your children to relate the faith they learn about, and experience around them, to their own lives. Think with them about relationships; how they should react when others treat them badly, how they should treat God's world. Help them to understand that their faith should influence every part of their lives, from the ordinary, everyday, to the extraordinary and the spectacular.



KEEPING OUR PROMISES

It's not just parents who make promises at services of baptism and dedication. St. John's Church itself, as a community of faith and representing the whole Church, also makes a promise *"to welcome, to care and to pray for the child; to provide teaching of the Christian Gospel; and to encourage him/her in the Christian faith by our words, by our love, and by our example."* Listed below are examples of some of the ways St. John's Church tries to fulfil this promise for the child and their family. These 'opportunities' are regularly reviewed to ensure that, as far as is possible, they remain relevant and helpful. The latest information about groups and events will be found in the church newsletter and we are always happy to have other ideas suggested to us.

Worship opportunities at St. John's:

- Family worship on Sunday mornings at 10.30am, including...
- ..TGIS (Thank God It's Sunday) for 0s – 18s on Sunday mornings
- ... an All-age Parade service once a month
- The Place (for those at secondary school): the young people plan and lead an informal service once a term
- Pre-school assemblies (twice a term, including the major Christian festivals)
- Special festival services as arranged (details in the newsletter)

Teaching opportunities at St. John's:

- TGIS, on Sunday mornings
- St. John's Church Pre-school, Monday – Friday mornings
- Housegroups (adults) evening and daytime groups
- The Young Adults Group (for 18s – 35s): this group includes those who are parents
- Workshops, training days, etc..., as advertised
- The Big Breakfast: run by Churches Together in Orpington for primary school children



Friends and Fellowship at St John's (church-run or sponsored groups) :

for children and young people:

- TGIS children are encouraged to have a prayer partner from the adult congregation. They also enjoy outings and other social events together.
- The Place for young people to meet and have fun (games, music, etc...)
- Just Babies (for under 1s and their carers)
- Toddler groups (for 1s – 3s and their carers)
- Pre-school (for 3s – 5s)
- X-Box (for under 8s and the men in their lives)
- Uniformed Organisations - Scouting and Guiding (from 5 – 18)
- Also, within the United Reformed Church, FURY (Fellowship of Reformed Youth) for 12s – 25s (national and regional groups)

for adults:

- Men of Leisure
- Friendship Club

for families:

- The Fellowship team organises a wide variety of social events such as meals, quiz nights, concerts, dramas, dances, an auction, etc...
- Regular members of the congregation are allocated a Pastoral Visitor, a named individual who 'looks out' for their family, prays for them and supports them as appropriate.



'The Stars' programme

Children aged 0 – 11 yrs who have been baptised or dedicated at St. John's Church are part of our 'Stars' group. As a reminder of our love and care for them, each of these children receives

- The gift of a Bible on the occasion of their baptism or dedication
- A prayer book on the first anniversary of that occasion
- Birthday cards (up to 6th birthday)
- Invitations to all our major festival services
- Invitations to special celebrations such as FIESTA and the Children's Christmas party
- A reminder about TGIS when they become 3, 7, and 11 (the ages at which children move between groups in TGIS)
- A personal invitation to join The Place (sent to children who are about to leave Primary School)

We promised to pray for these children and so each child is included in a 'Stars' prayer section in our monthly newsletter (in the month of their birthday).

In addition to all these specific actions,

- We encourage our children and young people by words – the congregation tries to know their names and to listen to their opinions; the views of TGIS are incorporated into our discussions at Church Meetings (the forum for our church authority)
- We encourage our children by love, as the congregation finds opportunities to be in relationship with the children and young people through the many groups listed above
- We encourage by example – wherever we meet our children and young people, both at St. John's Church and in the community, and we try to ensure that they have opportunities not just to participate but also to contribute to the life and witness of the church.



CHURCH IS NOT THAT EASY FOR MY CHILD

We agree! But Christians believe that, as a response to Jesus' commitment to us, it is worth the effort in order to train our children up in the ways that they should go, in order to provide them with the opportunity to learn about and experience the love of God within a family of faith.

Just as in all other areas of life, as children grow and develop, whatever hurdles seem to have been overcome (perhaps sleeping through night, toilet trained, being separated from a parent to go to nursery and then school, etc...) there will be new arguments/reasons for the difficulty of attending church. Families change too over time.

And even if you manage to overcome these hurdles, we know ourselves that it doesn't guarantee that the child will want to embrace the Christian faith for themselves when they are older! As we said, it's not that easy.

"I don't want to go to church!!"

The reasons why your child does not want to go to church will vary according to age – but the biggest influence on them is **YOU**. Children need to see and hear your enthusiasm for going to church on Sundays – do they see you looking forward to meeting your church family on Sundays? Do they hear you talking enthusiastically about church to others? And even where parents don't hold the same views about attending church, do they respect and support each other in front of their children?

A small child may be unfamiliar with the building, the toilets, the people – everything can seem very big and scary to a small child, including a church in which parents might feel very at home. Children need to know that they are loved by God and that there is a place for them in the church, whatever their age.





Fears about the building and/or about separation from parents could be overcome by:

- Introducing your child to the place through mid-week activities, with or without his or her parent
- On Sunday, you can tour the building with your child and introduce her or him to their group leaders and to those with special responsibility for your children so that others are able to welcome them in their own right in subsequent week
- Stay with your child for a few sessions of TGIS until he or she is comfortable by themselves
- Sit with your child at the start of the service and take them to their group when the TGIS groups gather

For an older child, reasons not to attend church may include following:

my child wants to join a sports/ballet/music club which meets on a Sunday:

- Celebrate the enthusiasm for sport/ballet/music – these are good things for us to enjoy!
- Can you find a club which meets on Saturdays or on Sunday afternoons? It may mean that you have to travel further but such effort would reflect the value that you place upon attending church as well as honouring the child's wish to take part in other activities.
- And what other mid-week activities could you and your child be involved in at the church in order to stay connected in some way; e.g. is the child a member of one of the Uniformed Organisation groups?



my child says s/he does not believe in God anymore:

- Respect the child's position.
- Depending on their age, you could either ask them to continue in their TGIS group or invite them to stay with you in the congregation and then, afterwards, discuss with them what they heard and understood. This respects the child's position and affirms them in their ability to think and make decisions; it also offers you an opportunity to have in-depth conversations with your child. (This may help your understanding of faith grow too!)
- Rejoice that we are not all the same – God made us as individuals (this is easy to illustrate e.g. I'm a teacher, your dad is a builder; you really like pasta, I really like curry; etc...)
- Thank them for challenging you; recognise that there will be some questions you can't answer; suggest that you try to find out answers together. (*see the 'Hard Questions' section elsewhere in this booklet*)
- Recognise that we are all individual people and part of the role of parents is to nurture their child so that they discover who they are for themselves. Your example of and attitude to living as an ordinary Christian in the world will be the major influence on their thinking and understanding. And the church is there to support you in this.
- Tell the child's TGIS leader of the child's view so that the group can emphasise that they are still welcome to attend, and that this is a safe place in which to express their views and to explore them further.





my child wants to accept their friend's invitation to go to their synagogue/mosque/temple:

- As has been the case for all communities over time, we too live in a community where there are people of other faiths. Children learn about different faith traditions and festivals at school and a visit to another's place of worship could be helpful in showing them the practical reality of what happens week-by- week there. Such visits (could you go too?) should be supported by subsequent discussion with the child, and also their friend should be invited to come and discover what happens in a Christian place of worship. As with any group that is 'different from us' and yet, as we acknowledge, which is not beyond the bounds of God's love, we respect individual people and realise that it is only by getting to know them that we will be able to share something of our faith in Jesus with them.

my child is laughed at school/at the sports club, etc...(or is worried that they will be) because they attend church

- How would you respond to your child if they expressed any fear of actual or anticipated teasing/bullying? The child needs to know that they are important to God as themselves, that God does not want them to be unhappy, and also that God understands what it's like to be bullied.
- You could remember together times when Jesus was laughed at to illustrate this.
- You could suggest that your child talks to God in their prayers You could also discuss any concerns that you have with the child's TGIS group leader so that they are aware and can gently reinforce their teaching that the child is special to God, and is loved by the church family who provide a safe space for all.



All ages have these problems:

I don't like the other children in my group / they don't like me:

- Attending church doesn't make us into perfect people! Again, every child needs to be aware that they are loved by God and, as most children will be able to understand, therefore God loves all the children in their group.
- As with any family or other social group, there are some people we like better than others but we can treat everyone politely, with kindness, and with gentleness.
- If your child expresses particular problems with other individuals, there are a number of people you could speak to in confidence: their TGIS group leader, the TGIS co-ordinator, the Youth & Childrens' Work Elder, the Ministers.

my group is boring;

- In order to value the child and their feelings, try to discover exactly what they mean by this and also ask what they would like to happen.
- If you are not already aware of what actually does happen, then talk to their TGIS leader and/or the TGIS co-ordinator. They will be willing to listen to suggestions and requests about different ways of doing things.
- It may be helpful for the TGIS leaders to discuss ways forward with you and your child together, especially if this involves the child taking on a particular responsibility.

no one I know is going:

- The more regularly a child is able to attend church, the less likely this will be the case.
- If you are aware of this in advance of either a particular day or of a period of time, could you invite a friend to go with them? You may have to offer transport and perhaps lunch but this would demonstrate the value that you place upon attending church (and also be a very good way of showing how to tell others about our faith!).



CHURCH IS NOT THAT EASY FOR ME

My partner never comes to church and thinks I am being unreasonable making our child go to church:

There may be several reasons for this – the other parent does not have a faith or does not feel that attending church is necessary or is concerned (from their own poor childhood experiences) that their child will be ‘indoctrinated’. These concerns may be expressed by saying that Sunday is the only day when the whole family can be together.

- Both parents need to discuss their understandings of a life of faith at the earliest opportunity – before the birth of children would be ideal but most of us don’t live up to that and only think about what to do when the children arrive!
- It can be helpful for each parent to think about their own upbringing in respect of a life of faith – what they valued and what they disliked and what they felt was unhelpful.
- What does each parent want for their child? How could this be accomplished?
- If the parents accept that at least one of them is responsible for the life of faith of their child, then it is important that this decision is respected so that that parent and child are able to worship regularly, if not weekly, with the rest of the local church. It is also important that ‘whole family time’ is planned as well.



I am a single parent:

Churches are full of ordinary people from all walks of life and from the variety of family circumstances that make up our communities. At St. John's, we believe that part of our role is to share God's welcome for all people with anyone we meet, and to demonstrate His love for every person, whoever they are. Jesus was not too interested in judging people – He was interested in and concerned about them and their lives and He still offers us all a way to live life in all its fullness. We help each other as we live and grow together as a church family.

I /we don't know anyone and/or what happens at Sunday morning worship:

- Everyone has experienced that 'first time' feeling but we hope that you will feel welcome and that you will join us for refreshments and conversation in the Link after the service. The stewards are happy to help you, as are most people sitting in the pews!
- There is a printed sheet which gives the order of hymns, readings, etc... for the day and which complements the directions given by those leading worship.
- Regular worshippers (not just those who have committed themselves as members of this local church) are allocated a 'pastoral visitor' (PV) – a named person who will look out for you, who could sit with you if you wish, and who is willing to support you as appropriate.



I/we worry about what everyone thinks as my/our small child makes a noise in church but won't be left in the crèche:

We recognise that small children in particular can be noisy as a way of expressing themselves and their needs. We support parents by offering various things which we hope will help:

- Very small babies may be hungry and mothers who are breastfeeding their children are welcome to do so discretely whilst in the church.
- For children who need to sleep – there is space for buggies towards the front (also a space for wheelchair users) or at the back
- For young children who are bored, there are activity bags with quiet toys at the back of the church – please ask a steward to help you locate these. Or, if you choose to go out into the Link for a while, there are children's books in the bookcase there and the service is relayed through the speaker there. Alternatively, you are free to join the Fireflies in the crèche at any time – the service is relayed there too.
- All children need to know that there are occasions when it is OK to make a noise e.g.: when they use the instruments to accompany the singing, when the worship leader invites a dramatic response, and when we say 'Amen'. Then they will also learn that there are times to be very quiet. Young children like to take part along with everyone else – they will follow your example!
- Just occasionally, parents may decide that their child is so distressed that their 'noise' indicates something else that needs urgent attention – they could seek help from a steward and/or may decide to leave altogether for that occasion. The problem is usually resolved well in time for the following week!
- It is not uncommon for some children to take a few weeks to settle in and so we do encourage you to persevere and to ask us if there is anything you think we could do to help.



My child has 'special needs':

- St. John's Church is convinced that all children are precious individuals and that all have something to share with us. We follow the Good Practice Code of the United Reformed Church and will try our best to accommodate particular needs. Please let us know how we could best serve your child to enable them to learn that God loves them and to grow in their faith. This may mean some simple additions to practical resources or perhaps a different way of communicating with the child – you are the best person to guide us about this. As part of 'Good Practice', all parents are asked by the TGIS group-leaders to complete a form which asks about particular needs, medical history, etc... This information is confidential and held in a secure place.

We have to visit grandparents on Sundays / my former partner has access to our child on Sundays:

- We recognise that there are many and varied demands upon families' time and because we believe that God is in favour of families, we try to support you as you as you have to juggle many different, and often competing, responsibilities. Again, much depends on the attitude of both parents towards bringing children up in the life of a Christian church (see above).
- If there is a schedule of regular visits away from home, perhaps there is another church nearby that you/your former partner could visit with your child too?
- If your former partner lives locally and would like to bring your child to St. John's on Sundays, they, too, would be welcome to come. If there are issues about access that we should be aware of then please speak to one of the TGIS leaders or your PV or the ministers in confidence.
- There are mid-week groups for adults and children that might help you to feel more closely connected with the fellowship at St. John's.



I CAN'T ANSWER QUESTIONS LIKE THAT!

Why can't we see God?

God does not have a body with two eyes, two ears and two hands like we have because God needs to be able to see everything in the world and hear everything. He needs to be able to help every person in the world: people in this house and people on the other side of the street and that is why you cannot see him the way you can see your very own Mummy and Daddy.

What happened to my Nanny when she died?

Everyone has a body; but one day that body wears out and it is no use to you anymore. Remember how Nanny's legs did not work properly and how she got so tired?

But Nanny was not just a body. She was a person who you loved very much. And that person you loved does not wear out. We do not know exactly what happened to Nanny but the Bible tells us that she went to be with God. And if she is with God then that means that she can still see you, even if you cannot see her anymore.

Why are there so many different kinds of churches?

Different people like different things. Some people like pizza and others like pasta. Some people like to play football and others like to do Judo. So some people like churches that are very noisy and others like churches that are very quiet. Some people like churches that have lots of statues and pictures and others like churches that have lots of empty space. Some people like churches where the Minister tells you all about God and other people like churches where you talk to each other about God. God knows that we are all different and, just so long as we go to church to learn about him, he does not mind which kind of church it is.

**Why didn't God stop that earthquake?**

We don't understand everything about how the world works and why earthquakes (or other natural disaster) happen.

But we can ask God to look after the people who have been hurt.

We can ask God to show us how we can help them.

And we can ask God to help us learn more about how the world works.

Why didn't God make my Mummy better?

We don't know why Mummy did not get better. But we do know that it was not your fault and it was not Mummy's fault. Sometimes people get ill (or hurt) and die and we don't know why.

But we do know that God is still looking after Mummy and that God is still looking after you.

Why doesn't God stop bad people doing nasty things?

Because you are a person, you can choose whether to be good or bad. And so can everyone else. We should ask God to help people to choose to do good things, not bad.

Why didn't God answer my prayers?

We do not always understand how God works but the Bible tells us that one day we will understand and, until then, we just trust God to do his best for us.

We hope that this booklet has proved useful.



God bless you as you continue your journey
together



St John's Baptismal candle

The Lord bless you and keep you:
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto you:
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace.

The Baptismal Blessing



www.stjohnsurc.org.uk