



## Introduction

Have you ever had a real light-bulb moment? That exciting point in time where everything falls into place and makes perfect sense. Explore Together is the result of one such moment for us. Well, actually, it was more of a gradual turning on of a light bulb using a dimmer switch process; let me explain.

It all began in 2006. Lee and I were having one of our many 'putting the world to rights' conversations during a coffee break at a conference that we were attending together as fellow children's ministry practitioners and friends. We have known each other for many years, working together on children's camps and other events.

At that time Lee was employed by the Salvation Army as the children's officer for the central south of England, and I was working in a voluntary capacity as a children's worker in a local church. I was also a full-time mum and had taken the opportunity to engage in studying for a degree in children's and youth work. Both Lee and I have a background in education: I trained as a nursery nurse and worked in early years and Lee trained and worked as a primary school teacher and a leading teacher within the local authority.

Between us we had clocked a total of 40 years' experience of working with children in a professional and voluntary capacity.

Lee and I would often talk to each other about the difficulties and challenges we faced in our ministries, and we would also share our triumphs and successes. Between us we had most of the theoretical bases covered. We had a solid grasp of theory and practice around child development and learning. We understood the significance of the works of Piaget, Bruner, Skinner, Vygotsky and Gardner.

We had heard and even trained others on much of the theory around faith development and spiritual formation. We were well versed in the works of Fowler, Westerhoff and Nye. We were like sponges, buying every book and attending every seminar and conference that could possibly help us to be the best children's practitioners we could be. We were desperate to see the children and young people that we worked with grow in their faith, love the Bible and become committed followers of Jesus.

Although we were both seeing some great things happening in our ministries, we were very aware that we were only catching a tiny glimpse of the treasure God wanted to share with us. The possibilities and potential were driving us to want more for our young people!

It was Albert Einstein who defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Lee and I had, over the years, introduced different elements into our programmes – great creative prayer opportunities, funky action songs with fun dance moves, interactive storytelling experiences, DVD clips, live bands, flags and ribbons – but the reality was we were still working within the same structure that we had worked with for years.

Lee talks about that time as being a time of huge frustration. He could see the increasing progress children were making in school by introducing small changes to his practice; he had seen for himself the power of personalisation, choice and children 'owning their learning'. On one hand he could see the potency of such elements in his teaching, but felt unable to apply them in a children's ministry setting. Children's work in church was still very didactic, generic and managed by the leaders.

What we both offered in our ministry was still very much a one-size-fits-all approach. The epiphany moment came to us when we seriously asked ourselves the questions: What would our children's ministry look like if we put all of the theories that we had spent years studying into practice? What would happen if we applied in church the excellent practice we had employed in our work with children outside of a children's ministry context?

I said earlier that our light-bulb moment was more like the turning up of a dimmer switch. This was the point that we turned that switch.

We began to work through our challenges and apply the theories to them. These included:

- managing groups with wide age ranges
- catering for groups of varying sizes
- managing difficult and challenging behaviour
- catering for a range of learning preferences and learning needs
- supporting parents within the church to recognise their responsibility for nurturing faith in their children.

What we discovered wasn't ground-breaking, in fact, it was comforting in its simplicity.

It didn't require us to do much more than create a safe environment where God's voice could be heard, and to step back and trust him to speak.

As Explore Together began to emerge we quickly saw the impact that it had on our groups. It encouraged:

- community building
- Bible engagement
- faith formation
- growth in discipleship
- inclusivity.

We recognised that God had given us a gift and we wanted to share it.

In 2009 we introduced Explore Together to the 8 to 11s children's programme at Spring Harvest. By this time, Lee had returned to teaching and I had taken up a full-time position with Scripture Union as a church and community development worker. The children's programme at Spring Harvest was part of my role.

Lee and I knew that Explore Together worked well within a small group setting, it had been tried and tested and we trusted the theories enough to introduce it to this programme. So, with 450 8- to 11-year-olds and a team of 60 volunteers, we set off.

On the first night, we presented the Bible story and sent the children off to explore the questions in the different zones that we had prepared. We knew that it could work brilliantly, but we were slightly nervous that it could also end in chaos so, with a contingency plan up our sleeves, the two of us went back stage to pray. Let's just say, we didn't need to use our contingency plan. The power of the Holy Spirit moved in that chilly venue

every night that week as the children and the team heard from God and learned from each other. The results were powerful and inspiring, with many children and team members feeding back at the end of the week that Explore Together had been their highlight. Team members went away itching to introduce it into their own children's programmes. The light bulb was getting brighter, but the brightest moment was yet to come.

All-age worship was beginning to feature quite prominently in my local church ministry and also in my role with Scripture Union. I would quite often be asked to lead all-age services at my church, and in my Scripture Union capacity I was often asked to run training sessions on 'How to lead all-age services'. In fact, the all-age sessions at conferences almost always attracted the most delegates.

I knew that the volunteers we had worked with at Spring Harvest had really engaged with Explore Together alongside the children, many experiencing profound encounters with God both directly and through the things that the children had shared. With this in mind, I began to use Explore Together in all-age settings. I quickly realised that the theories that we put into practice within our children's programmes were theories that applied to every age and stage of our faith formation. Explore Together really did release intergenerational communities to discover the Bible together at the same time, in the same place and it was truly beautiful.

The light-bulb moment? Well, that came when we embraced Jesus' words, '... unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3). Explore Together works because it helps us to rediscover what children haven't lost yet: elements that enable them to connect with God in ways that some of us have grown out of.

Elements like awe, wonder, creative exploration and interdependency.

In her book *The Seed and the Soil*, Pauline Hoggarth stresses the importance of the word 'creative', stating that 'the church needs to take seriously the fact that people learn in different ways, and adapt its approaches accordingly'.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that, 'there needs to be a continuum between our Bible engagement approaches with younger generation and with adults ... engaging with God's word as adults often becomes too focused on analytical, propositional thinking and ignores the intuitive and imaginative aspects of the person.'<sup>2</sup>

By placing children at the centre of our thinking, studying how they learn, develop and grow in their faith, Lee and I were able to reconnect to the very heart of who we are. We are children of God, dependent on a continued and close relationship with our heavenly Father, created in his image, connected to each other as brothers and sisters, dependent on each other for growth. We are all one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

We would both now find it hard to plan any event for children, young people or adults, churched or unchurched, that did not include an opportunity to explore together. Lee has continued to develop Explore Together within the context of the school where he is deputy head teacher, and I have used it in a multitude of settings, including sessions for teenagers and adult house groups.

This book is a chronicle of our journey so far. The first three chapters address the question, 'Why do we need to explore together?', investigating the practical, theoretical and biblical

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1 Pauline Hoggarth, *The Seed and the Soil*, Global Christian Library, 2011 p123

2 *ibid*, p124

contexts. The final three chapters focus on the question, 'What does exploring together involve?'

Our journey with Explore Together has revealed so much to us about the way in which God communicates with us, through his Word and through his community. We invite you to join us as we continue on that journey, and discover for yourselves how you can explore together in your own communities. We hope and pray that Explore Together will become a useful and valuable tool in your ministry toolkit.

*Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.*

*Proverbs 16:3*