IFG St Albans.

IFG began at St Albans Baptist Church, Christchurch at the beginning of February, 2017. They meet on Thursday evenings from 6:00pm to 7:30pm with some amazing leaders across a range of ages who are fantastic with the girls. I am the Children’s Pastor at St Albans Baptist Church and have found IFG (alongside ICONZ) to be an incredibly effective means to engage with our community.

I have sometimes wondered how relevant the church is to the community. Do we expect people to just walk in our doors and understand what we do and why we do it? Do we have any idea of what our community’s needs are? How are we engaging with our community in a way that truly demonstrates Christ’s love and compassion? This is a real challenge because I don’t want to be a pastor only for the sake of those within the church. The church does matter, but so do those who don’t attend church on a regular basis, if at all. Religion has definitely come under more scrutiny in recent times given the atrocities here in Christchurch and around the world, as well as social media posts which have gained the media’s attention. People struggle to make sense of the relevance of religious devotion when all they seem to see is the worst of it displayed by extremism.

As a pastor to families and children, I am challenged to find a way to be relevant that is kind, loving, caring, considerate. And in my experience I don’t have to look any further than Jesus. His example was to spend time with people who weren’t highly regarded by society. He addressed needs as he found them. He listened and allowed people to discover who he really was without being pushy or arrogant. And even when hard things needed to be said, He did it in a way that honoured people rather than put them down.

IFG is a wonderful program which enables us to engage with people regardless of whether they are churchgoers or not. It’s about presence in people’s lives, responding to things that matter, helping meet needs. We have created a small community of people (kids, parents/caregivers and volunteer leaders) who are doing life together. Shared experiences build relationships. Relationships help people not to feel so isolated. Happy, more settled kids, make for a calmer home life. We, the church, have a role to play in demonstrating Jesus to our community. Over time we have intentionally built in opportunities for the parents and wider family to join in on IFG (and ICONZ) activities. Our girls and boys and families all get together. Don’t underestimate the power of fun and activity when parents are doing it with their kids as part of a community.

On the first night of each term we have *Reconnect*. This is a night where everyone does simply that – reconnect after the holidays. Play some games, have some supper, let people chat. Nothing highly organised other than space for people to be with each other. In the middle of each term we have our *Mid-term Social*. We sometimes go off-site to places like a local lake, swimming pools, beach, etc. And sometimes we stay at church and have a takeaway and movie night, or a game of Spotlight, for example. The third time in the term is the last night which we call *Family Night*. This is a meal catered predominantly by members of the church as well as the families bringing something. We have a game or activity together, and the prize giving is done where badges are awarded. Often we have a goodie bag with a range of treats and often some written Bible material from the likes of Bible Society, as well as invitations to church services and events.

Another initiative which we began last year was to set up an *ICONZ Parentz* group. Each week parents of our IFG and ICONZ groups can stay and have a cuppa with a couple of our church members who run it. Often there is a Blessing Table where items which people may not need anymore can be shared for those who may find a use for them. It also means that for any who are bringing new children to the program, they can be nearby and available in case their child needs some assistance settling in.

For us IFG (and ICONZ) has been a fantastic tool to help us connect with our community. It provides a framework for running a program but also gives flexibility for leaders to work to their strengths. If you’re a church looking to build your connection to your local community, then a program like IFG really does give great support in doing it.

I’m always open to have a chat with anyone who might have questions about any other aspects of the program and how we have worked with it, adapted it and initiated new things from it. Feel free to flick me an email if you’re interested (don.benn@sabc.org.nz)