

# Coffee Connect | Children in Our Midst

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

congregation, church, stories, children

## SPEAKERS

Linda Booth

[INTRO MUSIC]

**Linda Booth** 00:27

Welcome to this episode of Coffee Connect, a podcast about how God continues to reach out to people today through the vibrant witnesses of a person or a congregation of witnesses of Jesus Christ. My name is Linda Booth. I've collected hundreds of stories over the years as I served as a Community of Christ Apostle and traveled to many states in the United States and countries around the world. And I'm going to tell you several stories.

The first story I'm going to tell you about is about two congregations. Now, I'm not going to tell you where they're located. But these are true stories and you'll understand why I don't give you them, their location, when you hear these stories.

### **The first congregation:**

Several years ago, I met with a couple who had seven children ranging in age from five to 15. Because their children invited friends to church, the parents drove separate vehicles to pick up an ever-expanding group of children and teenagers in their oversized vans. When they scheduled a family vacation, the woman enlisted couples in their congregation to pick up their children's friends who had been attending church regularly and wanted to continue. She introduced each child to the couple assigned to them. She said she even made matching name tags so that there was a visible link between the couples and their wards. Everything was set. And so, they left for vacation.

When they got home a day early and went to church, of the 10 or 12 children who had been assigned to couples, only two were at church. And when the woman asked why couples hadn't picked up the children, she received different excuses. The bottom line was it was just too disruptive on Sunday morning to go and pick up the kids, she was told.

### **This is about a second congregation.**

Several years ago, this congregation was considering closing because so few people were attending church. After months of praying for direction from God on the matter, one man noticed several children climbing through the fence that protected the church property from the rundown neighborhood. He shared his image of those children with the congregation. The members decided to tear down the fence. They started praying about their neighborhood and they built an inviting playground on church property. They walked the neighborhood and they met and listened to their neighbors and they invited folks into the fellowship. And they came, not just a few children, but lots of children.

When I attended a service in this congregation several years later, I was surprised by a nearly packed congregation made up primarily of children and neighbors who are now members or friends of the church. I sat next to five children who positioned themselves in front of the projector that displayed images and hymn texts on the screen. And during the service, the children occasionally would lift their hands, which were projected on the screen, as hopping bunnies and waving fists. I turned around to see if the children were disturbing the congregation which I remembered had been before, in the past, very traditional. As I looked at the adult's faces, they were all smiling.

It's amazing to me how people choose to act when God disrupts their lives with new ideas, a new opportunity, a new challenge or new children to love. And I'm thankful for those who celebrate the disruption and respond as true and living expressions of Jesus Christ.

**I'm going to tell you about another congregation, and this time I'm going to mention the name.**

This congregation is in, uh, Pensacola, Florida, and at one time, church members lived in that neighborhood surrounding the Jackson Street Congregation in Pensacola, Florida. As their incomes improved, they moved to newer homes and neighborhoods miles away from the church.

The families who now live in the neighborhoods around the church building look very different from those who attend. Their lifestyles are very different, too, and many children are being raised by single mothers or grandmothers. Drugs, gangs, crime and high school dropout rates are the norm.

The Jackson Street congregation began to prayerfully discern what Christ's mission was for their congregation and members said the Mission Prayer each day in their own homes and when they worshipped together. *"God, where will your Spirit lead today? Help me be fully awake and ready to respond. Grant me the courage to risk something new and become a blessing to your, of your love and peace. Amen."* The priesthood prayed for God's direction. People walked the neighborhood surrounding the church and prayed for the neighbors. They took flyers door to door inviting people into their fellowship. And one evening, a men's group gathered for a cookout and a prayer on the church lawn and several African American boys stopped by. The men invited them to shoot some hoops which they enthusiastically did. And then the men invited them to share in the grilled hamburgers and hotdogs which they enthusiastically did. As the men listened to the boys' story, a relationship began to form because it was obvious the boys enjoyed the men's company. The men talked about what they liked to do. And from that conversation, an idea formed. What if the congregation started JAM--Jesus and Me? What if it invited all the kids to a Thursday evening of food, fun and Bible stories at the church? What if

Christ's mission for their congregation was all about ministry with the children in the neighborhoods around the church, children who are very different than the few who attended Jackson Street?

In faith, the Jackson Street congregation walked the neighborhood again. This time, people talked with moms, boys, girls, teenagers and grandmas and invited all the children and teenagers to Thursday night JAM. At the first gathering, more than 30 children and teenagers showed up. The few men and women who prepared the evening activities were not ready for that many children and for the diversity of their ages and lives. The next Thursday evening, they were better prepared. And more than 40 children and teenagers showed up. Through trial and error, lots of love, lots of tears and lots of laughter, they developed deep relationships with the children and their families.

When I attended a Sunday morning worship at Jackson Street a year later, the congregation was alive. The congregation, once all white, now was multicolored. The primarily older congregation was now young. The congregation who loved a few children, now loved a neighborhood full of children. I sat across the potluck table from a group of energetic boys. One boy named James kept jumping out of his seat to go and talk with different people. And when he finally settled down to eat, he got my attention. "Miss Linda, do you see all these people?" James asked me flinging his arms wide and looking around the room. "All these people are *my* family."

The Jackson Street Congregation listened to God, listened to the neighborhood, and listened to all the beautiful children who were invited into fellowship. As a result, the congregation was awakened to God's presence in the neighborhood around the church building. Members also were awakened to a love that empowered them to live Christ's mission and our Enduring Principles: Worth of All Persons, All are Called, Unity in Diversity, and Blessings of Community. The Jackson Street Congregation began a journey to listen to one another, to God and to their neighborhood. It wasn't just listening that awakened the congregation. It was the way people listened. Through their listening, they discovered those places where God was at work ahead of them. The process of listening, sharing stories, and reflecting shared and shaped an environment where people could imagine new ways of being community as they followed Jesus into their neighborhood.

It's my hope and prayer, as you think about the stories of your life, that you will join Christ in Christ's mission to reach out to the people around you. Those you know, and those you may want to know, and even strangers.

[OUTRO MUSIC]