Top Tips for Assemblies

How to build a puppet stage

For a foldable, low cost puppet stage you will need…

- A clothes drier like this….
- A length of plastic pipe
- A wooden broom handle
- A length of … batton
- One piece of plywood

Cut the plastic pipe into four lengths of …..cm

Turn the drier upside down, so the longer legs are now pointing upwards. Add the plastic pipe segments. It looks like this now…

Measure the width of the folding segments of your drier. Make a matching front by cutting the plywood to the required width and drill small holes through plywood and plastic. Connect with small screws, adding a little glue underneath would make it stronger still. Now your puppet stage looks like this…

Measure the sides of your drier and cut batton to the required length. Drill a small hole to sit in the middle of the batton and the middle of the plastic pipe. Attach a small length of broomstick with a screw. It looks like this…

Now the skeleton of your puppet stage can be assembled, it should look similar to this. Now all you need is a cover. Either loosely drape sheets over your stage or make a "made to measure" curtain. Voila, your stage is ready!

Appendix II.

Things we do:

- We try to smile a lot!
- We invite children to think about issues of faith and life
- We keep it light hearted
- We prepare and practice
- We use simple language
- We focus on one simple, applicable message
- We ask for feedback from the schools

Things we don't do:

- We do not try to "convert" children in an assembly
- We do not assume that all the children agree with what we are telling them
- We are not apologetic about the fact that we believe in what we say
- We do not try and say everything that could be said about the subject in one assembly

Appendix III.

Training notes for school's assemblies

So let's assume you have been asked to go to your local school to take an assembly…how do you prepare? Most schools will give you something between 12-20 minutes and you want to make the best of this opportunity.

The building blocks of an assembly

Variety is very important. You could just stand up and talk for fourteen minutes. But unless you have as many facial expressions as Mr.Bean, that is going to be quite boring to a primary school child. Better by far to follow the model of the children's TV programmes and change your mode of communication every few minutes. You could use several of the building blocks below…

Sketch/ game/ story/ video/ song/ prayer/ reading/ poem/ dance/ dress up/ object talk/ power point/ prayer/ Memory verse/ challenge/ show and tell/ personal story/ mime/ puppet…

There is no end to the creative possibilities. This is just a short list, there are many other ways of communicating in an engaging way. It all depends on you and your team, try to make a list of presentation forms you might be able to use.

A typical order of an assembly would be something like this:

1. Intro: Telling the children who you are and what you are going to talk about
2. An acted out sketch or a video clip which goes with your theme.
3. A Bible story presented in a fresh way
4. A short talk to interpret the story and tell the children why it applies to them
5. A song to go with the theme
6. Summing up todays message, again: How could you do this in an interesting way
7. A prayer

The most important thing

At the end of one of our assemblies a head teacher came in, she picked one child and said, "Now tell me in ten words what the assembly was about." Phew, to our relief the child was able to do just that! Would you be able to sum up last Sunday's sermon at church in ten words. What did it tell you? What were you meant to do at the end of the sermon?

In our preparation the most challenging (and annoying..) question is, "What are we really trying to say?" It is really important that you can clarify in your mind WHAT you are going to say and then work on HOW you are going to say it.

We mainly base our themes around a Bible story. Take the well known story of Jonah. What do we want to say with this story? There are several options: "God sees you everywhere and you cannot escape him. Or: When God tells you to do something, you better get on with it. Or: God will send a storm after you too if you do not obey him."

None of those messages seemed to us to adequately present God to young children who know very little about him. So what lesson does Jonah teach which is relevant to the children, and applicable? We picked out the issue of patience. God was very patient; with Jonah, with the other sailors, with Niniveh and its citizens. Patience is a good theme. It is relevant to a child, it is also applicable.

Once we have decided what the main theme of the Bible story is, we group everything accordingly. We tell the story of Jonah, emphasising patience. We find a sketch or a puppet drama about patience. We sing a song about patience, we learn a verse from the Bible about patience and so on.

When we sum up the message, we explain what patience is, how it works, how it applies to our lives. We end on a do-able challenge…for example: This week, when you notice yourself getting impatient, take a deep breath and give the other person another chance.

The most important thing about the assembly is that you know exactly what you want to say and how this applies to the lives of the children listening to you. WARNING: This sounds simple but is really the most challenging aspect of presenting assemblies!

The structure of your presentation

We have found it very helpful to organise all our assemblies around three main points:

HERE'S WHAT…

Step one, you want to give them a quick peak at today's menu. Introduce your theme in an interesting way. Good songs have a "hook" in the first few seconds, something that gets you listening. An assembly needs something of this type too.

We often start with something that is either funny or a bit of an element of surprise, something slightly mysterious, something that makes the audience wonder, "What is going on, what is going to happen next?" In this you should present today's theme, so that everyone knows what you are going to talk about. In your preparation ask yourself: What exactly do I want to tell them?

No longer than two minutes. It is not the meal, it is the appetizer!

SO WHAT…

Step two, you need to get across why your message is relevant. Information is good, inspiration is better. Information can leave me cold. What has this got to do with me? Inspiration involves me and challenges me to action.

Step two begins to deepen the theme. We often do this through a Bible story. The story unfolds the theme and gives colour and detail to it.

At the end of the Bible story we have a short "talky bit", summing up the main point of the story. Stories can say many things, tell the children what the main point of this story is and why this is important.

The story can take five minutes, your talky bit should only be a minute. If it can have a repeatable snap line, or a short memory verse, even better.

NOW WHAT…

Your assembly is coming to an end. What is your message and how can your audience apply it to their lives? Children in primary school don't really do concepts yet. They are best at definite appeals to action. ("You should believe this and put your trust in God" is a concept. "Forgive your brother when he annoys you and let him share your toys." is a definite appeal.)

Summing up can be done in many different ways. Just talking is the worst of them. Better to be visual, use props, memorable sayings, rhymes, songs…anything that helps them remember what you have said… because you want them to remember your message and apply it!

Provided that your "Now what.." has several different ways of saying the same thing, it can take up another five to seven minutes. But it needs to remain interesting. In talking to groups at school less is more. One clear point is better than five presented in a confusing way.

Some do's and dont's

Do..

- Speak slowly and clearly enough to be understood
- Use simple words and think about the age of the children you are addressing
- Be creative and try to be as visual as possible
- Think hard about your intro, link talks and summing up talks.
- Share your faith in simple and sincere terms
- Read the Bible stories again before you turn them into a version for children, aim to stay true to the original.
- Present God in a way that is in line with the fact that he is good and his love endures forever.
- Tell them about your faith but allow them to make up their own mind
- Get there in good time to set up and make sure you are ready well before the children arrive

Don't

- Talk down to children. Repect their ability to come to their own conclusions.
- Try to say too much in one assembly. One clear main point is enough.
- Get too "preachy". For most children having faith is a new idea, give them time to get used to it.
- Use church jargon. "Repentance, sin, communion" are well known church words, but children would have no idea what you are talking about.
- Go over time. The school has a tight timetable and it is very inconvenient for them if an assembly runs over.
- Do not hype up the children. If you do something exciting, make sure you also calm them down again before the end of the assembly.

How to write an assembly script

Yes, it is probably best to work from a script. If you were to give a short informal talk or tell a bit of personal story, you would probably be fine without a script. But if you are going to present the assembly as a team of people, you will need a script. Without a script the assembly is likely to contain too much "waffle". To be sharp, you need to think in detail about what you are going to say and know who is going to say it and for how long.

Four steps:

1. Decide on your story and your theme. Write an initial script…
2. How are you going to present the story? What other elements are you going to use alongside?
3. Who is going to do what? Allocate dialogues, songs, sketches, prayers, summing up, intros and links to specific people in your team.
4. Have a test run (or ten…) and check your timings

Once it has all been agreed, make sure you write a final version of your script. We find that the main parts of the assembly are easier. The final touch, which takes time, is to agree the talky bits which link from story to song to prayer and to know how to sum up the whole assembly. Avoid waffle!

One last step..

It is uncomfortable to present your finished script to a critic, but it is good practise! Let someone see it and comment who is not just going to say, "Brilliant, super!" (…even if it is anything but). A good critic can help you to see your finished product with fresh eyes and iron out the last little hitches. As I said, uncomfortable but worth doing ☺

On the day

o   Did you contact the school a few days before the assembly to confirm time and place?
o   Check you have got all your gear
o   Allow enough time to get to the school for your set up
o   Have you got some music to listen to while everyone comes into the hall?
o   Introduce yourselves to the children
o   Run the assembly
o   Have a chat with staff afterwards to make sure everything was ok
o   Leave everything the way you found it
o   Perhaps you can book another assembly straight away

AND THAT'S IT, REMEMBER TO SMILE A LOT WHILE YOU ARE TALKING, ENJOY THE CHILDREN, GO FOR IT AND BE A BRINGER OF GOOD NEWS!