

# REACHING OUT TO URBAN KIDS

Ten Ways to Welcome Young People into Church

By Colleen Scheid ([www.colleenscheid.com](http://www.colleenscheid.com))

## 1. Be a Church Without Walls



Lots of city churches are dying. I know, I travel with [a Christian theater company](#), and over the years I've seen many mainline churches in city neighborhoods getting smaller and smaller, older and older. These churches are full of loving, devout Christians, who puzzle over how to welcome young people. I'm no expert on church growth or evangelism or youth ministry, **but there are some things we're doing at our church that have given children and adolescents some wonderful experiences of God's love and power.** So, in the next ten posts I'll share some things we're doing at [College Hill Presbyterian Church](#) in Cincinnati:

**Go Where the Need Is:** At the risk of stating the obvious, going to church is no longer mainstream. **"Beyond our Walls" is a phrase that's worked itself into many of our church's documents, and into many of our hearts.** We know that most people are only going to come to our church, after they have gotten to know us and trust us in some other place. So we go to the local school and tutor

kids, we have a big party for the neighborhood in our parking lot with free music and food, we get into partnerships with food banks and homeless shelters and global missions. Several families have taken in foster kids.

**Welcome People in Different Ways:** Then we make sure there are different events at the church that make us a welcoming community. Not everyone feels safe or interested in a worship service, so we have meals together, we have game nights, we have youth groups and kids groups that do Bible study in fun and challenging ways, we provide homeless people with temporary shelter. We have a writer's group, as well as a dance group and choir for children in a school district that struggles to fund the arts. We have a cooperative pre-school in our building. Our pastor, Drew Smith, has held a discussion group where people talked about race problems in a safe, respectful setting. **We try to be accessible and very welcoming to the people who do walk through our doors.**

During every worship service, we welcome visitors and invite them to a welcome table to talk after the service. After every service we offer to pray with people who need it. We have a good digital check-in system so people know their kids are safe, and greeters at each of our doors. We provide free snacks and drinks on Sunday morning, which draws people from group homes near the church, and some neighborhood kids who come without their parents.

We've had to set some rules for the kids, (requiring them to attend Sunday School or services rather than just rattling around the building,) but always with love.

**At one of our prayer meetings, we often pray that people will feel the love, peace and power of God as soon as they walk in.** But we know that a lot of people are not going to walk in, until we go where they are, demonstrating God's love, peace and power in how we relate to them.

## **2. Connect, No Matter the Differences**

**You can't generalize about city kids.** Cities are usually diverse, with people of different races and income levels living close. So a church within city limits is ideally a diverse congregation. The children and teenagers in our church are Americans and immigrants, black and white, some with their natural parents and some adopted. We have kids with parents who own companies and kids whose single moms are on public assistance. We have children with autism and other disabilities.

It can be harder to meet the needs of diverse groups than homogenous ones, but **there is no more visible witness to the love and power of God when a bunch of really different people getting along together.**

I've found that it helps me to **keep three things in mind** when working with diverse groups of kids in church:

**1. Focus on Jesus:** Any church should be doing that by definition, but with a diverse group of kids, God may be the only thing they have in common so you might as well get right to the point. Don't gather to have fun or give people a chance for 'fellowship' or provide 'a safe environment'. Gather to worship, pray and learn the Scriptures. Gather to draw near to God together.

**Many of our high school kids, at an age when kids often drop out of church, have been sticking around** since they started meeting in 'huddles' –



discipleship groups where there is a teaching about one aspect of the Christian life followed by a check-in time where people disclose what's going on in their lives and pray. **In this structured setting of confidential honesty, cultural differences no longer separate people.** A kid from the foster care system

and a kid from a privileged family are on equal footing when it comes to following Christ.

**2. Have a lot of adult leaders: It is crucial that kids are safe and feel understood, so we need enough adults to monitor behavior, with zero tolerance for put-downs, disobedience or exclusivity.** We state up front that this is a safe zone, a place where everyone gets respect. Have clear, simple rules enforced consistently. The worse kids' behavior is, the higher the ratio of adults needed.

There should always be adults available to help kids one on one if they struggle with reading or communicating, or to remove kids who are disruptive. I have four adults when I work with a dozen fourth through sixth graders. At our

summer camp this year, we added older adults to assist the high school and college interns we hired. We need as many spiritually mature adults as it takes to establish a culture of love and respect.

**3. Be brave:** I used to worry about mixing rough, unchurched kids with sheltered Christian kids. **I was afraid they would misunderstand each other, avoid each other, hurt each other. But I wasn't thinking about how they could bless each other.** One day a guy called me on it. He said, "You're overthinking this. Just throw them together and they'll have a good time." He should know. He has a household full of his natural kids, adopted kids and foster kids. Of course he is vigilant about supervision, but he's brave too. Every week, our pastor leads us in a prayer that includes, "Connect us in Jesus, no matter our differences." **To see a roomful of people – adults and kids, black and white, rich and poor, – all laughing and talking and playing together – that is a great joy and an answer to our prayers.**

### **3. The Power of an Hour – Tutoring**

Once a week I coordinate a tutoring program at the grade school closest to our church. The first year I did it was the hardest – adjusting to the noise, the rowdiness, the need. When I pulled my van up to the school, bracing myself to haul tutoring supplies into a cafeteria full of clamoring kids, Andre would always be running towards me, beaming. He would give me a hug and help me carry the stuff in, then ply me with questions, "What game are we gonna play today? What did you bring for the snack? Do we still get candy if we remember the verse?"

**As the weeks of patient tutoring went by, I saw changes in him.** His reading was more fluent. His failure to memorize gave way to an ability to study and proudly recite two or three sentences. He began to disclose his fears and anxieties when his tutor prayed with him. We got him enrolled in our church's summer camp. "That was probably the most fun I will ever have in my whole life," he announced on the ride home.

Then he was gone. Medical bills competed with rent, his family was evicted and they moved to some other neighborhood. When I pull my van into the school parking lot, I can still see his eager, beautiful face, and I remember what he said when I asked him why he liked Treehouse Tutoring so much. **He said, "Because we get to have fun and everyone be nice to us and we learn about God."**



**The magic of this program is in the one to one ratio; in a caring adult listening, reading, helping, praying. Many of these children have no one else with time or energy or know-how to help them read and do their work, so even an hour a week of focused attention is precious to them.**

Treehouse Tutoring, much like the city-wide program, [Whiz Kids](#), aims to improve literacy. In Treehouse we want kids to understand the love of God, so we use the Bible as our text. But **even more important than the content is the relationship.**

The after-school coordinator once said to me, **“As soon as I get one of our at-risk kids into a program where they are getting some attention, their attitudes change.** I can just see it.”

“Even just once a week?” I asked.

“Yup.”

To pull off a weekly tutoring experience, you need:

**A school willing to welcome volunteers.** Our faith-based program can only operate after school hours, of course, but the school is the host and you need to work with administrators to get space, referrals of children and parent contact information.

**Tutors who can love and discipline kids,** and model fluent, thoughtful reading. They also need to be willing to get a background check, which all schools will require.

**One or more coordinators with around ten hours per week** to prepare or find curriculum, plan activities and gather material and snacks (Don't skip the snacks; kids are hungry after school, especially if they're living in poverty.) Coordinators also keep records and stay in communication with administrators, parents and tutors.

**It's a lot of work, just for an hour a week with a few dozen kids. But I always remember Andre, telling me that Treehouse was his favorite thing all week.**

*If you have questions about Treehouse, email me at [scheidison@gmail.com](mailto:scheidison@gmail.com). For information on Whiz Kids, go to [citygospelmission.org/tutoring/](http://citygospelmission.org/tutoring/).*



## 4. Throw a Block Party

In early August our church throws a big party in its parking lot. There's a stage with a good sound system, music, speakers, dancing. There's free food and water. Civic organizations set up tables. There's a bouncy house for kids, and a tent with a sign that says, "Free Pop if you Talk with us about Jesus for Three Minutes."



I think the block party has done a lot to connect our church to people in the neighborhood who may not otherwise have come into the formidable stone edifice. **We needed to get outside the**

**building to show people that we cared about them.**

Traditional church festivals in our area are fund raisers, selling food and games to raise money for the church. But **we wanted this party to exclude no one**, including the [high percentage](#) of our residents who live below the poverty level, so everything is free.

We also decided that we didn't want it to be only about having fun; **we wanted people to experience God's love.** Hence the "Jesus Tent," with its offer of free pop for a brief conversation. We wanted to create a space where people would feel free to have conversations about faith. So we made our signs, filled coolers with drinks, set up chairs, prayed, and waited to see what would happen. The results were delightful. People of all ages came and eagerly talked of their faith, their doubts, their grievances with the church, their needs for prayer, their testimonies of the goodness of God. **Intense, personal conversations about spiritual things, which so rarely flow for most of us in the routine of our lives, flourished** in a setting that simply gave permission. Sometimes, when people were willing, the conversations ended in prayer.

**Lots of children came**, so we have expanded our conversations to include activities such as reading a Bible story, or making a bracelet with beads that represent key truths of the gospel.

I recall meeting Shauna, and her son Shallum, new in town, the first year we put our signs out (We didn't have a tent then, just a table.) They have been coming to church ever since. Shauna often helps out at our front desk, and Shallum brings his friends to youth group. I **can't imagine our church without them.**

**Other encounters I will never forget:**

The skeptical girl in her young teens who wanted to know how she could know that God is really there.

**The boy, around 10, who told one of our high school volunteers that his mother had just died the week before.** It was precious to see the older boy praying for strength and comfort for the younger boy.

**The young woman in her 20s who wanted to stand strong in her faith** and realized that this meant she was going to have to distance from some destructive friends. She accepted our prayers with hugs of gratitude.

**The four siblings who responded to our invitation to come to church** and have been showing up ever since, even though their parents don't come.

**I'm so glad we started the block party, to show our neighborhood that God's people care about them whether they come to church or not.** And I'm



glad we have the 'Jesus Tent', because it gives an open invitation for people to draw closer to God.

## 5. Make Church Fun for Older Kids

Many churches do a great job with little kids – providing doting nursery workers and dedicated Sunday School teachers. **But the older kids get, the harder it can be to engage and discipline them, particularly kids from tough backgrounds.**



One of the things [our church](#) has done for the last few years is to add a Sunday night activity in addition to traditional Sunday morning Sunday school. We'd rather do something during the week, but sports and other competing activities just crowded out too many kids. This time parallels when older youth groups meet.

**The upper elementary age group often becomes disenchanted with the activities of younger kids, so it's important to give them something different and challenging.** For example, here's our format for this year's MEGABLAST, which meets from 6pm to 8pm:

For the first half hour, they join older youth groups for a time of worship. **Kids are invited to help lead worship as singers, musicians or leading movement**



**to songs.** There is often a structured activity, like writing out a sentence of praise to God, then everyone reading theirs out loud. In a setting with older role models and guided activities, worship is caught as well as taught.

The next half-hour is spent **rehearsing a super-easy short drama that I write for them to present to their families at a monthly dinner.** The dramas include narration that can be read, Scripture recitations and personal stories. We keep memorization to one or two lines per person so kids don't get too stressed about performing. We want them to have fun, present truth and become confident speakers.



For the third half hour we break into boys' and girls' groups, with an adult leader. **These groups read and discuss a Bible passage and pray together. There is a strong emphasis on good group process, with simple listening exercises at the beginning of each session.** For example, we'll get kids to share a highlight from their week, but first they repeat what they heard the last person say. It pays to insist on good process; to require only one person talking at a time. **Good communication skills and behavior boundaries are crucial for diverse groups.** When those are established, even kids from very different backgrounds will feel safe and open-up.

The final half hour is devoted to some **crazy game that lets everyone run around our large building and make lots of noise.** This is by far their favorite time, and when they relate most spontaneously.

We're considering some other formats – maybe some in-home small groups next year, for example. But **this structure has worked well for us, helping kids from different backgrounds to worship, learn, work and play together.**

## 6. Give a Home to a Child

I am challenging myself as I write this post because the most time I've had a child in our home, who is not part of my family, is six weeks. But I still have to mention it as a key way to reach out to city kids, because the number of children needing foster care and adoption is epidemic.



Cincinnati's county alone, Hamilton County, has a case load of [over 20,000](#) vulnerable children. More than 40 per cent of those kids must be moved out of our area to find a home. **The heroin epidemic as well as many other stressors have pushed the number of displaced kids to all-time highs.** I think giving a child a home is one of the most generous and loving things people can do. **I'm struck by how many families in our church have reached out in this way.**

There's the couple with two boys who took in a baby girl with a severe disability. There are two couples who took in five kids between them, a family from Columbia. The father of one family and mother of the other are brothers and sisters. These two families live on the same street, and so do two sets of grandparents. One of these older couples also has foster children. **They form this marvelous community of caring adults, with a dozen or more children between them.**

One single lady, after raising her own family, took on a second family by adopting three siblings. Another couple with their own three boys are caring for two more little boys.

And there are more. I'm so proud of these families, who are living out their faith in Jesus in sacrificial ways. **I'm also continually delighted by all these diverse kids, with the joy and energy they bring to our church.** If I try to imagine Sunday mornings without all these children, I realize how much quieter, more somber, less fun – our church would be!

## 7. Cooperative Preschools Build Community



**I have so many good memories of taking my kids to pre-school.** They attended **3Cs Nursery School**, a Christian cooperative at College Hill Presbyterian Church that focuses on building a supportive environment for families.

I was often scheduled to work at the same time as a young dad, a big, muscled African American guy who looked terribly uncomfortable on the tiny

classroom chairs, his knees up to his ears. My son loved him.

He was a kid who hated crafts and wanted to play with blocks. The kids were supposed to finish their 'small motor activity' before they were allowed free play. This dad would only require the bare minimum before he cut him loose. "Me and Daniel, we got an understanding," he said, winking at Daniel as he hastily scribbled a picture and took off.

**Several good things are happening at once at a cooperative pre-school.** Children are learning from the teacher and from socializing with others. The parents are helping the teachers so kids get more attention. The parents are probably learning most of all – both from the gentle, patient teachers, and from watching how their kids interact with others. They're also saving money because cooperatives require less paid staff. In addition, they are forming relationships with other parents and grandparents who have kids the same age.

Even though I didn't always feel like dealing with a bunch of three or four year olds, it was very good for me to do so. **I learned what was developmentally appropriate for my kids at that age – especially helpful with my first child.** I

observed that he was way ahead of kids in some areas, lagging in others, and I adjusted how I worked with him accordingly.

I also saw how he related with other kids. At one point he was under the influence of a child with a strong personality, and was getting into trouble under that kid's direction. **I may not have picked up on what was going on if I were not there.** Because I was there, I could coach him on how to say no or switch activities to break the pattern.

Not everyone in our neighborhood can afford to pay for pre-school, so **3Cs has several fundraisers to raise scholarship money.** Staff and volunteers host Gingerbread Shoppe, an enormous craft show that fills every corner of the church and raises around \$8,000.

**3C's current director, Shannon Caton, has worked hard to make the preschool accessible to everyone.** The seventy children now attending are racially and economically diverse.

"It's been challenging to reach beyond the middle and upper classes to make it a place where everyone can benefit, **but that's what we need to be doing.**" She said about half the families are receiving some amount of scholarship money, or working extra time beyond their coop commitment. Some families may only be paying \$5 a month, but she has found that it is important to require people to contribute something.

Another way **the program has changed to accommodate families with single parents or two working parents** is to reduce the coop commitment to once a month, and offer a four-hour preschool as well as the former two and a half hours.

"That gives part time workers time to work a whole morning, and gives grandparents who are taking care of grandchildren more time to rest," Shannon said.

**3Cs has been part of our community since 1968,** and because it has adapted to meet the needs of our neighborhood, it will probably remain for years to come.

## **8. The Arts and Sports – the Great Equalizer**

**Having a good team experience can be transformative.** I wouldn't know personally, because I was always the kid who missed the ball and never got picked for a team, but from what I observe, kids who are completely alienated from all other aspects of school often come alive, and do better academically, when they start playing soccer or basketball or whatever is offered.

I am indebted to my high school drama program for a similar experience of working hard with other people to give a good performance; I was cast in two of



our musicals. Memorizing hundreds of lines, singing my heart out, dancing the tango with a rose between my teeth – these experiences transformed me from a super-shy wallflower to a confident graduate ready to take on journalism school. **The tragedy of many city neighborhoods is that their stressed school districts lack the resources to offer much in sports or the arts** – the two areas that give people so much pleasure and provide such important outlets for



energy and creativity.

**That's why I'm so grateful that our church, set in an urban neighborhood of Cincinnati, has a dance and choir program for children. One of our members also offers affordable karate classes and another family coaches girls' soccer at the local elementary school. I've also used**

**drama often in our children's ministry.** It can drive you nuts to try to rehearse with a group that has even one undisciplined kid, let alone two, four or six of them, but even then, it pays off.

Last year, when I started pulling together simple sketches with our fourth through sixth grade Sunday night gathering, I was appalled at how the kids behaved.

They would chat with each other right onstage when I was directing other kids, they would sit on the stage when they got tired of standing, they would argue over who got the biggest parts. Once, a kid came up and asked me a random question while I was narrating in a performance to parents. They just didn't get stage etiquette. Behavior that I assumed was instinctive had to be taught step by step.

But what helpful behavior for them to learn! **They grew in confidence, in patience, in focus, in body awareness, in timing, in their abilities to pick up social cues.**



A Friends of the Groom theater workshop

By sponsoring sports teams and offering arts training and experiences, churches can accomplish several goals. **It's an outreach opportunity**, drawing in people who may not otherwise get involved with a church. **It builds relationship**. One practice or rehearsal binds people together faster than months of just sitting with one another in classes or worship.

And in the case of the arts, **it contributes directly to the quality of the church's educational and worship experiences**. We need people who can sing well, play instruments well, dance well, act well and make beautiful visual art or we're not going to be able to illuminate spiritual truth the way our culture needs us to.

**Best of all, in a performing group or a sports team, all the things that so often divide people - race, class, age - those things fade into the background as everyone works together on the task at hand.**

## **9. The Agony and Ecstasy of Church Camp**

**For years, summer camp was a reliably idyllic experience for the kids at our church.** We always went to some awesome facility where kids could swim, boat, run around, eat s'mores around campfires, have raucous worship and animated teaching, sleep in cabins and practice minimal personal hygiene. **Then we started inviting kids from the local school and surrounding neighborhood, reaching beyond the crowd we'd all raised to share the same values and good behavior.**



**The first year we did this, it was rough.** We took on more needy kids than we could supervise well. We had fights, we had kids refusing to do activities, we had kids from tough home environments acting out like crazy, especially on the last day of camp.

My personal low point came on our last morning, helplessly watching an eight year old leap into one of the camp staff's golf carts and drive it erratically around the cars of parents who had come to pick up their kids. It was one of those moments when seconds felt like minutes.

**We felt pretty beat up after that camp** – physically, emotionally, spiritually. What had always been a high point of the year for adult volunteers became something that some of us needed to recover from.

**But Jesus didn't say, "Go create wonderful experiences for your children in safe and sheltered environments."** He said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel,... teaching them to observe everything I've commanded you." Summer camp is a superb opportunity to carry out that commission with children and teenagers. So we didn't give up. **We pulled back and regrouped, but we didn't give up.**



**Here's what we do differently** to make camp a good experience for children from different backgrounds:

**Set up high staff to camper ratios that ensure activities can go on while other leaders are free to trouble shoot rebellious**



**behavior and emotional melt-downs.** In the past, we had two teenagers in cabins with eight or ten kids. Now we have an experienced and spiritually mature adult in every cabin too. We also have an extra staff person in any cabin with a kid who has a disability like autism or a history of behavior issues. We have always had a nurse on site, now we have a mental health counselor too. Even if it means turning some kids away, we are committed to keeping enough staff per camper to ensure that all kids are well supervised and cared for.

**We offer summer camp as a privilege for those who have behaved well** during the school year. and reserve the right to refuse children who have been repeatedly defiant or destructive.

**We have few rules, but they are clear and consistently enforced.** We require parents or guardians to sign a form agreeing to the rules and consequences for breaking them. **Also, we require families who get scholarships to pay \$20, so the experience is not taken for granted.**

These changes have kept the atmosphere positive most of the time. The healthiest environment is a mix of rich and poor kids of different races with enough loving, mature leaders to set the tone. Put that together with worship, fun things to do and the beauty of nature, and camp is as close to heaven as it gets.



## 10 Ways for Churches to Love City Kids

*I think many urban churches need to cross cultures and classes and ages. I've visited a lot of mainline churches in urban areas struggling with aging, declining membership. Often they are predominantly white and middle or upper class. Often they are in neighborhoods where many people are not white and may be poor. The challenge to these churches is to become parish churches for the people who live right around them, and it may be as challenging as going with a mission organization to another continent. So be it. God has put us here for such a time as this.*



**Most people who become Christians do so when they're children or teenagers. So kid-focused ministry makes sense.** It's a joy to witness the group that shows up for youth group at our church on Sunday nights. This is our first group that has integrated black and white, rich and poor, for a sustained period of time. These kids are playing games, talking and praying together. Those who have committed to following Christ work together as interns in our summer programs. **I would not have been able to imagine this even ten years ago.** There is so much transforming power in Christian community. Even a struggling little church full of people over 60 can change the future for the kids in their neighborhood. So in summary, here are some ideas for reaching out to urban kids:

**Go where the need is.** In a post-Christian culture we can't just do things inside our church walls and expect people to come. We need to take our

ministries out into the schools, libraries, preschools, community centers, day cares and playgrounds.

**Don't be afraid of differences.** Connect with minorities. Wade into poverty. Welcome people who dress funny. Do not fear other languages, multiple piercings, bizarre tattoos, kids who come only for the food, or anyone who does not yet believe in Jesus.



**Consider tutoring at a struggling school.** In after-school programs, it's legal to use the Bible as a text.

**Consider throwing a free party for the neighborhood,** outside in the summer time. Include free food and water, and think of ways for people to meet, have fun, get into conversations, and draw closer to God.

**Consider becoming a foster parent** or providing help to other foster parents.

**Consider helping a single mom in your community to raise her family.**

One older man in our congregation did this, and his love transformed an extended family.

**Consider hosting a preschool or day care at your church.**

**Find ways for artistic members to pass on their gifts to children,** with free or reduced cost lessons, classes, mentoring relationships, or by leading dance teams, drama groups, bands, or teams of visual and production artists.

**Find ways for athletic members to pass on their gifts,** by starting teams, coaching existing teams, sponsoring teams or passing on skills in free or reduced cost lessons.

**Provide church camp for children of the neighborhood** as well children within the church, and sponsor the kids who can't afford it. If you don't have camp, partner with a camping ministry to send a few kids there.

**There is a big harvest of children longing for love and truth, in every city.** Sometimes people doubt whether they are qualified, or 'fun' enough to work with kids. I say, if you can pass a criminal background check and you've got a pulse, find at least one kid to help.