



HOW TO...

create welcoming spaces becoming an FTD-Friendly Church

Sikunye seeks to equip and support churches to care for families in the First Thousand Days (FTD). This reflection is part of a range of Lunchtime Conversations hosted by Sikunye, aimed at equipping churches to become FTD-Friendly.

Listen to audio recording [here](#)

Watch the video recording [here](#)

Psalm 62:5-8

"Yes, I must find my rest in God. He is the God who gives me hope. It is surely true that he is my rock and the God who saves me. He is like a fort to me, so I will always be secure. I depend on God to save me and to honor me. He is my mighty rock and my place of safety. Trust in him at all times, you people. Tell him all your troubles. God is our place of safety."

how do you create a warm, welcoming, safe space?

FTD-Friendly Churches are seeking to enable loving connections by creating warm and welcoming spaces. This is less about the physical space and more about how moms and dads feel when they are in a church meeting or group setting like a mom's group or bible study.

A good question to ask is: *Is our church a place where moms, dads and families love to come to each week?* Is it a space where they feel seen, heard, loved and safe? or do they feel judged, shamed and alone? Do they feel both emotionally and physical safe in this setting?



As you will be aware, pregnancy and birth bring great change to individuals and families. As a pastor, you may have experienced families leaving the church community for a few years, after their child is born. This may be because they do not experience church as being welcoming and embracing of new families. They may feel judged if they arrive to meetings late, struggling to get a young baby ready for church.

Members of your congregation who are new to the stage of the First Thousand Days (FTD), may be wondering: is my church going to be 'with me' as I go through this new stage? Will they support me? Will I still feel like I belong here? Will it be 'worth it' to come to church with a very young baby, or will it simply be better to stay at home? Will I be merely tolerated, or embraced in this community now? If my baby cries in a meeting, will I be judged?

Then there are also people in the FTD season who visit your congregation and looking whether your community of faith is a place where they are seen, valued and engaged.

In different ways, churches communicate whether families and children are welcome, valued and integral to the community. This is not only the pastor, but the typical congregant's engagement with families. This guide will help to inform some things to explore in your context that can be used to most effectively create a warm, supportive environment for families in the FTD.

To make your church warm and welcoming for families in FTD you need to look at:

- **the physical space** (the building where you have church gatherings)
- **the people** (your congregation)



the place



the people

the physical space

These places and spaces send a message to people about what you believe about families and young children. Have you thought about:

- What can you do to make your church venue more FTD-friendly?
- How can you make it simpler / easier for families with young children?
- If you have a space where mothers are breastfeeding, or a separate place where parents can take care of very noisy children, what is that place like? Is it comfortable? Is there a changing mat or some water? Consider using the back row of seats for breastfeeding and nappy changing so mom and dad are still able to listen to the sermon
- Put up some pictures up about the importance of the FTD and declaring that your church is FTD-friendly (like the Sikunye posters)
- You can't always change the size and shape of your church but you can do things that show mom & dad you are thinking of them, like if there are stairs have someone who will help mom carry a pushchair up the stairs
- Use your venue during the week to be a safe place where caregivers can meet during the week
- How can you make children safe in your church?

what are the key ingredients for physical safety?

Is this a safe environment for mom or dad to bring their baby? Is it safe for children? Is enough being done protect young families from harm? Do parents feel safe to come to this venue? What must be improved to help them feel safe? Walk through your venue with a view to see what is potentially harmful to a young child. What are the things that could be improved to increase safety? Here are some ideas:

- Implement a **Child Protection Policy** in your church. Ensure that all leaders and volunteers are aware of how to safeguard and protect children in your church. For more information on developing a Child Protection Policy contact [Connect Network](#) or [look at this resource](#)
- Remove any **child hazards** in your venue. Look for things like: covering all electrical plug points, buckets of water, sharp objects, any cleaning or poisonous materials that are in reach of children.
- Check if all the **toys and other materials** used in room or venue are safe for babies and toddlers.

- **Check your security measures.** Ensure doors / gates are closed or have a volunteer at entrances – to protect children inside and watch that children are not unaccompanied or are able to leave without their parents.
- **Practice good hygiene** – including following all Covid regulations like social distancing, wearing masks and using hand sanitizer.

the people

No matter how nice your meeting space is, people get the message from the comments, the looks, the people when they walk into the church. How is your church welcoming families in FTD?

- What practices do you currently use to welcome people? Ushers? Greeters at the door? Consider asking them to look for families in FTD to welcome them as they come in or offer to carry any baby bags
- Have someone tasked with looking for families with very young children to say “hi, how can I help you?” so they feel seen and welcomed
- Welcome from the pulpit – include FTD in your announcements and let moms and dad know they are welcomed
- Celebrate life. Take opportunities to celebrate new life. Announce pregnancies and births (with permission), pray for families publicly at key milestones, use baby dedications or Christenings to communicate key beliefs, hold baby showers to bless new families. And use these times to bring awareness to your congregation and show love and care. [Look at the resource here](#)
- Make a moment to make parents feel seen e.g. Mothers & Father’s Day

Think about families that might feel a bit embarrassed coming to church. Not confident. Worried about what people will say, such as a single mom, teenage parent, caregiver with a very noisy child.

- Does your congregation welcome them in?
- What can you do to help them overcome that fear?
- When a baby cries, encourage your congregation not to scold mom and make her feel unwelcome. Ask someone to help mom soothe baby
- Model it: show your congregation how to respond to a crying baby by saying “you are welcome here even if baby is making a noise”
- Find someone with the spiritual gifts of welcoming families in FTD that might be ashamed to come to church

- Or have a mid-week meeting for these families. One church said the teens feel too shamed to come to church on Sunday - so they created a welcoming space mid-week for them to meet and get support and teaching. Depending on the context/cultural aspects of the church you may need to think of other ideas for creating a welcoming safe space for this group of parents.

remember: to talk to parents to see what it is like attending a church meeting. Keep asking, listening and learning. Especially parents who were regularly attending but have stopped coming for a while.

what are the key ingredients for emotional safety?

You can create a warm welcoming space in any space – small church, big church, classroom, home. It is less about the physical space and more about the feel and thoughtfulness that has gone into 'seeing' mom and 'seeing' dad.

- **Warm, friendly welcome at the door.** Have a congregant serve by greeting and hosting families as they arrive. Leaders within the church can also serve in this way to acknowledge moms and dads.
- **Offer help** like showing moms and dads where they can sit or where the changing mat is or to carry something. Make them feel comfortable and at ease.
- **Connect with families** like being available after the service to hear how they are really doing.
- **Ask mom and dad, "How are you doing?"** Don't only focus on baby.
- **Smile!** Use a warm, friendly facial expression. Smile with your eyes when behind a face mask.
- **Positive, encouraging words** – 'so good to see you today, you are looking wonderful'
- **Acknowledge families or celebrate key moments** from the front of the church like announcing pregnancies or new birth/babies
- Sending birthday **cards, letters, or pictures.**

It is important to recognise there is no prescribed way to do this. Ask parents what would help them to feel emotionally welcomed and safe. Take into consideration your context, like the size of your venue and the cultural practices in your church. This might include working towards changing the perceptions or attitudes of the congregation towards babies, young children, and nursing mothers as well as the role fathers play in caring for their little ones.

lead with leaders

Building communities that are warm and welcoming for families in the FTD is something that is not only taught. It is caught. Congregants will observe the behaviour of the leaders to determine what is a priority and what is not.

the pastor

As a pastor, you have a unique role to play in helping people feel seen, embraced and welcomed. Your culture, congregation and capacity will influence how you can personally lead in this space. These are ideas to explore as you discern how you can personally welcome people.

As the pastor, you model something of the heart of the church towards children and families. Your response to a crying baby in the middle of a sermon is observed. They are listening to sermons and if they connect faith to parenting and recognise the unique challenges and opportunities of young lives. Families observe your interaction with new parents and caregivers.

After hearing Sikunye share the role of the church in the First Thousand Days, a pastor decided to wait at the entrance to his church venue as the service started. This helped him to welcome everyone and observe a family in the FTD arriving late to get into the church meeting. He could see them rushing and had the chance to either scold them for being late, or to warmly encourage them. He chose to say, "Well done for getting here. I know it is hard work in this stage of life. Welcome!" The family were visibly relieved and admitted they had been out of Sunday meetings for a while, as they couldn't quite get out the house on time to get to church. They felt welcomed and acknowledged.

When possible, seek out families that are in the FTD. Congratulating families in person who have recently shared their pregnancy / birth goes a long way in helping them feel seen. You can keep in touch with them through the pregnancy and, if possible, visit the family when baby has arrived. Sending personal messages to families also helps them to feel that they are part of the congregation.

what your leaders can do

As passionate as the pastor, priest or elder is, the range of leaders within the congregation have an important role to play in welcoming families. Be sure to lead your leaders in the importance of the role of the church in the FTD. In this way, there is a broader group of people looking out for families who may feel disconnected during this time and end up dropping out of the very community that can provide support to them.

If you have smaller mid-week gatherings (like bible studies, life groups, small groups etc), you have a great opportunity for practical support around families. In these groups, there exists a smaller group of people who can pray for, care for, visit, support, babysit older siblings, encourage and stand with families in this space. Ignite a passion for this stage of life within these group leaders, so that they can be a key role player in providing the necessary care and support.

If you have pastoral carers, counsellors or specialised groups that meet, encourage them to be looking out for families, when necessary. Some families do require specialized support.

grow your ministries

In addition to creating a warm and welcoming space for families, there are specific ministries that can be formed to intentionally draw in, care for and support families in the FTD. You may have ministries already aimed at families in the FTD. Kids ministries, parenting courses and so on. Consider how you can grow their impact and reach. This may involve new training to the people serving, utilising new material, learning from other churches doing similar ministries etc.

Knowing your context, you may recognise that you can start new ministries serving those families in the FTD. This could be based on Sikunye's training, forming a mom's group, a dad's ministry, ministries to younger children etc.

Knowing that there are specific ministries for families in this unique stage of life sends a strong message about families being welcome. Even simply announcing them to the broader congregation helps those outside of the FTD recognize their church's heart and passion for people in this stage of life.

use your space

You may have a space in which families with very young children can be gathering during the Sunday meetings. Many young children can't sit still or quietly through a whole adult meeting but find a space that can be used for moms and dads to play with baby, change nappy, breastfeed or put baby to sleep – but are still part of the service – to ensure families feel like they are embraced and not merely tolerated in the meetings.

A space for moms to breastfeed is also something to explore. Depending on cultural practices, it may serve well that moms can have a private space to breastfeed during meetings. We know people want/desire a breastfeeding room but we know it is not always possible – but even if you do not have a space, how do you make mom feel comfortable, seen, heard and able to make the decision that she wants to breastfeed in public by making it accepted in your church, or if she will go out to feed baby.

- Firstly to create a church that is welcoming to breastfeeding moms – it is about the people. You do not need a special room for breastfeeding. It is about raising awareness to the importance of breastfeeding; it is about saying that as a church you welcome breastfeeding in your space – perhaps it is having a chair at the back of the venue for mom to sit and feed baby – or it is having posters encouraging exclusive breastfeeding
- As the pastor you need to sensitise – so make your congregation aware of breastfeeding and how important it is and how their looks and comments can make a mom feel she cannot BF in the church. So, the message you want to send to moms and dads, your congregants need to be saying the same thing. You can speak about the myths around breastfeeding, the importance of breastfeeding in making sure every child receives adequate nutrition.
- If you see mom going outside to breastfeed – that is ok – you can still make her feel welcomed by simply going and asking her if she is comfortable or if you could get something for her. Maybe bring her a chair or a blanket to sit on. Or a glass of water to drink as BF moms need to drink a lot of water. Have someone who is responsible to go check on moms outside.
- Some churches have used the back row of their chairs to make a space for moms and dads to be able to sit and feed baby or change nappies. Others have put a curtain up for mom to sit behind and breastfeed but still be part of the service.

- You can have someone be responsible for giving good and reliable information to the mom about where she can get breastfeeding support from if she is struggling to breastfeed.
- Can include posters/ signs that show where can breastfeed, think about the wording – we welcome breastfeeding mothers – there is a space available if you would like to use it.
- Look at what you call the room so that it does not make dad or caregivers who are not breastfeeding feel excluded e.g. “parents” room or “tiny tots room”

There are a range of things that model and communicate whether families in the FTD are welcome in your church community. We encourage you to explore what current practices and attitudes are and discern what you can start doing, stop doing or change in order to lead your congregation to being a place that warmly embraces, supports and welcomes families in the First Thousand Days.

