

Dean Phillip asked me to talk about my vocation.

I have been on such an amazing journey that it is hard to know where to begin. On my journey of faith, I have been called with the love of God to work with families with children and youth. I think often in the church we view family and children's ministry as a place for training to get ready to step up for real ministry. But actually, I think this is the real future for ministry and a true vocational calling. Families, youth and children are the future of our church and often today we are learning to minister to them a little bit differently than the traditional churches used to.

In the Gospels, Jesus acknowledged the immense value of children. In Jesus' culture, children tended to be ignored or devalued, but he made it clear that he viewed children as people with great value in the sight of God. Jesus reached out to children, welcoming them into his presence and blessing them (Matthew 19:14-15).

Very early on, when I first became a Christian, I had always had a heart of prayer for children and their families. Even now after many years of ministry I ask the same question: How can we reach out with Jesus' love to bless children and their families, in our homes, neighborhoods, churches and communities?

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is John 13:34-35. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." We are called to love each other - unconditionally.

I have been so blessed to have worked in with families, youth and children in many different countries and circumstances. In Romania I worked with abandoned babies with HIV and AIDS. I also worked with children who live on the streets and in the sewers of Bucharest. My time in Romania brought me to question my faith. I asked, "How can the God, whose great unconditional love I had experienced, I had been transformed and felt his presence, bring pain and suffering to these little people".

The love of one very beloved child of God spoke to me through her death. In the midst of sadness and grief I felt God's presence, strength and love. God showed me through the death of one precious little girl, that the greatest healing in life, is life with Jesus Christ either in heaven or here on earth. For these babies, the greatest healing was to be with Jesus. This was the beginning of an important part of my ministry in understanding God's unconditional love for all children.

My husband and I moved to North Wales, and I studied at Chester University as a youth worker and worked with young people with eating disorders. I also developed a program to support young mums to go back school. I helped develop Minnows, which was one of the first Messy churches, and developed a rural youth program for kids who were often isolated. When our oldest child Lulu turned 6 and Joshi was 3 we moved to Australia.

In Australia I had the blessing to work as a family minister at Holy Covenant and St James, where we still have many close friends. Then I worked as the Cross-cultural minister at St Philips with the African Dinka Community. This opened my eyes to the struggles of refugee families and opened my heart to walk an amazing four-year journey with a very special community of faith.

Alongside this work I work as a Scripture Union school chaplain. I love my role as a chaplain in Government schools. I worked in Black Mountain school for 5 years journeying with families and youth affected by disability. Chaplaincy at Black Mountain brought so many challenges but also so many blessings.

With the support of Anne Ranse and Jane Robinson and the others in the diocese, I recognised the calling to journey more deeply with the families affected by disability. "For God so loved the world" – sometimes we forget that this means the whole world – not just our little bit of the world, or the parts we like.

All people without exception matter to God! Our worth and value as human beings is not based on what we can do or what we can't do. It's not based on the education we have, how much money we make, the language we have or not, or the shape of our bodies or how we look.

The worth of a human being is rooted in the truth that God loves each and every one of us. He loves all people unconditionally because we are made in HIS image.

According to the Bible a person is not diminished by what they can or can't do, their ability or disability. There is nothing that we do that can make God love us any more or less. We all belong to God by HIS grace. God's love and God's grace are big enough to include all people.

It's because of this idea of inclusion that Embracing Ministries has developed. Through loving and journeying with families who have children and young people with special needs over the last 9 years I have come to realise that all people need the opportunity to experience the love of God and hear the gospel message.

The love of one family brought me to have confidence to listen to God's call, and work more purposefully in the area of inclusion as a servant of God within our diocese.

I journeyed with and supported a family with a child entering palliative care. For a number of years, I visited this little girl frequently at home - bringing activities and songs from school to home. The little girl became very ill and the family asked me to say prayers with her. They were not particularly a Christian family but felt that they wanted someone to acknowledge her and love her in a time that she was so very sick. I sang a blessing to this precious girl, and as I sang she opened her eyes and smiled. She began to get a bit better over the following weeks. It became a routine that I would sing a blessing every time I saw her. I know that this was God's gift for me and for her. The family were astounded by the way their daughter responded when I sang her the blessing. She would smile and open her eyes and really respond and enjoy the love of God at that moment.

A few years later, this precious, little soul passed away. A couple of weeks after the funeral I went to visit the family. I spoke to the little girl's mother, who confided in me that she wished her child had gone to Sunday school. She wished she could have experienced God and heard the stories. She told me that the only times her little girl had attended church was at her Baptism and at her funeral.

I came away from the house with such a heavy heart and soul. I reflected on so many families - how much I had grown to love them and how hard it was for them to go to church. It weighed heavy on my heart. All children, youth and adults regardless of their abilities needed to know that God loves them and to hear the gospel.

I would like to share a part of my journey with Embracing Ministries from the past 18 months through a power point presentation.