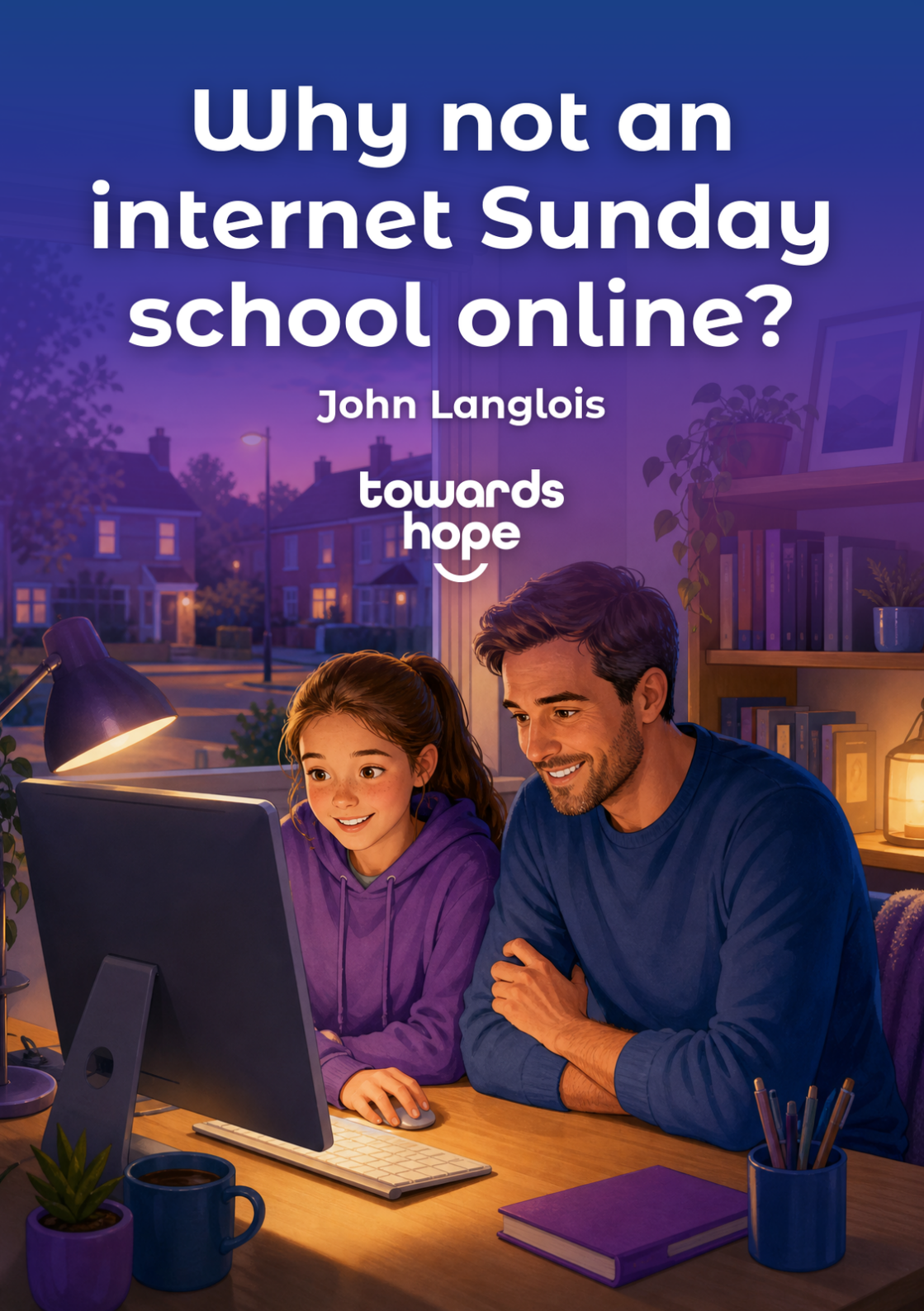
Why not an internet Sunday school online?

John Langlois

towards hope



The future of the church lies with our children. The recently published survey of U.K. church attendance would lead us to believe that the church is in its death throes. Not only do the general statistics make depressing reading but the statistics of children attending church and Sunday School are even worse. They are little less than disastrous. By 2020, with current church members having died off, there wont be any church left in the UK, in spite of the triumphalism we find in some churches.

Yet, is it a foregone conclusion? If we continue as we are doing the answer is yes. As far as children's work is concerned there are valiant workers who faithfully week by week, year by year, maintain Sunday schools, children's clubs and junior church, as well as the well-known uniformed organisations. But they are only reaching very limited numbers. The vast majority of children in the UK have no opportunity of finding out who Jesus is or what he taught.

The whole of society is changing. This does not help us. In the secular world organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to attract members. Local branches of a whole range of men's, women's and mixed organisations are struggling to keep going. Suddenly we are in a whole new era. Welcome to a new millennium. Nothing will be the same again. Except God, of course. He is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

Back in 1760 things were not much better than they are today - in fact in many ways much worse. The church was a shadow of what it should have been. Children were not instructed in the Christian faith in any great numbers, nor were they getting educated at all.

One man, Robert Raikes, a newspaper proprietor, decided to do something about it. It was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Families were beginning to migrate to the towns. Parents and children were drafted into work. Parents and children worked long days and long weeks, twelve hours a day, six days a week. There was no opportunity or time for education for the children. They were stuck on a treadmill from which there was no escape from poverty and deprivation, both physically and spiritually.

One day Robert was walking down the road in his home down of Gloucester. He remarked on the ragged children playing in the street causing a lot of noise and trouble. He was told it was even worse on Sundays (the children's day off) when the street was full of children cursing and swearing.

The idea struck Robert: "If they can't go to school Monday to Saturday because they are working, how about laying on a school for them on Sundays?" (Not a "Sunday School" as we know it, but a school on Sundays). He laid in classes on reading, writing and arithmetic, plus attendance at the local church, i.e. a wholistic education, meeting a broad spectrum of the children's needs, not just their spiritual welfare. He didn’t just invite children to "come to church" - he went out to them where they were and met their actual needs, as Jesus would have done. He did not just preach to them.

Where are our children now? Not in the church, that's for sure. They are possibly stuck in front of a television set, watching hours of substandard, and often dubious, programmes every day. The church cannot do much, if anything, to influence the content of what they watch. Each year the moral standard drops.

In the past few years it has become even worse because now our children have more than television. They are stuck in front of their home computers with access to Web sites which are anything but morally wholesome. A whole range of offensive pornographic material is available to them. And there are groups specifically targeting children for immoral purposes. It is disastrous to the moral welfare of a whole new generation of children.

But, unlike television, where the church can do little to influence the content of programmes, there is something that we can do about the content of material on the Internet. How about the modern equivalent of Robert Raikes' Sunday School? It would not be limited to Sundays, because that is neither desirable nor necessary. The Internet is a 24/365 service, that means it's there 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's a medium on which anyone can post websites - for good or evil - even the church. Yes, we can do what Robert Raikes did. We can go where the children are and do something about it.

Robert started in Gloucester, but before long through publicity in his local newspaper Sunday Schools were popping up all over the country. John Wesley said in his travels "I find these schools spring up wherever I go". The transformation of Britain had begun, and it was to continue right through the 19th Century. It would transform the spiritual condition of the country.

Today we can do the same, but vastly quicker and vastly more extensive. The possibilities are endless. Today national boundaries are irrelevant. You just click your computer mouse and you're there, anywhere in the world.

We in Britain have a great opportunity. Ours is a small island whose native language has become the number one communications medium in the world. Just in the past few weeks various states in Europe have decided that English will be taught in the schools from the age of 6 instead of 11. They have acknowledged that English is the world language of the future. The same is happening all over the world. Children in almost every country want to learn English. It is the "cool" thing to do. And all they need to do is click on a screen. They need to have access to wholesome material.

What we need is an Internet "Sunday School" where children can click and join virtual "Sunday School" classes, at any time of the day of night. Churches and para-church agencies can post Christian education material on interactive websites and "Sunday School" teachers can be on hand to teach and assist.

The online "classes" in cyberspace can be just as interactive as physical ones. This can be very useful to help children with their problems. There are many children in the world who are abused and are desperately unhappy with their lot. In other cases their parents may have divorced and the children are feeling unwanted and in-the-way. The pressures of life may be just too much. At the same time they are confused with the many different (im)moral messages being bombarded across their screen.

They need to talk. What better way than to let them discuss their problems with children of their own age in their online "cyberclass", with teachers on hand to discuss, guide and pray with them? The "classes" can be in any language, of course, not only English. And because cyberspace makes national frontiers

irrelevant "closed countries" are no longer closed. The Internet has no problem with visas.

John Wesley said "The world is my parish". Now perhaps for the first time with the frontier-less world of cyberspace as our "parish" there is no reason why there should not be 100 million children enrolled in an Internet "Jesus Discovery Forum". What an opportunity for the Gospel. All it takes is vision and know-how to put it all in place. Naturally it will be far from easy. As well as a method of delivery there will have to be a great deal of discipline in keeping it under control, so that unscrupulous people cannot get in on the act and be wolves in sheep's clothing.

Let's start and see how the Lord leads. I have reserved a domain name and web site called simply "jesus.je". Just click and seek on www.jesus.je and see for yourself. Would you like to have your own Internet children's work? If you are interested contact me on john @langlois.com and indicate your interest. We need a whole range of ministry to the young. And why limit it to the young? There is no reason why adult "classes" should not be included, like the American all-age Sunday School. May be 100 million is too low a figure. May be God has invented the Internet for a great ingathering of souls in the last time as he always intended.

At the present rate, with the present methods, the church in the UK will be dead in 20 years. Have we got anything to lose in using new tools that God has given to us tools which others are using at the present time to corrupt the young.

Let's give it a try.

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15th March 2001