

Super Sunday School!

By Philippa Simou

Earlier this month I was privileged to attend part of a conference held in Cyprus hosted by the International Development Charity 'World Vision'. The purpose of the conference was to offer training and support to those who are involved in training others to teach an Orthodox 'Sunday School' programme called 'The Youth Bible Curriculum' (YBC) in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. I have taught Sunday School for several years in some of our Churches here in the UK, and am currently a Secondary School teacher in Hertfordshire. I can honestly say that I have never witnessed such a level of professionalism, dedication and commitment to the spiritual development of our Orthodox young people across the world. I was truly humbled in the presence of these individuals who give so generously of their time and talent.

The YBC is a series of easy-to-read and interactive study materials for children as young as six through to youth aged 17 that encourages a love of learning about the beliefs and practices of our Church. I learnt how YBC is helping the Church to engage children and youth in a structured, interactive and fun environment, imparting lessons and values that impact children's everyday lives. Positive relationships and attitudes fostered in the 'classroom' can help protect children from being drawn into the wrong crowd or being tempted into 'risky behaviour'. I spoke at length with Katerina from Albania about the enormous benefits she has witnessed since delivering YBC in her community. She said one of the key benefits is how children and their families have been able to overcome the legacy of suspicion and develop trusting relationships with one another and the Church community. Roubina shared with me the healing that YBC is bringing to individuals in Lebanon, which has so often and so recently been the scene of violent conflict.

His Holiness, Patriarch Bartholomew gave his blessing to the YBC project some time ago, and since then it has gone from strength to strength. YBC is currently distributed among Orthodox Churches in seven countries within the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region. These include Armenia, Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia & Montenegro, Georgia, Lebanon and Romania, with the endorsement of the Head of the Church in each country. The great advantage of this particular programme is that it is contextualised by each jurisdiction, so for example the Romanian Version reflects the specific practises of the Romanian Orthodox Church in terms of Iconography, Saints and music, allowing the children, Families and clergy to fully identify with the material.

I was particularly delighted to see how the YBC is closely linked with 'Diakonia' – the Orthodox term for supporting the poor and oppressed by pursuing justice, which has historically been central to our faith. This 'diakonia', once suppressed under communism, is today seeing a revival across Orthodox countries. As well as learning about the beliefs and practices of our Church, child centred issues such as developing and nurturing good relationships; protecting human rights; promotion of peace within families, communities and across nations; care of the earth and stewardship of the environment are all an intrinsic part of the Curriculum.

The heart of YBC really supports the teaching of our Lord in His command "Let the little children come unto me ... for the kingdom of Heaven belongs to them"

If you would like further information about this project or to know how you could support this type of work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me via e mail: plsimou@yahoo.co.uk