



The Rev Canon Bro David Jardine reading with nine-year-old Katie at Forthriver Primary School, Belfast.

'TIME TO READ' IN SHANKILL, BELFAST

In the Shankill area of Belfast, retired professionals are volunteering their time to help expand the opportunities of children attending local schools.

Equipping for Life is an initiative spearheaded by the Rev Canon Bro David Jardine, former director of Divine Healing Ministries.

Each week during term time, up to 65 volunteers give up their time to read with 180 boys and girls in the classroom. "The children are very enthusiastic," said David. "We have volunteer tutors coming from as far away as Holywood and Lisburn.

"Although Equipping for Life was officially launched on June 21, we have been working in schools since October 2018. We are now in 12 primary schools in this area. We are pushing an open door every time. When we started, we had no divine right to think we would be in all the schools in the greater Shankill area within a year, and yet we are.

"The head teachers have been very thankful. One said 'We have a lot of talented pupils in the school, but whether they fulfil their potential or not is determined by what is going on at home.'"

To this end, Equipping for Life is proposing to introduce reading tuition for parents, so they are better able to read with their children.

"We need to change the

motivation of the people in the Shankill," David said. "In the past, Protestants had a good chance of getting a job in heavy industry, and some may not have fully valued education. But those heavy industries are no longer here.

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My mum has a library of books in the loft and I go up and read for hours!
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"If we can get parents to accept what we have to offer, they would be in a much stronger position to read with their children. I see this as key."

David has ambitions to extend Equipping for Life into other areas, including Carrickfergus, Lisburn, Downpatrick and south Belfast. The project is also hoping to introduce homework clubs so children have a quiet place to work, and is working with Impact Training, an established organisation, to help young people and adults increase their employability.

David, a member of the Anglican Society of St Francis, said: "I founded Divine Healing Ministries in

1993 and worked there for 25 years. When I stepped aside I thought I might have a much more leisurely time, but no, the Lord picked me to do this work in the Shankill Road."

The Gazette called in to Forthriver Primary School during an Equipping for Life session. David and nine-year-old Katie are working together. "I love reading," Katie says. "My mum has a library of books in the loft and I go up and read for hours. It's a bit creepy at night-time though."

"When I was in P5 I was really struggling with my reading. When my teacher told me about Time to Read, I thought it might help me improve, and it has."

David explains that every tutor says a prayer before reading. It includes the words 'I bless you in the name of Jesus that he will help you to learn, to play well and to make good friends so that you will be happy at school every day.'

Eileen Fell from Derriaghy Parish volunteers one day a week. "I have grandchildren of my own," she explains. "I thought this was a great opportunity to help people and especially little children."

She is reading with Dakota, who is herself a budding author. "I love reading. I cannot wait to come in here. I know how to read bigger words now," Dakota says.

We leave them to their work...

CONNOR'S BIG WEEKEND

Lisburn Cathedral Chapter, in partnership with Connor youth and children's development officers Christina Baillie and Jill Hamilton, is running weekend of events for children, young people and children's and youth leaders.

This takes place on November 16-17 in St Patrick's, Ballymena, and is jointly funded by Lisburn Cathedral Chapter and the Church of Ireland Orphans and Children's Society.

Events will be led by Bob Hartman along with the English band Inspire, and the Northern Ireland-based Play It By Ear drama group.