



The Changing Nature of UK Children's and Family Ministry during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic brought prolonged and constantly changing restrictions to UK churches from March 2020. These have significantly impacted the nature and practice of ministry amongst children and families. The unstinting efforts, creativity and resilience of children's leaders (salaried and volunteer) across the UK during this unexpected and turbulent time have ensured that children's ministry has remained active in a variety of contexts and settings. Yet much of this ministry activity has had to be reactionary and very responsive to meet immediate needs as they have arisen. Few have had the time and space to reflect on children and family ministry during this time. The *Nurturing Young Faith* Project therefore sought to investigate the ongoing situation in this sector, to aid reflection and facilitate local churches and national organisations in shaping agendas and strategies for the seasons ahead – as the pandemic continues and beyond.

This project explored the impact and changes within this sector between March and November 2020, through zoom interviews with 55 parents, children's leaders, resource providers and regional advisors. Participants were asked about their experiences, frustrations, ongoing challenges, ideas and strategies which had worked well. There were some clear themes and distinct observations which were frequently reported, suggesting emerging patterns that are important to be aware of in order that onward ministry may be most effective in supporting children and families throughout the pandemic and during post-pandemic times. Some key findings and recommendations are presented here, to aid reflection on children and family ministry at both local and national levels.



Key Research Findings

Children's Ministry Activities

- More churches held children's provision online in the second lockdown than the first.
- In many instances, children's ministry has become task-focussed rather than spirituality-focused.
- Local churches are finding the need to contextualise all that they do – it seems that resources are required to be highly bespoke for each setting.
- 75% of participants devised their own activities for online sessions to ensure suitability.
- Many churches reported reduced engagement with families as the pandemic has continued.
- In families where minimal faith activity took place in the home, attendance at church was the primary influence on a child's faith prior to the pandemic. Much concern was expressed for these children if they have not accessed church activities over this nine-month period, and the longer-term consequences of this on their faith journey.
- Alongside this, it is not possible for children's leaders to assume that all children have faith resources in their home, such as access to Bibles.
- There was tension felt by many children's leaders between the pressure to provide entertainment and fun activities versus those which enabled meaningful spiritual encounters.

Children's Ministry Teams

- The majority of children's leaders felt despondent, disillusioned and exhausted from continual changes, demands and restrictions.
- The role of children's leaders has become vastly different. For example, many are finding that the majority of their time is occupied recording and editing videos, rather than carrying out face to face pastoral and discipleship activities.
- 91% of respondents reported a significant reduction of volunteers within their children's ministry teams due to the pandemic. Many felt that these were not temporary losses.
- There was a lot of concern about what the future holds for children and family ministry in the UK, due to reduced volunteer pools and reduced engagement from children and families.

Relationships

- Where relationships between church families were strong pre-pandemic, they had been strengthened. However, where this had not been the case, many church families were very disconnected from one another during the pandemic restrictions.
- Many children's workers felt disconnected from the children in their church community.
- Children often seemed unfamiliar with people from their church family, meaning that faith role models had been dramatically reduced for children.
- There was concern for younger children who now had no experience of being part of a safe, secure faith community during a key time of their emotional and spiritual development.
- As the pandemic continued many churches had prioritised relationship building with children, rather than provision of activities since this met the needs of families most effectively.

The Family Context

- In the majority of cases, adult and children's ministries were operated separately, raising concern that adults no longer see or value children as part of the faith community. Caution was consequently expressed regarding the place of children in church during post-pandemic times.
- Some families reported positive experiences, including quality time together. However, the majority had struggled significantly during the pandemic, mainly due to loss of support networks. This was intensified in families with special needs.
- Churches endeavoured to support families through phone calls, doorstep visits and kindness acts, but found it hard to support effectively due to the restrictions. Furthermore, it was often difficult to support fringe families due to limited contact information and prior relationship.
- There was great disparity in family participation in faith activities in the home context – in some faith was a very prevalent part of family life, but in others it was never mentioned.
- A disconnect was apparent: On one hand many churches believed that parents should be more proactive in faith activities in the home during church closures. However, many parents felt overwhelmed and pressured by the prevailing situation so did not feel the capacity to do so.
- Parents often felt disempowered in faith nurturing due to the pre-pandemic ethos and relationship with church (ie. churches were often viewed as having key responsibility for this).
- Many parents felt ill-equipped for this task. However, efforts to address this during the early stages of the pandemic resulted in parents feeling bombarded with too much information about family faith without any contextualisation, explanation or support.



Recommendations - at National Level

Investment in this Sector

- A shift is required to prioritise and invest more in child-focused ministries rather than prioritising adult-focussed ministry for the longer-term wellbeing of the church. This may mean a shift in strategy and approach, so that if resources and energy are limited, a greater focus is placed on child-serving rather than adult-serving ministry.
- Alongside this shift in focus, there is a need to re-envision and re-inspire adults for children's ministry to significantly expand the volunteer base.
- It is crucial to provide affirmation and encouragement for children's ministry leaders, including reinforcing messages of the importance and value of their ministry.

Focussing on Family

- During these challenging and changing times, there is a need to serve family units rather than adults and children as distinct entities so that their needs are most effectively met.
- There needs to be greater clarity and focus upon the joint responsibility of parents and church in nurturing children's faith.

The Structure of Children's Ministry

- The church must ensure that the voice of children remains an integral part of decisions and activities. This includes ensuring that children feel valued and integrated into the wider church community, rather than segregated into child-only online groups.
- Unspoken perceptions within some churches must be challenged, regarding the role of children's ministry as entertainment rather than fostering meaningful spiritual encounters and wholesome faith formation.
- There is also the need to challenge an understanding that effective children's ministry requires a full programme of big events with large numbers attending. Indeed, during this time of upheaval there is immense value in very small-scale work with children.
- National organisations need to facilitate churches in tailoring materials and activities for their own setting – perhaps providing a tool kit or framework to support children's leaders in doing this, or establish a mentoring or partnership network.



Recommendations - at Local Level

Children's Ministry

- Consider the role and place of children in your church. Evaluate the extent to which children have a voice and feel valued as part of your church community during these pandemic times. Explore how this could be addressed, in order to improve their integration into church life.
- Evaluate your activities to ensure that they are spiritually-focussed and valuable, rather than simply being 'tick-box exercises' or something which you feel pressure to carry out.
- Develop strategies to strengthen relationships of children both with children's leaders and others within their church community.
- Explore ways to both be aware of and cater for children's individual faith journeys, which have become increasingly diverse and polarised during this time. Developing a range of activities to cater for these differences will improve effectiveness of faith nurture at this time.
- Focus on working with smaller groups of children to facilitate this relational work.

Family Ministry

- Consider how your church community could more fully integrate children into church life.
- Focus more on intergenerational activities (services, social activities) to enable families to engage with faith experiences together and facilitate role models of faith within the faith community.
- Evaluate in conjunction with families the understanding within your church regarding roles and responsibilities of parents and the church in supporting the faith formation of children.
- Greater focus is needed on collaboration of the church with families to nurture children's faith in the form of a partnership.
- Churches must listen more to parents and children about their genuine needs so that pastoral care and discipleship may meet their needs most effectively. This is particularly true in families who are different from the 'norm', such as single-parent families or those with additional needs.
- Alongside this, consider whether there are resources or materials which you could provide families with to support in this task, such as Bibles, discussion notes and activities etc. This bespoke approach, according to their context, is much more effective than bombarding them with a vast array of resources which are not specific to their needs.
- Take care not to have unrealistic demands or expectations on parents, but rather ensure that they feel valued, cared for and included.

Conclusion

The rapid and constantly changing response which was required by churches throughout the pandemic has greatly impacted those involved in children and family ministry – both leaders, children and parents. It is critical that careful consideration now takes place at local and national level to establish strategies moving forward to provide some stability and effective support within this sector.

Discussions as part of this research have revealed alarming trends in children and family ministry across the UK, including reduction in volunteers to serve in this way, feelings of separation of children from the church family, and consistent reduced engagement by many families with church activities. In order to retain these younger generations within our churches, reflection is required regarding ministry priorities both locally and nationally. This undoubtedly demands increased investment in child-focused ministry. It is also imperative that UK churches genuinely listen to families regarding their spiritual needs during the pandemic and beyond in order that ministry amongst them may be most effective. Pivotal strands of the onward strategy for this ministry may include increased awareness of the diverse individual faith experiences of children, greater collaboration with parents in nurturing children's faith and a focus on smaller scale relational connections with children and their families.

Ultimately, it is crucial that the church – both locally and nationally are proactive and persuasive in communicating that children are genuinely valued, affirmed and supported within the faith community, however hard this may be within the pandemic restrictions.

About the author

Sarah Holmes is a lecturer of Early Childhood Studies at Liverpool Hope University, UK. She has a range of experience working with children and families in community and local church settings. This experience is combined with her ongoing research projects connected with children's spirituality, Christian faith formation, the influence of family on young children and holistic well-being.

Nurturing Young Faith seeks to disseminate the findings from these research projects, into both academic and mainstream arenas.

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