

Children

- in family, society and the church

CHILDREN IN PERSPECTIVE

The child within

Every adult was once a child. The nature of that child, and its early experience, form the core and foundation of who and what we are as adults. So much of our earliest days are lost to our conscious memory, but they are alive in our emotional and spiritual depths. This child within has often failed to mature and is incarcerated by a pseudo-sophisticated adult exterior and never at peace though often not understanding why. The child and the adult stand together at the heart of the mystery of maturity; they need each other, as we shall see, to express full personhood within the world.

In most primal societies children play a central role within the extended family community. They are given the freedom to enjoy childhood but also carefully prepared for the tasks and responsibilities of maturity. One feels that in the West the child within society is frequently crushed; by materialism rather than relationship, by exclusion from much of adult activity, by media and external pressure to grow up before their time. The very recent notion of a 'teenager' has distorted the natural transition from childhood to maturity. It has severely truncated childhood and created a gulf before adulthood.

We need to rediscover the child within – the child within childhood, the child within society and the child within each one of us – which is the key to both maturity and spirituality.

Facts and figures

Children must not and cannot be marginalised. They make up a huge proportion of the world population and yet are the most vulnerable to the world's problems:

- There are 1.9 billion children below 15 years old globally (27% of population)
- 3.1 million children die from hunger every year
- 5.9 million children die before they reach the age of 5 years old, but the rate is decreasing
- About 21 children under the age of 5 years old die every minute
- It is estimated that there are some 100 million street children globally¹
- In 2013-14 there were 3.7 million children living in poverty in the UK (that would be 9 in every classroom of 30 children)²
- It is estimated some children (even as young as 4 years old) make up to 100,000 a year by begging on Britain's streets.³
- For the last 30 years an average of 73 under 16 year olds have been murdered each year⁴

¹ These facts have been gleaned from various website sources in 2016

² Child Poverty Action Group 2015

³ BBC Panorama 2011



The paradigm

We have chosen to study children for two clear reasons:

- **First:** we want to study an example of a particular interest group within the church as an illustration of the specific needs such a group may have, and the attitudes and responses we should have towards them. Because of the constraints of our study programme we are not able to look at more than one of these groups. We could, of course, have chosen from a range of such groups: the elderly, ethnic minorities, youth, singles and others, but we have chosen children because, as we shall see, while their needs are common to other groups, their place within the church is critical for future church development.
- **Second:** it is clear from Scripture, as we shall detail below, that children have a unique place in God's heart. They are a paradigm of entrance into the kingdom of heaven and the attitude Jesus requires of disciples. From the sweep of the biblical story one principle seems quite clear: if you want to find God anywhere you will find him among the poor and among children.

GOD AND CHILDREN

Open to one another

'Children are a gift from the Lord.'
(Ps 127:3)

It has been significantly stated that 'no word in the Bible contains so much of God's goodness and human happiness as is found wrapped up in the word "child"'.⁵ Throughout Scripture children were always acknowledged as gifts from God; they are never spoken of as personal possessions.

'You whose glory above the heavens
is chanted by the mouths of babes and infants ...'
(Ps 8:1-2)

'Blow the trumpet on mount Zion;
give orders for a fast and call an assembly!
Gather the people together;
prepare them for a sacred meeting;
bring the old people;
gather the children , even the nursing infants
... I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ...'
(Joel 2:15-16, 28)

⁴ Chanel Four TV 2012

⁵ G M Mackie article 'Children' in *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* , vol. 1, 1898 p. 381.



The joyful, though unintelligible, gurgling of a young baby brings glory to God. When the covenant community assemble even the infants have their place, and in the new covenant the children along with all the others, including their parents, will experience the overwhelming of the Spirit of prophesy. Even in the first covenant Samuel heard God and prophesied (1Sam 3), and we see David as a boy being used by God (1Sam 17:28). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we see, and shall see, God and children wide open to each other with remarkable results.

Receiving children

One of the most remarkable aspects of the incarnation is the fact that the almighty God could become a newborn baby without his deity being in any way diminished. This is not simply an affirmation of humanity but also of childhood. The childhood of Jesus itself is remarkable, on the one hand for its naturalness, while at the same time for its uniqueness.⁶

In maturity, Jesus showed astonishing sensitivity to and awareness of children. He was neither patronising nor sentimental but genuinely affirming. On only three occasions in the Gospels are we told that Jesus was angry; two of them were over the mistreatment of children.

These responses were remarkable enough in a society, like so many, where in practical terms children were marginalised; but this is just the beginning. Jesus continues; he makes a direct connection between the receiving of children and the receiving of himself, and in fact none other than God himself:

‘And he took a child, and put it in the midst of them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mk 9:36-37)

‘At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he stood it in the midst of them, and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles themselves like this child, that person is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for them to have a great millstone fastened around their neck and be drowned in the midst of the sea ... See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 18:1-6, 10)

These are quite astonishing statements. To receive a child in the name of Jesus is to receive Jesus himself, even God himself. In touching a child you are touching the incarnation, you are touching the divine. Here indeed is one of the thrilling mysteries of the

⁶ see Workshop notes on ‘The Incarnation’.



kingdom of God .We are commanded not to despise children; we are actively to receive children, and in fact we are to become like children.

Children and the kingdom

‘And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.’

(Mk 10:13-16; cf. Matt 19:13-15; Lk 18:15-17)

Not only is our response to children a clear sign of our response to Jesus and to God, but children themselves stand in a unique place within the kingdom of God. The kingdom ‘belongs’ to such as them. We have seen above that to enter the kingdom you have to ‘turn and become like children’ (Matt 18:3). The status and character within the kingdom is the humility and greatness of a child (Matt 18:1, 4). Their vulnerability has angelic concern (Matt 18:10) and to violate it will incur divine anger (Matt 18:6) – an indignant anger that Jesus displayed even towards his disciples because of their attitude towards children (Mk 10:13).

We see parents bringing their children to Jesus in hope of a blessing. We see the children themselves attracted to Jesus, for he does not say, ‘Bring them ...’ but, ‘Let them come ...’ And the climax of the episode is Jesus taking them in his arms and, in a unique New Testament phrase, we are told that ‘he blessed them fervently again and again’. Something quite dramatic is happening here. It is clear from the way the story is told in the Gospels that it was a startling experience for the disciples and left an indelible mark upon them.

The words and actions of Jesus combined make a dramatic statement about children and the kingdom of God. It confronts us with a paradox. There is an astonishing innocence and spiritual openness within children and yet they are a part of the human community that is in rebellion against God. What appears clear from Jesus’ statements is that children stand within the kingdom of God until and unless they choose otherwise. As we saw in a garden east of Eden, choice is the key: everyone is confronted with choice and it is the choices of children that will ultimately decide their spiritual direction and destiny. However, Jesus seems to make it clear that in their early years children stand in a place of special blessing.

As we shall see, the home is a crucial factor in how the life pattern of the child unfolds. At the end of the day, it is their choice the direction they take, but it seems clear that in the Hebrew covenant and in the kingdom of God parents should expect their children to grow up in faith. Sadly, it will not always be the case, but it should be the expectation.

Becoming like children

Everything that we have seen so far declares something wonderful about God’s heart for and towards children. We see that children have equal status with adults in the kingdom of



God. But much more than that children themselves are a sign to adults as to God's requirements regarding entrance into the kingdom of God:

'Unless you turn and become like children ,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'
(Matt 18:3)

What does it mean to 'become like children'?:

- *it reminds us that there is something pernicious about 'adulthood'* within our world that destroys the essence of personhood which is uniquely and particularly illustrated in children. Our societies demand a sophistication of adults which is not the product of truth. We wear our so-called maturity like a mask; playing out roles and social stereotypes that rarely reflect who we really are and certainly not what God wants us to be. To 'become like children' requires us to 'turn', 'change', in fact 'repent' and be re-formed in childlikeness.
- *it draws a distinction between 'childishness' and childlikeness'*. Adults are not being asked to become infantile, but rather to become more ingenuous. The transition from childhood to maturity is a subtle one; there are limitations and inhibitions which quite properly are replaced by adulthood. As Paul says, 'When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became mature, I put childish ways behind me' (1Cor 13:11). Becoming childlike will in fact enhance adulthood. Outsiders will be aware that there is some difference; it will be very attractive though it may be hard for them to define it.
- *it declares that in a child there is something primal about personhood.* The way a child looks at the world with wonder, questions, awe and yet confidence is the way a disciple should look at the world. The way a child touches the world with curiosity, excitement, sense of discovery and joy should be the pattern for ourselves. The heart of childlikeness is surely to be found in the blending of innocence and truth; these form the essential foundations of a child's spirituality. There is an emotional and intellectual gentleness and vulnerability coupled with a remarkable honesty and even shrewdness that can be both disarming and terrifying for an adult. This is what God is looking for. Jesus' instructions to his disciples before sending them out was to be, 'Wise as serpents and harmless as doves' (Matt 10:16); this is childlikeness at its heart.

As you read the Gospels you notice language that flows between childhood and maturity when Jesus is speaking about his disciples. The frequent references to 'little ones' are as applicable to his followers as to children; both are included, neither excluded. It is probably unlikely that we will ever fully fathom Jesus' call to 'become like children' because it does touch the epicentre of true personhood. Its haunting simplicity is so profound it constantly draws us back, as a touchstone for our development and a lodestone for our direction.

'At that time Jesus declared,
"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding
and revealed them to infants;
yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."
(Matt 11:25-26; cf. Lk 10:21-22)



CHILDREN AND GOD

How children learn

Children have an innate sense about God, but they also have to learn about God. Understanding how children learn is therefore an important key to understanding the personal and spiritual development of children.

Every person has become who they are because of what they have learnt. When we speak of learning we are talking about the development of the whole person; their intellect, their emotions, their whole being. We are talking about their understanding, their responses, their choices and everything else that makes up developing personhood.

Learning is a life process; in the young child it is almost explosive in its impact, with every sense attuned and the awakening mind absorbing each stimulus and forming patterns of insight and behaviour. But this process continues throughout life and is at the heart of true maturity. Scripture is clear:

‘Wisdom is supreme: therefore get wisdom
though it costs you all you have, get understanding.’
(Prov. 4:7)

If children are shown how to learn, even from negative experiences, they will have the potential to become wise.

The desire to learn is part of the inherent nature of the child, and has the force of an instinct; it appears as powerful as the desire for food or the will for survival. Newborn infants will respond to every stimulus.

We shall illustrate the natural learning processes of children by seeing how they learn to speak. This is not simply a good example; it is a vital one. Acquiring language is not simply gaining the ability to communicate externally; it is essential to integrating a person internally. To a great extent it is language that gives us our inner structure. For that reason an understanding of how speech develops will help us understand a child’s spiritual development as well.

Each child is an individual and the rate of development will vary from child to child, but the pattern and principles of development will be the same in each case. At birth a child cries; at one month they make guttural sounds; at four years you would expect them to be able to hold an intelligible conversation. How does this transformation take place?:

- *Desire to learn* to speak is a strong instinct in young children, given the stimuli they are highly motivated to communicate.
- *Copying parents* is the most significant factor; while a child will not usually speak until it is nine months old, talking to a child from birth is so important as the verbal association and vocabulary is being formed throughout that time.
- *Relationship with parents* is as vital as their verbal stimuli. The time, love and joy shared by the child and parent together is the perfect environment for learning to talk; the interaction is essential: sound without response [e.g. TV] stunts speech. Talking is communication, not mere repetition.



- *Individual attention is essential.* Children need the focus of personal attention; they need to be talked to and read to if they are to become fluent in language. No two children are the same; they will learn at different rates, face different problems, and yet even the most disadvantaged child can make astonishing progress with one-to-one attention.
- *Learning what they hear* may seem obvious, but it is a reminder that the environment is central to learning and development; a French child learns French while a similar Chinese child is learning Chinese; accents and dialects are all the product of their environment.
- *Play and experiment with sounds* is at the heart of learning how to speak; there is the discovery of what sounds it is possible to make with the mouth, and the sheer delight of the fun of running the sounds into one another. The joy of what they sound like and the physical way it feels to make them.
- *Expect mistakes* as learning is a process of discovering what works and does not work, what communicates and what is gibberish; parental guidance helps but 'over-correcting' on the part of parents inhibits the development of language. A child needs space.
- *Clear stages* can be identified in how the child learns to talk; each stage is essential because it forms the foundation upon which the next one will be built:
 - By 9 months the child is usually copying the sounds of the adult
 - By 12 months a child seems to understand sounds have a meaning
- *Adult encouragement* is an essential constant factor; continually stimulating, challenging and providing experiences which spur the child forward to develop their language skills into adulthood where they will be used to think, debate, reason, argue and so much more, and still be developed.

Learning about God

Children develop as a totality. You cannot separate out a child's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development. Everything that a child learns, does and chooses is interlinked in with their spiritual development.

Every child is developing spiritually from the moment of birth, irrespective of the environment and yet significantly shaped by their home and culture. The motivation is every bit as strong as that for learning to speak. Spirituality is a fundamental instinct. A child from an atheist family still develops spiritually, albeit with a disorientated sense of spirituality. A child from a Hindu, Muslim or Primal family develops a deep sense of the spiritual but with an entirely different set of concepts from a child in a Christian family. Childhood spirituality develops from the total environment around them and from the specific environment around them. Let us examine some of the most important factors in the shaping of a child's spiritual awareness; these will be of great importance when thinking of children in terms of their homes, schools and churches:

- *Parents are God* is a startling but clear truth when we are talking about the earliest years of a child's life. The young child's main experience of 'an other' with whom there is relationship is their parents. Their later, and personal experience of 'the Other', God,



will be powerfully shaped by this initial experience. Christian parents should use this fact as a means of grace to their young infant.

- *Parents are models* which the child copies; not simply in learning a language but in every aspect of behaviour. A child does not acquire a faith by being taught information about God, but by seeing values and principles being lived out spontaneously in life. What they see will determine to a great extent what they want to know.
- *Asking questions* is a central characteristic of a growing child, they are the windows in to their highly motivated inquiring mind. So many of the questions are to do with spiritual issues: 'Where does God live?' 'What happens when you die?' Many of these are an embarrassment to adults who give trite answers, with the result that children think they are really inappropriate. Answering questions is at the heart of spiritual motivation and stimulation.
- *Making choices* is the point at which spiritual character and direction are really forged. Out of this their values are established – whether it is the choice whether or not to share a toy, to tell the truth or to steal from a newsagent. Helping children how to choose and why or why not to choose is vital and affects so many other areas of spirituality.
- *Stimulating ideas* need to be encountered if the spiritual quest is to develop into maturity. There is need for discussion and dialogue as appropriate. This can arise naturally out of the issues of questions and choices.
- *Faith and fun* must be seen to go together. The reason so many children turn their backs on faith in adulthood is because they believed it was 'boring'. If children can learn to laugh with God, rather than at God, the joyful dance of truth will become their path for life.
- *Steady stages* of development are at the heart of all careful learning. Some concepts will be inappropriate until others have been learnt. If the adult is sensitive the child will make it clear what they are, or are not, ready to learn.
- *Personal focus* on each child is essential; they need to know that spiritual truth applies to them as individuals. Each child will be at different stages of understanding and interest. They will need to be able to talk things through with someone they can trust; sometimes a parent, sometimes another adult or friend.

CHILDREN AND THE FAMILY

The stronghold

The divinely created environment for children to grow up in is the family. The covenant bond between a man and a woman forms a physical and emotional womb in which the child is both free and secure to develop in wholeness and fullness. This is the place where the spiritual awakening takes place and where the choices of destiny are knowingly, though sometimes unknowingly, made. The biblical environment for the family is brilliantly presented in the words:

'And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.' (Deut 6:6-9)



However, in fractured societies, the family can often be a place of tension and even pain. What should be a place of strength and security can be fractured by bitterness and broken by divorce. The spiritual development of children is stunted by godlessness in its many forms. So the family really is a stronghold. It can be a bulwark of safety for children in a hostile world. It can be a disturbing place from which a safe place needs to be found.

Families in flux

The traditional family: father, mother and children with grand parents and other relatives close by has been changing in the UK for decades, as it has been many other parts of the world. In the 21st Century these changes have increased in many ways:

While of course many traditional families remain, there are also numerous lone-parent families, step-families, cohabiting families, same-sex families, plus various combinations of these. People are making many different choices. This is the reality and also the truthfulness of our times. Many Christians are also among those exploring these different possibilities. From a place of faith the important thing is not to try and impose one particular style of family expression (as has often sadly been the case in the past), but rather think through and support the essential qualities of what family life and wellbeing should be. Supporting those who are struggling financially, emotionally and socially. This is an important opportunity for Christians to learn as well as to help and support.

The garden

Being a family should be an exciting place, even in a dark and dangerous world. Thinking of it as an enclosed garden, a place of sheltered *shalom*, where adults and children together can experiment with and discover life giving values and find creative ways to put them into practice can be a helpful image.

The idea of being a 'Christian' family was a subject of considerable discussion during the 1980's and 1990's. An issue about which people were very opinionated and dogmatic, and about which others felt vulnerable and insecure. Therefore what follows must be seen as some personal observations and insights into creating a family environment in which children can grow spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and physically (which are applicable far beyond simply being 'Christian'). However confident one may feel about these principles, it is always humbling to remember the observation that no one can be called a good parent until their children are at least 30 years old!

Some essential principles would appear to be:

- *Natural spirituality*: the relationship with God in the home flows naturally through life and from life; there is absolutely no sense of 'religion' or spiritual formality whatever.
- *Physical contact*: there should be frequent and strong physical contact throughout the whole of childhood. Touching integrates a child within themselves and within the family; it is the basis of a strong sense of security and self-confidence.
- *Parental vulnerability*: parents will frequently make mistakes and they must be prepared to admit them to children and to say sorry and ask for forgiveness.



This builds respect; it in no way diminishes it. Only this way will children learn how to ask for forgiveness, to forgive others, and be vulnerable themselves in a world which is always saying 'I'm right' even when wrong.

- *Any questions:* children must be free to ask any question whatever on any subject at any time. Between parent and children there must be absolutely no 'no-go' areas, no taboo subjects. Nothing is inappropriate if it is on the child's agenda. If they want to know, now is the time. If parents don't know, tell them and discover the answers together.
- *Truth talking:* at every opportunity children should be affirmed by their parents; expressions of love for them and pride in them. Parents should be sensing what God is feeling about the child and telling them in a flow of gentle prophesy in the natural opportunities of life. Sleeping and waking moments are very important, a time when children are spiritually very vulnerable; 'dream-talking' God's truth then can be wonderful and life-changing.
- *Real acceptance:* children need to know that they are accepted for who they are, that love does not depend upon performance or fulfilling parents' expectations. They are genuinely loved for who they are alone.
- *Memory building:* giving children happy and exciting memories is one of the greatest investments parents can make. They don't have to be expensive but we should try and make them special. Magical moments, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, unusual happenings. When a child says, 'Do you remember when ...' you know it is happening.
- *Good friends:* above all else parents should be friends to their children. This is more than sharing friendship, it is having a relationship in which the child's primary response to the parent is as a friend, and the same from parent to child. This does not diminish respect but builds it.

Child abuse

Child abuse has been defined as 'actions towards a child that are considered harmful to the child, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually'. Physical violence, sexual interference, neglect, non-accidental injury, cruelty and exploitation are all different forms of child abuse. At its worst it can lead to death or long-term trauma. A common factor in abusers themselves is that often they too have been abused as children; there can also be sexual frustration, despair, drugs, emotional and financial pressure or an inability to cope.

It has been said that child abuse can only be widely recognised within a society where child mortality is low and children should be expected to live to adult life. The acceptable treatment of children in one country may be considered abuse in another.

The subject of child abuse has received great attention in recent years, and rightly so. It has probably been far more extensive in the past that people have been prepared to recognise. How to deal with abuse is not easy. There are two major options:

- **Remove the child from the home:** but this can cause further problems for the family if the child does not want to go; it also immediately condemns the parent(s) concerned before things can become really clear. Often the child want the abuse to stop but does not want to lose their family.



- **Help the family as a unit:** this recognises parents as much victims of abuse as the children they are abusing. There are dangers of further abuse, but the aim is to see the abuser take responsibility for what they have done. The first step is to attempt to bring about change before moving to prosecution.

CHILDREN AND THE WORLD

Between and between

The acid test for many children of faith comes when they go to school. They often face an environment which has values very different from those of their family; and this will increasingly will be the case as society changes. They are away from parental influence and they are in the midst of growing peer and social pressure. What do they choose?

This is an important time for both parents and children. The child must come to confidence in themselves; they must decide and choose and face the consequences. Parents should be there for them to talk things through with; this will really test what kind of child–parent relationship has been built to date, It is also a great opportunity to build it deeper.

Initially a child will tend to make their decisions on the basis of what they believe their parents would expect. This is good for a start. But as parental values are challenged by the status quo the child can begin to live a double life; behaving one way at home and another outside. Parents must spot this and encourage the child to root into their personal relationship with their faith within themselves. In a crisis the issue is not, ‘What would my parents want me to do?’ but, ‘What do I believe is the good and spiritual thing for me to do?’ This can be a most exciting transition for both parents and children. It is essential to help them to get it right.

Christians and school

This has been a subject of great debate in recent years. There is great change in secular education; there is real challenge from humanism in education. What should Christians do?

There have been considerable moves to develop new Christian schools, with varying success. We must remember that of course Christians have been at the forefront of education for centuries, and their work laid the basis for state education in the UK as we know it. The question is the role for special Christian schools today. This is a huge subject, but suffice it to say that if the intention is simply to shield children from Christian homes from the ravages of secularism this must be mistaken. However, if it is to provide a choice and creative alternative in education, which children from both Christian and secular homes can enjoy there is a real place for it. (provided it is of good quality). Schools such as these can also play a real part in creating learning environment for children who have been failed by state education because of behaviour or other problems.

It is very important that Christians support the state education system as much as they can. We should encourage Christians to train as teachers for State education, and support them in the schools. We should look for opportunities as school governors and other posts.



Bullying

Bullying has always been an issue for children throughout history, however it is at epidemic proportions in 21st Century society, with the added opportunities and reach presented by the mobile phone and computer. The link between bullying and suicide is also a growing concern:⁷

- 50% of young people admit to bullying another person
- 64% who were bullied did not report it, only 36% did report it
- Reasons for pupil bullying were appearance (55%), body image (37%) and race (16%)
- At least 62% of children admit to being cyber bullied
- 74% of those being bullied have also been physically attacked
- 98% of children bullied were bullied by another child

There should be zero tolerance to bullying. Faith communities should be supporting schools and neighbourhoods to bring bullying to an end.

CHILDREN AND THE CHURCH

Family of faith

The Christian family is part of the extended family of faith, the church. Because children are full spiritual people in the eyes of God they must play their part in the full body of the church. Because we live in a society that marginalises children, and because the attitudes of our society have shaped the church, children do not usually fit in with the normal flow of events in a church service. They are usually tolerated or excluded. If church were to take children seriously the whole shape of church would be remarkably different from what it usually is. This is not to say that everything will be appropriate to children; it wasn't so in Nehemiah's day (cf. Neh 8:2), or everything children do appropriate to adults. But the guiding principle should be that children not only enjoy church, but see themselves as part of the main body and community of church. They are *not* the 'church of tomorrow' but at the very centre of the church of today!

Facts and figures

There are some significant statistics regarding children and church, which should not only affect how church serves children within the community but how it endeavours to serve those beyond with the good news of Jesus.

87% of all people who make a Christian commitment do so through a Sunday school; however, only 20% of all Sunday-school pupils actually make such a commitment. So we see that only 10% of the church's effort secures 90% of its dividends; it is estimated that if the possibilities of Sunday school were fully realised the church membership in Britain would be five times greater than at present.⁸

⁷ These facts have been gleaned from various website sources in 2016

⁸ Scripture Union statistics in 'Direction', February 1991.



- It is estimated that between 1990 and 2010 the Anglican Church UK has lost the attendance of 1.1 million children
- The rise in the number of youth workers in churches in recent years has slowed the trend
- 48% of churches have less than five under-16s attending
- 85% of British children under the age of 13 years old are cut off from the gospel.
- 65% of church members came to some sort of faith by the time they were 13 years of age.⁹

Learning or believing?

Should Christian teaching take place at home in the family or in the church? In biblical times, homes were also workplaces; the family and the community flowed into one another; parents and community all played a natural part in bringing up children. Clearly parents have the prime responsibility to bring up children and to teach them about God, but parents need help and the community of faith has a real responsibility to help. However, children's workers can only really supplement what is already going on in the family. Nevertheless, children from Christian families need to relate to Christians outside the home to help bring faith into sharp relief; others can often communicate things parents cannot.

One of the sad facts about the story of children and church has been, first, their exclusion from the main structure of the worshipping community and, second, that what goes on in church is little different from school. The whole notion of Sunday school still lingers within the Christian community despite serious attempts to change it.

The reason for this is historical. In 1785 Robert Raikes opened a Sunday school in Gloucester. It had as its clear aim to help educate working-class children in moral, religious and social matters. While intellectual development was not its initial aim the Sunday school became the key to teaching reading to the poor. Ragged schools played a similar role.

Children's work in church has been shaped by this legacy. However, children's work should be about communicating spiritual truth; not about teaching in any formal sense. The purpose of communication in church is about revelation; it is often quite different from education. Why do we think 'the way to a child's heart is through a syllabus'?¹⁰ Spiritual truth is to be perceived spiritually. We must remember that a child of three can respond to God as effectively as an adult. Children's work should have the sense of fun expressed on TV shows and yet be a vehicle for real spiritual experience.

From the statistics quoted earlier we see that the real challenge is bringing the gospel to children outside the church. The 13 to 16 age group is the most fertile ground. Yet sadly it has been said that 'Sunday school has often made the gospel only fit for misfits'.¹¹

⁹ These facts have been gleaned from various website sources in 2016

¹⁰ D Halls and 'Lighthouse Company'.

¹¹ Ray Joslin, 'Urban Harvest'



Therefore the gospel must be seen to be fun; it must have relationship at its heart and must be flexible in approach.

Because the likelihood of children continuing in their faith is slim [approx. 1%], if their families are not Christian, we cannot consider doing children's evangelism without being prepared to confront their parents with what we are doing. Quite simply, evangelising children and their parents must go hand in hand

Questions

1. Should parents in a Christian family expect their children to follow their faith? What reason can you give for your answer?
2. How do you think we should see children integrated into the main body of the church?
3. How can we see more children from non-Christian families become part of the Christian faith?

Open Reflection

There are many vulnerable children in our society and in countries around the world. Many different individuals and groups are working with them. What do you think the main needs are? What particular contribution ought the Christian community bring to the task, and why? What reasons do people give for focusing on the needs of children in society? Are you persuaded by their views?

Reading and Resources

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