



## **The Hidden Congregation**

### ***A summary of our recent CGMC Conference***

*22<sup>nd</sup> November 2012*

This was something new for CGMC, and indeed, as far as we know, no one else has tried to do something like this before! For a number of years now the idea had been brewing; over the past 18 months it took shape; and in November 2012 it came to fruition: namely, *a day conference for Principals and Directors of Study from colleges preparing people for the ordained ministry, in conversation with members of CGMC about the place of children and families in their formational programmes.*

For too long, as children's and family specialists, we have moaned that church leaders just don't seem to get children's ministry; are not equipped to do things like all-age worship, take a school assembly, understand and nurture the faith of children and work with families effectively. The real world of a congregation in a church seems strangely to have been off the training agenda for those preparing to be leaders. This congregation was, you might say, hidden and not addressed by the most college curricula. Hence the focus for this day conference; but would colleges come?

Booking a well-known speaker and a respected facilitator was one way forward of course, alongside repeated invitations both by letter, e-mail and through personal contacts. And it worked! The day was finally attended by 60 of us, including over 30 delegates from 19 colleges of all traditions, some invited guests and members of CGMC. If nothing else was to be achieved on the day, we already felt that we had put the issue of children and families on training courses 'on the map' and a conversation would have begun.

Bishop Paul Butler set the context of the day with a very helpful analysis of where we are now with children, families, the church and society. His useful PowerPoint is available on the CGMC website. He outlined the pressures on childhood today, including commercialisation, sexualisation, 'mediafication', family breakdown, poverty and changes in education, including the world of the internet. He also drew delegates' attention to key reports and publications that had been produced in this area of expertise over the last decade. The stark reality is that most people come to faith before the age of 13 but that most children

today do not have any contact with church and the Christian story. Set alongside this the reality that theology down the centuries has largely 'missed the child' in its understanding of scripture, then there is definitely a challenge to those providing training for future church leaders. What difference will it make when we, like Jesus, place a child in the midst?

Dr. Paula Gooder entitled her presentation 'playing in the marketplace'. She drew on Zechariah's picture of God's future (8:4-5), where we encounter a multigenerational vision topped and tailed by references to the end-times. The Gospels of course affirm that, because of the cross and resurrection, this 'end-times' reality should now be breaking into the present and indeed be visible in our church communities today.

The streets where the children play and the old people sit with their staffs are the open plazas, which biblically are the heart of the business community. It is therefore very significant that it is in this very place that the two groups, which church largely hive off or are invisible, have an important role to play. And the fact that children are playing is also meaningful, with its echoes of God's creative play as explored in the poetry of Proverbs 8. Intergenerational play should perhaps be one of the most important aspects that churches can encourage, whereas in reality – and like the critical comments of the present generation found in Matthew 11 from Jesus – quite the opposite is happening. In most churches the adults are not playing and so would likewise fall under Jesus' condemnation. The question is how can this Biblical vision of a Christian community be established and how do we help prepare leaders to make it possible?

Following this, Bishop Paul offered some reflections, noting among other things that in some parts of the world this togetherness of young and old, as in the prophet's vision, is still the norm and demonstrated far better than we manage it in our churches. This opened up conversations and a range of contributions from the delegates, including:

- The challenge is not about finding clever ways to include children and families in our life and worship but how as a church we can make it easy for them to feel 'comfortably present'.
- Children may well be 'icons of play' for us but they are also much more than this, according to Jesus, who offers them to adults as examples of Christian discipleship and maturity.
- However, it was acknowledged that colleges are under all sorts of pressures to include many things on their courses and this very fact sadly leads to there being no time for play.

So in what ways can college tutors and leaders of churches be like the elders with their staffs in the vision and create a safe place for others to play?

After lunch we had a series of contributions, including information about the new common orders that are coming into being, which will affect most training colleges and also bring the opportunity for some rethinking of the curriculum; input from CGMC members about the sort of issues they are facing; an overview of thinking on children and children's spirituality; and possible models for how children and families might be included within a typical normal college curriculum, but *not* just as an 'add on' (again, see the CGMC website for the related PowerPoints).

There was certainly a lot to fit in, possibly too much in the time we allowed, but it did get cluster groups talking and some of the outcomes from these conversations can also found on the CGMC website. The day ended with some time for reflection and final comments, facilitated by Bishop Paul. It was clear that all this was only the start of a dialogue and indeed we were encouraged to hear some delegates talk about 'the next time' we do this!

Following this conference CGMC members got together to work out what might be the best, next steps. There is always of course the possibility of doing something like this again; but in the meantime **the hope is that the conference will create a platform for CGMC members to hold deliberate and focused conversations now within their denominations about these issues.**

We were able to present all the delegates with a folder containing a CD of past CGMC publications, information about our network, reading lists and hard copies of the Core Skills course. One delegate said he had come hungry for resources and ideas and in a small way we think we did our best to feed this.

If we are going to be a network that helps facilitate change in colleges, which will in turn transform the future ministers and ministry of the church, then we must indeed be vigilant and intentional about keeping open channels of communication about all that was discussed on the day. To this end we will need to keep returning to these issues as a group and seek ways to make any new thinking and possibilities available to those colleges who came, and indeed new ones, in the years ahead.

**December 2012**