



Reflections on the CGMC November 24 hour Conference 2011

Fresh Expressions of Children's Ministry Something old....Something new; Something borrowed...

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the term 'fresh expression of church'. What does it look like.... and what do you feel about it? And what do you imagine when the talk is of 'fresh expressions of children's ministry?' *'There's nothing new under the sun'* claims the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. Is heor she...right?

Whatever we think about these questions, the opportunity to talk them through and try and tease out some answers was certainly of sufficient interest to attract one of our largest gatherings to date of delegates and guests for our November CGMC 24 hour conference at Feldon Lodge to the west of London. It was particularly exciting to have a large contingent from Scotland and Northern Ireland, which added to the buzz of conversation and the rich forum that is CGMC for networking and mutual peer support in what can be a lonely field of ministry – that of the professional children's work adviser, trainer, advocate, minister or co-ordinator. We go by many titles!

There's no doubt there are some very exciting things happening on the fringes of the established church and more than once during the conference we were reminded of how important to God these voices from the margins are. Indeed they may well be prophetic and it was interesting in a Bible study on Luke 18, led for us as part of Joanne Cox's presentation on the second day, how Jesus tells stories about marginalized individuals or else responds to the insistent voices of those that others want to shut up; while central to this chapter is the story of Jesus welcoming the children.... a scandal that his disciples – then and now – just don't get!

For many people considering fresh expressions of children's ministry, their first thought is Messy Church, which has seen phenomenal growth in its seven year existence. It is however important to note that Messy Church is not just children's ministry; it is most definitely about an inclusive, re-imagining of church for all ages. The trouble is because glue and glitter is involved, it is too easily filed under 'children' in many people's minds.

So it was with Messy Church that we began on our first afternoon, when we heard from Rev. Bridget Shepherd of Emmanuel Church, Croydon and Catherine Duce, an ARCS (Action Research: Church and Society) fieldworker, who shared their findings from a limited but fascinating piece of research into how eight interviewed non-church mums viewed the Messy Church at Emmanuel that they attended with their children. It was an important piece of reflection and, though it was acknowledged that so much more listening needed to be done.....particularly to what the children had to say....., it did throw up some fascinating insights into how a generation that has had no contact with faith and the Church understood what was happening when they met monthly on a Monday after school; what was important about it for them; and their views on how, or even if, God was involved in it all.

If nothing else Messy Church, and fresh expressions like it, are certainly raising important questions for traditional Church about the nature of people's spirituality today; what it means to be church; how people

can be disciplined; what it means to lead a church; and the recognition that God is very much at work in our so-called secular society in surprising ways and unexpected places – on those very margins highlighted by Jesus in the Gospels. Some of the key findings of this research are posted on the Messy Church website as a blog, but one element that came out of the interviews that was perhaps significant was that it was often the children who valued Messy Church for what it taught them about faith and God more than their parents; and it was almost as if the children were taking the lead and becoming the evangelists as a result – what was termed ‘the ecclesiological overflow’! Interesting parallels were drawn with how the early church widened its reach through infant baptism, the sanctification of unbelieving spouses and new formulas of catechesis in its desire to be inclusive and embrace a broader theology of grace.

Of course all this opened up lots of fascinating lines of thought for us all. Was Messy Church Church-lite? And if so, is that a good or a bad thing? Is it merely a church for beginners.....at the shallow end of the swimming pool, as it were? But then again, no one can swim in the deep end all the time....and anyway aren't we all always merely paddling where God is concerned? Is it ‘real church’ or a ‘stretched notion of church’? Were the interviewed mothers talking about ‘an unknown God’ or ‘an unnamed God’? And much more. But isn't it exciting that a fresh expression of church where children are as important as any one else opens up this sort of vital debate about how we offer the gospel in the 21st century, how we give people opportunities to respond to our Christian story and what a community of faith with values of hospitality and grace might look like. This is surely one of those voices from the edge that is insisting on being heard – the sort that Jesus valued so highly.

But surely, haven't we been here before? Or is this really something new that the Spirit of God is saying to the Church? Is there something new under the sun, after all?

It was this that Rev. Piers Lane, Director of Evangelism at Cliff College, addressed in our next session on Day 1. Piers drew parallels with a fresh expression of children's work that appeared over 200 years ago, pioneered by Christian social reformers like Robert Raikes. He unpacked how the Sunday School movement had grown from its earnest beginnings near the offices of The Gloucester Journal in the 1780s, was variously interpreted, became sidetracked with unhelpful agendas, institutionalised and now, in many peoples' opinion, has been left stranded as something that no longer works either for the church or the children of our 21st century western world. Parallels and contrasts were drawn between the social environments, the prevailing world views, the state of the Church and the influences on children then and now. Just like Raikes, we in our day are called to be counter-cultural for our times and this will mean finding new ways to work with children and their families that focus on dialogue, relationship-building, the sharing of stories, play, exploration and the offering of safe space.

Many of us recognise what a gift to the church Godly Play has been in this respect, where once again it has been a voice from the edge, grounded in how we welcome and work with children outside ‘proper’ Church, that has been so prophetic. There is no doubt that in so many fresh expressions of church with children and families, this reflective and invitational style of telling our story has been very significant. Yes, we need new wine skins but intriguingly Jesus also reminds us that the old wine is still the best (Luke 5:39); and it could be said that Godly Play is an interesting mix of both old and new!

Joanne Cox is the Evangelism in Contemporary Culture Officer for the Methodist Church and our second day was largely facilitated by her as she helped us dig deeper into what a fresh expression of church really is and how we can pass on the message to a generation that is shaped by Facebook and Twitter. From Luke 18 she drew out some key questions to ask when we are considering fresh expressions of church with children and families: What are we offering? Where is the blessing? How do we help people on a journey? Are we really listening to what people are saying? What is God passionate about? She also touched on ‘success criteria’ when evaluating Fresh Expressions, though that needs to be held in creative tension surely with how God sees ‘success’; arguably three years of being disciplined, even by Jesus, failed to produce 12 ‘successful’ disciples! It took a lot longer.

What a full diet of input and discussion we enjoyed these two days. And alongside all this we worshipped, renewed friendships and made new ones, enjoyed late night discussions, networked and encouraged each other in our ministries – just what CGMC is all about! For all of us there was something old and something new to take away; and, as we shared our ideas and news of resources, there will surely also be much that will be borrowed!

These two days happened at a conference centre on the *edge* of London. And CGMC is a network of those, who work on the edge, and which is called to speak up on behalf of those who are on the margins – and do so with persistence! In the words of one participant whose prayer card I was invited to take away: 'I've felt encouraged to continue my ministry which can often be lonely and isolating. It always invigorates me to share with others who are passionate about children's ministry'. Amen to that!

Martyn Payne on behalf of CGMC November 2011