



Reflections on the CGMC Spring Conference 2013

Where are we now with children and evangelism?

A telling question!?

In the lifetimes of most of us in CGMC, understandings of how and when children begin their own journey of faith have changed; and of course, not surprisingly, this is reflected in how the church as a whole has wrestled with what it means 'to be converted' and consequently how it also understands mission and outreach. Is it a crisis or a process? Is it nurture into faith or a definite moment of public commitment with a decision to believe? Is it an individual act or a community experience? Is it a once for all happening or a daily discipleship of following 'the Way'? Or indeed should we even be talking about evangelism at all when it comes to children? The 'empty vessel' verses 'flame to be fanned' understanding of children's spirituality surely has insights that question the view that children need to be specifically 'evangelised'. So, it was with this whole debate that the CGMC Spring conference at Sheldon House in Devon attempted to engage, against the backdrop of these many different understandings and experiences of this whole topic.

Our three days in beautiful surroundings and in one of the most peaceful and comfortable venues we have enjoyed over the years, were all spent on site and divided between sessions that opened up the theme, the sharing of local stories and an attempt to explore the key questions together and work through what we should be saying about all this to those we work with in our denominational and organisational networks, as well as to the church generally in the UK and Ireland. We were not at all surprised to find that we struggled to come to any neat and unambiguous conclusions!

Nick Harding - the children's work adviser for Nottingham and Southwell diocese - opened up the debate wondering out loud whether, with the loss of confidence that there is around the word evangelism, particularly when applied to children, we may not perhaps have lost our way about at least one important aspect of our ministry. With the statistics pointing to the fact that least 90% of children have little or no knowledge of the Christian faith, surely this was a challenge to present the faith to them more intentionally with an accompanying invitation to believe rather than just hoping that somehow our relationship-building ministries of outreach would somehow lead them one day into naming what they already know or perhaps into asking questions to which we might offer some possible answers. Nick's observation was that there have been hardly any new books written on this whole subject in recent years; in fact it seems a topic to be avoided if at all possible and maybe this is because we have all been rather cowed by accusations of indoctrination and manipulation. When we explored our own experiences as a group, in a 'conversion line exercise', it was interesting to see the range of ways in which we each talked about how faith had begun for

us and whether we had been 'evangelised' into faith or not. And of course this exercise also reminded us that our own personal journeys into faith are hugely influential in shaping our own attitudes and practices when it comes to what we think about evangelism with children.

We can all recognise that there are definitely forms of evangelism with children that are not only unhelpful but very unhealthy; however, does that mean that we should give up on this idea completely? Nick left us with lots of questions, including:

- Are we in danger of being so open-ended as never really to bring children to a point of challenge about anything?
- What, after all, was the message of the gospel?
- Have we created an unhelpful confusion about children both being very spiritual but also not yet Christian?
- Have we relied too heavily on faith development theories?
- And what ultimately do we understand by the 'believing' component of the 'befriending-belonging-believing-behaving' model of coming to faith?

Following this opening session, Andrea Harrison facilitated further discussion in groups as to what all this meant for our own training and ministries. Our discussions focused around issues such as:

- What is the place of evangelism within the broader spectrum of what is meant by mission?
- How is evangelism understood in the context of what we believe about children's spirituality?
- Are there helpful guidelines that we can pass on to those we work with?
- What is the relationship between evangelism and discipleship?
- What are helpful models of evangelism in the post-Christian western world?
- Can CGMC make any useful statement about children and evangelism that could be the beginnings of discussions for the wider Church?
- Is there a place for a Core Skills module that looks at evangelism with children? (What is the good news and how do we share it with children?)
- How might we firmly but tactfully challenge some unhelpful models of evangelism with children that are already out there and which in fact already have an influence on the way many churches think?
- What should CGMC be saying about this at a national level?
- How does all this relate to initiatives around the phrase 'it takes the whole church to raise a child'?
- Can we gather short pieces of writing about this whole issue, representing a variety of views, and which can then be used to stimulate discussions in our networks?

- Can we produce a conversation starter paper with reflections and questions as result of this conference?

Our second day together was very helpfully set on track by Rosy Nixon, who presented to us some of the thinking around 'spiritual styles' as formulated by David Csinos. Rosy unpacked the different ways that people came close to God in terms of their preferences towards the four styles David names: word, emotion, symbol and action. This presents the challenge of course as to how we accommodate all styles and thus work inclusively within our ministries and so it was very useful at this point to break into groups and experience a series of interactive exercises based on the Lord's prayer that had been created in line with these different spiritual styles.

All this naturally led into how this should and could impact whatever we mean by evangelism with children. Clearly children will encounter and become more deeply aware of God in different ways and at different rates. It is therefore important that practitioners understand the sort of groups they are working, while at the same time, following the pattern of Jesus's own ministry, recognising that every encounter is unique and needs a unique approach. Thinking all-style rather than all-age worship is a helpful by-product of these insights as well as reflecting on how it might shape our evangelism with and nurture of children. There will be further resources from David Csinos both in future Roots magazines and some articles can be downloaded from the following website:

www.davidcsinos.com//publications

On our previous 48-hour CGMC conferences some of our programme has taken place 'out and about'. This time, both because of the challenge of travel around Devon and, to be honest, the attractiveness of staying at Sheldon House, we stayed put and local people visited us! Katherine Lyddon, part-time children's adviser for the diocese of Exeter, invited six people from her team around the region to join us and share their stories. First however we heard her own story about her new work and in particular about holiday clubs. She shared her heartache both that large numbers at these once a year events are not the best context to build relationships that can help faith to grow and that even when some children do make the beginning of a faith commitment they are often not followed up. She doubted that the churches even knew how to disciple such children.

We heard of schools work in Honiton and youth work in Sidmouth. Chris and Phil told us about their work on a housing estate in Plymouth emphasising the importance of long term commitment and relationship building. One of the great dangers with any form of evangelism is that things are just simply not followed up and that 'event Christianity' still too easily shapes how we work with children. We also heard about flourishing preschool work east Devon although at the same time it was sad to hear from one story how poorly the church councils both understood and supported this sort of work. In her summing up Katherine urged us to take risks, to trust God and to rejoice at everything that God was doing among children; it's not about relying on what happens in the 'God-slot' but rather all

our talk should be 'God-talk' and all our being with children a God-slot! Drawing on research tools such as the Engel scale, it is clear that many children and families are far more distant from anything to do with our faith than most churches realised. And in her experience most within the fold of the church are caught up with themselves and their own faith journey rather than being caught up in God's mission.

In the afternoon we heard from two more visitors. Hannah Richards works for the ICE project based in Exeter working with schools in and around that city. Their strap line is 'bringing faith to life' as they deliver Christian schools work in a variety of ways. She shared some stories of what God was doing through their core team but also revealed that they are still searching for the right models to move forward, especially as RE in the curriculum is coming under pressure and maybe even the place of collective worship is under threat. Turning to another area of traditional evangelism, Margaret Lilley - who is the Scripture Union team leader for the south-west - shared about her work in this region, focusing on some of the activities she has helped set up and support, including X-site, Kids breakfasts and after school family clubs. She then turned to a particular concern of hers, namely the future of the beach mission, which has always been one distinctive expression of evangelism in this part of the world. The question is, have they had their day? She is doing research into this convinced that there is a future, although clearly so much has changed. Who are they for? Who runs them and why? How can they be followed up? What is their connection to the local church? We heard of bad examples of how this form of evangelism can be something that is little more than Christians parachuting in and out of a place. Margaret did however point to one promising model from the north-east of the UK in Hexham, where whole family mission weeks that have taken place regularly over many years are bearing much fruit.

For the second half of the conference we were in-house, as it were, enjoying a raucous quiz that Shelley had devised with questions of a local flavour and then on the final day we worked more intentionally in groups looking at some key questions, unpacking the meaning and the connections between the words 'evangelism' and 'discipleship' and then exploring what we wanted to say to the churches and to our networks about these aspects of ministry with children.

There's no doubt we inevitably left a lot of threads hanging from our three days together; nevertheless, as usual we were all very much encouraged by being able to meet, affirm and support each other in our different ministries around the UK and Ireland. Finally we did also spend some time exploring the ways in which CGMC might develop its own identity more, both within CTBI and as a voice to the churches. These thoughts will be collated and recorded separately and sent round our membership and will be taken forward by the Executive.

We had begun our conference with a short reflective story about a local saint, St Boniface, who came from Crediton not far from where we were staying. He is still recognised abroad

and honoured as the English Bishop who came as a missionary to Germany and Holland back in the 9th Century AD. Mission in this period of history was about telling an unknown story and challenging wrong ideas about God. It invited people to listen and respond to the stories of Jesus. In our post Christian era there is clearly a need yet again to find appropriate ways to tell the story of Jesus, once again unknown by so many, and to invite adults and children to respond. In addition it also became clear that evangelism, whatever we think of the concept, must surely take place within a context of making real relationships and thus being alongside people on a journey into faith. Katherine suggested that all evangelism must come out of a passion for God and a passion for people and that its key imperative was 'to go', as indeed Jesus asks us to do in the great commission, and to meet people, including children, where they are. She shared with us the following quote from 'Christianity Rediscovered' written by the missionary Jesuit priest in east Africa, Vincent Donovan:

'Do not try to call people to where you are, as beautiful as the place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a new place that neither you nor they have ever been before.'

We had a running joke during the conference! In a quote related to Wesley's experience of his 'conversion', it is said that his heart was 'strangely warmed' when he first understood about God's particular love for him and God's calling on his life to go rather than just to stay where he was. Likewise we are in different ways always 'being evangelised' and 'strangely warmed' by every encounter we have and very often this happens particularly in our encounters with children, who in this way evangelise – are good news - to us. This sort of evangelism is at the same time a form of discipleship, as we grow in faith step by step. Although we came to no strong and definite conclusions at the end of the conference, all of us were able to say both jokingly and seriously that our hearts had at various times been strangely warmed by new insights and thoughts, which would inform both our own personal walk with God and our understanding of how we can best support and encourage those we work with.

Martyn Payne on behalf of CGMC

March 2013