



Notes and Reflections on our CGMC Conference 2013 in Birmingham

14th-15th November

Family Matters!

In recent years the word 'family' has hit our UK headlines for good and for bad. We hear from those who lament the loss of 'traditional family values' and complain of 'family breakdown'. We are all too familiar with terms such as 'fatherless families', 'one-parent families' and 'blended families'. And to this we could add many more, such as 'displaced families', 'dispersed families', 'abusive families' and 'networked families'; and all this is alongside what now seems the rather old-fashioned term, namely 'the nuclear family'. At the same time as all this, organisations and voluntary groups, including the church, are aspiring to be 'family friendly', have a 'family ethos' and want to nurture 'family well-being'. It's clear that family matters; but it's also obvious that defining family isn't that easy.

The Christian Church is caught in this same culture of uncertainty. There is the constant rebranding of the 'family service'; its own mixed understanding of the church as 'the family of God'; and increasingly, we come across the re-naming of its traditional children's work as 'children and family ministry'. What is going on? What is 'family' in our western, industrialised 21st century world? What, if anything, is a theology of the nature of family? What does Christian tradition say about family? And what guidance does the Bible have to offer that might inform some of these questions?

Alongside all this, family matters are of current and on-going interest to both secular and faith-based research and the general public conversation; but how do families still matter? And more especially, how do they matter to the church and why? And how does all this relate to our traditional endeavour as Christian communities to nurture children for a life of faith? Should traditional children's workers now have nurturing parents as part of their remit? And if they are to, how are they equipped for this task?

All these questions and many more lay behind our November 2013 CGMC conference, with its catch-all title of '*Children and Family Ministry – where are we now?*' The first day of our conference at the International Mission Centre of the Baptist Church, in Selly Oak south of Birmingham, was open to day visitors and there were in total over 40 of us who gathered to explore this topical theme. This wider audience opened up a great variety of perspectives and a refreshing breadth of contribution, as well as allowing CGMC members to make new friends, renew old acquaintances and to share its actions and concerns with a wider audience.

Family is clearly a big word; and indeed it always used to be. Even the briefest glance at the Old Testament for example reveals that family includes a very wide network of immediate as well as more distant relatives. And even amongst immediate family, relationships could be complex – just pause to reflect on how each of the brothers is related to the others within Jacob’s blended family! Biblical families – and indeed many families in the developing world today – are not just a gathering of those connected by DNA but also by bonds of friendship, financial dependence, mutual concerns over territory as well as a shared faith. It’s only in more recent history that we have tended to limit ‘family’ in the west to two parents and their biological children, living in what we have called the ‘family home’. But in the 21st century things are very different and families now come in all shapes and sizes, drawn together by loyalties and commitments that don’t necessarily depend on promises made in public at a civil or religious ceremony.

The creation mandate to the man and the woman to become one and to have children is a biological one; however it is clear from the rest of the Old Testament that the mandate to nurture those children and help them grow into a life of faith is not the responsibility of the parents alone. It was a task for the whole community to raise a child and help her or him to flourish as a human being – to become all that she or he is meant to be. Exactly how this community of faith operates in our western world is hard to say and whether the family of the church can take on this role is debateable. Should its energies go into being this wider family for the children in its midst, or is its role to help the individual families within its membership – however those families are constituted – to do that job in the home? How does faith in the inter-generational village of the church relate to faith in homes? For many children’s workers this is a whole new dimension to their original job description and a challenge to a ministry, which up to now has tended to deal with the generations in age-related silos. Church ministry has been shaped by an age-related educational model and consequently this has meant that insights about human spirituality, that have come particularly from those with a specialism in children’s ministry, have been too easily overlooked and side-lined by the rest of the church.

So our CGMC investigation into family ministry was both important and timely; a moment to rethink how we bring children and adult ministry into a more holistic togetherness as a ministry to people - people of all ages - and thus focus on what it means for all God’s children, young and old, to come to fullness of life.

The conference opened with a reflection on the sort of families that we come across in the New Testament and in particular the family experiences of Jesus himself. His own family was by no means typical and in his life he found safety and nourishment from being with all sorts of ‘family’ groups, both with and without children present. Perhaps his most telling statement was that his true brothers and sisters were those who chose to obey God.

And then to stimulate our thoughts, we watched a 10 minute video presentation that drew together a series of short interviews with a range of those involved with children’s and

family ministry around the UK. There were also responses from parents and carers; from workers, students and experts, who reflected on where they experienced God, what church meant for them, how their roles have changed, and how they saw children and family ministry in five years time. This led to discussion groups focusing on a range of key questions:

- In your contexts how do we equip volunteers and paid workers to enable children and families to meet with God and grow in faith?
- What does church in a national context and local context need to do to gain a clearer understanding of the needs of families?
- Where do we enable the voice of children and their families to impact and influence what we provide nationally and locally?
- In the context of your setting, what does holistic support around children look like?
- In the context of your own setting, what do we need to do or change to meet the needs of families in the 21st century?
- How can churches nationally and locally have a better dialogue with families?
- And what are the gaps in training and provision of resource material?

A range of responses to these questions was captured on flipcharts as they were passed from group to group and a list of what was written will be published on the CGMC website. The overall effect of the questions however was to throw lots of thoughts up into the air and to get people thinking about the issues in the widest possible sense.

We then heard from four invited speakers who each presented a 10 minute perspective on children and family today.

1. **Nigel Vardell of the Children's Society** kicked off with statistics and observations on the way in which issues of poverty, relationships and autonomy come to bear on children and families. Sadly it seems inevitable that the 27% of UK children who are living in poverty in 2013 will sharply increase by 2020 and yet these children don't often realise they are in poverty as their parents and carers do a good job of covering up, to avoid worry and stigma. In any family it is the quality of relationships that matters, yet research has shown that the happiness of children declines as they grow older, particularly among girls, while at the same time it is clear from the research that all children look for boundaries to feel secure. Nigel left us with three stark but important questions:
 - How can the Church be good news to the children and families facing issues of poverty in 21st Century UK?
 - What is the quality of the relationships that church congregations are making with families in their community?

- How are churches allowing children to have a say in the running of a church community?
2. **Val Mylechreest, Families Officer for the Salvation Army**, then took us on the next stage, presenting some of the stories of what these statistics look like in practice within the work of the Salvation Army. It is becoming difficult for many families to provide the basics anymore and the long summer holidays in particular can provide real challenges to family survival. In many ways these issues today are not dissimilar from when William Booth first started his work and wrote about the situation 'in darkest England' over 100 years ago; then, like today, eating or heating was the stark choice for many. This leads of course to an increase in stress and brokenness within families, with parents supporting multiple children and a generation of single parents relying on school meals. A number of Salvation Army Corps have experience of working with single teenage parents and providing much needed social support alongside the sharing of faith.
 3. **Mary Hawes, the Church of England Youth and Children's Advisor**, took us on an imaginary flight through 10 years of Children's Ministry, mapping some of the trends and key thinking that have emerged during this time. Although there are some signs of new interest in trying to be church for the family in its various shapes and sizes, and also a growing concern for faith in homes, it seems that much that has been learned has yet to filter down and influence best practice in most of our churches
 4. **Gail Adcock, who is heading up a families research project for the Methodist Church in co-operation with CGMC**, shared some of her initial insights and findings from talking with children's and family workers across the country. The aim is to gather an overview of what family ministry looks like today, to identify key trends and to explore the ways the church can best support what is going on. It is a big study and there is a huge diversity in what she has observed already. However what is being done is often very short-term, when long-term relationships are really needed. A more holistic approach is called for and a more joined-up approach from churches.

(N.B. These and the other presentations will be made available via the CGMC website)

Once again the insights and information from these speakers opened up a number of avenues for conversation as conference delegates split into groups to identify key questions they would like to ask of a selected panel after lunch. This panel was made up of six of the delegates who represented a range of denominations and Christian experience of working with children and families. The following key questions were addressed:

- What is the nature of a church? Is it like a football team or a brass band?!

- What are the barriers people meet with when they consider multi-generational church?
- Can the church be more prophetic rather just reacting to trends within society?
- How can we get children's and family ministry higher up on the agenda of churches?

The panel's varied and insightful answers were captured on video and CGMC plans to make this available on its website, so that others can use this to stimulate further discussion in members' constituencies. Some important practical and theological questions emerged, namely:

- Where does authority lie within the inter-relationships of adults and children in a church community and how do we facilitate a shared ownership of the issues that face everyone? It was suggested that if we look at the budget allocation of most churches, this tends to reveal its understanding of itself as church.
- The model for diversity within the Christian community, and its complexity, finds its roots within the Trinity. Within this understanding of the inclusive and diverse nature of God, we find our model for a church that must surely embrace all.
- The term all-age is often unhelpful in our discussions and even the word 'multi-generational' tends to focus on the people involved in an age related way. Within the community of the church we should be modelling a variety that welcomes and values different styles and stages of faith whatever the age of those involved. Creating space for all to belong must be a priority.
- Speakers drew our attention to the danger of churches being seduced by the current climate of consumerism and thus becoming product-orientated. Churches should also be advocating the importance of silence and modelling new ways of being together that are not measured by the market, particularly at a time when the welfare state is becoming the market state. Churches need to be thinking how and where they need to challenge the state because it is failing and where it can do it better and set an example.
- Our Christian understanding of the nature of personhood is also vital in all these discussions. We need to refuse to be defined by what we own or by what we do or how busy we are. Our identity cannot be bought. The Christian understanding of identity lies in the quality of our relationship with God and with our neighbours.
- Although the model of church as a brass band or football team opened up all sorts of interesting conversations, some of the panel preferred to return to the Biblical model of the church as body, with its gifts and strengths and interdependence. We should not talk about groups of people in silos but individuals, who in their own right are part of a church community that appreciates difference and knows how to say sorry.
- There was general agreement among the panel that we need to celebrate what God is doing wherever the church is working successfully as a family and with families.

We cannot engineer instant solutions but need to give processes space to work themselves out in God's time.

After a full day, we were able to relax as 'the CGMC family' both with some space before and after our evening meal as well as coming together for a light-hearted presentation from Colin Pitt, who works for the Education Department of Cadbury World. This family business was begun with Christian values which have strongly influenced its care for its workers. Colin shared some amusing anecdotes and insights from the Cadbury history and we rounded off the evening with chocolate among other things!

On the second day of the conference CGMC members had time to reflect on what had happened on Thursday - the process and how it could be improved, and also where do we take things from here. The day had certainly been busy with discussion and information and clearly more reflection would be needed. It was suggested that perhaps a more intentional sharing of good family ministry practice could have been facilitated and also that the panel had been more of one voice than had been anticipated. Delegates looked forward to re-visiting some of the key questions which will be available on the CGMC website and to taking them back to be discussed within their various networks and organisations. Although no clear threads may have emerged, opening up this topic with such a wide and experienced audience had been welcomed and it was suggested that the planning group meet once again to explore how the discussions from the day could be made available as a toolkit for use by churches as well as church leaders.

Following the CGMC Business meeting, which looked particularly at future conferences, we finished our time together with some practical suggestions as to how CGMC might work more collaboratively and also be more effective in its role as a network and a voice of advocacy on behalf of children in the UK.

It was clear from the 24 hours that family matters are important but at the same time difficult to define both for society and the church. Exactly how family should matter to the church is something that is far from clear but as we approach the International Year of the Family in 2014, CGMC hopes that the discussions and unresolved issues from this conference may have begun to open a door to a wider and continuing debate that the church and its ministers needs to have with itself in relation to those with whom it works. Too often local churches are still thinking in stereotypes and want to put people into silos and thus deal with them separately rather than understanding how they might be part of a whole. It is hoped that some of the questions from this conference will facilitate further discussion about this and be part of ongoing re-evaluation of what it means to work with children, who are in turn also part of complex family networks that should make up a church congregation that believes families matter.

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