



**Reflections on the January 2016 conference of
The Children's Ministry Network (formerly known as CGMC)**

'A time for listening and a time for speaking'

When you bring together a group of professionals working with children and families, their shared passion and experience far outweigh any differences there may be among them. This has always been true for the Consultative Group for Ministry among Children, where those representing a diverse range of national organisations and denominations have an opportunity to sit down together with those engaged in similar ministries from around the UK, to reflect together on what is most important about our work and focus on what unites rather than divides us. Although we often do have outside input from visiting speakers or have been involved in running a conference for a wider audience, there is also great encouragement and inspiration to be had when we simply come together to listen to and speak with each other, as was true at High Leigh this January.

Our recent meetings have largely been driven by the work around our research into Family Ministry (along with a national conference and the Core Skills book) and an in-depth look at our own constitution, aims and terms of reference. This January conference was a moment to gain some perspective on where we are now and to look forward with a fresh start as the Children's Ministry Network (CMN) by beginning to explore what it means to better fulfil our new strap line namely, 'to promote reflection and best practice for the whole church' when it comes to ministry among children in the church, within families, and in the community.



The way forward for our network

For our first session, Mo Baldwin facilitated a discussion on what we understood by 'children's ministry' and how and whether this was different from being a children's worker or advocate. Ministry should be a holistic word, although it is often limited by Christians in its application to a church context and to matters of faith. Mo shared something of her own ministry as it relates to the welfare of children which needs the support of good theologically-sound government policy on their behalf. If we as CMN are to promote a broader understanding children's ministry then maybe we will need to seek input and expertise from a wider constituency. This led us on to wonder who else might be invited to share in our conversations.

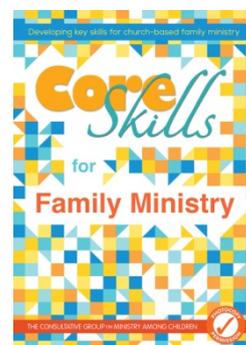
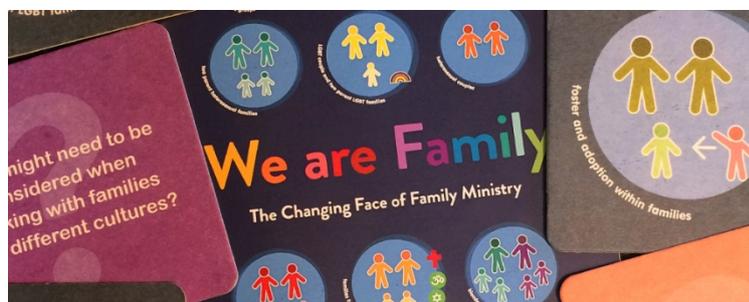
Three key words emerged in our discussions, namely that ministry needs to be incarnational, proclamational and relational. The cultural context in society and church has changed since CGMC was set up over 40 years ago. Since then many of us have travelled in our understanding of children's ministry – something on which we reflected briefly through a visual presentation at the start of this session. It has been a journey away from the more didactic educational model of the Sunday school leader with his or her group of children separate from the main body of the congregation towards a desire for greater integration of the generations where faith can be shared, sometimes without always being named, through the example of old and young 'being church' together. Ministry is about service and this is something all ages can experience as we encourage our networks on a similar journey of re-imagining our commitment to each other in the body of Christ as a community of mutual faith formation.

While holding on to this vision, we're all well aware how much work there is to do to help churches even to begin to travel a similar journey. The reality of many churches' attitudes towards children is still painfully disappointing. Our advocacy for children is for the sake of the whole church and not just the child and this has been mapped over the years in the range of seminal documents that CGMC has produced. Our newly named Children's Ministry Network should be a place both to stand together and to shout out together on behalf of children because there is still much to do to affect cultural change within the church - in effect to change 'the rule book' when it comes to ministry among children.

In recent years as a network we have changed how we work and this change in our 'way of being' is in itself a model which we can encourage others more locally to imitate. We are called to be prophets to the church on behalf of children but also to live that out in our own way of listening and acting together.

The way forward for the Family Ministry research

Penny led us in our next conversation, for which we broke up into two groups to think about how we can carry forward the momentum of Gail's important research and the impact of the Liverpool conference last September. The notes made during this session will be circulated to the group including the key recommendations on which we voted by ticking those suggestions we thought were most important.



Gail is already involved in courses at Cliff College based around Core Skills for Family Ministry and she has been leading road show days across the UK introducing the research, going through the modules in the book and helping equip trainers to use the resource in their local contexts.

Alan Charter told us about the Children Matter initiative called 'Faithfull Generation' and invited us to join in with a day conference at IMC in Birmingham (26th May) entitled 'Let's talk family'. The aim is to disseminate best practice of faith formation in families and in church drawing together a spectrum of resources in a similar way to the 'Will you make a difference?' DVD launched some years ago.

In this context it was also important to hear from Mo about forthcoming research from the Children's Society looking at the impact of neglect in families across the board - particularly emotional neglect. This should be fed into our thinking about ministry among families and particularly among those Christian parents who are too busy, too overwhelmed and who just don't know what to say to their children. This is an issue with which our Children's Ministry Network needs to engage the church: namely 'how can the whole people of God be an emotional as well as spiritual support for our children?'

The way forward among our members

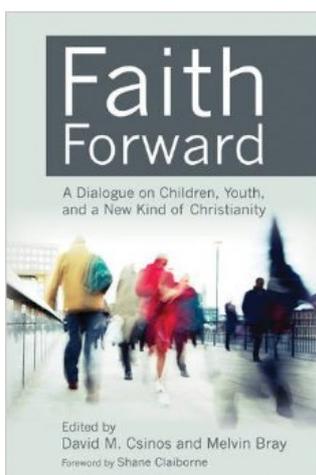
Our early evening session on the first day was a more relaxed sharing together in threes, looking at our personal work focuses for the year ahead and how some of our earlier discussions in the day might inform those. We heard encouraging stories about a knitted Christmas tree in Birmingham and the flotilla of soul boats in that city's Cathedral; Sarah shared a challenging story about a child's ministry to her neighbourhood which she had heard at the Hope Forum discussions; and Mary told us about a more positive approach to research among 11 to 30 year olds, asking the questions, 'why do you stay in church?' and, 'what contribution did your parents make in this?' – it is called 'Rooted in Church'. Finally we heard the encouraging story of the most recent translation of the Bible into Welsh. We ended this part of the evening by praying in small groups for each other.



The way forward for faith formation

As part of our new way of working in the Children's Ministry Network, we have decided that every conference should include an opportunity for theological reflection based around a significant piece of writing by a leading theologian. On this occasion we considered a chapter from Faith Forward (published in 2013) and written by John Westerhoff, entitled 'And so the gift can be given'. John Westhoff is someone who many in our network have longer respected as a prophet in our

generation, although sadly he is often less well known among college theologians. He urges us to keep rethinking and has admitted that he regrets writing his many books, simply because it can encourage people to become fixed in their views and not be prepared to change. This is particularly true of his theory of faith development. The chapter invited us to recognise that we are in a period of transition - one in which we need to regain the intuitive dimension of faith with an accompanying need for creativity in exploring it. 'One Christian is no Christian', he writes, and 'community is an important gift from God', where faith can be formed through our common story and common interests. He warns of the danger of becoming specialized and having a chronological understanding of people's faith development. The way forward was doing things **with**, not to or for, each other. Unsurprisingly the whole group agreed that they had found this chapter inspiring.



The way forward for large events?

After our mid-morning break we welcomed Kyle Cottington to our conference who shared with us a computer based 'child check-in service' that has been produced by his company *iknow Church Software* (www.iknowchurch.co.uk). It involves wristband scanning in of children to a large church Sunday school, or, as came out in our questions afterwards, it could be useful too for one-off large events. They work with CCPAS and there are all sorts of additional record keeping possibilities that are part of the system. There was a standard cost for large churches, who would use it regularly, but it seems that there might be the possibility of negotiating a reasonable one off-cost in which most of us would be more interested. Aled would be ideal to lead any negotiations!!



The way forward for 2016

We ended our time at High Leigh with our usual Business Meeting at which we were able to draw together some of the threads of our conversations and also look forward to conferences this year

and beyond. Most immediately there is the ECCE conference, which the UK is hosting this year, at High Leigh in May. The working group urged us to book into this as soon as possible so that we might sit alongside our European counterparts and colleagues in children's ministry in the same way in which we have richly done so at our CMN conferences in this country. The theme for the week will be 'accompanying children on their life long journey of discipleship' and there are full details of the programme available on our website. Judging from the feedback from our members who have attended previous ECCE conferences, this will be another unmissable opportunity to enrich our own journey of theological reflection and help us to promote best practice across the churches in Britain and Ireland.

See you in May!



The European Conference on Christian Education



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9th to 13th may 2016

Martyn Payne

January 2016