



Summary Report of the Children's Ministry Network conference

November 2016

'Ask and you will receive... research and you will find!'

A record number of us gathered at the International Mission Centre in Birmingham this November for our first conference with a new logo and a new website!

Our focus was on current research into children's ministry training and the ongoing conversations around the family ministry research which our network co-sponsored last year. We were very grateful to Sian Hancock and Sara Barron who shared their findings and insights into the current state of training for children's ministry across the UK and for introducing us to a wide variety of research projects in this area; and also to Gail Adcock who facilitated sessions unpacking how her research has been shared and explored in a variety of vision days across the country.



All four sessions helped to map the children's and family landscape and give us a better understanding of some of the new challenges for our work as we face both financial pressures and cultural shifts in society. It was appropriate then that we began our conference with some reflections from Richard Knott's time in Malawi which reminded us of our dependence on God when it comes to receiving the resources what we need and even the knocking at the door in our attempts to find the right way forward for our ministry.

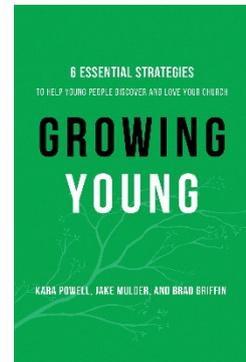
Sian and Sara have provided a very helpful summary of their sessions which have been sent as a separate attachment to members along with posters that include different sorts of research that are happening in the areas of: church life; discipleship and evangelism; and playful spirituality and wellbeing. We also spent time creatively with building blocks deciding what should be the key theologies, knowledge and skills in a healthy and fruitful training course on children's and family ministry. It was very good to get the bigger picture of what research was going on and therefore what still needs to be done, as well as to who is doing this training and to what levels. The worrying trend is that training for ministers is minimal and that opportunities are in fact shrinking with more and more providers fishing in the same pool.





As part of their session, Mary Hawes also reported on the CofE research called 'Rooted in the Church' which is soon to be made public along with research into church toddler groups. In the latter case it was important to think through what are the distinctives of a church-based toddler group and what are its missional opportunities. For 'Rooted in the Church' a group of young adults aged 16 to 30 were asked what had kept them in church and themes such as inclusion, equality, leadership and safe emotional space emerged, along with the interesting finding that an intergenerational culture of church is much more likely to retain young people.

This theme of retaining children and young people was picked up in our theological reflection based on a chapter from a new book of research from America called 'Growing Young'. In groups we were able to make connections between the authors' understanding of 'keychain leadership' and the importance of taking risks with our children and young people by sharing responsibilities with them at a much younger age and giving them significant roles in the body of Christ. *'Young people do not want to sit comfortably on the sidelines but are drawn to churches and leaders who help them get in the game.'*



At the end of our first day together we used an abbreviated version of 'open space technology' to break into groups and discuss topics of interest which included:

- LGBTI young people in mission
- Gender identity
- The synergy between Sunday church and fresh expressions of church for children
- How do we teach challenging children in church?
- Using the Guardians of Ancora app
- How do we intentionally help create a culture of all age discipleship in a local churches?

- How can the value of what we do and learn with children influence structures, theology and life in the wider church?
- A new resource from Northern Ireland called 'Jigsaw'

On the morning of the second day, Joy Raynor's reflection reminded us that research is nothing new and that diverse family life has been around for a long time. A church where all are known as 'kin' with shared, extended responsibility for the children should be part of our understanding of church and particularly today with a growing importance of grandparents and grandparent figures for young people.



This helped us prepare for Gail's presentation which reminded us of the scope and the findings of the 'We are family' research and the 12 different sorts of family as depicted on the set of coasters produced by the Methodist Church. Family work includes both ministry and support although they should not be seen as separate entities. Gail has been involved in facilitating a number of days around the country based on this research exploring a wider understanding of family and therefore a wider spectrum of ministry among families. This in turn opens up further questions of how we become intergenerational not just multigenerational and how we do faith together. Following discussions in groups here are some of the headlines that emerged:

- How much do churches still only look inwardly and not outwardly to the community?
- There is family diversity but how much is this reflected in most churches? And if not, why?
- Insights into the millennial generation of parents suggest that courses may not be the best way forward but rather tailored, issue-based conversations.
- Many churches have a sticking plaster approach to employing children's and family ministry and do not consider the bigger picture.
- The need to balance intergenerational activities and space for peer group support
- Different parenting styles today should be influencing how we connect with the present generation of families
- Is enough time given in ministerial training to an understanding of family work and how this is best supported in a church?
- We need to support conversations between the different groups of people involved in appointing new workers
- We need to be careful in our assumptions about families, particularly using words like 'broken' or 'struggling' to describe them, as this implies a false assumption as to what is right (or even Biblical). We need us walk alongside families prayerfully and humbly.

In her second session, Gail introduced us to a YouTube clip entitled 'Not in our town' in which we heard children and adults talk about their different sorts of families. One young

boy of 11 said prophetically, 'you shouldn't just go to the people who are like you but reach out to everyone.' <https://www.niot.org/nios-video/our-family>

Before breaking into discussion groups again, Gail shared with us her 6 hot discussion topics for this area of work:

- The transforming narratives of family life
- A ministry that fits
- Ministry that is joint enterprise
- Relationships matter
- Work beyond Sunday, including faith at home
- An appetite for training

Gail also talked about the unfortunate language of blame that is often expressed about families who can't make it on Sunday morning, and also the challenge to model being church outside the formal structures of church. Too often our church language around families is elitist and off-putting. An incarnational ministry is not just about being in the same place but about understanding the mind set of those with whom we work.

Lots of important strands came together in this conference that link our understanding of children within families today and the best way forward to equip and train those who work among this particular group. Children's work is never in isolation and increasingly we need to recognise and understand the bigger picture of how the generations connect around the children and indeed the ways those children and young people connect with the generations above and below them.

As usual our network, with its wide expertise and professional experience, meant that discussions were lively, informed and thought-provoking. There are many strands from this conference that the CMN would like to pick up and take further and so our challenge is to work out not just the best way to support each other but also how to inform and better equip those children's and family ministers who work within our denominational networks.

Our **researching** has helped us to find many new things about our ministry and the church in the UK today and our job as a network is to go on **knocking** and **asking** so that we might find the best way forward to grow God's kingdom in the lives of the children and families in our care.

Martyn Payne

CMN Secretary

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