



CREATING SPACES: MINDING THE GAPS

*A Case Study Analysis of Growing Faith
in a Northern English Village.*

Written by

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Creating (Genuine) Spaces: Minding the Gap(s): A Case Study Analysis of Growing Faith in a Northern English Village.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the application of the Church of England's (CoE) national Growing Faith strategy. The Strategy promotes partnership in fostering faith development in the nexus between CoE churches, CoE schools and home. The paper draws on data derived from a deep-dive ethnographic case study in a small CoE village primary school in the North-East of England, which engaged children, school staff and church leaders via a range of different qualitative methods. The research highlights blind spots in practice and argues the importance of resisting the pressures of performativity in order to create conditions and spaces for faith to truly flourish.

Key words: Growing Faith; Performativity; Nurturing Fruitfulness; Educational Chaplaincy; Partnerships.

Introduction:

Against a backdrop of general decline, marked by increasing age profiles and decreasing attendance across many of its parishes, the Church of England, has, in recent years, launched a number of strategies to promote evangelism, church planting and faith development. These have included the development of Resource Churches, sponsorship of the St Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, 'Growing Younger and More Diverse', and the initiative which is the focus of this article, the 'Growing Faith Foundation' (GFF). Approved by the House of Bishops in 2019 and inaugurated in 2021, the Foundation has two core purposes. Firstly, to ensure that children, young people and families are central to the Church's mission and ministry, and, secondly, to develop faith within the nexus of church, school and home.

In conjunction with state funding, the CoE's c.16000 parishes support or co-sponsor some c.4800 primary schools (for children up to the age of 11) and 228 secondary schools (for young people aged between 11-16, or 11-18, if they have a sixth form attached) across England and Wales. This equates to approximately a quarter of English Primary Schools and 1 in 16 secondary schools

(Church of England, 2023a). Originally, as a response to the socio-economic conditions engendered by the industrial revolution, CoE schools were set up to support the development of children's education in areas of disadvantage; today however Church schools can be found in diverse socio-economic geographies. Levels of involvement in Church schools by clergy, lay ministries and church members vary considerably between contexts. This tends to be influenced by histories, priorities, levels of locally available resources and the importance, or otherwise, placed on the relationship between churches and schools.

Church schools retain an expressed commitment to faith values; however, the meaning, significance and outworking of this is contextually variable. Alongside, OfSTED, the state's inspection system for schools in England, Church schools are subject to SIAMS (The Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools) inspections. SIAMS focuses upon schools' effectiveness in promoting and outworking a distinctive Christian ethos and vision in every aspect of its life in order to promote flourishing for all (Church of England, 2023b). GFF's inauguration as a national strategy is concerned with developing relationships between CoE parishes and schools that cultivate faith and flourishing. It is intended to build a culture, and, develop practices that support faith exploration and development with children, young people and their families through the engagement of local parishes. 'Journeying with', 'accompanying' and 'exploring' are key motifs within the strategy that speak to a commitment to the incarnational, and, to processual learning and development, with the language and practices of educational and community chaplaincy highlighted as key to its implementation (Casson, Hulbert, Wooley and Bowie, 2020).

In late 2022, as part of an early evaluation of its work and impact, GFF commissioned a number of pieces of research. This article explores the findings of one of these projects – a 'deep dive' case study into 'Smythvale' Church of England Primary School. Smythvale is a small village (population <1500) located equidistantly between two larger market towns in the North-East of England. The village itself is leafy, relatively affluent and set around a large, unspoilt village green near the banks of a river. The School has an overall pupil population of <70, 10% of whom are in

receipt of free school meals¹. The village is served by a Catholic Church, and 'St Bart's' Anglican Church, which, through the encouragement of the current vicar, 'Yvette' and the deployment of a Parish Youth Missioner, 'Cara', has, in recent years, become increasingly involved in the life of the school. Together, Church and School have sought to embrace and trailblaze the principles and practices of Growing Faith, including the appointment of young worship leaders who work with adults to lead collective acts of worship in School and Church. Further description of context and our approach to research are developed in the methodology section.

Literature

The following review of literature, drawn from sociological, educational and theological thinking, is intended as a critical contextual backdrop to some of the empirical themes presented later in this paper.

Programmes, Performativity and the Quest for 'Certainty'.

Faith communities exist within the socio-cultural frames of wider societies. The postmodern, neoliberal era is characterised by individualisation and risk (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2007). Governments and organisations have come to develop pseudo-mitigation to wider societal risks by developing programmatic approaches to governance which, attempt to promote ostensible 'security' and (quality) assurance as counterpoints to risk via outcomes that are always 'measurable' (Duffy, 2017; Hayler, 2017). OfSTED (and SIAMs in the context of Church) schools is just one example of such 'measurement'. This broader culture of performativity, has osmosed to become pervasive in the context of Western churches (Lynch, 2019; Wilson, 2019) many of which face existential threats from declining numbers and ever-growing age profiles. 'Programatisation', pseudo-measurement and performativity appear to have become the managerialist means by which churches act (Lynch, 2019) to self-soothe, and justify activity that attempts to 'fill the gaps'. Yet faith is found at the nexus of certainty and uncertainty – its prophetic gift is to move us towards questioning the 'assumptive knowns' of the different domains of our human condition (Rollins, 2012). Faith calls us towards fruitfulness (Roberts,

¹ Nationally, 22.5% of children are entitled to free school meals (UK Government, 2023). Receipt of free school meals is a key marker of economic disadvantage in the UK.

2018) - the antithesis of shallow performativity with which fruitfulness itself is often conflated (Lynch, 2019). It calls the church towards relational communication of God's transcendence (Root, 2017), rather than the measurable and formulaic programmatic perpetuation of a received cultural faith which appears to be withering on the vine. Faith formation needs to develop beyond the safe prescriptiveness of cognitive rote learning towards growth of a living, risky faith, where spaces for questions, wonder and doubt are fostered (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013; Lamont, 2020). This, as Westerhoff (2012) suggests, is essential in order to enable meaningful faith that will be able to thrive in the context of contemporary contingency, complexity and risk. It is for this reason that Westerhoff further argues the need to go beyond cognitive programmatic that emphasise teaching religion towards 'communicating Christ' (p.85) in ways that are profoundly lived and relational (see also Root, 2007, 2017). As Csinos and Beckwith, (2013 p.46) argue: 'Over time and without the warmth of intimate and personal encounters with God, the study of God can overshadow the authentic experience of God'. Faith, therefore, is 'grown not taught' (Westerhoff, 2012 p.19).

Christian Values: Bridge or Barrier?

Values as the long-term underlying principles used to decode what is right, wrong, good or bad are axiologically contextual and shaped by the moral, theological and socio-political (Moss, 2007). The values of the Anglican educational vision are concerned with encouraging a full and flourishing life for all (see John 10v10) – developing wisdom, knowledge and skills and offering hope and aspiration, in promoting community and living well together (Draycott, 2016). They are underpinned by a deep commitment to serving the common good and towards dignity and respect for all (ibid.). The focus on the whole child and the development of their spiritual, moral, intellectual and academic character is therefore central to the CoE's involvement in education and the foundational *telos* of its expressed axiological commitment to these values as experientially lived (The Church of England, 2015). The Theos Report 'Doing God in Education' (Cooling, 2010) argues, learning to make judgments about the meaning and significance of what we learn, and how, is a fundamental educational concern. What teachers teach, and how, is, therefore, significantly influenced by who they are and what they understand as being of value (Worsley, 2013). Indeed, Swaner and Wolfe (2022, p.41) suggest 'The character of teachers is

foundational to the flourishing of students.’ Christian values as those derived from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ are the expressive outworkings of a commitment to following his example (Westerhoff, 2012).

Discourses pertaining to (‘British’) values’ are, of course, central to governmental rhetoric regarding educational policies, priorities and practices (Department for Education, 2014; Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Given church schools’ own particular espousal (Cooling, 2016), values can, therefore, be seen as *teleological* and rhetorical ‘bridging points’– spaces where teachers and school leaders can feel comfortable in expressing ideas that may be ‘cognitively known’, but, with reference to ‘Christian values’ not necessarily experientially lived. However, drawing on Sensabaugh (1924), Westerhoff (2012, p.85) argues: ‘Religion, is an experience, and we cannot communicate anything we have not verified. The teacher may teach about Christianity, but if he (*sic*) is to communicate Christ, he (*sic*) must live in fellowship with him.’

Creating Genuine Spaces for Faith Exploration and Development

Genuine faith development takes time and appropriate conditions for growth (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013). Relational essence between individuals, others and the divine, or what Hay and Nye (2011, p.108) articulate as ‘recognition of relational consciousness’ together with a sense of choice in pursuing a relationship with God are key to developing a flourishing faith (Casson, *et al.*, 2020). Collective worship in school, which should ‘offer the opportunity, without compulsion, to all pupils and adults to grow spiritually through experiences of prayer, stillness, worship and reflection’ (Church of England, 2021 p.3) is also highlighted as potentially significant to faith development and formation.

Creating time for children and young people to ‘be with God’ and recognise Him in the whole of life – in the everyday *and* extraordinary is essential to growing an inquisitive and holistic faith (Nye, 2017; Swanner and Wolfe, 2022). This reflects the ways in which children appear to ‘have a more seamless join between their spiritual and physical experiences’ (Lamont, 2020 p.18).

‘Faith is connecting with the God who holds all things together. So, faith is found in our joys and cares, in our challenges and conflicts as we lean into God’s presence and guidance. Faith informs our thinking and our actions as we discern how God might be

using us in his work. Faith is an ongoing encounter with God. Faith is our everyday existence with the God who holds all things together' (Church of England, n.d.).

The co-creation of spaces which foster wonder, exploration, worship, questioning, experimentation, reflection and resolution are essential therefore to abductive faith formation (Csinos, 2020; Westerhoff, 2012) and are central to the GFF strategy. To be effective, these spaces must develop cultures in which children and young people, their questions, perceptions, doubts and experiences are genuinely and respectfully valued (Nye, 2017; Westerhoff, 2012). Such an approach is essential to the decolonisation of the gospel and to the development of an enduring faith which is personally owned in the context of deepening community (Csinos, 2020, 2022). These are spaces to be filled, not with rigid curricular programmes or rote certainties, but with opportunities for wonder and encounter (Nye, 2017). They should be spaces which allow possibilities for the divinely created to meet the divine creator. They are spaces of risk and grace - spaces created for God to fill - in order that God can do God's work- rather than spaces which are programmatically filled because of leaders' or educators' fears that God might not show up (*ibid.*). In this regard, Crispin (2017) articulates a commitment to a Pauline theology of accommodation. Premised upon divine modelling of preferential grace towards humanity, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11, invokes the church towards the 'radical hospitality' (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013, p.127) of ethical and joyful accommodation of those deemed newer or younger in faith. Such theologies call Christian educators, church leaders and church communities towards a deep and radical re-imagining and re-ordering of their ethos and practices in ensuring the preference of others as they explore and deepen faith (Crispin, 2017).

Faith Development as Lived Action

The development of a rounded, holistic and living faith which actively expresses Kingdom values is integral to the work of the GFF (Church of England, 2023c). This reflects Biblical imperatives that faith should be actively lived out (see, for example, James 1v27; James 2v26). Imaginor, a UK-based organisation which supports spiritual and moral development in schools, contends that faith in action is theology in action and the marrying of the two is critical for deep discipleship (Imaginor, 2017). This links to ideas from Piagetian developmental psychology which contend that children are active participants in the development of their internal worlds (Fontana, 1995).

They reach beyond Self into the world in order to actively participate in it. Symbiotically, both the world, and the child's internal world, are changed (and grow) in the process (ibid). Likewise, Lamont (2020) argues for it to take root and flourish, children must be allowed to generatively co-create a living faith with others around them². Thus, faith must be symbiotically and reflexively grounded in the context of 'real-world' experiences that can be touched and acted upon in meaningful ways. In this way, faith as *praxis* goes beyond the development of beliefs, attitudes and worship practices, towards a more critically engaged ontology (Root, 2017). This enables children and young people to develop a more participatory, living faith which expresses Christian social teaching as a whole-of-life practice in the classroom and beyond (Imaginor, 2017). Such practices release children and young people towards active leadership and holistic expressions of a living and active faith which promotes common flourishing (Swaner and Wolfe, 2022).

This resonates with the Growing Faith Connections report (Church of England, 2023c) which calls for the rejection of programmed passivity wherein children, young people and families become quasi-consumers of pre-ordained religious goods. Instead, the Report encourages the voiced participation of children and young people in promoting the development of a living and active Kingdom faith which has a visible impact on their worlds and the things that concern them (Casson, *et al.*, 2020). This reflects a new prophetic imaginary of 'courageous advocacy' embedded within the SIAMS inspection framework which grounds and gives expression to collective and actively lived-out Christian values in school communities which release children and young people to reflect on and contribute to the common good (Church of England, 2021). Thus, children and young people can be empowered to prophetically excavate (Bruggeman, 2014) and respond to issues of contemporary injustice and need in ways that make a real-world, living-faith difference (Casson, Cooling and Francis, 2017). Such *praxes*, therefore, begin to release children and young people's potential as spiritual leaders in the context of school, home and wider community (ibid.), and 'give pupils confidence to develop and take ownership of their

² This includes peers and others of different ages and speaks to the development of intergenerational theology and ecclesiology. The importance of modeling and mimesis within Piagetian and wider constructivist thinking is also integral to discussions on faith formation and development.

spiritual development' (Casson, *et al.*, 2020 n.p.). Thus, faith, as active experimentation, moves from the abstract to the lived in ways that are not detached from life as a whole (*ibid.*).

Methodology

Our approach to this research was to undertake a singular 'deep-dive' case study which explored the implementation of the Growing Faith strategy in the life of the School³. In developing a multi-faceted methodology, the triangulation of different empirical data, has, we suggest, enabled the production of rich and rounded findings (Cresswell, 2013) which underpin the evaluation developed in this research. Children and young people are at the heart of Growing Faith. As such, attempting to place them at the centre of this research has been paramount. As part of their approach to Growing Faith, the School, at the start of each academic year in September, invite children to consider becoming Young Leaders of Worship (YLoW). 'Arthur', 'Eve', 'George', 'Jayden', 'Eden' and 'Alice' (who were aged 10-11 at the time of the research - Autumn, 2022-Spring, 2023) volunteered to do so. The children meet regularly (usually weekly) with Cara to plan, prepare and deliver acts of collective worship for the whole school community. On occasion, invitations to these acts of worship, which usually take place in the school hall, but sometimes in the nearby medieval church building, are also extended to parents, relatives and the wider village.

Our approach to the School and Church to undertake this research with them was warmly welcomed. The School contacted the children's parents/carers on our behalf to outline the plan for the research and to gain consent for the children to participate. As the School, and, in particular the YLoW are culture sharing groups, an ethnographic approach to the research, and especially, to its first phase was rationalized. In order to enable the excavation of critical meaning and interpretation, a stance of 'otherness' (Walsh and Seale, 2018) was adopted throughout the research. The intention, especially given that as researchers we have worked in similar environments and are embedded in related educational and ministry contexts, was to develop an ethnographic imaginary that enabled us to see 'strangeness in the ordinary and the ordinary in the strange' (Bright, 2013; Fetterman, 2010; Willis, 2000). Our approach therefore was

³ Smythvale was selected for this research due to its relative proximity for the researchers and because of its reputational commitment to the principles and practices of Growing Faith.

intended to disrupt our own thinking and pre-imaginaries by attempting to go beyond surface observations in order to 'see differently' in ways that may have been uncomfortable but ultimately 'truth-revealing'. In this sense, we have sought to cultivate a prophetic imaginary within the research that seeks to generate deeper insights regarding what 'is' happening and what 'is *really* happening' in the context of Growing Faith within this case study site. Our hope in doing so is that this will also speak to wider contexts. The overarching ethnographic approach enabled the inclusion of observations, informal conversations, photographic evidence, interviews and focus groups. After the agreement of consents, we met with the YLoW and Cara to introduce ourselves, outline the purpose and proposed schedule of the research and gain each child's assent to participate and video-record sessions. The children welcomed us and gave their agreement to take part. Over three non-consecutive weeks, either one or both of us observed the children and Cara at work, participating in the group as we were invited, or, as it felt fitting. This approach meant in some ways we became part of the group – this felt appropriate to the context of the research and to helping the children act and interact more naturally around us. As researchers, we engaged in discussion after each of these sessions. This allowed us to debrief, wonder together about what we had observed and engaged with, and, triangulate and record perspectives.

The observation sessions were later followed by an interactive focus group with the children. The focus group was split across two hour-long sessions on consecutive weeks. This was designed to allow the YLoW to explore and express their ideas regarding faith development, church and their role as worship leaders. With the intention of enabling the children to speak more freely (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017) these were undertaken without Cara being present. The focus group used various approaches and stimulus including video clips, interactive and creative activities and discussion (Greig, Taylor and McKay, 2013; Heath, Brooks, Cleaver and Ireland, 2009; Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher, 2009) to enable the children to abductively catalyze shared thinking and reflection. We regularly reassured the children that there were 'no wrong answers' and that different perspectives were welcomed and had equal value. In this way, we sought to create a space for the respectful validation of honest reflection and individual and collective learning that honoured the possibility of going beyond 'anticipated' or humanly prescribed answers or platitudinous

certitudes. This, we suggest, offered space to cultivate wonder and wondering, and to tussle with the often unnamed ambiguities and uncertainties of faith – principles which are central to Growing Faith and to meaningful faith development.

Upon completion of our work with the children, we engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews with ‘Megan’, Smythvale’s headteacher, Yvette and Cara. The purpose of these interviews was to explore perceptions of Growing Faith from the perspective of each of these adult stakeholders and, in doing so, understand its significance to both School and Church. These interviews followed a broadly similar schedule which allowed us to develop insights regarding:

- the cultivation of faith and spiritual leadership in school and the wider community;
- lived faith values;
- and, the development of faith partnerships between School, Church and home.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2022), each transcript was systematically coded. Candidate themes were identified from each data item and synthesized to generate master themes for the interviews as a whole. These were subsequently triangulated with the earlier ethnographic data gathered with the children in providing a rich and contrasting data set, the findings of which are described below⁴.

Findings

A note on the significance of time and context

It should be noted that the research happened at a particularly busy time for the School and Church. The YLoW were working with Cara to prepare leading Christmas worship and for another high-profile event. The School was also the subject of a SIAMS inspection during the course of our research. Case studies tend to capture particular moments in time. The context of circumstances can, therefore, play a significant part in what might be observed (Creswell, 2013). Whilst we recognise this, and the particularities of context, our sense remains that certain cultural undercurrents regarding the outworking of Growing Faith remain significant in the wider context of Smythvale’s practices, and, that these can offer critical insights to the wider, national

⁴ Attempts were made to engage parents/carers in the research via a focus group and online questionnaire; however, this only elicited negligible interest.

strategy. Our findings therefore recognise the good work that is taking place in growing faith in one particular local context, whilst also naming facets of ethos and approach that might be further refined in nurturing fruitfulness from a national strategy which holds significant potential.

Ethnographic Reflections

Observations of YWoL Group.

The YLoW work with Cara took place, each week, in a separate, unused classroom, at a time when other lessons were happening elsewhere. There was a culture of warm inclusion and encouragement evident in the sessions we observed. This appeared to reflect the overall ethos of the School in which each person, their uniqueness, gifts and views are valued⁵. The children seemed very much at home in this space, and in being and working together. Cara and the children would meet round a table. There would often be time for an icebreaker or 'check-in' to see how people were, followed by a re-cap of the previous week's activity and space for Cara to lead collaborative discussions which outlined targets for the session. This might involve preparing and practicing prayers or readings from scripture. In preparation for their Christmas service, the children were invited to contribute ideas that mattered to them for intercessory prayer. Cara asked: "What could we say to God?" In one way, we could see this 'naturalising' prayer; yet paradoxically, it also appeared to de-naturalise it through preparing what was to be said⁶. Cara seemed to change the focus of the children's concerns (climate change, impact on polar bears, flooding in Pakistan, the UK cost of living crisis, homelessness, people known to the children who were ill) towards things that perhaps seemed (at least from an adult, or seasonal perspective) 'more appropriate' to the service. Shifts in the children's body language caused us as researchers to reflect on whether this perhaps shut down opportunities for awe, wonder and expression⁷. In the same observation, the children practiced reading different verses from scripture, yet to us, it seemed that they had little understanding of what they were reading, or its significance to the

⁵ Using computers to research ideas, or type onto MS Word, or PowerPoint was a coveted task and allowed those who were IT-confident to share their skills with others who were less so.

⁶ As researchers, we later reflected on whether praying together at the start of each meeting might have been helpful in naturalise talking with God and establish focus in each session. This reflection led us in our later focus groups with the children to do this. This was greeted by some of the children with excitement and surprise.

⁷ Eve later shared a powerful prayer she had written concerning global warming.

context of the service, beyond 'performing' what they were being asked to read. This seemed like a missed opportunity to question and wonder together.

Overall, the facilitation of, approach to and 'tone' of the sessions we observed felt very much like that which might be expected in any other classroom or curriculum subject in the School. On one level, this perhaps reflects a seamlessness through which faith might be viewed as being embedded in a whole-school ethos and approach; on another however, it very much felt like the approaches employed, with their focus on 'work' and 'outcomes' for the session were grounded more in expectations of the OfSTED framework thus negating its full potential for sacredness. The culture of the sessions felt decidedly cognitive in pedagogy and output-focused in orientation. Spaces for questioning, wonder, reflection, sharing in the context of a developing community and more personal and 'natural' forms of prayer and exploration of 'life' and scripture were limited. Deeper enquiry, where it did happen, seemed stifled and exploration of questions appeared to be addressed (including by some of the children) with predictable rote. Spaces that may have allowed the possibility for God to 'show up' seemed closed off, perhaps because of fear (that He may not), or uncertainty regarding boundaries, or how to respond if He did⁸. It appeared, to us at least, that products of performativity took precedence over the processual and exploratory approaches of fostering wonder, questioning, community, and deepening of living and active faith so prized in the type of educational chaplaincy described in the Growing Faith strategy. There were moments of discomfort in our observations - moments where questions, sometimes of wonder and significance, were missed, perhaps because Cara was so focused on task completion, or, in working with one child, at the expense of noticing others. In the performative busyness, some of the things that mattered to the children went unseen, unheard, and, with them, opportunities for deepening conversations, wonder and faith, missed. In all of this, we want to affirm Cara - her passion, calling and heart for these children and this ministry is undeniable. Yet our observations of Cara's practice highlight to everyone involved in educational chaplaincy, the need to attend to the small, and the delicacy and richness of Spirit-

⁸ This perhaps reflects a wider crisis of faith in some Western churches that has led many to retreat to the 'safer ground' of fixed and performative certitudes, or what Rollins (2012) describes as 'addiction to certainty.'

attentive processes. A key task of chaplaincy is to 'notice'. This requires appropriate space, stillness and awareness from which to respond.

Themes Emerging from Focus Group Work with Children.

We recognise our focus groups with the children merely 'scratched the surface' of our understanding and that more time with them may have elicited deeper insights, learning and reflection. The approach adopted was intended to create a different space for/with the children – one where they could be more exploratory and expressively truthful regarding their experiences, views, and (un-)certainties. We therefore adopted an expressed stance as fellow pilgrim-learners *with* the children⁹. In this way, we wanted to give permission to question and truthfully express thoughts, perceptions, and ideas. This felt like a deliberate contrast to the sessions we had observed in which anticipated outcomes, ideas and 'correct answers' were more affixed. We sought therefore to allow the children to think and reflect in authentic ways.

The centrality of building relationships at depth is key to educational chaplaincy and to the Growing Faith strategy. In our work with the children, we attempted to cultivate warmth, openness and a willingness to listen and wonder at depth; however, given the limitations of time, we acknowledge that we were, perhaps, unable to do this as fully as we may have wished. However, we also appreciate that the children may have been able to express questions and critique more authentically to us as people they did not know, compared with Cara, Yvette, or Megan with whom they may have a longer-standing bond.

(Children's Perspectives on) Growing a Growing-Up Faith

Together, we talked about faith using the metaphors of journeying and climbing a tree. Each child was invited to place themselves on a 'Blob Tree' (Wilson and Long, 2018) to illustrate how they viewed their own faith in that moment. This opened up some deep conversations and led to further questions. These included the extent to which the children thought the church accommodated their faith-questions and experiences. There was a sense in this aspect of our

⁹ To express and validate this idea, we showed the children the Pixar Short 'La Luna'. This film shows a boy, his father and grandfather learning together and from each other. The children discussed their thoughts on how each of them, especially the boy as the youngest, contributed.

work of validating different subjectivities and emotions that go beyond 'childish happy-clappiness' in fostering a growing-up faith where lament, joy, doubt, grief and a quest for justice are validated. The observation was made that there is not necessarily an affixed position on the tree - but that at different times in people's faith journeys they might find themselves at different places. Perhaps surprisingly, given that he was the most confident and performative member of the YLoW group, Jayden expressed that he wasn't anywhere on the tree, but looking up at it and still considering faith. This felt like a very powerful, authentic moment. He reflected with honesty, wonder, realization, relief and a kind of quiet sadness as he expressed what he truly thought. Arthur, a boy with little church connection, articulated a deeply relational faith. He saw his faith as being on a strong platform on the Blob Tree, explaining that it gave him confidence and strength to be himself and take risks:

"God's by my side and I feel I can do absolutely anything."

Other children, who did attend church, were however in some ways *less* expressive regarding experiences of a personal relationship with God.

[Relational connections in developing faith, church and leadership](#)

We took time to explore the significance of different relationships, including those with family members, school and church in fostering faith. Responses to questions of faith and home (e.g. 'Do parents/grandparents ever talk with you about faith?') were varied. For some, 'faith', or attending church, was the norm and likewise greeted with diverse reactions:

"My granny does" (Eve).

"Aw my dad! All he talks about at home is God. We go to church every single Sunday!" (George).

For others however, faith did not factor in family life, and, where it did, discussion and engagement tended to be at the children's instigation.

The children were keen to express their appreciation for Cara and the role she played in giving them opportunities to explore faith:

"Before I started working with Cara, I wasn't that interested. But now I understand more. She has helped me start off, but now I understand more..." (George).

"We don't want to talk about God all the time, but we learn to talk about Him naturally..." (Arthur).

This appears an important relationship which enables the children time and space to consider matters of faith and spirituality. Whilst there were clearly constraints on Cara's time with opportunities for deeper exploration appearing squeezed by performative expectations and continual demands brought about by preparation for acts of worship, the children clearly valued her presence and the dedicated nature of her role.

We engaged with the children regarding their current experiences of church and what kind of church they would like to be part of. There was a sense of hunger but exclusion in much of what they said. Some of the group expressed an appetite to be a part of the broader church, but on reflecting on their experiences to date, didn't always find it to be a space where they were invited or encouraged to engage and participate in ways that were *meaningful to them*. This exclusion meant some felt they were not an equal or valuable part of the Church. When asked what kind of church would they want to belong to, themes of active participation and relevance to lived experience were evident:

"A church where I'm more involved - less sitting, more doing." (Jayden).

"Children don't like just sitting watching what's going on - they'll get a bit bored." (George).

"ACTIVE - Worship - moving round." (Arthur).

"Everyone to speak and share ideas." (George).

"I'd want to be part of a church that gets involved with the outside world." (Alice).

Alice was one of a number of the children who expressed a desire to be involved in worshipping God through creation and the importance of engaging with environmental/climate concerns as an essential part of faith. She suggested a regular Muddy Church would be a good way to do this, and, that the Church more broadly has lots of work to do in order to meaningfully address and speak out on climate issues .

In discussing leadership with the group, we used their previous knowledge and experience of participating in the 'Archbishops' Young Leaders Award' (Archbishop of York Youth Trust, 2009).

They listed 'being clear', 'strong', 'positive', 'joyful', 'courageous', 'brave', 'a good role model', 'willing to forgive' and 'looking after others' as key characteristics of good leadership. We explored how, in the Bible and beyond, God called different people, including those like Moses, who struggled to speak confidently, to positions of leadership. Within this frame, we discussed some of the gifts of leadership found in Ephesians 4 and the importance of complementary teams which value others and their God-given gifts and graces in expressing wholeness in the body of Christ. The children seemed confident in identifying their own skills and qualities and in affirming others':

"I can solve things." (Jayden) "Get jobs done." (Alice) "Helpful, clear, strong, caring, faith, joyful." (George) "Caring, kind, trust-worthy and helpful" (Eden) "Forgiving, kind, brave, helpful, hard-working." (Eve) "Supportive, focused, helpful, caring, pastor, curious." (Arthur).

It is clear these children have lots to offer. The urgent task is to create conditions in the nexus through which they, and their gifts, can be released to fully flourish in enabling transformation in, for, through and with church, community and society.

Interview Themes

Upon completion of our work with the children, we interviewed Megan, Cara and Yvette in order to develop perspectives and further triangulation. Three master themes, described below, emerged from this data.

Children's Leadership: Towards Mutuality.

Each interviewee emphasised the importance of creating spaces for children's deepening participation and leadership in the context of Growing Faith. Megan described how Growing Faith had begun to generate a culture wherein children can lead adults in the way of faith. Reflecting on pupils' engagement with prayer spaces she proffered:

"It has been a very positive way that the children have developed their spirituality but have also encouraged adults to develop theirs as well."

Yet she also noted that children's understanding, outworking and expression of faith is, in many instances, different to that of adults. Likewise, Cara highlighted the importance of children developing ownership of, and, leadership in, deepening and giving expression to faith:

“... they are taking ownership of what they believe or don’t believe, and they are bringing their ideas as a way of developing and nurturing their own faith – they are on a journey of their own faith.”

There was a recognition from each interviewee of the impact of ‘missing generations’ in church attendance upon children’s faith formation:

“[Faith] stays at a level, I would describe as, part of the culture of this country, part of the tradition of those families who had been church-goers, but it didn’t go anywhere else. It didn’t involve the kind of personal exploration and personal engagement e.g. ‘What does this mean for *me* spiritually?’” (Yvette).

For the majority of these children’s parents, church has not, therefore, been a significant part of their story. Likewise, Megan noted: “We’ve looked at children’s perceptions of the Christian tradition; for them it’s not necessarily about going to church.” Cara suggested that whilst parents may not be interested in exploring faith, they are interested in their children. Children’s faith engagement and spiritual leadership therefore present opportunities to engage parents; however, there was an ethical caution that engagement with families should be developed respectfully, in community, and, in ways that are not manipulative.

Lived Values: But a Living Faith?

Each participant recognised the importance of the ‘common currency’ of expressed Christian values. Megan highlighted ways in which the School’s Christian ethos encourages the children to be courageous advocates who understand and engage with issues of social and moral concern in various ways. This includes awareness-raising, letter-writing, fundraising and prayer. For Megan, working with issues of concern to the children is key to enabling them to grow Christian values. Whilst this speaks of the normalization of faith ‘by doing’, it does not necessarily emphasize the deeper *inward* transformation of living faith. Awe and wonder risk being squeezed therefore in the focused performativity of outward actions. This, Cara and Yvette recognised as symbiotically influencing a ‘right answer’ mentality – where Jesus is the reductionist answer, irrespective of the question. However, Yvette, in particular, also emphasized the significance of another dynamic – inherent nominalism in parts of the Anglican Church- as detrimental to growing a culture of living faith. Cara’s view of her own ministry however might be seen as something of an antidote to these issues. She suggested her role is concentrated upon a ministry of presence

which joins in with, and makes contributions to, the broader life of the school, enriching it by embodying an explicit living and lived-out faith. The challenge of doing this meaningfully involves ensuring sufficiencies of time and intentionality in order to grow fruitful faith.

Starting journeys of change: building collaborative partnerships

Developing meaningful partnerships is integral to Growing Faith. Each participant articulated a sense of significance regarding mutual and overarching benefits of partnering together. Cara expressed the Church's passion to connect with the School and a need and willingness to invest its resources in children and families. Pursuit of a diocesan award which frameworks and recognises excellent practices between CoE churches and schools, has, according to Megan expanded the relationship and fostered a different outlook in which different opportunities to work collaboratively have been adopted:

“It's really beneficial and what we find is that there is more connection with school, church and home.”

Yet Megan also recognised that pressures of time and cost are prohibitive to deepening and widening collaboration. It is perhaps this pressure, of seeking to exact everything possible, within these constraints, that inadvertently contributes to the sense of performativity within this partnership, and, which ironically undermines the truer spaces and processes of Growing Faith that the children in the study would seem to value. Cara, too, re-emphasised the importance of spaces for belonging, connection and meaning-making, which, despite her articulated commitment to incarnational ministry in the School, she recognised as being squeezed. Yvette, likewise recognised gaps between her intentions for this ministry, born out of a tangible passion and sense of vision for ministry in the village, and what is actually happening on the ground. This passion drives a desire to continue the commencement of new initiatives, of a desire to see evidence of growth, but also, perhaps, a nascent recognition of misplaced metrics in evaluating this. There appeared a dawning recognition in our conversation with Yvette of the need to avoid spreading efforts too thinly - for investments of time, patience and faith in seeing meaningful fruitfulness, and of developing a commitment to 'quality over quantity/quantification'. This echoes Cara's emphasis on the importance of developing spaces for meaningful relationship building in order to nurture a sense of connective purpose in exploring faith.

Other priorities for partnership were also articulated. There was a recognition from each interviewee, especially Yvette and Cara, that the transition between primary and secondary schools was a key moment in young people's faith journeys. As they leave primary school and disperse to different secondary schools, locally, none of which have a faith foundation, there is a sense in which faith, or at least its collective development and articulation, is lost, or at least paused. Contact with the Church decreases. This phase, with its loss of continuity, seems to represent 'growing up and growing out of faith'. Yvette and Cara ponder what to do about this – with initiatives that might engage the young people of the village being trialled. This seems to link with discussions regarding how the Church might need to be different in its approach and priorities in order to continue to engage young people in faith conversations and development. Herein lie issues of resources and capacities and of wishing to ensure that fruit which begins to grow whilst the children are at primary school continues to flourish when they leave. Initial wonderings regarding potential partnerships and chaplaincy ministry might be extended with secondary schools were in evidence in our interviews, with Yvette expressing a desire to listen to young people regarding what might be helpful.

Given the privacy of its nature, home has perhaps always been the most challenging aspect of the nexus to understand and influence. This was also evident in our research, with only one parent offering to engage with our research. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic offered the Church opportunities to support families in the village during lockdowns in creative and engaging ways. Megan, Cara and Yvette each described how members of the Church supplied activities and developed online videos that enacted Bible stories which went viral in the village, and made a significant difference to how the Church was viewed:

“...there were lots of gaps and we were fillers. We produced stuff that lifted up the family” (Yvette).

Yvette and Cara reflected on ways in which families reported engaging more in faith conversations as a result of this activity. Growing Faith is having an influence on families in other ways. Yvette reported a conversation with one parent, whose child had expressed atheistic views

at home. To the surprise of the parent, the child said they were enjoying worship at school and were considering joining a group that meets in Church to explore faith further.

Regarding conversations with another parent, Megan noted:

“One parent last week mentioned that since joining our school (not that long ago) her child has enjoyed being in worship, going to messy church and now wants to be baptised. It is transformational for some pupils.”

In all of this, there is a growing sense of dialogue within the nexus. The significance of context and goodwill should not be underestimated here however. Each interviewee noted that building the partnership has taken time, understanding and considerable effort to reach its current position. One senior member of Diocesan staff, commenting on the work of Growing Faith in Smythvale, cited the importance of the concentration of community capital in rural contexts as significant in facilitating collaboration and change.

The growing dialogue encountered in Smythvale’s partnership gives the sense of a nexus that is willing to ‘speak back to itself’ in order that its different contributing dimensions might grow and flourish. Echoing the YLoWs’ comments, there was a recognition from Megan, Yvette and Cara that changes are needed for St Bart’s to be a ‘wineskin’ where children’s and families’ faith might flourish:

“Church needs to be more relevant and engaging if children are going to want to go – if they see the point of it then they will lead their parents to it too” (Megan).

“Church needs to be more relevant, addressing issues that matter to [children and families]” (Cara).

"We need to journey with our young people, just because they leave primary school into a non-church education environment, it doesn't mean that we stop journeying with them. We need to somehow find a way to journey with them. Maybe more intention to ask them how and then to try it, whatever they tell us, just do it." (Yvette).

Listening to these voices is important, but changing the culture and expressed ecclesiology of a congregation as a result, requires a committed whole-church approach. This reflects a key task in enabling the fulfilment of flourishing in the Smythvale nexus. Other priorities are evident too. There are inherent challenges and possibilities in working with teachers who do not necessarily

have, or express, a personal Christian faith, yet who are expected to understand and facilitate the potential of Christian transformativity with their pupils.

For Yvette:

“[This] journey of faith is both within the person who is working out their faith, and those that are enabling or facilitating, teaching, guiding and so on.”

It would seem, therefore, that continuing to deepen support for school staff in furthering Christian distinctiveness remains an important task. Likewise, in order to cultivate fruitfulness, developing communities of practice with the growing cadre of educational chaplains who find themselves at the coalface of Growing Faith in diverse contexts, must be prioritised.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate the implementation and development of Growing Faith in a single study site, the selection of which was premised on the reputation of good work unfolding within the local nexus. We observed and heard good things. There was a clear commitment to developing partnership between Church and School, a clear values-led ethos and a growing sense of listening and responding in pursuing change. However, ethnographic insights also highlighted particular challenges, which were, perhaps, not necessarily obviated or acknowledged. There is clearly a sense of shared passion for Growing Faith in Smythvale. However, to enable continuing flourishing, evaluation that ‘minds the gap(s)’ between rhetorical expression of what partners *believe* is happening, borne out of a place of vision, and, the reality of what *is happening*, is required. This speaks of a need to develop effective evaluation within the overall Growing Faith strategy that is motivated by a spirit of healthy questioning and reflection, over one that risks being driven by pre-determined outcomes.¹⁰ Asking questions with children, parents, families, teachers, school and church leaders, and allowing this to shape educational, theological, ecclesiological *praxes* is therefore essential.

Our findings indicate four major themes of note, with following recommendations:

- the need to reflect upon the expressed nature of Christian values in Church schools;

¹⁰ There is a phrase that has run through aspects of our observations and analysis: ‘We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong’ (U2, 11 O’clock Tick Tock).

- the need to conscientize and challenge enacted cultures of performativity which threaten to squeeze spaces where faith and fruitfulness might be cultivated;
- the need to develop applied theologies and ecclesiologies of accommodation, wherein children, young people and families' active participation and 'issues of concern' are given authentic expression;
- and, the need to develop communities of practice which support work within the nexus on local, regional and national levels, with a particular focus on the ministry of educational chaplains.

Values

Our research demonstrates that Church schools hold significant potential to 'normalise' spiritual formation for their whole community (Swaner and Wolfe, 2022); however, for this potential to be fully realised, individuals must choose to understand and model faith beyond a set of values to aspire to, or, rules to live by (Lamont, 2020). Faith cannot therefore simply be reduced to a set of shared values; it is a call to a belief in, and, relationship with God that is both transcendent *and* personal (ibid.). The nexus, wherein educators and whole school communities, can articulate the importance of (Christian) values, but without necessarily having a personal faith (Westerhoff, 2012) therefore represents a potential bridge *and* barrier to the potentialities of Growing Faith. There is an accepted comfortability in knowing *about* God, without necessarily *knowing* God. This is an inherent challenge for Church schools and the Growing Faith Foundation.

Naming and Challenging Performativity

We observed a culture of performativity within Smythvale, which appeared to be driven by a desire, or perhaps pressures to 'succeed'. This seems reflective of the wider culture of performativity in education, and beyond, in which particular metrics are employed in order to validate value and justify investment (Hayler, 2017). Such cultures of performativity, exacerbated by a drive to succeed in mitigating against, or, reversing broad decline, have undoubtedly become pervasive in many places within the Western Church (Lynch, 2019). The drive to 'succeed', by outwardly demonstrating value, outcomes, targets and 'performance' seemed to have become embedded by stealth in the Smythvale nexus. However, whilst performativity may give a temporary outward *appearance* of fruitfulness and provide a sense of cathartic relief, or

comfort regarding work or ministry, it is often deceptive, and not, itself, fruitfulness. This drive for the comforting validation of outcomes and performance was evident in different spaces within our research engagement. It was perhaps driven by the need for certainty which is reflected in broader global constructs and programmatics of risk and risk management (Duffy, 2017). Whilst of course Christians profess faith as certainty (Hebrews 11:1), God's transcendent and mysterious Self will not, cannot, be reduced to the realms of human rubrics. For Rollins (2012), this type of reductionism risks idolatry. Yet it seems that in case God does not turn up in ways that are recognisable, or acceptable, the spaces for God to be present and move in and through questions, wonder, fear, doubt and hope were minimised in the Smythvale nexus, and replaced by defaults to performativity, which ultimately undermine the potential of fostering faith that will enable children, young people and families to navigate contingencies. As Csinos and Beckwith (2013, p. 38) suggest:

'It's not about helping children fall in love with the "dreamy Jesus" portrayed in their Sunday school workbooks. It's about helping them live as committed disciples of the radical way of life Jesus calls us to... Children's ministry is less about providing children with absolute answers and more about helping them live faithfully with questions and doubts that arise on the journey of discipleship.'

If, therefore, Growing Faith is to be orientated towards fruitfulness, faith must be cultivated through co-pilgrimage and the creation of spaces which deeply honour processual learning and engagement in ways that foster genuine spiritual exploration and reflection (Nye, 2017). These spaces may be uncomfortable at times. They are sacred spaces not to be filled with rigid curricular programmes or simplistic answers but opportunities for wonder, encounter, exploration, worship, questioning, and lament - spaces created for God to fill.

[Churches: Towards Accommodation](#)

The children and adults we engaged with articulated, in different ways, the need for Church to change and adapt its priorities and approach in order to be meaningful to the exploration and development of children's and families' faith. The children communicated with passion their *need* for Church to be a place of welcome and inclusion which responded to their desire to *be* active participants in the life of a local faith community. They spoke clearly about their current sense of passivity when attending worship that did not include them in leading, and of their desire that

the Church engage with issues that are generationally consequential to them, specifically, climate change, justice and inclusion. This speaks prophetically to wider debates in the Church regarding ecological justice, and, more broadly, to what it might mean to be Church to emerging generations. It connects to other pertinent ecclesiological debates regarding the development of truly intergenerational Church which is committed to deeply embedding relationalities of participation, co-learning and co-discipleship (Allen and Ross, 2012; Csinos, 2020, 2022), and, the significance of this to developing theological *praxes* of accommodation (Crispin, 2017).

Developing Communities of Practice

Educational chaplains are central to the enactment of the Growing Faith strategy. Significant weight is seemingly being placed upon their success for the Church's future. In Cara, we witnessed someone with a clear and passionate sense of calling to this work. But whilst vocation is pre-eminent, this growing and specialised area of ministry, and, in particular, those who are called to minister therein, need to be nurtured and supported in order that processes of meaningful reflection, which take account of complex ecologies of practice, might be fostered. Whilst Cara enjoyed others' undoubted support, there remains a risk for her, and other educational chaplains, of 'specialism isolation'. Developing intentional local, regional and national 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2000) for support, mentoring and reflective peer-observation, seems therefore, essential for the health and success of Growing Faith, and those who pioneer this ministry.

Conclusion

We have been privileged to undertake this study. It has been an honour for us to observe, listen to and learn with and from the children, Megan, Cara and Yvette – we are thankful to them for the ways in which they graciously allowed us to watch and question¹¹. The Smythvale case study demonstrates many good things are happening in a particular local nexus; however, it also reveals the need to make space *and* close gaps. The insights generated in this paper reflect the idiographic nuances of particular context; however, we hope that they also speak in ways that

¹¹ Likewise, we are grateful to Lucy Moore and the Growing Faith Foundation for commissioning this research and for awarding a grant to make it possible.

are both reflective and prophetic in promoting fruitfulness in the national strategy, and stimulate further inquiry and evaluation of Growing Faith in diverse contexts.

DRAFT

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