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TAKING THE PULSE OF MINISTRY AMONGST CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

RESEARCH REPORT
BY DR SARAH HOLMES
OCTOBER 2024

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Abbreviation:

Throughout the report we use CYF to indicate Children, Young people and Families



INTRODUCTION WITH PETER GREGORY

(ASSOCIATE, CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY & CYM TRUSTEE)



INTRODUCTION



As we were discussing the remit and scope of the newly launched CYM research centre in February 2024, it seemed important to carry out a substantial piece of research work to find out more about the challenges, issues, gaps and opportunities relating to ministry in these areas... We wanted to take the pulse of ministries amongst children, youth and families.

Our hope is that in doing this piece of research, we have captured some of the heart, some of stories and some of the hopes of key stakeholders in raising faith in the younger generations of the church and beyond. As we share these research findings with mission organisations, para-church groups, denominations and local churches and ministries, we want them to prompt reflection on how existing ministry can be enhanced, to spark new ways of thinking, and to foster more dialogue and greater collaborations.

PETER'S COMMENTS

In the pages of this report, there is a lot of information, insight and provocation. Which we humbly bring before you, praying that God will stir those who can actively respond and further enable the growth of His Kingdom. We know that it's good to be provoked towards both reflection and action. Jesus himself adopted this approach many times in his recorded ministry so we ought to expect and embrace this today.¹

In the secular academic field of education much research sets out to explore, expose or reflect on the perceived situations or circumstances.² Sometimes, the information presented may be unpalatable for organisations to hear.³ The limitations of such research may include the intellectual capacity of the researchers, their unacknowledged bias, the choice (or availability) of the sample population included or the way(s) in which the information is presented to the reader.⁴

None of those who have contributed to this report would claim to be entirely free of these challenges, but the prayerful humility in which the information has been collected, considered and presented here is evident throughout the following pages. The intention is not just to claim academic prowess but rather to provide that sense of provocation: if these things are evident in the first quarter of the twenty first century – what ought our corporate response be? How can others use this research to stimulate further exploration of the themes and consider the impactful evaluation of churches, Christian organisations and partnerships towards affecting change?

The Institute of Children Youth and Mission (CYM) hopes to serve the Christian community well and hopes to work more closely with the wider church. Please contact us if you feel there is scope to develop this together. We look forward to serving Christ with you.

¹ Harewood, L. (2021) Is Education Enough? The Journal. Ludlow: The Association of Christian Teachers. Summer 2021: pp 5-7.

² Wallen, N.E. and Fraenkel, J.R., (2013) Educational Research: A guide to the process. London: Routledge.

³ Bowie, R.A., Casson, A. and Hulbert, S. (2018) What Really Matters about Teacher Education at Cathedrals Group Universities and Colleges?

Available from: https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/d67beb8afcf6059127bd10e77f34d1f52207830801a2ac9e978a058be1097b40/1147001/CGITE_1_Report.pdf [accessed September 2024]

⁴ Education Endowment Fund (2024) Evidence and Resources. Available from: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence> [accessed September 2024]



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DR SARAH HOLMES

- This project was scrutinised and approved by the Liverpool Hope University ethics committee.
- Data for this report was collected via an online survey, which was open for three months in Spring 2024. The survey was distributed through denominational, para-church and social media networks. Once complete, 33 young people aged 8 to 18 years old were interviewed to gain their perspectives on the same issues.
- Survey responses were collected from 2108 participants. Once cleaned and probable spam responses removed, this equated to 326 paid workers, 312 volunteer workers, 49 chaplains, 216 church leaders, 296 parents, 140 grandparents, 25 those no longer involved and 142 those who grew up accessing church children's/youthwork. This totalled 1506 useable responses.
- The survey contained a blend of questions, generating qualitative and quantitative data, which was analysed using MAXQDA software, both thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and using descriptive statistics and correlations. Nine detailed papers are being submitted to academic journals and have been summarised in this research report. To keep updated about journal article publications, please join the CYM Research Network.

KEY FINDINGS WERE >

- There is immense passion, commitment and dedication across the UK to support under 18's in their faith journeys. However, it is evident that this often feels overlooked, unappreciated and misunderstood by the wider church.
- There is a loud cry from this sector for the church to intentionally invest and prioritise these ministries and bring them more fully into the centrality of church life, mission and ministry.
- The most striking aspect arising in the young people's interviews was their desire to be involved and active in church life. To them, this showed that they were valued and wanted, much more than providing age specific activities (although they did enjoy those also!). They want to be taken seriously and included in decisions, lead events and services and see existing structures of the church accommodating and empowering them.



- Church leaders expressed a strong sense of value of younger generations in the church. Yet both paid and voluntary ministry workers conveyed that they did not feel valued. And over half of parents indicated that their church was not good at listening to families, being flexible and accommodating of them, or understanding the needs of modern-day families. This was particularly marked regarding widespread lack of SEND provision.
- Parents are clearly keen to be active and involved in their child's spiritual journey, but they really want and need support from the church to do this. Many responses from paid workers seemed to not realise this and were rather negative presuming that parents were deficient in their involvement. It is key to consider carefully how best to equip parents.
- It was noticeable across the survey data that there is much siloed working taking place and many called for greater collaboration – between church and families, across local churches, amongst denominational structures and amid support organisations and networks with those working in this sector (paid and voluntary).
- There is a need for improving signposting and awareness of existing resources, particularly amongst families. There is also a distinct call for new online resources which are interactive (rather than only reading). Increased integrating of the opportunities afforded by technology into these ministries was urged by many stakeholders.



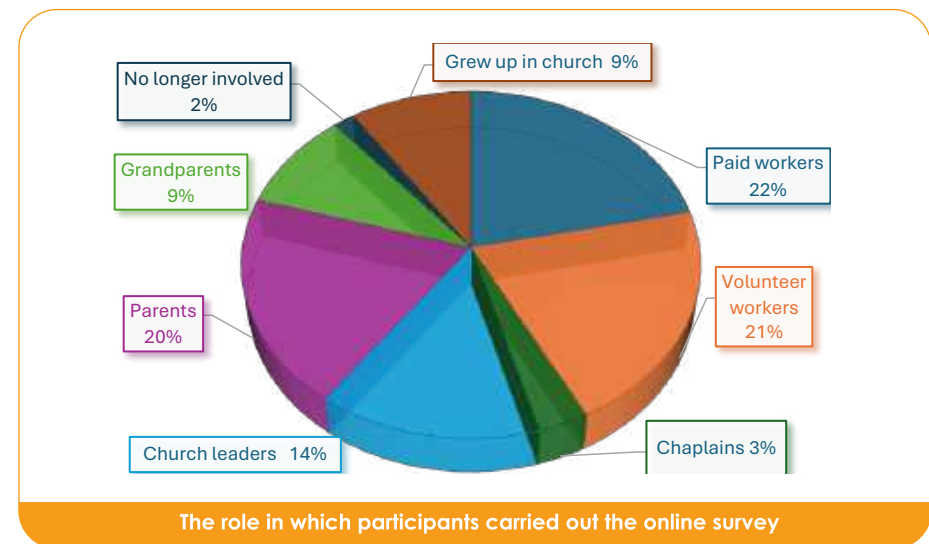
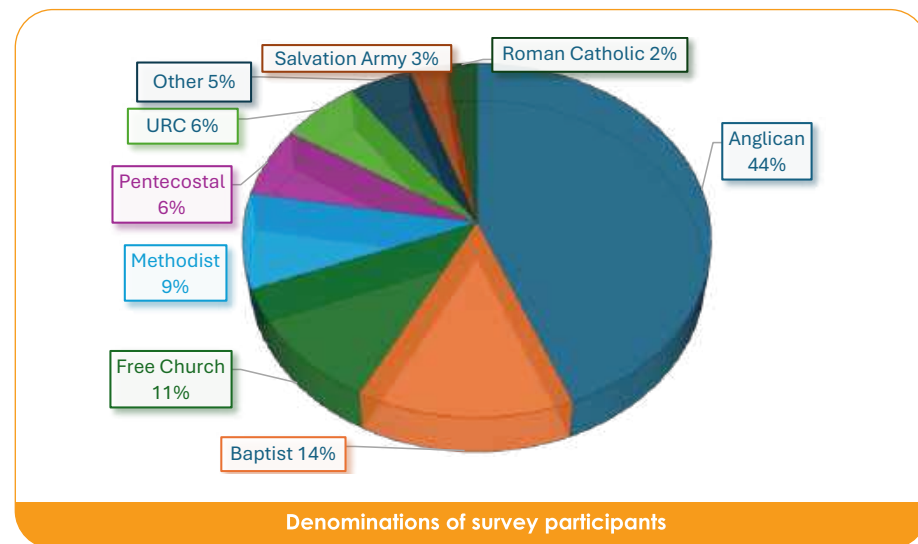
SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

We were delighted with the response to this survey, particularly since we were able to hear from a great cross-section of denominations and strands of the UK church (see chart below).

The 1506 useable responses all contained rich and insightful information – some through multiple choice responses and others through qualitative and rich responses which enabled participants to use their own unprompted words to share their views and experiences.

It was great to hear from such a variety of stakeholders (see chart below). This helped us to make sure that we heard from a wide range of perspectives – including those who may be heard less.

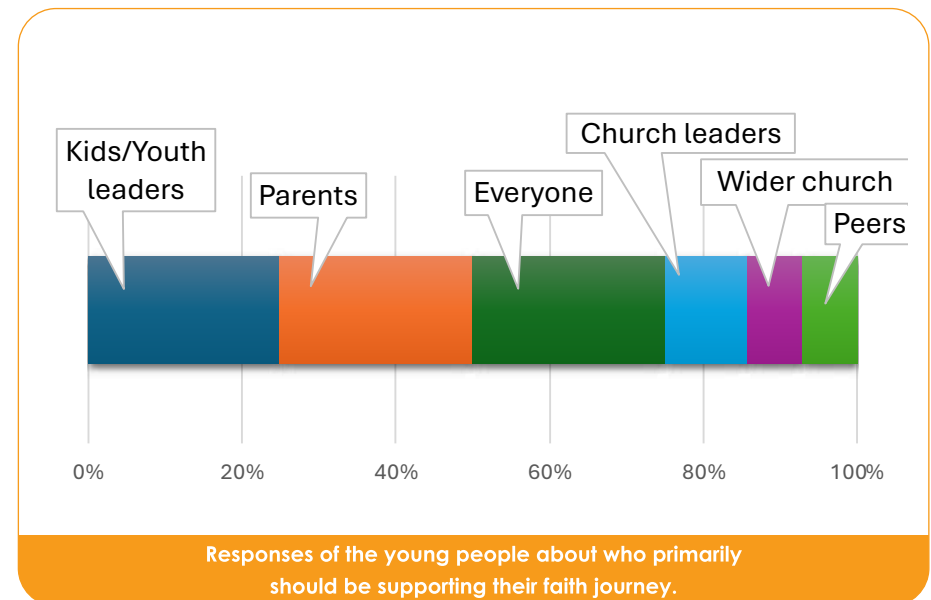
It also allowed us to compare across the different groups to find out for example what they all thought the aims were, how they each thought children and youth were valued and what they perceived as priorities.





We were keen to include the voices of young people, so once the survey data had been analysed, we carried out zoom interviews with 33 young people aged 8-18. This allowed us to ask them about things which had jumped out to us in the data, but also to hear their heart for what they thought people their age wanted and needed from the church. They were all regular church goers and hence tended to be quite positive about their experiences of church.

Yet they gave powerful insights particularly about how the church can show they value children and young people – for them it was all about visibility and involvement, rather than being hidden away and uninvolved and having no voice. They also strongly expressed the 'team' mindset which they thought was needed in the church – so that everyone was jointly responsible for supporting faith in the younger generations (see chart on the right).

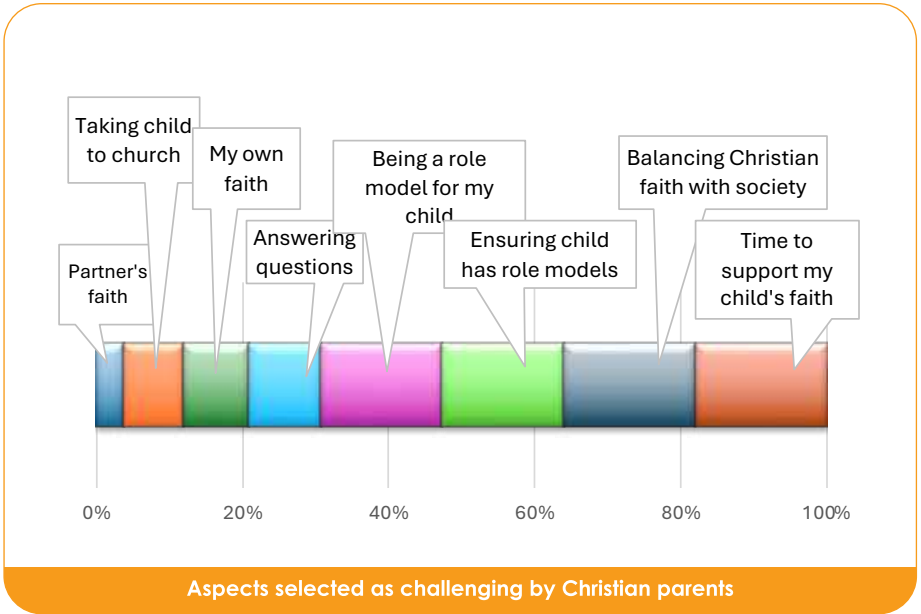
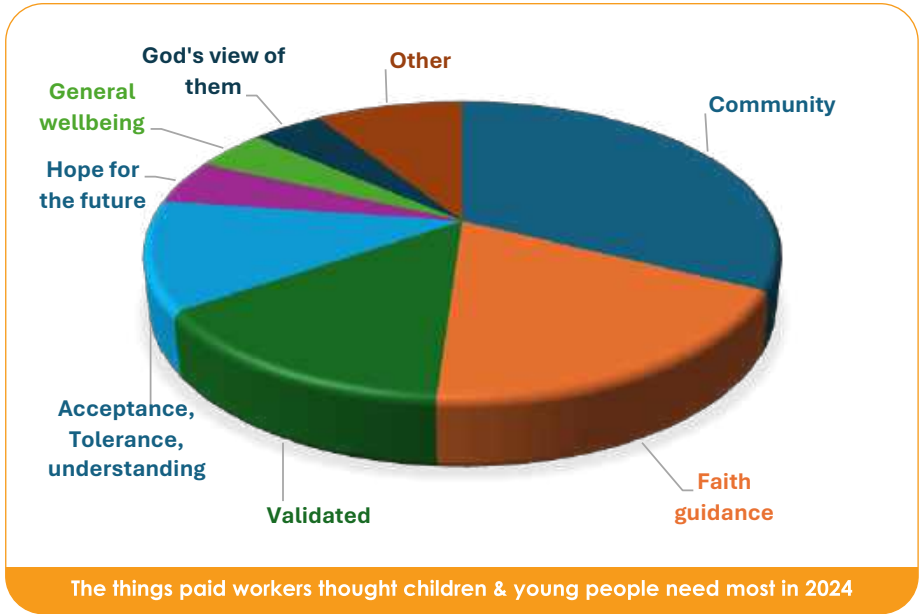


The young people strongly expressed the 'team' mindset which they thought was needed in the church.



One of the things we were keen to capture in taking the pulse were insights into the pressing needs and challenges of children, young people and families in 2024.

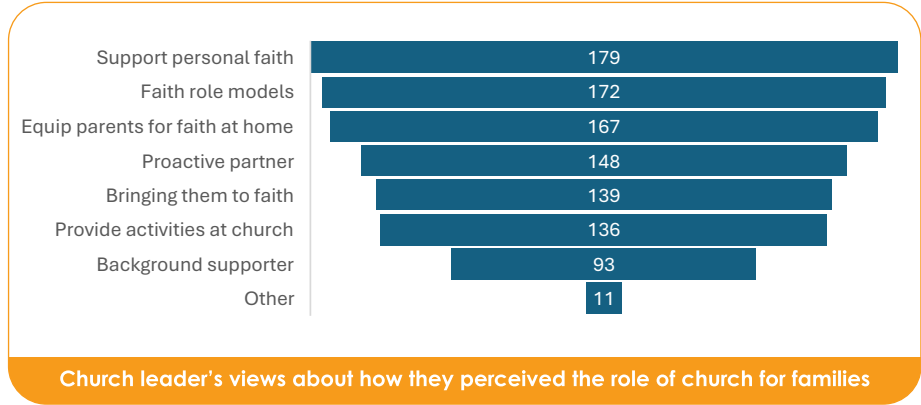
You'll see this woven throughout but here are some key insights to provide context for the report and help us to think about the different roles of key players in supporting faith of these younger generations.



What the children and young people said families needed from the church, and how churches showed they were important and wanted there.

Needs of Families	Percentage
Faith support	54%
Connection	31%
Physical space	8%
Support	6%

Importance shown	Percentage
Involved	35%
Age specific groups	20%
Accommodate	18%
Prioritise	15%
All age connection	12%





MINISTRY AMONGST UNDER 18'S IN 2024 WITH PAUL FENTON

(CONSULTANT TO YOUTH & COMMUNITY SECTOR AGENCIES AND INSTITUTIONS)

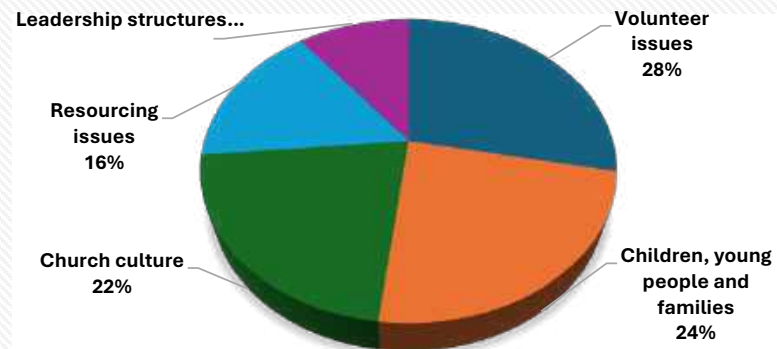
There are many learnings from previous seasons of CYF ministry, but we wanted to find out in the survey about current issues, pressing needs and challenges within current CYF work.

KEY FINDINGS >

What church leaders said

Only 1% reported no barriers, but 99% identified barriers. The most significant were a lack of volunteers, irregular attendance and the busy lives of families.

Church culture was also highlighted, namely negative cultures in congregations hindering change, welcome and inclusion; CYF ministry being a low priority and the voices of under 18s not heard within their church. Some mentioned resourcing issues, including funding changes and leadership structures.



Church leaders' perspectives regarding barriers to effective ministry amongst CYF

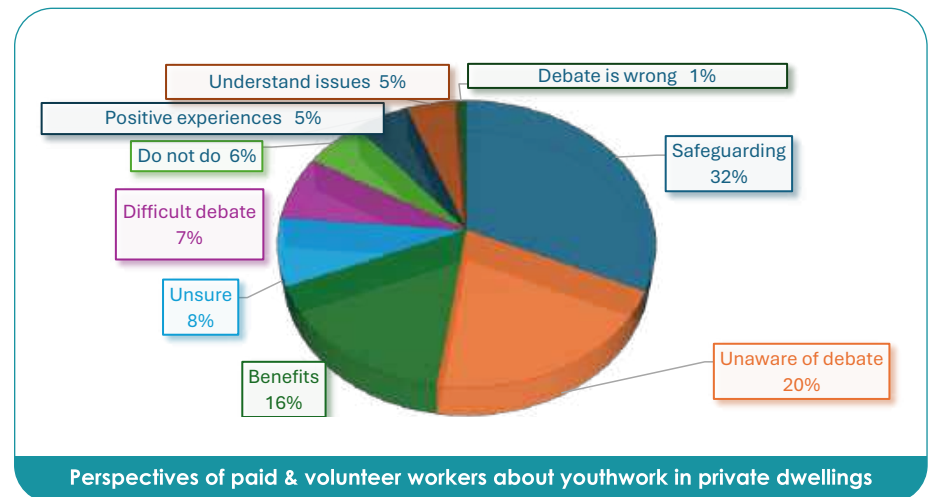


What the workers said

Within the responses about youthwork in private dwellings, 20% were unaware that this was an issue and 15% said that they were unsure or thought it was difficult. Whilst 21% expressed that they had positive experiences or could see the benefits, 11% said that they understood the issues or stated not to take part in youthwork in private dwellings. A third of respondents wrote about safeguarding concerns relating to this topic.

When asked about the impact of mental health on their work, over half of the paid and volunteer workers reported high impact, and a quarter reported low impact. Those reporting low were not in direct contact with under 18s, or they worked with mainly under 5's.

For those whom it did impact, they explained approaches to support, such as being aware of young people who are struggling (33%), working holistically, with an underpinning approach to children and young people's mental health (29%), using specific activities to support mental health such as play therapy, wellbeing groups and mentoring (28%) or providing informal support. A small number felt ill-equipped to support young people's mental health so signposted resources or support agencies.



99% of church leaders identified barriers to ministry amongst children young people and families





PAUL'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

The findings from this research have a golden thread that reminds us we cannot isolate ourselves from contemporary society and the shifting cultural practices that are challenging our understanding of ministry amongst a younger generation. We must reimagine ministry for a new generation, challenge traditions that continue to present barriers to faith making and equip God's people with practical tools, resources and knowledge to engage meaningfully as we 'go into the world' with a vision to make it a better place.

Some uniquely contemporary issues are highlighted as being barriers to engaging a younger generation. If other significant adults are to engage meaningfully with children and young people then we, in good conscience, must address safeguarding concerns in how and where we engage with children and young people. The debate around 'work in private dwellings' is an example of, but not the only situation, where the church must demonstrate responsibility and transparency in our practices.

Young people have a right to feel safe in a world that already exposes them to uniquely contemporary pressures and complexities. The church must adapt by providing safe spaces, trauma sensitive approaches and inclusive practices that encourage ethical faith building in the context of contemporary society.

PAUL'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- At a structural level, church ministry must be in the context of service to society and not only gathered congregations. The younger generations live and engage in a global village with 'all God's people.' We need to meet them in the world, not only in our buildings.
- We need to recognise the strengths that younger people bring to our ministry, creating more opportunities for co-learning and co-creation. This requires more collaborative vs authoritarian approaches and an embrace of community life in a contemporary context.
- We need to reframe our measures of success, not by congregation numbers but by service to community, bringing healing, wholeness, and demonstrating solidarity with the contemporary realities of life for younger people. This will go some way to removing the barriers we have created that distance a younger generation from faith making.
- On a practical level, we need to be better equipped for the task. Congregational teaching is often limited to biblical exegesis rather than practical guidance in parenting faith, managing mental wellbeing, navigating social media, and being a good neighbour. Leaders need to be equipped and resourced to facilitate these discussions, just as they have been equipped to teach the scriptures.





DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF THE SAME AIMS? WITH ED DREW

(MINISTRY DIRECTOR, FAITH IN KIDS)

KEY FINDINGS >

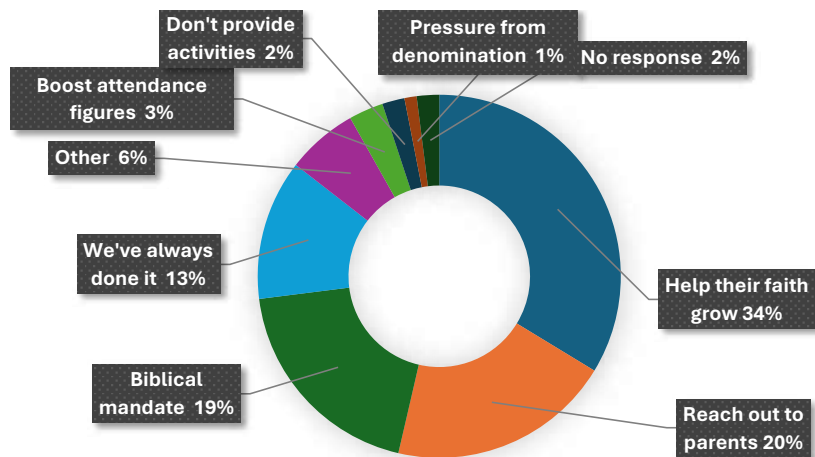
It was encouraging that all of the stakeholders agreed that the primary purpose of CYF ministry was to help faith to grow in younger generations. But we also explored some of their other aims.

Other reasons church leaders gave for running CYF ministry were to reach out to parents, because it's a Biblical mandate and they've always done it.

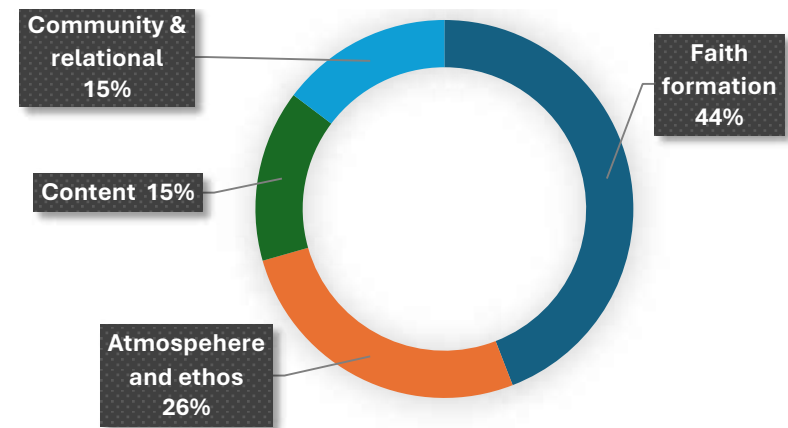
In addition to supporting faith development, paid workers and volunteers alike also viewed their role as being a role model, supporting general wellbeing, equipping and empowering families for faith at home, and arranging ministry logistics.

80% of church leaders deemed their role to be providing faith role models, and 77% said that their role was to equip parents for faith at home. This concurs with parent's desire for the church to provide faith role models for their child, and to equip them to support faith in the family home. They desired the church to be a proactive partner, communicating and collaborating with families.

The young people said that the atmosphere, ethos and relational aspects of church were the key aims and purposes, with content only being a small part.



Reasons given by church leaders for their church having CYF ministry



Perspectives of young people regarding what the aim of CYF ministry is



80% of church leaders deemed their role to be providing faith role models, and 77% said that their role was to equip parents for faith at home.





ED'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

Having a shared vision and aims means that outreach events, Sunday services, parenting support and individual conversations can all move in the same direction. There are encouragements in this research that point towards this happening. We see that faith formation and ministry ethos is a priority for all groups. However, we would naturally expect the different roles to lead to different priorities.

This research showed that the church leader's most common responses were proactively strategic in nature. Conversely, the aims of the paid workers were more relational, but still focused on the development of personal faith, and also balancing some leadership elements also. Similarly, the volunteer responses reflect their relational priority, with that same absolute priority of seeing faith as their goal of their service. The parents are clear on their role. Theirs is the primary responsibility for faith development. And they see the church as supporting and equipping them in this task. There is heartening clarity of roles and responsibilities.

Finally, for the young people themselves, they do not seem to have the clarity of their parents that faith is nurtured in the home with 44% seeing church as the source of 'faith formation' but no one would want to criticise young people for wanting more 'faith formation' rather than less. These young people are engaged with church. They have clarity on its role and their engagement with this research project is encouraging in itself.

ED'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- Let's continue to strive for a united Vision for all stake holders in CYF. Let's ensure that the top headline data continues to show that faith formation is the priority and that all stakeholders feel valued in the team ministry approach that is surely needed.
- There seems to be a need for greater clarity around the roles of the different stake holders, particularly ensuring an understanding of the right differences in priorities. If we understand each other's prayers and goals better, we could understand how better to support one another. We might also understand the particular role that only we have, placing our prayers and energies in good places.





HOW CAN THE UK CHURCH BEST SERVE FAMILIES?



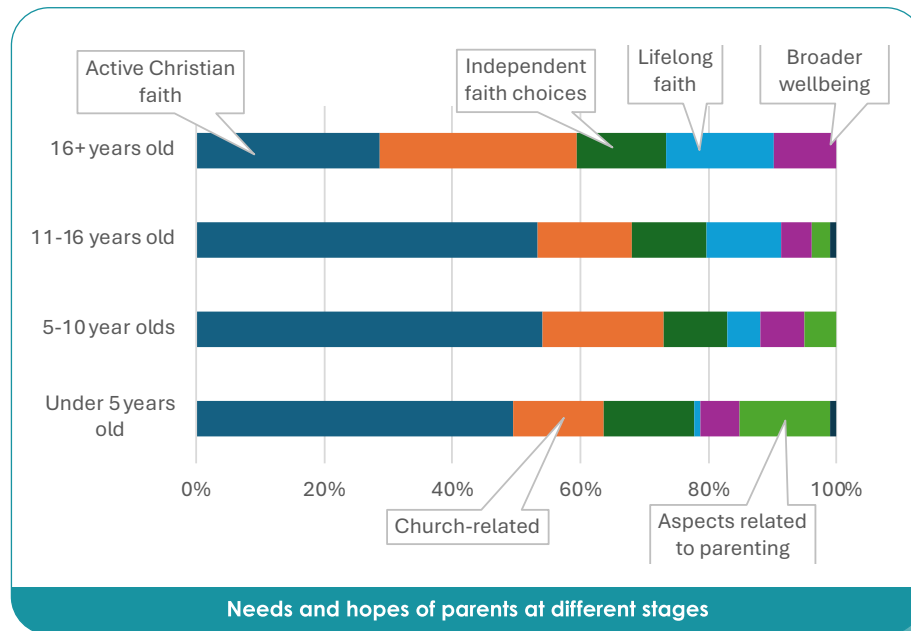
KEY FINDINGS >

All of the stakeholders agreed that the greatest needs and hopes of children, young people and families are for the child to have an active Christian faith, and for the church ethos to be relational and welcoming. Parents did not view general events and activities as a priority, but did see age specific activities as valuable.

71% of the church leaders said that their church values children, youth and families as part of the church, and they felt they demonstrated this through the ethos, infrastructure and providing services and activities. Whilst the young people did value separate activities for their age group, they most valued involvement, being accommodated and prioritised.

Compared with the other stakeholders, parents were the only ones to mention independence about faith choices, lifelong faith and briefly mention eternal life in heaven. Church leaders did not include these aspects in their answers at all, although paid children/youth workers did hint at independent faith choices.

Whilst parents at different stages identified the same sorts of needs and hopes, there are some variations as their child grows. Notably the church seems to be more important from 16+, along with lifelong faith and broader wellbeing. Aspects relating to Christian parenting decrease in importance with the child's age. Those with children under 5 years display strong value in their child having active and independent faith.



Whilst the young people did value separate activities for their age group, they most valued involvement, being accommodated and prioritised.





SOME COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

So often we assume we know what parents/carers want or need, but this data shows that it's important to listen to specific needs of families, and that this needs to be done continually as it will change to some extent as children grow and develop. The fact that the church leader respondents produced slight differences in the needs and hopes to the parents suggests that church leaders may need to intentionally listen to the families around them to find out their precise needs and hopes, to consider how the church can best support and equip them through each season of their onward journey.

Our research shows that whilst provision of a good repertoire of age-specific activities is often the route churches take to demonstrate that they value families, this may not be the primary need or hope for families. Indeed, the young people clearly expressed that they feel most valued when they are involved, and their church accommodates them. Indeed, when their church prioritises them.

Intentional efforts to shift the church culture to view and welcome children and young people in this way will have significant impacts, and also would be less labour intensive than providing a timetable of activities.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS >

- Think carefully about how your church can intentionally and genuinely dialogue with and listen to children, young people and families in your church and beyond. Then consider how these insights can be integrated into the fabric and structures of your church. This will require some change (accommodating!) but equally, this will bring positive change to the environment of the church for children, young people and families.
- Reflect upon the sort of faith which is being fostered through the activities you provide, and consider how this dovetails with efforts of Christian parents/carers in the home. To what extent are your church programmes building independent and lifelong faith in addition to supporting an active faith now?





LISTENING TO CHRISTIAN GRANDPARENTS WITH BECKY SEDGWICK

(PARENTING FOR FAITH RESOURCES CO-ORDINATOR, BRF)

KEY FINDINGS >

Christian grandparenting is slowly being resourced more, although it is not focussed upon much in UK churches.

One grandparent said:
"It is a huge responsibility but such a wonderful privilege."

We wanted to find out more about their experience so included this in the survey.

What is your overall experience of being a Christian grandparent?

The table below shows that 40% of the themes in the responses were positive, whilst 11% revealed negative experiences. Some wrote of their input and influence into their grandchild's faith (16%), whilst 16% talked about church attendance with their grandchild. Attendance was sometimes reported positively and sometimes negatively.

Many wanted to take their grandchild to church activities, but this wasn't always possible. Some spoke about bringing God into daily grandparenting life (10%), although 4% described frustration that the church did not recognise the role of Christian grandparents or support them in any way. One interesting suggestion was an organised grandparents and children weekend conference/residential activity.

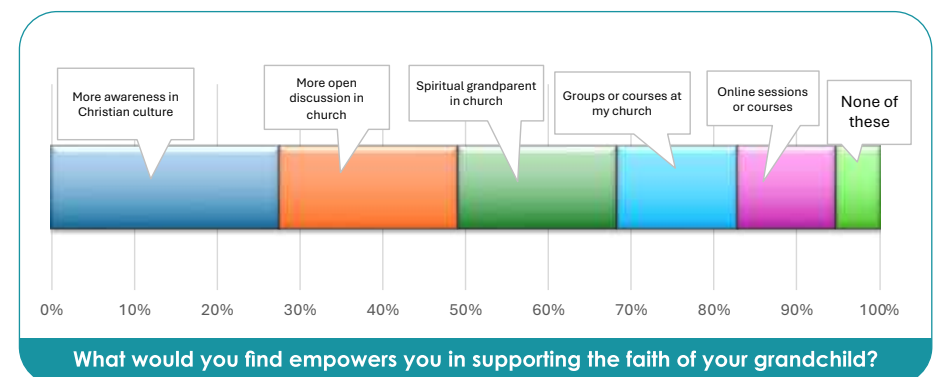
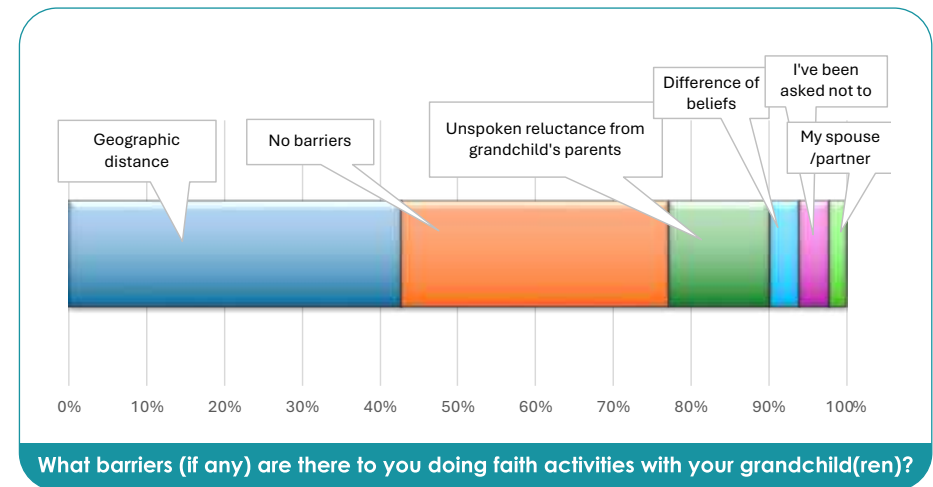
Themes identified in the responses	Percentage
Positive experiences	40.44
Faith-related comments	16.18
Attendance at church	16.18
Negative feelings/experiences	11.03
Grandparenting in everyday life	10.29
The church's lack of recognition of role	4.41
More support needed	0.74
Mixed experiences	0.74
TOTAL	100.00



The charts here show the faith activities and barriers reported by participant grandparents, in addition to what empowers them in supporting the faith of their grandchild. It is evident that they are an active bunch but that there are also many things hindering their spiritual involvement with their grandchild(ren).

What church leaders said

The church leaders said that over half (54%) did not specifically work with grandparents in their church, whilst 25% said that the culture of their church actively involves them in supporting younger generations. 5% said that they had grandparenting prayer groups, 3% reported church discussion groups. Less than 1% said that they had run a grandparenting course.





BECKY'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

Whilst churches often see the importance of parents and carers in the discipling of their children, this research confirms earlier findings that Christian grandparents are far less confident about their role. Spiritual grandparenting is less simple than spiritual parenting. Grandparents are rarely the primary carer, so have less influence on values, beliefs and behaviours. It's heartening that almost all of the grandparents did faith activities with their grandchildren, although 70% of those grandparents identified one or more barrier to sharing faith with their grandchildren.

The grandparents all called for empowering to support their grandchildren's faith. Notably, the church leader's suggestion is not the same as what grandparents would like or what is currently happening. Less than 10% of the churches offered specific support to grandparents, but grandparents want to see more open discussion, courses and peer mentoring.

While the landscape of Christian grandparenting in the UK is rather unformed, there is much encouragement in this research. Grandparents want to be involved in their grandchildren's discipleship and are already working hard; it will only take a small shift by churches to enhance the encouragement and equipping of Christian grandparents.

BECKY'S RECOMMENDATIONS OF WHAT WE NEED >

- A national conversation about the role and importance of Christian grandparents.
- The establishment of a national, cross-denominational body to work together to resource, equip and inspire Christian grandparents.
- Training for church leaders to realise and release the power and potential impact of the grandparents in their congregations.
- The raising up of a 'grandparenting champion' in each church.
- Further research to determine good practice in spiritual grandparenting.





DO PAID & VOLUNTARY WORKERS FEEL VALUED? WITH ALI CAMPBELL

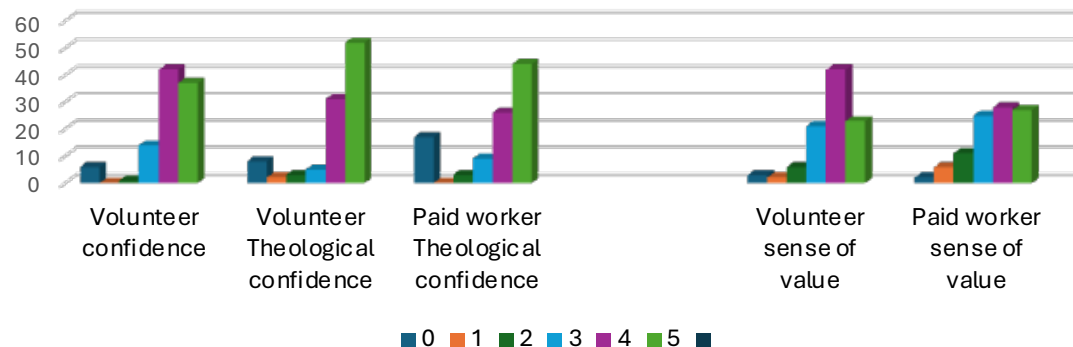
(THE RESOURCE AND PARAKLESIS)

KEY FINDINGS >

There are often assumptions, suggestions and even assertions about reasons for decreasing numbers involved in paid and voluntary ministry within this sector, so we explored this more.

The graphs below show how participants self-rated their general confidence, theological understanding of their ministry area and their sense of value in their ministry. It is great to see that 52% of the volunteer participants and 44% of the paid workers selected the highest possible rating of '5,' expressing strong confidence. The challenge is now to support the remaining 50% in developing a similar confidence. However, the scores were less good for feeling valued. The mean score of feeling valued by volunteers was only 2.45 (within a range of 0 to 5), and only marginally better (2.58) for paid workers.

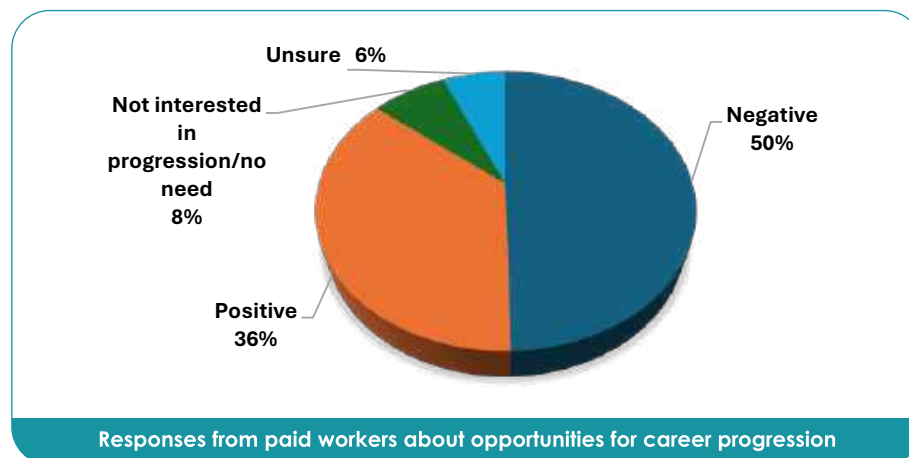
There was a slight variance in this across the age groups of ministry, with 36% of those working with 11-16s selected '3' or below. 31% of those working with primary school children, and 29% of those working with families selected '3' or below. This indicates similar experiences of feeling valued across these sectors, and it is disappointing to see that 32% of these paid and voluntary participants did not feel valued for the ministry work they were involved in.



Frequencies of self-rating given by volunteer and paid participants (0 = not at all, 5 = a lot)



Paid workers were asked about career progression (see chart below). Whilst 36% felt positive and that there were opportunities for them to progress, and 8% said that they did not perceive a need for career progression, 50% of respondents reported negatively, expressing that there were not appropriate career opportunities available. Some commented that this ministry was often viewed as a 'stepping stone to becoming a minister,' whilst others made comments about feeling 'blocked,' 'hindered' or 'prevented' and some stated that they wished to be 'enabled' and supported.'



Participants were also asked in an open-ended question about their frustrations. The themes identified in these responses are shown in the table below. There are similar frustrations evident amongst both paid and voluntary workers, revealing that logistics and practical issues are frustrating and impeding this work. This included volunteer issues, funding and other resourcing limitations, admin needs and the need to 'juggle different demands or pressures.' Many expressed frustration and guilt about time limitations and others commented on the lack of support, not feeling appreciated and isolation.

Paid workers	%
Logistics	34.88
Pay & conditions	29.65
Church ethos/culture	13.95
Ministry misunderstood	6.40
Vision/purpose	5.52
Practical activities	5.23
Leadership	2.62
Society	1.74
TOTAL	100.00

Volunteer workers	%
Logistics	40.70
Practical activities	18.99
Church ethos/culture	13.57
Working conditions	9.69
Ministry misunderstood	8.91
Leadership	5.81
Society	1.55
Vision/purpose	0.78
TOTAL	100.00

Frustrations of voluntary and paid workers amongst CYF ministry



ALI'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

There are clearly many challenges surrounding paid and voluntary workers. The comments about being blocked, hindered or isolated resonate with my observations and experience. Connections beyond the local church (whether for peer encouragement, regional or diocesan training and support) are often left to the individual worker to arrange for themselves.

It is interesting that some, who identify their role as a calling, are not expecting progression opportunities because it isn't a career. My observation would be that progression is about professional and personal development – it isn't about a foot up the wrung of a career ladder. Continuing professional development enables paid workers to grow as reflective practitioners.

Retaining volunteers does seem to have become harder post -Covid. The challenge of just trying to find them in order to run and / or maintain CYF groups and activities often means there just isn't time to invest in those volunteers – training and equipping them, sharing vision and developing a sense of team. This in turn impacts whether volunteers themselves feel valued or are just valued for being a warm body in the room that enables activities to happen.

ALI'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- We need to set a higher bar for volunteering, with more commitment and regularity. It can lead to a higher calibre of volunteer – those who really want to serve children and young people, or it can also lead to fewer team and willing volunteers, often with limited time. This remains a constant challenge and tension.
- There needs to be a greater connection between the training institutions and denominations and the reality on the ground as local churches struggle to recruit, adequately pay those they employ and equip and train volunteers.
- The autonomy of the local church means that salaried workers are often employed in isolation. If a level of responsibility was shifted away from the local church and denominations / networks took the employment of salaried CYF ministers as seriously as they do for clergy, this could bring about the kind of change we need to see.
- Ultimately, we need to see a wider responsibility for training and recruitment, and broader understanding of where the needs are.





WHAT ARE THE RESOURCE NEEDS? WITH ANDY FROST

(DIRECTOR, SHARE JESUS INTERNATIONAL & WORKS AT
KITCHEN TABLE PROJECT, CARE FOR THE FAMILY)

KEY FINDINGS >

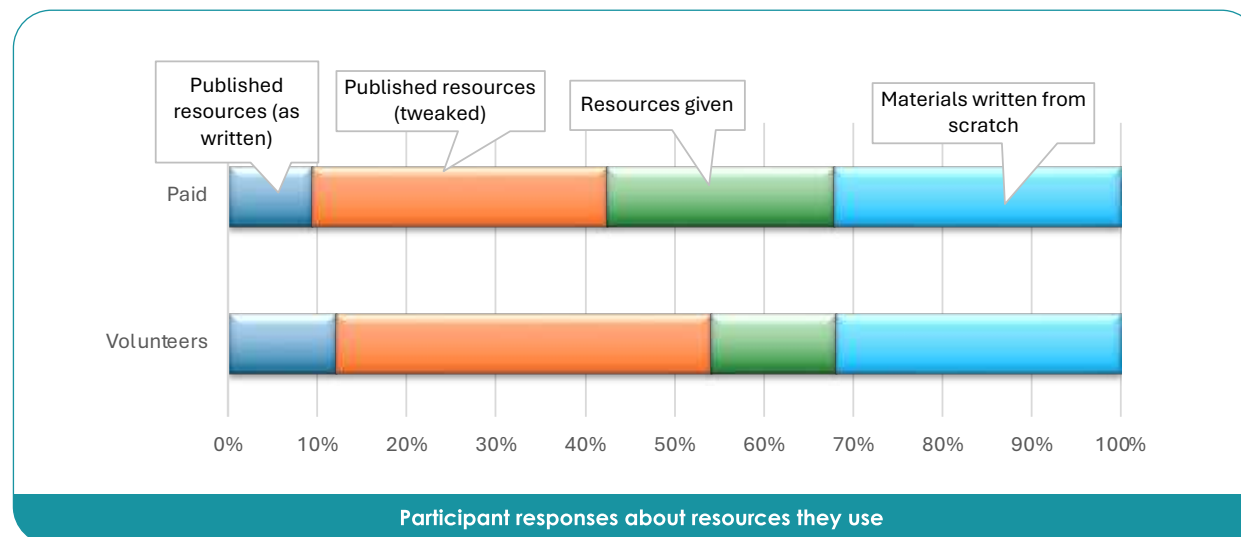
We wanted to find out about the experiences of participants using resources, and also explore their perspectives of what new or revised resources may be helpful.

So, we asked parents, church leaders and paid and voluntary workers to share their opinions.

Paid and voluntary workers

Over a third write their material from scratch, whilst another third tweak published resources for their group. Reasons for self-writing were: 'I want things to reflect my theology and context,' 'I love writing my own' and 'I have yet to find published session plans that are actually beneficial.'

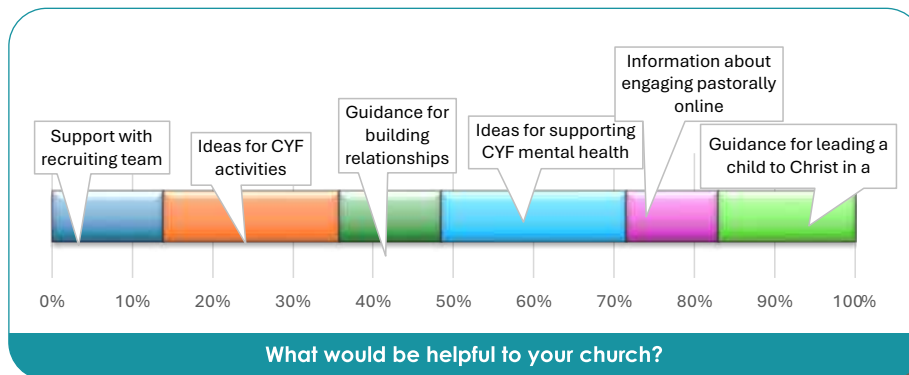
Those who wrote their own resources said it would be helpful to have more ideas of games and craft, demonstrations to illustrate Bible stories, an online space to share resources and connect online to learn from one another. Others asked for: More good quality UK material online, good examples for inspiration, ideas for themes/series, training or ideas for very diverse groups.





Church leaders

Church leaders called for resources of a guidance, support, advice or signposting nature, rather than 'traditional' printed resources. They also desired video content to enhance their work, and ideas to empower their workers. Only 10% wanted more activities for Christian families, although almost 80% thought families needed online support or advice.



Parents

Parents were asked what they would find helpful (see table on the right). Over half wanted increased resource production, although the nature of resources desired were not in traditional formats. 30% requested increased variety of resources for families, such as influencers podcasts, apps and online quizzes, novels and biographies, conversation cards and blog posts. 26% asked for enhanced support for Bible study or devotional materials, stating that existing Bible study resources did not meet their family's needs. More interactive resources were desired, rather than simply reading or listening, and some preferred shorter and more flexible devotional activities. Some highlighted the need for more resources to cater for children with SEND.

Some parents highlighted that changes in family life (limited time and busyness) made it hard to focus on faith activity at home, and others called for more support from churches (such as Q+A forums and support beyond their immediate contacts), including support for parental spiritual life also. For some, signposting existing resources would be helpful since some felt overwhelmed by the current offering.

Is there anything which would help you to pray, discuss or read the Bible more with your child(ren)?

Themes identified in the parent responses	Percentage
Discipleship resources for children & youth	30.08
Bible study resources	26.02
Changes in family lifestyle	21.95
Support from church/others	11.38
Parent's own spiritual life	7.32
Signposting existing resources	3.25
TOTAL	100.00



26% asked for enhanced support for Bible study or devotional materials, stating that existing Bible study resources did not meet their family's needs.





ANDY'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

It is clear from the research that resources are really important but it's challenging to create the 'right' resources. Children's and youth workers each have unique contexts, with children with specific learning styles or needs. On top of that there will be theological nuances that they want to communicate. No resource can do everything, and it is not surprising that so many people create their own. On top of this, there is the 'how' people use resources. Churches have a broad range of people delivering children's content – from young to old. Some will prefer analogue resources, but others will be solely digital.

Perhaps one of the big challenges here, is that resources are created in silos. They may be developed by a denomination or a well-resourced church or a para-church agency and the curriculum strives to be self-contained. Often the material provides content for the hour-long session itself and fails to consider the role of family and the wider church.

From my perspective, I see so many different resources available. I'm not sure it's a case of creating more resources but more about helping people find existing ideas and content that will serve their mission. This is even more true for parents and carers. In a changing cultural context, with no Christian bookshops, it's very hard to find the right resources. I think that the content is 'out there' but finding it on different websites and understanding what is worth the money is very challenging!

ANDY'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- If you have been to Subway, you will know that you can choose your bread, your filling, your salad and your sauce. It would be really helpful to have a similar online space where those involved in children's and youth ministry could find videos, talk outlines, illustrations, games, activities and home ideas from the array of content producers. This space could also become an exchange where people share what is working in their context.
- A similar space could be created for parents also, to point to the array of resources that exist to help them disciple their children with links to specific issues and content.
- More than just resources, many in church life want a conversation. They want a safe space to mull over where things are at and where things could be. Perhaps para-church organisations and denominations should look for ways to help coach children and youth workers.
- All of the suggestions above come at a cost and require far greater collaboration across the church. Working out who will take the lead and how it could be paid for is a challenge but surely it's a worthwhile investment for the future of the church.

IS THERE ENOUGH SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY WORKERS?

KEY FINDINGS >

We wanted to find out where and how these workers were accessing support, to provide information to inform churches, networks and organisations about how they can refine and enhance the support they are giving.

The table below shows the themes identified in the open-ended responses of both paid and voluntary workers regarding where they access support for their ministry work. Overall, the themes identified across both sets of data were remarkably similar, indicating that

experiences of paid and voluntary workers in this sector are broadly similar, suggesting that whether or not someone is salaried or fulltime has minimal difference on the nature of the support they access or receive.

Paid workers	Frequency	%	Volunteer workers	Frequency	%
Peers/other paid ministry workers	205	27	Other volunteers	204	34
Church leader	168	22	Church leader	143	24
Church congregation	153	20	Facebook groups	108	18
Regional groups	93	12	Church congregation	87	15
Facebook groups	63	8	Regional groups/networks	39	7
Friends & family	30	4	Friends & family	13	2
Ministry networks	20	3	Books	2	<1
Line manager/trustees	15	2	Online resources	1	<1
Mentor/coach/counsellor	9	1	God	1	<1
God	1	<1			

Sources of support reported by paid and volunteer workers



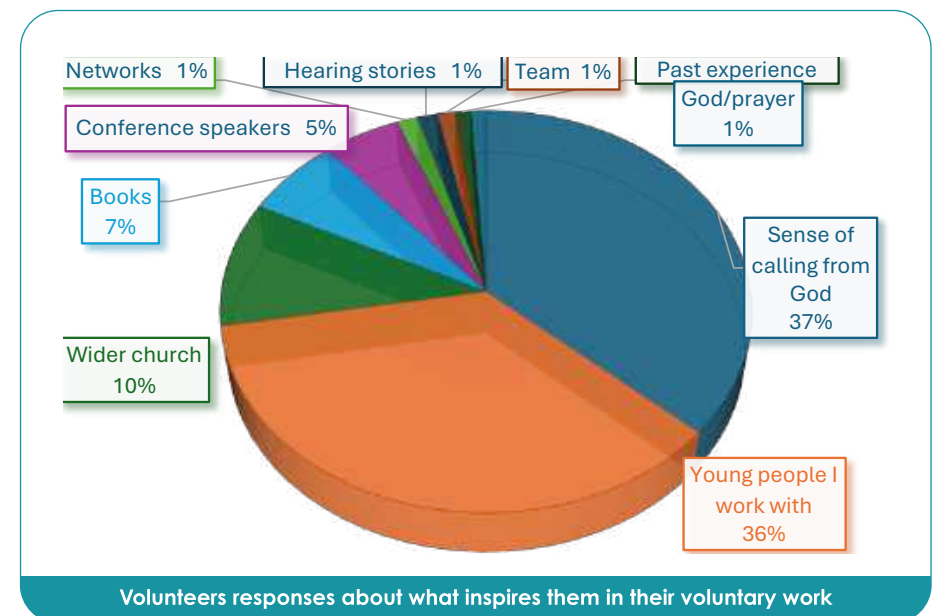
The paid workers were then asked about their feelings about the team around them, which prompted an overwhelmingly positive response, with 72% responding that they had a good team around them.

This data, combined with that of the table on the left (showing that 27% cited their peers as their support) reveals that the immediate colleagues and team surrounding these paid workers is supportive and beneficial to them and their work. The fact that the participants are citing their church leader, regional groups and Facebook networks reveals that these provisions of support are available, known to them, and indeed accessed by them – volunteers and paid alike.

The volunteers were mainly inspired by a sense of calling from God (37%) and the young people they worked with (36%). 10% cited the wider church as inspiration to them, whilst 7% said books and 5% said conference speakers.

When asked about enhancements they would like to see, the majority were about more focus and priority being given to CYF work, and more people from the wider church being involved and invested.

Alongside this, there were calls for improved conditions – for paid workers this was about employment terms, but for volunteers this was about expectations and unreasonable demands being placed upon them. There were also calls for more resources, finance and investment into the sector to support their ongoing work.





REFLECTING ON THE FINDINGS ON THE FINDINGS >

A theme which is recurring across many of the research segments is about improved accommodation & involvement of children, young people and families within church. Here again, in this strand, paid and volunteers alike are crying out for this. On the one hand, it does seem that they are able to access forms of support for their ministry work – this is reassuring and encouraging. But on the other hand, despite these support structures, many still feel isolated, overlooked, and peripheral to the primary mission and ministry of the church.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS >

- The fact that all of these people or places are supporting paid and voluntary ministry workers is deeply heartening. This means that they themselves are at least in part invested in these ministry areas, even if not directly involved. So, it would be beneficial for creative and strategic thinking to occur about how these support roles could be used to speak both into the sector and into the church simultaneously about the importance of ministry amongst children, young people and families, to bolster and reinforce the value of this ministry to be seen by all.
- Many of the volunteers wrote of being inspired by the young people they work with and a sense of calling from God. Filtering these messages and stories more widely could serve to inspire more to catch the vision and get involved.





IS THE UK CHURCH DOING ENOUGH TO INVEST IN UNDER 18S?

WITH HOWARD WORSLEY

(TRINITY COLLEGE, BRISTOL)

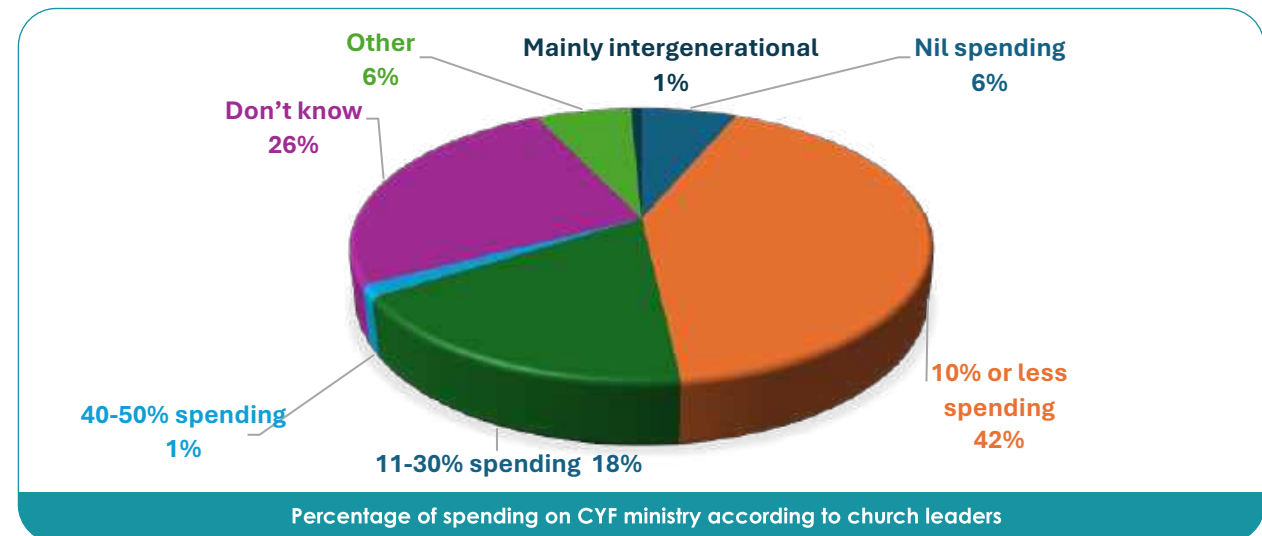
KEY FINDINGS >

Recently, there has been a deluge of funding, particularly from the Church of England into CYF ministry, focussing primarily on recruiting and training more paid and voluntary workers in this area. We wanted to evaluate the extent to which the wider UK church is investing in under 18s.

Church leaders were asked about their financial and time investment. 48% spent less than 10% of their church finance on work amongst CYF, and 26% did not know the proportion of their church's allocation.

Only 3% of the church leaders said that they were not involved at all with this ministry area, whilst 35% said that they pray for CYF and 26% said that they verbally encourage them.

Other respondents were more actively involved, with 13% helping occasionally and 55% a regular part of the team. However, 32% said that time hindered their involvement, 7% said that it didn't feel like their role, 5% said that they have a paid worker for that role, 4% reported that they had no children/youth in their church and 4% gave safeguarding as the reason they were not involved. 1% had not been asked to be involved.

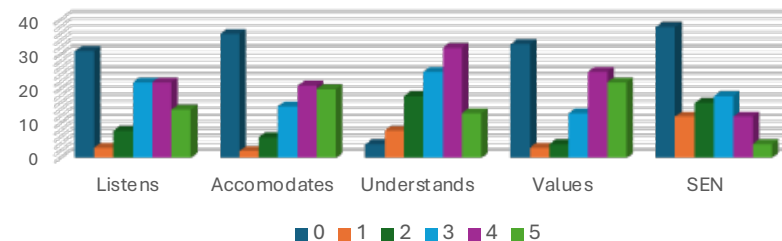




68% of church leaders said that their church significantly valued CYF. When asked how this was exhibited, the most frequent response (54%) was activity provision, dedicated age specific groups (43%), all age/intergenerational services (25%), involvement with local schools (12%), providing training and praying for them (8%). Other responses included fostering a church culture wherein CYF are welcomed and involved (26%) and focussing the infrastructure of the church (21%), such as having a paid worker, dedicated resources and budget, a children's/youth area in church, involving them in decision-making, and embedding this in documentation.

The young people perceived that their church exhibited value of CYF by explicitly involving and including them in church services, such as sharing testimonies, leading service segments, singing at the front, doing Bible readings, or performing the likes of a nativity play. For these participants, value was expressed as presence and visibility of young people.

Parental responses (see chart below) indicate a broad spread of experience regarding each of these aspects of church life. The attribute with the highest mean (3.14 with a range of 0 to 5) was understanding the needs of families. The lowest mean was SEN provision (1.67). Overall, the scores are all lower than the midpoint. This indicates that churches are not meeting the needs of these families effectively.



Parental responses to statements about how their church operates
(0 = do not agree at all, 5 = strongly agree)



HOWARD'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

If we are to consider the place of younger generations in the UK church, we must also examine the culture of church to ensure that it is a safe place where children and young people are nurtured as whole people. Young people's needs of body, mind and spirit must be addressed alongside discipleship. Church history does not show a positive picture of how children have been treated in the Church. These survey responses indicate that most churches find it easier to accommodate primary school aged children than young people.

Parents are biologically predisposed to desire what is best for their child as they perceive it in terms of their own tribal preferences. Therefore, a Christian parent will want their child to be disciplined into the Church and to embrace a Christian worldview. Andrew Roots' insights (2020), based on research in the USA, suggest that it is this tribal protection of the child in the church that has led to subsequent disaffection.

His observation is that children in churches have been treated like customers and thereby been made into consumers of product Church rather than as disciples. As a result, the growing child has abandoned the church when it is no longer convenient to their present requirement.

HOWARD'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- We need to move more towards a church culture which listens to the voices of those outside of church culture. By having the youth/ children's minister as one of the church leaders, it gives more voice to the young people as they feel they have someone who understands them involved in leading the church. Their thoughts, concerns and ideas can have more influence on the direction of the church. This is the essence of involvement and empowerment.
- Church ministry focused on children and young people will have impact only if it is embedded into the life of the church. This will mean that the CYF minister will have a clear remit that includes accountability within the structures of their denomination so that they can effect transformation.
- CYF ministry needs to be given a similar respect to that which is given to adult ministry, so that it is resourced by stipend and by training. In the Church of England, the average length of time that someone remains as a CYF minister is relatively short compared to that of the clerical minister because they are not recognised for their ministry. As a result, many CYF ministers either leave their job or seek ordination within their denomination.





EXPLORING SOME PERSPECTIVES ON CHAPLAINCY WITH NIGEL ROBERTS

(LEAD TUTOR CHAPLAINCY IN EDUCATION)

KEY FINDINGS >

We included chaplaincy as a strand of this research as it's a growing area of importance in UK church and ministry.

We only had 49 responses, but the insights provided are valuable in focussing our thinking.

When asked about how helpful respondents perceived the word 'chaplain' to be, the responses were more positive (58%) than negative (35%) or neutral (7%).

Positive responses expressed a sense of clarity and understanding of what the role was, whilst others perceived that the underlying connotations carried by 'chaplain' to be helpful, as 'it is well respected,' 'it is a distinctive role,' 'it opens doors', and it is a safe space.

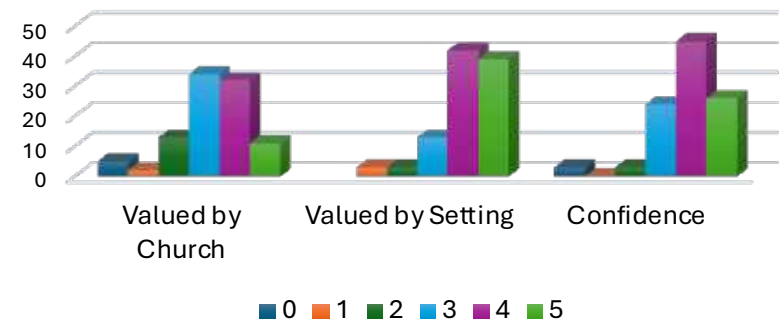
There was a strong discourse that the very essence of the term 'chaplain' brought these positive underlying perceptions. Other positive responses were functional, such as the ability to personalise and explain the role in one's own way. Others said that it provides a framework of values which is helpful for all parties.

The negative sentiments were that there was a lack of clarity about the term and its meaning is not known by most people. Some saw the term as 'off-putting,' 'unhelpful' or 'inaccessible,' and some spoke of it eliciting pre-conceived ideas about death or boring vicars. The neutral responses tended to refer to ambiguity of the term.



The graphs on the right show that these participants feel more valued by their setting than their church, since 81% selected '4' or '5' for their setting but only 43% selected this for their church. The mean score for the how valued they felt by their setting was 4.13 (response range 1 to 5), and the mean score for how valued they felt by the church was 3.13.

The mean for ratings of confidence by the respondents was 3.87, demonstrating some confidence in the role. However, 8% selected zero for confidence and 27% selected '2' or '3' for confidence level indicating that only 71% of these chaplains feel confident in their role.



Responses from chaplains about their sense of value and confidence
(0 = not at all, 5 = a lot)



NIGEL'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

It's interesting to see the split responses about the word chaplain. The problem is one of interpretation. In a school or college setting it will be viewed differently by the management who have appointed the chaplain, by the young people the chaplain serves, by the sending church or organisation and by the chaplain themselves.

Sometimes there are overlaps and points of connection in the differing interpretations but sometimes there are very real points of difference. Even within the church the word has become a battlefield. For some it is missional. For others, it has no evangelical agenda. Tregale⁵ spoke of school chaplaincy as a prism with seven aspects – discipler, pastor, missionary, teacher, servant, priest, prophet. Whilst that image is helpful and inspiring, it also illustrates some of the potential for confusion in interpretation.

It was interesting that the word chaplain evoked a response of respect and was perceived by some as a safe space. This concurs with Pattison⁶, that chaplain is a more acceptable word to the public than vicar or priest, and is perceived by the public as a person more inclined to support than judge. What this research reflects is a growing sense that chaplains are the acceptable face of religion in society in a very real sense.

The responses about how valued chaplains felt were not surprising. Whilst I believe the situation is changing, the reality is that until chaplaincy is seen as a valid ministry in its own right, by the whole church, rather than an add-on to an existing ministry role, these sentiments will continue.

Chaplaincy is a vocation. A distinct calling to a ministry which has a complex theology that combines incarnation, accompanying, teaching and presence. The time has come for it to be recognised as such and to be celebrated. That recognition will, in part, be an answer to the issue of lack of confidence expressed by some of the respondents. This change can be further enhanced if we offer a better framework of support for those engaged in this vital ministry.

⁵Tregale, D., 2011. Fresh Experiences of School Chaplaincy. Grove Books.

⁶Swift, R.D.C., Todd, R.C.D.A. and Cobb, R.D.M. eds., 2015. A handbook of chaplaincy studies: Understanding spiritual care in public places. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.



NIGEL'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- The wider church needs to agree on a general definition of chaplaincy, its theological basis, and its application. The definition should be available to all parties so that when appointing a chaplain to an institution there would be greater clarity and congruity in understanding. An attempt to do this is found in the working standards for chaplaincy with children and young people.
- The wider church needs to acknowledge chaplaincy as a vocation that stands alone and is separate from (though can also be part of) a parish style ministry. It does not need to be an ordained ministry but does need to be one that is recognised and affirmed by the church.
- Appropriate and context aware training should be available to chaplains that gives confidence to the chaplain that they are able to do their job and to the institution they serve that they are competent, professional and in receipt of CPD.
- In addition to training chaplains should be in receipt of appropriate supervision that is helpful affirming and again a basis for confidence of both chaplain and institution.





THE CHANGING TRAINING NEEDS AMONGST THESE MINISTRIES WITH DAVID HOWELL

(CONSULTANT & FACILITATOR TO THE UK CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORK CONSORTIUM)

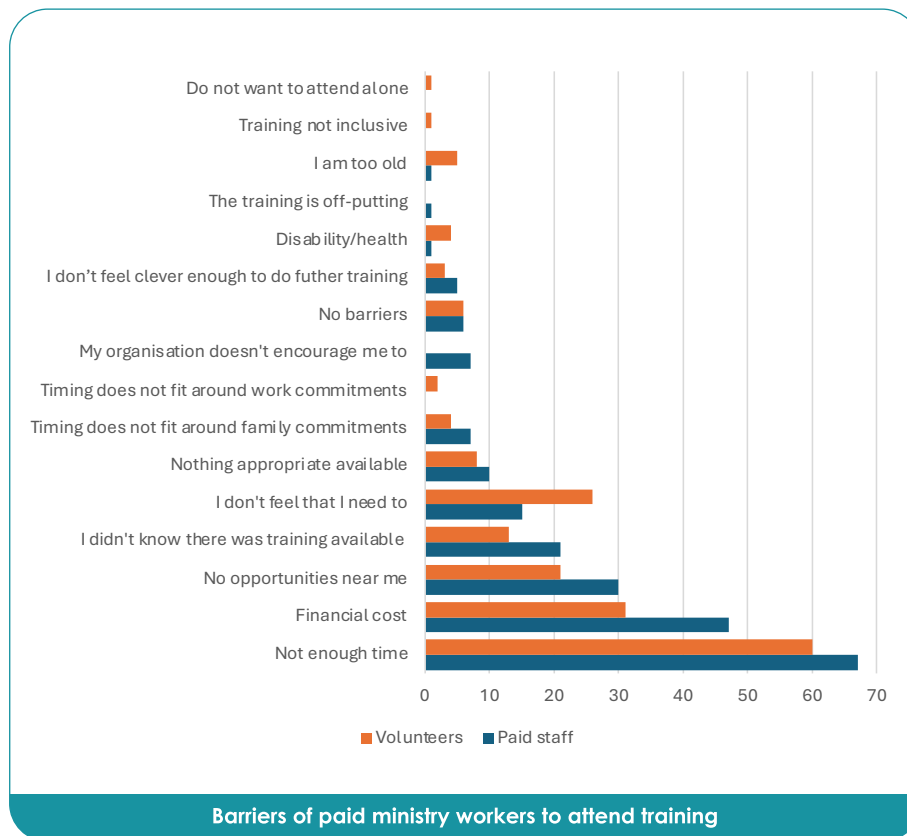
KEY FINDINGS >

There has been decreased demand for university-validated training courses in recent years, so we wanted to investigate the reasons for this, and explore what the training needs are at present? We asked paid and voluntary ministry workers and church leaders for their perspectives.

Accessing training

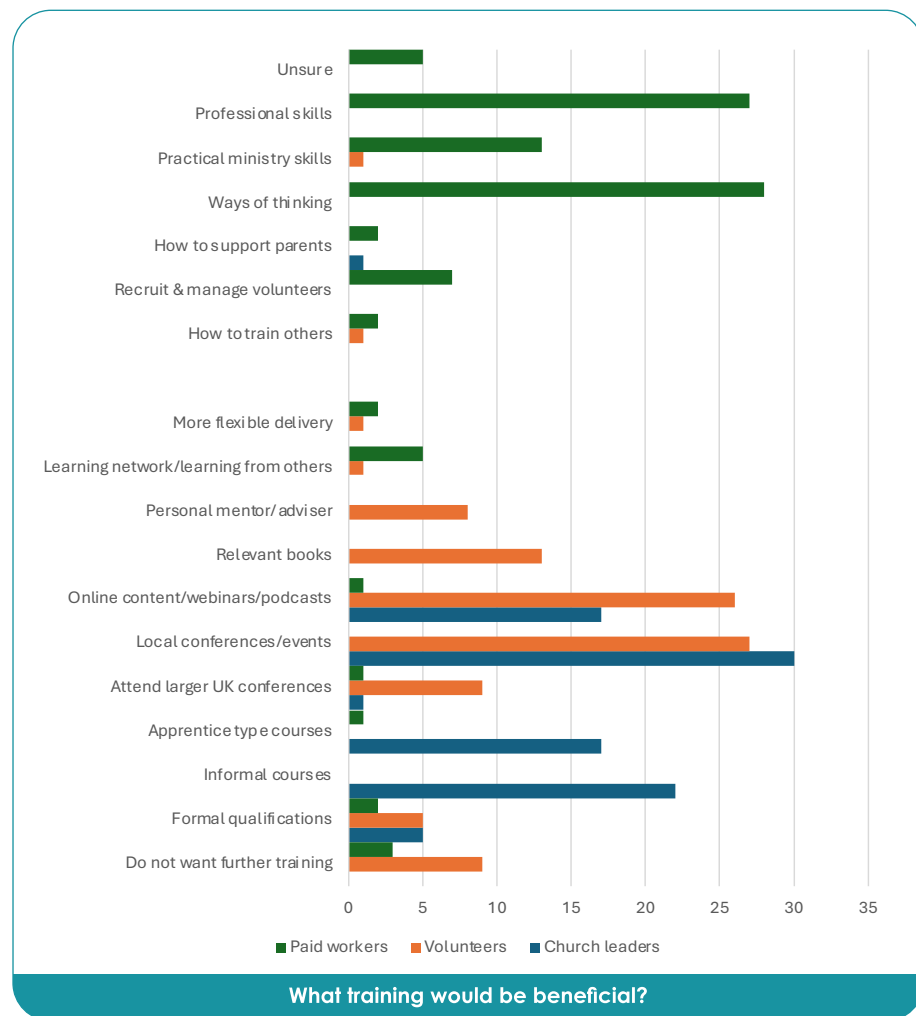
83% of the paid and volunteer ministry workers said that they had accessed training for their role, which was primarily attending conferences (88%), reading books or online information (77%) and formal university or college courses (66%). Some had also utilised a mentoring or coaching arrangement, 'in house' training, denomination-specific training events and opportunities, gap year programmes, attending webinars, seminars or short certificate courses.

The reasons for not accessing training opportunities are shown in the chart below, revealing that time and financial cost are the most frequent barriers amongst paid staff and volunteers alike, although there were many other barriers reported also. Approximately a third (36%) of the church leaders stated that they were unsure what was available, whilst 34% said that there were plenty of opportunities available and 24% said that there needed to be more training opportunities made available.



The other chart shows the suggestions from participants about what training would be helpful. The most common response related to training in underlying ways of thinking, such as reflective thinking, theological understanding of the ministry, more updated approaches, greater awareness of neurodiversity, SEND and trauma, understanding children and families and child development. But there were also calls for more practical training, to equip the workforce for everyday youth/ children's work, specifically worship, creative arts, storytelling, ministry in schools, all age services and chaplaincy.

Some suggested practical training for wider church involvement, such as how to inspire churches, intergenerational working, managing church politics, support parents pastorally and dealing with diverse needs within the church. Professional development was also in demand, such as mentoring and coaching, mental health training, project management, managing budgets, line management, behaviour management techniques, fundraising, marketing, risk assessing and first aid training.



The volunteers expressed particular desire for online training content, such as podcasts and webinars. They seemed to value such training opportunities much more than paid workers did, and more than church leaders perceived.

The church leaders indicated a preference for local and regional events (29%), informal courses (22%), apprentice type courses (17%) and online webinars (17%).

This suggests a desire for more context-specific training, but also lower cost. Only 5% suggested that there is a need for degree style training and even fewer (2%) expressed a desire for national conferences for this ministry sector.





DAVID'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

There is a sense of 'siege mentality' in these results. The church has experienced a significant drop in numbers of CYF in the last fifty years. Hence, there are fewer opportunities to employ those who can minister to these groups and therefore fewer role models for young people, especially when reflecting on their own future careers. Austerity has also caused many faith employers to pull back on recruitment, and to concentrate on maintenance over mission.

Most adverts for CYF workers in churches see passion and energy as the most important character traits. The result is that, as witnessed in the barriers to training above, we are primarily attracting activists who may struggle with reflective practice, have limited time for reading and research, and who regularly find themselves having to prioritise the urgent over the important and who burn out or move on because the work is so stressful. Is this the reason why so many said that there is not enough time for training? The struggle which so many experience, to balance the pressures of this type of work is not helped by the lack of training for church leaders in good line-management!

The training organisations do exist, although declining numbers are threatening their future existence. All of the training needs identified by the research are available, but there is a disconnect between those who want to be trained and an understanding of the opportunities available; a disconnect between the time available and the time needed for training; and a disconnect between the reality of the costs of training and the willingness or ability to pay for it.

DAVID'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

- We, the training providers, must interrogate these results and reflect on the impact that they need to have on the programmes, courses and formation activities with which we are engaged.
- We, the training providers, have to work together more. We have to combine and create programmes which will enable people to engage with learning and, as a result be more effective youth, children's and families' workers who will want to learn more.
- We in the churches must invest in equipping volunteers to undertake these important tasks. We must recruit, train, support and retain teams who will enable the good news of the Christian faith to be encountered and experienced, both within and outside of the faith community.
- Churches need to invest in professionally qualified workers and recognise their ministry and mission as of equal standing with the ordained ministry patterns currently existing in most established churches.



WHY ARE PEOPLE NO LONGER INVOLVED? WITH ROBIN SMITH

(DIRECTOR OF TRAINING, CYM)

KEY FINDINGS >

Why did they say they were no longer involved?

We wanted to capture the perspectives of those no longer involved in these ministries. There were barriers to accessing this group since they could not be contacted through CYP ministry groups. Whilst only 25 people responded, their insights and comments are important to note and feed into ongoing work in these ministry areas.

The table below summarises responses about the reasons for no longer being involved. The most commonly reported reasons were life circumstances (57%), with half of these being 'retired,' and other responses such as illness or new job, 'demands of my paid employment,' 'the need to now focus on the needs of my own children,' and 'I felt I needed a break.'

Just over 20% of the responses reported that the church culture or ethos had led them to

no longer be involved, such as 'there was little desire to work with parents which was my passion,' 'demoralised with members attitudes at churches,' and 'misogyny and sexual discrimination.'

Another 20% of the responses spoke about the working conditions, for example 'the working hours,' 'inadequate pay,' 'no career progression,' 'work/life balance was neither modelled or supported by vicar,' and 'after 10 years ministry felt unsustainable.'

Codes identified in the survey responses	Frequency	Percentage
Church ethos/culture	6	21.43
Working conditions	6	21.43
Life circumstances	16	57.14
TOTAL CODES IN RESPONSES:	28	100.00



WHY ARE PEOPLE NO LONGER INVOLVED?



What would survey participants like to say to those involved in this ministry area now?

Some inspiring comments...

'You are needed and valued and thank you for all you give to children in the church.'

'Children's ministry is very important it is not a babysitting service while parents are in church'

'Believe that God will do great things!'

Some advice...

'Focus on the relationships'

'Find ways to keep spiritually feeding yourself'

'Get a good mentor, aim for a healthy work-life balance, learn to say 'no', take time for your relationship with God.'

'Avoid spending too much time in the group as it will reduce your own spiritual growth and social interaction after services.'

What would they like to say to those in positions of power?

'Don't see youth and children's work as less important/ valuable than adult ministries. Make sure children are part of the church not occupying them until they are old enough to join in with 'church'. '

'Children's and youth work is vital for the future sustainability of the church so give it due importance, support and a voice in the church.'

'Please value children and families workers more than you do. Please help them find ways to have their own faith journey and community while also serving the church. Please listen to them and focus on empowering parents and families for everyday discipleship rather than focusing so much on Sunday attendance.'



ROBIN'S COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS >

There are some common threads from those no longer involved in CYF ministry that either they as workers and volunteers, or the ministry they had left was not valued sufficiently within the church.

Many start with a passion and commitment to their ministry but struggle to maintain that as their life moves on with limited support from leaders or the wider church. Gifted people will give their lives in support of a significant role but need to feel useful, rewarded and seen in the wider church.

ROBIN'S RECOMMENDATIONS >

Most ministry relies on committed volunteers or paid professionals willing to sacrifice better paid jobs to do the work.

Churches should consider:

- When was the last time we sat down and listened to the week-in week-out experiences of our volunteers and paid staff?
- How can we support our volunteers in a more rewarding way?
- What training and development can we offer our CYP ministry team, for example online courses, conferences or local networks?
- What does the way we organise our space, time and communications say about the importance of ministry with children and young people?



VISIONS FOR MINISTRY AMONGST CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MARK ARNOLD, GARETH CRISPIN, CAROLYN EDWARDS, OLLY GOLDENBERG, ALIA PIKE, BETH PRZYBYLSKA, ANNA WHITFIELD



MARK ARNOLD

Additional Needs Ministry Director, Urban Saints

“ Imagine children's, youth, and families work where everyone belongs; where everyone can be who they are, who God made them to be, and that's OK. Imagine that work thriving and multiplying because everyone is invited, no-one is left out, all are welcomed, valued, included, cherished. We're getting there, but there is still more to do to make this vision of a truly inclusive version of children's, youth, and families work the reality across the church.

Jesus didn't turn anyone away because of their disability, neurodivergence, or difference; my vision is for a church that doesn't turn anyone away either, but instead embraces and envelopes everyone in the love of Jesus. ”



DR. GARETH CRISPIN

Lecturer in Practical Theology, Cliff College.

“ Imagine a trumpeter, playing a tune on their own. It sounds stunning as they explore the music and instrument in freedom. Now add other trumpets, and the potential increases. Hear them as they belt out a fanfare! Now bring in some trombones, tubas and other brass and suddenly with a bit of co-ordination and understanding there is depth and umph that can fuel a march. But add in strings, wind and percussion and you get something completely new. Something utterly different – a symphonic sound. A sound that is greater than the sum of its parts. A sound that you could not imagine for a moment, having heard all the individual instruments. Well here you have a vision for CYF ministry. A vision of different ministries playing to their strengths and fitting together for the purpose of raising the next generation to know, love and serve Jesus. Working with youth and children in peer groups, as part of a bio-logical-legal family and as individuals with their own personal devotional lives are all important. But ultimately the picture we have in scripture is of the church playing the music of faith together in glorious symphonic sound. We are not in eternity yet but may we see, hear, feel and play some of that symphonic sound today. ”



DR CAROLYN EDWARDS

Church of England's Ministry with Children and Young People Officer

“ What better way to live life like Jesus than to put children at the heart of what we do? Just like he did with a child when the disciples were arguing about status. Yes, it might be challenging and costly in terms of both money and time. Yes, it might be messy and slightly uncomfortable. Sometimes it even involves making some difficult decisions about priorities.

But... churches that value children and young people, and the people who care for them, with what they do, particularly with their time and money, as well as what they say, don't just grow numerically.

Those churches who strive to welcome and actively include children and young people experience Jesus' upside down kingdom of love, joy, curiosity, hope and openness, in ways that has a positive impact on everyone's spirituality and faith, whatever their age. ”



OLLY GOLDENBERG

Children Can

“ We must return to God's model of ministry to the next generation and cry out for God to move in our nation once more. This will be family-centric for children and involve a radical release for our youth, all supported by the love and wisdom of the older generations who pour their lives into those younger than them.

Imagine families who are spiritually vibrant where Christ is exalted and prayer, love and faith are the substance of the home, reflecting 1 Corinthians 4:20. Imagine a church where children are viewed as full and active members of the body of Christ; resulting in a strong Sunday gathering leading to a fruitful Monday. A community where children are equipped to live full uncompromising lives for the Lord, preaching the Gospel, and leading their friends to the Lord. Imagine a church where youth not only serve in ministry but are mentored in faith. A church where children, youth and adults all worship together, inspiring one another in their callings. A generation rising who do not compromise in their faith, but are strengthened by home and church to stand strong.

When family and church work together we see children flourish in their faith, which in turn enriches the wider church community. The revivals and reformations of history have all involved children and youth. Frequently young people are at the cutting edge of what the Lord has been doing, with the older generation being awoken by their zeal. We are seeing these seeds in homes across our nation. Our prayer is, Lord do it again! We echo the prayer of Habakkuk 3:2, 'Lord I have heard of your fame, I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy. ”



ALIA PIKE

Volunteer youth worker

“ I’m forever grateful to those children’s and youth workers who invested time in me as I was growing up. I remember the sisters (both in their 70s) from the very small Evangelical church who held free activities in the summer holidays. Their care and compassion towards the children who attended and their love to create something memorable for us to be a part of will never be forgotten.

Then there’s the youth workers who gave of their time to sit with me and encourage me to explore my skills and help me to think about what sort of person I wanted to be. And finally, those who volunteered at local summer camps. They gave up their time so I could meet other children and young people and this all shaped the Christian that I am today.

My hope is now, as a volunteer youth worker in my church, that I am able to invest my time so that children and young people can explore who they are and become all that God has created them to be. ”



BETH PRZYBYLSKA

Strategic Project Director, CYMFed – Catholic Youth Ministry Federation

“ I envision a Christian youth ministry that fosters deep, personal relationships with Christ, empowering young people to live out their faith boldly in a world full of challenges. I would love to see it become a space where they feel genuinely known, loved, and equipped to explore their vocation through discipleship and community.

My hope is for a ministry that both nurtures spiritual growth and encourages youth to be light in their communities. ”



ANNA WHITFIELD

Course Co-ordinator/Lecturer at Nazarene Theological College, youth worker and site/ church plant leadership in local church

“ At its best, children & young people's ministry is a beautiful reflection of the richness and creativity of the Kingdom of God. I've seen it birth prayer warriors, activists for godly justice and future church leaders.

It's so important to keep striving for excellence and innovative practice so that the full potential of work with our under-18's can be realised. This ministry can be transformative for them and for the church. ”





CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



In framing the conclusion, I have borrowed the outline of a BEPA (2007) document, because I think it provides helpful focus areas.⁷

Reflecting on the insights from the different strands of the survey and interview responses, I propose that what the UK church needs now is a strategy for investing in these younger generations – actively and intentionally. But many strands of this research have shown that this strategy needs to be both collaborative (different stakeholders working together) and participatory (involving and empowering younger generations). That almost sounds like a biblical concept...the Body of Christ!

The three focus areas of the BEPA report will now be used to frame observations and recommendations relating to needs for change within the areas of children, youth and family ministries.

The areas of this proposed strategy are:

- Spiritual health and wellbeing
- Education
- Citizenship and participation

⁷ Barrington-Leach, L., Canoy, M., Hubert, A. and Lerais, F., 2007. Investing in youth: an empowerment strategy. Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA).



SPIRITUAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING >

The survey data shows significant awareness of mental health and its impact on young people. But few respondents spoke of the implications of poor spiritual health. When asked what young people needed most, most of the participant parents said they desired for their child to have an active Christian faith. Similarly, the young people themselves said that primarily families needed faith input, and connection amongst community is secondary. With a slightly different focus, the paid workers thought that community was the primary need, followed by faith guidance and being validated, accepted and understood. It is therefore important to evaluate whether the activities of the UK church serve this primary need for spiritual health and wellbeing of under 18's. Does week-on-week activity seek to improve the spiritual health and wellbeing of the younger generations? Or do we get distracted, focussing on building community, tolerance and acceptance, which all of our research groups said were secondary aims and purposes?

There has recently been a significant shift towards financial and time investments into supporting mental health. But if we believe in the hope of Christ, why has there not been similar investment from the church into enhancing the spiritual health of young people? How much time and money is spent on maintaining church buildings, providing refreshments and comfy seats for adults to sit and listen

to sermons while their mind drifts off to other things? Conversely how much time and money is spent by the UK church on supporting children to discover the love of Jesus Christ?

What is at stake if our children and young people are not spiritually healthy? What does spiritual wellbeing even look like? Is that what we are actively striving for or are we too busy 'keeping the show on the road' for adults in our congregations? What about those who have never heard the gospel message? How can we reach out and support their spiritual health and wellbeing? And what does it look like to care for the spiritual health of under 18's collaboratively – with a team spirit? Equally, what about participation? – how might younger generations rise up and be enabled and empowered to take responsibility for their own spiritual health? What tools and structures would they need? Do our existing church cultures help or hinder children's spiritual health and wellbeing? These are big questions which span across sectors such as training, resourcing, investment and church culture. But they must be engaged with for the sake of the spiritual health and wellbeing of the children across our nation.



EDUCATION >

The field of education within CYF ministry has seen drastic change in recent years. There are distinct challenges in delivering training to paid and voluntary workers in accessible ways, but also in ensuring that the training content matches the needs and expectations of their context. When we consider these changes, we often lament the losses but this hinders us from keeping apace with the constantly changing world. We now need to explore the opportunities which lie ahead. To think about how training could be more effective if it is done collaboratively, rather than in silos. How could training be a launchpad for building greater awareness and enhanced understanding of the wider church about the importance of CYF ministry? Indeed, what would it take to educate the wider population of the UK church about Jesus' teaching of being like a child, or of genuine collaboration and accommodation aligning with the Body of Christ?

And thinking of the children themselves...How are they being educated or raised in the Christian faith if they are not attending church regularly when many of our ministry models and structures presume that the focus is primarily on Sunday attendance? We need creative ways of how this education can happen beyond the Sunday School model. This calls for greater focus on faith formation throughout the week - supporting parents but also equipping and empowering the children and young people themselves. And what about those

outside church? What about missional activity? The focus of the vast majority of this research data was discipleship – relating mainly to working with families who are already linked with the church. But where are the opportunities for educating those beyond this about the Christian faith?

Within the world of education, there has been much change. Yet within the church we have not followed suit. Why are we continuing with the same models of ministry for outreach and discipleship? We are living in different times than when many of them were created! Our children and young people live in a hybrid world, so they are simultaneously involved online and in person....they are surrounded and bombarded by influences and influencers...they are entertained and occupied every second of their time awake. But where are the opportunities for them to explore Christianity in credible and relevant ways? We need to rethink these structures and models and be more creative in the educational opportunities we create and utilise.



CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION >

The young people expressed very clearly that they want to be involved, visible and valued in church. Yet so many of the research findings indicated that CYF do not feel valued. Even worse, those who volunteer to minister amongst them do not feel valued either! How can this be turned around? And it's beyond paying good amounts for fulltime workers, although that would be a start....this research shows the need to change the culture of the churches - where there is safety and security for older generations in traditions and 'adult' ways of worshipping, there needs to be a radical and intentional overhaulto truly accommodate and include under 18s as participants and full citizens of the church.

But this needs to come from the church leadership structures.... both top down and bottom up...for everyone to work together with the aim of enhancing a sense of accommodation of younger generations and facilitation of their authentic not tokenistic participation. In this way, the younger generations of our church can truly feel like citizens and participants, not outsiders or observers; or even worse outcasts and oppressed.

The BEPA report calls people to consider what is at stake if policy-makers do not take seriously the need to change for the sake of children and young people. In the same way, we need to consider what is at stake in the light of this research...

The younger generations are rapidly disappearing from our churches. In 20 years, what if they have chosen to belong and participate in things other than Christianity because they are more welcoming and inclusive?

What if our churches are no longer vibrant and buzzing with the life and soul which our younger generations bring? Once the older generations have departed this earth, what if we've left it too late to change the culture of the church and there is no-one left? That is what is at stake! The Kingdom of God in our younger generations. We need to rise up together and champion for change for their sake.

> WHAT PART CAN YOU PLAY IN ACTIVELY AND INTENTIONALLY INVESTING IN THESE YOUNGER GENERATIONS?

FURTHER READING

Some strands of this report have also been developed more fully into academic papers:

Holmes, S.E. (pending publication)

As slippery as an eel! Researching under 18s ministry activity from a range of stakeholder perspectives

Holmes & Campbell, A. (pending publication)

Factors affecting the sense of valuing and confidence of paid and volunteer youth and children's workers in UK churches

Holmes & Drew, E. (pending publication)

What's the point of ministry amongst children, youth and families? Examination of aims and activities from different perspectives

Holmes & Fenton, P. (pending publication)

What's distinctive about contemporary ministry amongst younger generations

Holmes & Howell, D. (pending publication)

The changing landscape of training for Christian ministry amongst under 18s

Holmes & Richards, S. (pending publication)

Do they have the support they need? Illuminating the experiences and perspectives of Christian youth, children and family workers in the UK

Holmes & Turner, R. (pending publication)

What do UK families want from the modern-day church? A comparative analysis of responses from parents of different stages and key stakeholders

Holmes & Worsley, H. (pending publication)

The place of younger generations in the UK church: An explorative study of investment and empowerment initiatives

Holmes, S.E. (pending publication)

Investigation of factors which equip and give confidence to parents in passing their faith onto their child.

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The Institute of Children, Youth and Mission (CYM) launched their research centre in March 2024, with the aim of drawing together people who are interested and active in research amongst children, family and youth ministries.

We are keen to ensure that the work we do strengthens the church, specifically these ministry areas.

You can find out more here: [**https://cym.ac.uk/research**](https://cym.ac.uk/research)

You can join our research network/e-newsletter here:
[**https://cym.ac.uk/research/join-our-network**](https://cym.ac.uk/research/join-our-network)

Or you can email **Dr Sarah Holmes** (Director of Research) here:
[**sarah.holmes@cym.ac.uk**](mailto:sarah.holmes@cym.ac.uk)

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