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Changing Children? A Case Study Approach in Christian Education

MA dissertation

Richard England

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August 2007

17 OCT 2007

This dissertation is the product of my own work, and the work of others has been properly acknowledged throughout.



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September 2005

MA

Changing Children? A Case Study Approach in Christian Education

Supervisor: Prof Jeff Astley

Abstract:

The subject of this thesis is the changing world of childhood within the context of the church's ministry to children. The connections between models of children's ministry, approaches to Christian education and changing trends in childhood are examined through the concrete situation of the case study, a local church. Much current research in Christian education focuses on those already present within the church, so a substantial analysis of the wider experience of children outside the church is offered through analysis of cultural change and the experience of the case study.

The thesis begins with an exploration of the effects of consumerism and technological development upon the experience of childhood. The changing place of children within the church is then examined, with an analysis of new trends in children's ministry. An overview of approaches to Christian education is followed by the case study. The final chapter contains reflections on the case study within a Christian education context.

The aim of this thesis is to connect the theory of Christian education with theories of cultural change in the light of the experience of the case study. The reflections on the case study contain the dialogue between the approaches to Christian education and the concrete experience of those involved in children's ministry, particularly to children from outside the church community.

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Introduction

There is nothing permanent except change.

– Heraclitus

Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed.

– Irene Peter

What might change mean to children? After all, they will have known nothing other than their present experience, which they will therefore assume to be normal. In one *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon, Calvin asks his father why old photographs are in black and white. Calvin's father, unable or unwilling to discuss advances in photography, tells Calvin that the whole world was black and white until 1947. Calvin is amazed at this new knowledge but then wonders why paintings made before 1947 are in colour. Children do not know how different the world they are born into might be from the childhood world of their parents or grandparents.

This is a study in the ways the world of childhood might have changed in recent decades, and how the church's relationship with children might have changed in the same time. It is also an exploration of Christian education theory and how helpful that theory might be in a changing world. Finally, the study is contextualised in the story of a church seeking to find ways to work with children in the world around. This is obviously a wide remit; any one of these areas could have filled the whole thesis. The aim is to try to understand how ministry to children might need to change to meet the needs of the contemporary child. So it seems appropriate to try to understand how the contemporary experience of childhood might differ from that of a generation ago. In recent years, attempts to improve the state and status of children's ministry seem to have focussed on reform of pastoral care systems and children's groups based upon an internal critique of our effectiveness in caring for our children. But it is equally important to look at the wider scene of childhood and ask how, as a church, we might become more effective in offering the message of Christ to the children around us.

The thesis begins with this analysis of contemporary childhood. Two major themes are explored in some detail: consumerism and technology. How each might influence childhood is then examined before some brief reflections on implications for ministry to children. Next, we turn to the recent history of children in the church.

The present situation of children's church attendance is examined, followed by a brief study of the decline of the Sunday School, which was for many years the nation's outstanding example of the Christian education and nurture of children. New trends in children's ministry within the church are then looked at.

Finally, before the case study, an overview is offered of Christian education theory and approaches. Three approaches are examined in more detail, the faith community, interpretation and faith development approaches. Without wanting to disregard the other approaches, these three seemed to me to have the most relevance for the current state of children's ministry in the UK. After the account of the case study, the thesis closes with theological reflections from its experience.

As we shall see later, case studies are more common within the discipline of social science than theology. My aim is to try to critically reflect on the experiences of Christian education within a particular context. Perhaps, then, this is an exercise in practical theology. It is certainly an attempt to connect theory and practice within the context of the experiences of a local church – both the theory of Christian education and theories of social change in the light of developments in consumerism and technology.

There is much that does not change, such as the imperative to reach out to children with the message of Christ. But I hope that this thesis will help us wonder how those things that do change – the methods of communication and the models of belonging – might be more closely tailored to meet the needs of today's children.

At this point, I need to offer my thanks and appreciation to Jeff Astley, my supervisor, who has been so helpful and supportive. Also to the staff and wardens of St Thomas', Crookes and St Thomas', Philadelphia who have kindly supported me on behalf of the church. The encouragement and financial support to complete this period of study has been invaluable. My thanks to Ruth Deller in particular for her help in editing the final draft. Finally, I must thank Kathryn, my wife, for her love and support during this season of study, especially in the closing months as we also awaited the arrival of our second child.

While this work has been my own, it tells the story of over five years of ministry to Sheffield's children from the team at St Thomas'. It has been a privilege to work alongside such a wonderful, committed team through the successes and the setbacks. I am truly grateful to God for the time I have spent sharing in ministry with them.

Chapter 1: Changing Childhoods

Children and Change

In his book *Lost Icons* Rowan Williams begins with childhood. What has been lost about childhood, he argues, is the idea of ‘latency’, that children can exist in a ‘not yet’ of adulthood where they can experiment with their world free of the responsibilities and consequences adults have to bear. That latency has been shrunk, Williams believes, because children’s place within society has changed. For example, their roles now include that of economic subject and sexual subject. Like the rest of us, they are initiated into a culture of choice, whether or not they are equipped to occupy such a place.¹

Here the language of loss is deployed, rather than merely of change. But, very often, those who speak of social change, particularly change affecting childhood, seem to do so in negative terms, implying that such change has precipitated loss in some form. In what follows, we try to navigate some of the currents of cultural change in childhood. That such change has occurred is rarely disputed, though it is often difficult to measure in childhood, as children are notoriously culturally silent. Lacking adult language skills (which is part of the ‘latency’ Williams speaks of), words are given to them, or interpreted for them, by the adults who are around.

It may not even be childhood itself that we are actually examining. In trying to understand what we might call the ‘felt experience’ of childhood, we are looking at changing social realities from the child’s point of view. This is to help understand how children growing up today might view the world because of the particular experiences of childhood in the UK in the early twenty-first century. So, it is children’s relationship with certain social changes that is the object of this part of the research. These social changes are children’s changing economic role and the place of technology within society.

As we shall see, it is not difficult to argue that there has been substantial change within each of these areas in recent years. But that is not the end of our investigation, only the beginning. How might any changes we discover within these areas affect the way that children view and interact with their world? And what

¹ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp11-52.

implications might such cultural change within childhood have for those within the Church seeking to educate children in the Christian faith?

This requires theological reflection, but it is reflection that tries to start with the state of our world. I should declare my prejudices at this point. As a children's worker for some years in a large Anglican-Baptist LEP (Local Ecumenical Project) in Sheffield, it is my conviction that today's children do see the world differently from those of former generations. These differences must be taken account of by changing values and practices in children's ministry. I shall be seeking to elucidate and defend this view as we proceed.

There are a number of other issues that could have been examined, such as the changing face of the family, children and poverty or the urbanisation of childhood. Some of these issues are touched on as we explore the issues of consumerism and technological change. The changing face of the family is dealt with later as part of the reflections on the case study. But the whole thesis could have been an analysis of such changes, so I have had to limit this section (though it is still quite long) to two developments within childhood that I consider to be important to the church's ongoing ministry to children. Within each section, there is a survey of how the experience of childhood might be changing, followed by brief reflections on what implications this might have for those working with children.

1) Children, Consumerism and Finance

We begin with what may be at once one of the most profound and subtle changes that the world of childhood has undergone in past decades. It is the place of money, and with it the values of consumerism, in a child's life. Children have had money before, and, like adults, have gone to greater or lesser lengths to obtain more of it, but, as we shall see, in relation to money the world of today's child differs in two significant ways from that of the children of just a generation ago.

- 1) Our children are growing up in a society in which consumerism has become one of the most potent forces.
- 2) Today's children are more affluent than any generation of children before them, and, as such, are treated as a discrete economic group with their own products, services, and accompanying advertising and marketing.

While this is a subtle change, neither revolutionary nor radical, but inevitable and unremarkable, it is undoubtedly a profound one, simply because *it has never happened before*. Children have never been consumers before, with the resources, rights and opportunities to participate fully in our consumerist world. We can expect that this new, consumerist childhood will produce distinct qualities in today's children and tomorrow's adults.

We shall briefly look at the ascent of consumerism, and the emergence of the children's market in the latter half of the twentieth century. We shall try to understand the particular circumstances in which today's child consumers find themselves, and the ways in which the church might need to respond to this very different world.

Consumerism

Consumerism is, in some ways, the illegitimate child of the cultural change and intellectual advancements of the last century. Since the Enlightenment, a growing emphasis on the material and the rational – the 'knowable' – had caused much of the modern world to regard with mistrust those aspects of life (and, often, faith) which seemed immaterial, transcendent and un-knowable. However, with the rise of a more relativistic way of thinking, which called even that which we had considered 'knowable' (such as science, history, progress) into question, many were left without certainty or security about anything. It seemed that all we could do was enjoy the 'now', living for the moment, because anything beyond that was fraught with uncertainty. All this might have been irrelevant in a more primitive society, yet for the first time (at least in recent history) we had the means to live like this – possessing a surfeit of time, energy and money. Harvie Ferguson describes the situation thus: 'the "age of irony" passed to be replaced by an "age of glamour" in which appearance is consecrated as the only reality... Modernity thus moves through a period of "authentic" selfhood to one of "ironic" selfhood to a contemporary culture of what might be termed "associative" selfhood.'²

Graham Cray, considering the effects of cultural change in the UK for those involved in youth ministry, believes that the development of a consumer culture is one of the defining characteristics of this cultural 'gear shift': 'the most significant dimension of the shift from modernity to postmodernity is the move from a culture in

² Harvie Ferguson, 'Glamour and the end of irony', *The Hedgehog Review*, Fall 1999, pp10-16, quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2000), p87.

which personal identity and social integration were found through production and the work-place (and thus making a positive contribution to a foreseeable better world) to a culture based on consumption, the market and personal choice'.³ Zygmunt Bauman makes a similar point, arguing that we have fundamentally changed our sources of identity: 'in the postmodern, consumer-orientated society individuals are socially formed under the auspices of the pleasure-seeker or sensation-gatherer role instead of the producer/soldier role formative for the great majority of society members (at least the male society members) in the modern era.'⁴ For both writers, the move towards consumerism does not merely reflect more leisure time, or more disposable income, but a transition within the very fabric of our culture. Our new, outward practices reflect inward changes in the creation of identity and the search for significance.

Roger Scruton, while writing with a markedly different emphasis, expresses similar sentiments: 'something new seems to be at work in the contemporary world – a process that is eating away the very heart of social life, not merely by putting salesmanship in place of moral virtue, but by putting everything – virtue included – on sale'.⁵ All of these writers explore the moral, emotional and spiritual poverty created within such an environment. By making everything at once valuable and disposable, a constant cycle of need and gratification is generated. Certain experiences, such as shopping at one of the country's many new shopping centres or initiating a one night relationship with a stranger in a nightclub, provide an immediate emotional high, but are of no long-term value in either providing genuine emotional depth or developing moral, ethical or spiritual character. Yet we still hear the implicit message that these shallow, self-centred experiences are the best we can hope for, and the cycle not only continues but grows in strength. The highs get higher yet the genuine, lasting experiences of virtue or meaning (Roger Scruton might describe them as 'sacred') are denied by the very ease of access to the high itself.

The archetype of that particular race in which every member of a consumer society is running... is the activity of shopping. We stay in the race as long as we shop around... [However] shopping is not just about food, shoes, cars or furniture items. The avid, never-ending search for new and improved

³ Graham Cray, *Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1998), p4.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Postmodern Religion?' in Paul Heelas (Ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p69.

⁵ Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (London: Duckworth, 1998), p51.

examples and recipes for life is also a variety of shopping... There are so many areas in which we need to be more competent, and each calls for "shopping around."⁶

Western materialism/capitalism is not a new thing, but subtle shifts have taken place in recent years which have changed the way we view how we live and what we buy. Naomi Klein, in her groundbreaking book *No Logo*, explains the change of emphasis undergone by manufacturers and corporations in the 1980s and '90s.

Until [the mid-1980s] ... the primary concern of every solid manufacturer was the production of goods... An editorial that appeared in *Fortune* magazine in 1938, for instance, argued that the reason the American economy had yet to recover from the Depression was that America had lost sight of the importance of making *things*:

This is the proposition that the basic and irreversible function of an industrial economy is *the making of things*; that the more things it makes the bigger will be the income, whether dollar or real; and hence that the key to those lost recuperative powers lies... in the factory where the lathes and the drills and the fires and the hammers are. It is in the factory and on the land and under the land that purchasing power *originates*...

Klein continues,

But by the eighties, pushed along by that decade's recession, some of the most powerful manufacturers in the world had begun to falter... At around this same time a new kind of corporation began to rival the traditional all-American manufacturers for market share... These pioneers [such as Nike, Microsoft, Intel and Tommy Hilfiger] made the bold claim that producing

⁶ Bauman, *Liquid*, pp73-74.

goods was only an incidental part of their operations... What these companies produced primarily were not things, they said, but *images* of their brands.⁷

While this recollection of history misses out some significant earlier developments in this area (such as the work of Alfred Sloan, whose marketing innovation complemented the groundbreaking work of Henry Ford in car production⁸), her point is still well made: when we shop today we are not buying products so much as ideas, concepts or fantasies of how life or the surrounding world could or should be. We are participating in an elaborate (and expensive) ritual of aspiration: buy this and your life will be better/you will be more sexually attractive/you will feel better about yourself/other people will like you/you will be admired and respected/you will seem cool, and so on.

The superficial nature of this image-driven marketing revolution means that *youth* (youthful looks, youthful attitudes, and youthful circumstances – i.e. no commitments or responsibilities) has become our new idol, with every aspect of youth culture (including rebellion) being repackaged and sold to the masses of each generation. Which begs an interesting question: now that we all dress, act and look young, what marks out as different and unique those who are actually young? There is no sense of a defined period of life when one was young, because adolescence can now be extended indefinitely, with commitment and responsibility being put off as long as possible.

Consumerism as myth and ritual

In many ways, consumerism has replaced religion within the heart and mind of our society. As John Hull writes:

Money has literally become the God of our culture. But since many people do not believe in God, they do not realise that their attitudes toward money have

⁷ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London : Flamingo/HarperCollins, 2000) pp3-4. The *Fortune* quote is from "Government Spending Is No Substitute for the Exercise of Capitalist Imagination," *Fortune*, September 1938, pp63-64. Author's own italics.

⁸ Bauman, *Liquid*, p85.

all of the traditional attitudes that people used to feel and express towards God.⁹

Martin Lindstrom agrees: 'Brands have almost acquired a religious feel and exist right up there on the ladder of priorities'.¹⁰

The rapid decline of our (Christian) faith-based society in the 1960s left a vacuum which needed to be filled. While many agencies and belief systems vied for influence in the wake of the church's collapse as society's moral and spiritual centre, by the 1980s it was clear that the essential worldview of the British was now a consumerist one. Those responsible for the ongoing development of our consumerist lifestyles, the advertising and marketing executives, have intentionally worked to develop what we buy into something more than mere products. As Lindstrom points out, 'The dramatic change in the role of brands has been part of the advertising agencies' long-term goals. It was initially the advertisers who envisioned turning brand into a form of religion, to increase their sales. And it has worked.'¹¹

Our attitude towards consumerism, and the way it has developed over the last 50 years, displays all the hallmarks of a new religion: shopping malls are our new temples and communal centres; money (as the means by which we can participate in the rituals of consumerism) our new Absolute Being; the priests and priestesses of our new cultural obsession are the celebrities who act as clotheshorses for the latest styles and the designers themselves are the mysterious high priests and priestesses of our modern cult. There is the opportunity for self-improvement and the aspirational life in one's ability to mimic the celebrities, with thousands of pages of magazine articles dedicated to the latest clothes, fitness regimes, hairstyles, holidays and other minutiae of celebrity lifestyles. There is also the chance to deal with sin and guilt: the shops will always give you a second chance, so long as you have money (or credit) to spend, where you can be absolved of the past and come out a new person! There is no chance of this new faith becoming tired, old or boring, because it is constantly seeking to reinvent itself. With a weekly craving for the new, the latest and the innovative, the expressions of this belief system can stretch as wide as the human imagination. The act of worship is found in the purchase, the getting, whether it be that new dress, or, in

⁹ John M. Hull, 'Money, Modernity and Morality: Some Issues in the Christian Education of Adults', *Religious Education* 95, vol. 1 (Winter 2000), p12.

¹⁰ Martin Lindstrom, *BRANDchild* (London: Kogan Page, 2003), p82.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p82.

a more abstract sense, the sexual encounter, the illicit drug taking, the conquering of the next level on the computer game. It is the momentary thrill, the excitement, the release of adrenalin or endorphins, which is the act of consummation at the heart of the consumerist ritual.

Not only has this new ideology replaced religion for very many people, it has also changed the ways in which many of us treat the older forms of religious expression. As Paul Heelas explains:

The deregulation of the religious realm, combined with the cultural emphasis on freedom and choice, results in intermingled, interfused, forms of religious – or “religious”-cum-“secular” – life which exist beyond the tradition-regulated church and chapel. People no longer feel obliged to heed the boundaries of the religions of modernity. Instead they are positively encouraged to exercise their “autonomy” to draw on what has diffused through the culture.¹²

Yet do we believe that there is no deeper reality in the consumerist ritual than that which is experienced? This particular ‘myth’ points only inward to the darker recesses of our own fantasies, desires and fears. It can never draw us into an experience of the sacred or divine. However, with the absence of any genuine competitor for the heart and mind of our culture, it seems that most of us are prepared to play along for the present. We *know* it’s not real, we *know* that the promises of every marketing guru will prove hollow or, at best, shallow and temporary, yet we are prepared to close our eyes to the banality of our situation, and the absence of any genuine emotional depth beyond the momentary high of the purchase, and agree with the marketing executives that image is more important than substance.

Perhaps very few of us are conscious of these mental processes when we are at the shopping mall, yet, whether we believe it or not, it is apparent from a distance that this is how we have chosen to live and, in the absence of any meaningful alternative, seems to be the way we will continue to live for the foreseeable future. In a society that can reinvent itself every year, the possibilities are endless.

¹² Heelas, *Religion*, p5.

Children as consumers

Children have a unique place within this new age. All of us imbibe the values of the surrounding culture as if by osmosis, through various media and life experiences, and children are no different. They cannot remain unchanged in their development, outlook and experiences within this cultural upheaval. As Charles Kraft writes, 'Our culture is within us as well as around us. We cannot escape it, though it is possible to transform, and in other ways alter our use of the culture we have received.'¹³ Yet children are one of the groups within society least able to critique, and therefore transform or alter, the cultural vision and values they inherit. The responsibility therefore falls to those who work with children to understand the often subtle shifts in thought and attitude that are taking place.

The children in our primary schools today will be the richest generation in history. How they relate to the wider consumer culture, and particularly to brands, in childhood and through into adulthood is one of the issues generating much interest and research among marketing and advertising agencies. Currently, UK 'tweens' (a term used to describe 8-14 year olds, reflecting the fact that while most are not yet teenagers they are already displaying many of the characteristics traditionally associated with teens) 'are estimated to command a disposable income of US \$2.7 billion [£1.7 billion] a year, from pocket money, gifts and odd jobs.'¹⁴ With an estimated weekly income of between \$6.60-\$7.00 (£4.20-£4.50) for 8-10 year olds and \$13.00-\$13.50 (£8.30-£8.60) for 11-14 year olds in the UK¹⁵, the financial power of this age group is significant. With this fundamental change in the nature of childhood, 'it's no coincidence that this emerging generation has become powerful enough to have a specific allotment in every marketing director's budget.'¹⁶

To try and put this into context, I was born in 1974, so my time spent at primary school was mostly in the 1980s – not so long ago, it seems. As far as I can recall, my income was extremely small during that time (not more than £1-£2 per week) and was allocated for expenditure on such serious items as sweets and comics. I never bought my own clothes, never went shopping on my own, had to save up for toys, and was otherwise utterly dependent on the adults around for me for any further financial support. While talking to some of the children at one of our clubs recently,

¹³ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Orbis: New York, 1979), p106.

¹⁴ Nigel Hollis, 'Bonded to Brands: The Transition Years' in Lindstrom, *BRANDchild*, p46-47.

¹⁵ Hollis, 'Branded', p46.

¹⁶ Lindstrom, *BRANDchild*, p2.

they told me they earned anywhere from £5-£20+ per week from various sources (parents or jobs, mostly), and were responsible for (among other things) clothes and transport and often went shopping on their own. If we average their income out at around £10, even allowing for inflation, it still represents a significant increase.¹⁷ While this is not exactly an objective study, it begins to give an idea of how different things feel for the children of today than it did for those of us who grew up just a short time ago.

How has this situation come about? When we trace the development of Western capitalism and consumerism, it appears inevitable that children should have become consumers. Yet it has all happened very quickly. Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham examine the emergence of the children's market. 'Interest in young consumers began with the baby boom generation after the Second World War. The idea of the "teenager" as a distinct life cycle phase, for example, coupled with the emergence of a so-called "youth market" did not really attract much specific marketing significance until the mid-1950s.' However, the subsequent economic boom, new levels of teenage wealth due to full employment and faster-growing markets, meant that 'many of these [new] commodities were aimed specifically at satisfying the needs and aspirations of young consumers.' These social and economic developments were accentuated by 'further various changes that took place in most developed countries in the 1980s [that] contributed to the increased economic power of children. These included fewer children per parent, the postponement of having children, and dual-working families.' In conclusion, these authors write, 'Richer parents with fewer, but better educated children, have created a more sophisticated young people's market with money to spend and increasingly well-informed tastes and opinions in the sphere of consumerism.'¹⁸

Marketing consultant Gene Del Vecchio gives a personal account of the change of priorities within the baby boomer generation where their children are concerned.

Baby boomers such as myself came of age, struggling to make a place for themselves and their families in an adult world. So we, as every generation

¹⁷ If we give my income in 1985 as £2 per week, and allow for inflation of 6.1% (taken from www.safalra.com/other/ukinflation.html on 20 September 2005), which gives a current equivalent of £3.80 per week, £6.20 less than the average of £10 per week taken above.

¹⁸ Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham, *Children As Consumers* (London: Routledge, 1998), p1-2.

before us, have strived to make our children's lives richer and more fulfilling in every conceivable way. That meant more and more varied experiences in education, social interaction, sports, culture, and just plain old excitement. We also had fewer children, which allowed dual-working boomers to spend more per child. And as some boomers divorced and remarried, it actually *added* to a child's list of gift-givers through an extended family network of step-parents, step-grandparents and step-siblings.¹⁹

We can trace three strands through the emergence of childhood wealth. The first is *guilt*: many parents, as Del Vecchio notes, have had to work harder, with longer hours and more time spent away from home, in order to provide a sense of fulfilment for themselves and the level of affluence and comfort for their family to which they aspire. The loss of quality time with family and children is often compensated for by providing more 'stuff': extra pocket money, nice clothes, expensive family holidays and so on, as parents try to assuage the guilty feelings prompted by their absence.

The second strand is the increase in the level of our general wealth. We live in an era of unprecedented prosperity that is not limited to an elite few but spread across the general populace. So our children, whatever background they may come from, will be members of the richest generation that has ever lived.

Finally, children have more sources of income than ever before. With families fracturing and the impact of 'pester power', children have many more avenues of financial input than their parents did. More adults may be financially involved in a child's life, each wanting the best for that child. Some will want to make up for their physical absence (whether enforced, for example, through relationship breakdown or chosen, through longer hours at work) by giving the child something. A clever child can even play one adult off another for increased fiscal gain ('Only £10? My step-dad gave me £20...') and push the boundaries to see how much they can get out of the system.

For advertising and marketing executives, the children's market is significant for more than the immediate spending power of the children themselves. Today's children are considered to have some influence on how and what their parents buy.

¹⁹ Gene Del Vecchio, *Creating Ever-Cool – A Marketer's Guide to A Kid's Heart* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican, 1997), p19.

Translated into precise dollars and cents, it is staggering. One specialist in kid marketing... estimated that the 34 million kids [in the United States] ages 4 to 12 receive an astonishing \$15 billion (£9.5 billion) a year. Of that, they spend about \$11 billion in such categories as snacks, sweets, toys/games, and clothing and save about \$4 billion. And beyond their own income, children also influence the purchase of more than \$160 billion (£100 million) in *family* goods and services.²⁰

The categories in which children exert a significant influence on parental choice are varied. Some of these categories, such as cereals, dolls, frozen pizzas and fast food restaurants, might be expected. Other categories are more surprising, such as shampoo, hotel selection, and even choice of car.

We can summarise the importance of today's children to the marketing and consumer world in three ways:

- 1) Children have a lot of money to spend for themselves – '[Children] command a substantial disposable income of their own'.
- 2) Children substantially influence the spending of their parents – 'Don't think this is limited to brands bought in the supermarket or the toy store. [Children] have a strong influence over major household purchases too'.
- 3) Children can be persuaded to develop brand loyalty that will last into adulthood – 'There is good evidence that brand relationships formed in childhood do last into later years, even though the relationship is initiated when the brand is not one that is actively consumed or purchased.'²¹

But what does it mean for children to be consumers? What emotional, moral or intellectual differences will it make to the way they view the world? And what will this mean for those agencies, particularly the church, that seek to work with today's children, when those children's early experiences of life seem to be so very different from the children of just twenty or thirty years ago?

²⁰ Del Vecchio, *Creating*, p20.

²¹ All these are from Hollis, 'Bonded' in Lindstrom, *BRANDchild*, p46-47.

Choice

The advent of the children's market has opened up a sphere of influence and experience that has been largely closed to children in the past. As I noted above, beyond the limited opportunities available to me with the £2 per week I had to spend, as a child I was dependent on others for most things: transport, entertainment, clothes and so on. However, had I had *more* money, I should have been able to do more things, and I should have had more choice about what I could have done. Choice is one of the powers that a consumer has, but one that had been denied to most children in the past, because they lacked the resources to access a wider range of choices. Today's children possess the essential resource (money) needed to access the consumer world, and have this power of choice that previous generations lacked. This is in contrast to the general experience of childhood, where 'children are locked... within the contingency of social conventions. The negotiable character of these conventions is power, which children can only exercise in a partial form.'²² Children certainly do not have spending power equivalent to that of adults, but the more money they have, the more choice they have and the more *power* of choice they have. This could lead to conflict with other areas of their lives where they are still effectively powerless and subject to social conventions.

With the power to choose, children have the *right* to choose. The modern era saw the establishment of various inalienable rights belonging to every person, which were enforced by law. The widespread effect of the creation of this set of rights has caused a number of perhaps unexpected consequences. For instance, recently I was involved in running a road show around various Sheffield parks in conjunction with Sheffield City Council. One of the elements was a performance by a hip-hop band, which included a number of young, female dancers. These young ladies naturally attracted the attentions of some tweenage boys (in this case, 11- to 14-year-olds) who tried to peek into the tent in which the girls were changing. They were confronted and, when they became abusive, were warned that they would be asked to leave unless they cooperated. Because it was a public park, their almost predictable reply to this was, 'You can't ask me to leave. I know my rights.' Undoubtedly, many similar sentiments have been echoed in playgrounds, classrooms and shopping malls across the country in recent years.

²² Chris Jenks, *Childhood*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p123.

However, in a consumer culture, the right of the consumer is choice. The power and the moment of choice is one of the sacred moments of our new ritual, so the right of the individual to choose has become paramount.

Now, try combining this with going to school. On the one hand, a child is told through the media that they have the power and the right of choice, and the means to exercise that power and right. On the other hand, they have to go to school, where other people will tell that child what to do, where to sit, what to learn, how to behave, and so on. The rewards seem negligible ('Education? Who needs one?'), while the price seems extremely high (monotony, boredom, discipline). Unlike adults, who seem to have an element of choice about what they do, the child has no choice about going to school. This conflict is certainly exacerbated at secondary school, where 11-year-olds with little or no say about how they can lead their lives are plunged into the same pool as 16-year-olds (or older) who have much greater autonomy.

We might ask the same question with regard to children going to church. While school is the bane of every child's life, and probably always will be, at least everyone has to go to school. Not everyone has to go to church. Life is supposed to be exciting, and the child is supposed to have the right and the power to choose what they do, yet church can often seem boring and irrelevant. So is it any wonder that some children will try to jump ship as soon as they can? The world understands that children have the power of choice, and so tries to win them to choose *their* product, *their* brand, *their* values. But the church treats children as if they have no choice, and makes little or no effort to make them choose *their* faith or win them to *their* way of life. It is no wonder that the vast majority of children will follow those brands that take the time and make the effort to get involved in their lives.

Unlike schools, the church has little state influence trying to force market values into it. 'Choice and diversity' are not being touted as the future of children's ministry within the different Christian traditions in the UK. Whether market values are the answer for either the church or the education system is debatable, but the underlying point is that children elsewhere are encouraged to choose. Attendance at church may be mandatory (for the child in the churchgoing family), but if churches make little effort to encourage their children to choose their church and their faith, attendance is likely to be temporary. Churches who have changed little in their involvement and provision for children over many years risk giving the message that they are not interested in children. The consequences of this attitude within churches,

and the risk we are taking with our own future, are clear: if we don't encourage children to *choose* Christ and his church, we risk losing our children, who represent the future of the church in the UK, to a market culture that invests huge resources in trying to win them to the endless cycle of need and gratification.

Commitment

Consumerism is, by its very nature, non-committal. Emerging out of an environment that questions 'big picture' concepts and stories, the only commitment the philosophy of consumerism encourages the individual to make is to him- or herself: do whatever works for you. When we combine this with our growing penchant for the instant satisfaction of our needs and wants, the disposability of most of our products, and the constant craving for change, long-term commitments start to look uncomfortably out of place in our new cultural vision. We are all 'shopping around' in every area of life, looking for the next and the latest. This is a new pragmatism, where the diffuse elements of life, even career and relationships, are meant to serve the fulfilment of the individual's needs and desires.

Developing genuine Christian commitment in this context is not easy. The words of Christ are in stark juxtaposition to our cultural norms: 'if anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it' (Matthew 16.24-25). The self-centred, short-term choices of the consumerist ritual are challenged by Jesus' call to self-sacrifice, and the long-term journey of commitment to him.

Yet the other side of our non-committal culture is that there is an increased longing for something deeper, something more substantial than the temporary anaesthetic of our throwaway world. The word that is often used to describe this mystical thing that many are looking for is 'community'. Hence we see the portrayal of intimate friendship groups as a contemporary ideal in our television programmes and advertising.

In the next generation, we can expect to see similar numbers of rootless individuals, with many more people drifting through the churches, to see if the Christian faith is for them. Consumer attitudes towards spirituality will undoubtedly continue to prosper, with syncretism, in which individuals mix more than one form of religious belief and expression, becoming more and more popular.

These issues need to be taken seriously when presenting the faith to children. The likelihood is that we will see higher numbers of children coming through our educational programmes, as Christianity moves from being rejected meta-narrative to one of numerous personal life choices, but how many will stay? If we understand the conflicts well, we may find many opportunities presented to us in our changing world for developing new forms of Christian community and mission, but if we are not so aware we may find ourselves frustrated by our inability to develop lasting commitment in those young ones in our care.

Churches reaching consumer children

The Working Party that produced the General Synod report into children's involvement in church, *All God's Children*, concluded its analysis of the cultural influences on today's children with these words: 'We (that is, the church) need to attempt to be a major contributor in the market place of experiences within which today's children live.'²³ One of the implications of this statement is that churches need to relate to children on terms those children can understand, either intellectually or emotionally. We need to use the language and the methods of the market place, not only in reaching out to children outside the church, but to those who are already members. This creates an inevitable tension: how far should we go in associating ourselves with the market place? Where do we draw the line in the language and images we use, and in the level of commitment we expect from our hearers? Church is not shopping, no matter how user-friendly we might try to make it. It is a similar, though distinct, discussion to that going on in schools. Richard Pring comments that, in schools, market forces have redefined the relationship between teacher and pupil: 'The market is said to depict the relations between teacher and learner in a particular way – namely, as a relation between provider and consumer – which is inappropriate.'²⁴ But this provider/client relationship can in no way be used to describe a person's relationship with Christ, nor should it characterise their relationship with the church.

²³ National Society for Promoting Religious Education, *All God's Children: Children's Evangelism in Crisis* (London: Church House Publishing), p33.

²⁴ Richard Pring, 'Markets, Education and Catholic Schools' in Terence H. McLaughlin, Joseph O'Keefe S.J. and Bernadette O'Keefe (eds.), *The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity and Diversity* (London: The Falmer Press, 1996), p60.

So the changing role of the child within our consumer culture presents churches and other agencies working with children with specific challenges. Negotiating a way through these changes will mean confronting our tendency to treat children as 'silent partners' in our churches, and then being surprised when they choose to leave in their early teens to pursue other lifestyles. Making every effort to win these children to the faith, and to the faith community, whether they come from inside or outside the community itself, must be churches' aim. But confronting the consumerist cycle must also be a priority: challenging the culture of the instant hit, the moment of self-gratification where long-term values are exchanged for short-term fulfilment. Building discipleship and Christian commitment in such a climate will not be easy. But if we understand the issues we can at least begin to wrestle with the implications of raising children to operate within their culture but live by the values of the Christian tradition.

2) Communication and the First Digital Generation

In the early twenty-first century, childhood and technology have become almost synonymous; 'perhaps the most salient image of a contemporary child in western society is a picture of a rapt face staring entranced at, almost *into*, the computer screen.'²⁵ The wholesale adoption by younger generations of technological advances such as computers, mobile phones, games consoles and so on, has created a deep ambivalence on society's part to these innovations. Concerns over the content of television programmes, video games and Internet sites vie with the hopes and promises made by proponents of the new media.²⁶

We got our first home computer when I was at primary school; it was quite a basic machine, with some simple games and home programming. Now, just over twenty years later, the world seems a very different place. The technological innovations that brought me my first home computer have continued, diversifying and accelerating with new breakthroughs every year. The average home computer is now more powerful than all the computers put together that were used to put a man on the moon. In the early 1980s, during my childhood, it was all new and exciting, now it is

²⁵ Julian Sefton-Green (Ed.), *Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multimedia* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p1.

²⁶ Ellen A. Wartella and Nancy Jennings, 'Children and Computers: New Technology – Old Concerns' in *The Future of Children*, Vol. 10, No. 2: Children and Computer Technology (Fall/Winter 2000), p31.

commonplace. Change is here to stay and the pace of change is growing as companies bid for market share and greater profitability by patenting the newest breakthrough and mass-producing the latest innovation. 'What makes this generation different from all others before it? It is the first to grow up surrounded by digital media.'²⁷

So, as we examine the changing reality of childhood in our culture, we inevitably come to the technological revolution. Most would agree that these far-reaching changes in the way the modern world functions and interacts will have some effect on children and childhood, though many would disagree about whether those effects are positive or not. But, is it merely the outward façade of childhood that has changed, without affecting much of the underlying structure and values of childhood? Or do these external changes point to deeper, more fundamental changes about how children perceive and understand the world, how they process information and construct reality?

A familiar debate

While the new media innovations of the 1980s and onward have taken society's access to and use of technology forward in huge leaps, these changes represent only the latest technological wave to have broken across Western society in the twentieth century. The earlier advances – film in the 1900s, radio in the 1920s and television in the 1950s – produced similar debates surrounding children and their access to and interaction with the new media.²⁸

The previous three or four generations, then, have each lived through particular, technological leaps forward. Yet, the size of each jump seems to be growing. The role television took in describing the world for the post-war, baby boomer generation was a phenomenon unlike anything the world had seen before. 'TV's impact on society in general and the boomers in particular was profound. We may remember early television only as *I Love Lucy* or rigged quiz shows, but when the American civil rights movement began to find a voice, it was television that served as the messenger and the mobiliser. Just as television redefined the American political process, it has transformed marketing, commerce, education, leisure and culture.'²⁹

²⁷ Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p1.

²⁸ Wartella and Jennings, 'New Technology – Old Concerns', p31.

²⁹ Tapscott, *Growing*, p2.

Wartella and Jennings' analysis of the earlier debates surrounding children and each new media reveal recurring patterns in both the nature of the debate, and the conclusions of the research into the impact of the new media on children. The debate would always be on the same ground: between proponents of the media innovation, who argued 'that the new technology benefits children by opening up new worlds to them,' and opponents who suggested that the 'new media might be used to substitute real life in learning ethical principles, undermining children's morality and causing them to engage in illicit sexual and criminal behaviour.'³⁰ For example, they quote from research into children and radio done in the 1930s: 'Newspapers reported parents' complaints about children gulping their meals so as not to miss a favourite radio show and waking with nightmares from listening to "lurid radio bedtime stories."³¹

Research into children's exposure to new media through the twentieth century followed a similar pattern.

In each case, initial studies have tended to examine which demographic groups of children were gaining access most quickly, how much time they spent with the new technology, and their preferences for different genres or types of use. Then, as the technology became more pervasive, research has tended to shift toward a greater emphasis on how the content of media exposure may be affecting children.³²

We can see this trend being repeated currently as our society continues to feel the effects of the last two waves of new technology. The debate over children and television still rumbles on as an unresolved conflict over whether or not watching television is harmful for children, by making them more prone to violence, illicit sexual activity or criminal behaviour. Every now and then, a tragedy such as the Columbine massacre, or the murder of Jamie Bulger, adds fuel to that debate. However, the discussion over children's use of computers is just on the cusp of a change from the issue of children's access, preferences and habits to a discussion about the content of the new media, and how it might affect children and their

³⁰ Wartella and Jennings, 'New Technology – Old Concerns', p32.

³¹ Ibid, p33.

³² Ibid, p32.

development: 'current debates surrounding the emergence of computer technology and new media echo the promises and concerns of the past.'³³

The most significant difference between this latest wave of new media and its predecessors is the level of *interactivity* involved. Older technological forms do not require the same level of participation as computers and consoles. 'As broadcast technologies, television, cinema, and radio communicate information through dictation, not dialogue. Unlike closed dialogue systems, broadcast technologies are open or public systems; but what they are open to is reception rather than interaction.'³⁴ Wartella and Jennings agree: 'compared with new media, earlier media forms are quite limited in their responsiveness... In earlier media, the character generally provides a staged response that cannot build on exchanges with the media user. Such a response cannot be labelled as true interactivity.'³⁵

So the new media represent the latest chapter in the ongoing saga of our society's struggle to come to terms with its own innovation. The dichotomy in our attitude toward children's participation in these technologies reveals not only our discomfort with the technologies themselves, but 'encapsulates the hopes and fears within popular narratives of childhood'.³⁶ The new technologies offer new ways to nurture our children, by offering new avenues of entertainment, education and communication. But the desire to nurture conflicts with the responsibility to protect, just as our hope that these new tools will help them to be responsible, constructive citizens contrasts with our fear that they may prove to be the means by which our children happily give rein to their baser appetites and desires. How we see children intertwines with how we view technology and the future to create two views, which seem to contrast and, yet, are held concurrently within our culture (both within the popular media and in more reflective circles). On the one hand, our desire to control and regulate children's access to the new media reflects 'a combination of panic and nostalgia which is characteristic of the closing decades of the twentieth century'³⁷ and, equally, of the opening years of the twenty-first. On the other, we embrace the promised rewards of the new technology with open arms and enthusiastic declarations such as that made by Don Tapscott: 'For the first time in history, children are more

³³ Ibid, p35.

³⁴ Tapscott, *Growing*, p81.

³⁵ 'New Technology – Old Concerns', p37.

³⁶ Sefton-Green, *Diversions*, pp1-2.

³⁷ David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Multimedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p32.

comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate about an innovation central to society... They are a force for social transformation.'³⁸ Somewhere between the two extremes of outright panic and breathless excitement, we may find the peculiar combination of feelings, both anxiety and enthusiasm, expressed by many parents, educators and commentators.

A generational divide?

Children represent a hugely significant market within the realms of new media. They are the target audience for billions of pounds of design and production of hardware (such as games consoles and mobile phones) and content (such as television shows, websites, computer games, movies and interactive learning materials). Children's natural affinity for play and their greater leisure time makes them ideal end users of the multitude of products available, while their seemingly greater adaptability enables them to involve themselves easily in the new world of computers and consoles. So much have children immersed themselves in this new technological culture that they seem to find it easier to access and understand than many adults. '[Although] some people worry about the social divide between the information-rich and the information-poor... the real cultural divide is going to be generational.'³⁹

However, the consequences, for good or otherwise, of this generational divide are sharply disputed. Nicholas Negroponte concludes in *Being Digital* that 'the control bits of the digital future are more than ever before in the hands of the young. Nothing could make me happier.'⁴⁰ But not all parents, educators and commentators share his sense of optimism. Many fear that the digital divide both comes between children and those who care for them, such as parents and teachers, and has the potential to remove the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, exposing children to ideas and experiences normally removed from the childhood sphere.

The basis for this latter argument is that media such as television and the Internet can bring into the home or school images, experiences, themes and subjects from which children had previously been protected.

³⁸ *Growing*, pp1-2.

³⁹ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p231.

Television was the ideal form of entertainment for a cocooning family. It could be enjoyed without leaving the home and enjoyed in tandem with families' enjoyment of other home comforts... Whether through the set design of fictional programming, or through advertisements, the television acted as a 'shop window', presenting the bounty and diversity of the consumer society to consumers in their own homes. Television was a technology that brought news of the outside world into the home, the news that the family home and family division of labour had been designed to filter for children's consumption.⁴¹

This view of the threat to childhood that media such as television and the Internet contain, popularised by books such as *The Disappearance of Childhood* by Neil Postman⁴², assumes certain things about the nature of childhood, and the role of parents and the family home. Childhood exists because adults keep 'secrets' from children about the adult world, particularly about the realms of violence and sexuality,⁴³ and the institutions of childhood, epitomised in the family home and primary school, are protected places ('cocoons', Lee calls them) where these secrets are kept and the boundaries of childhood are reinforced.

Yet television and, more recently, the Internet and the growing number of new channels available through digital television show no respect for the preservation of this phenomenon. The same tool for viewing *Blue Peter* or *Bob the Builder* can be used to watch horror movies, scenes of violence or rape, and even pornography. The argument follows, therefore, that the very presence of objects capable of transmitting such images and themes within the protected space of the family home exposes children to the previously unseen world of adulthood, thereby shattering the myth of childhood and propelling children into an adult world for which they are largely unprepared.⁴⁴

David Buckingham, reviewing much of the literature reflecting this position, finds writers offering various evidences of changes in children or childhood behaviour to support their positions: stress and psychological disturbance in children brought on by the pressure to 'grow up too quickly'; social problems such as childhood

⁴¹ Nick Lee, 'The Extensions of Childhood – Technologies, Children and Independence' in Ian Hutchby and Jo Moran-Ellis (Eds.), *Children, Technology and Culture* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), p158

⁴² London: W.H. Allen, 1983.

⁴³ Buckingham, *After the Death*, pp26-27.

⁴⁴ Lee, 'Extensions', p159.

criminality, drug-taking and teenage pregnancy; a lack of deference to figures of authority; the disappearance of traditional childhood games and dress; falling rates of literacy and changing themes in children's literature and, even, the demise of 'good manners'.⁴⁵ While no single cause can be argued to contribute absolutely to this catalogue of social catastrophe, the role of television and mass media, it is argued, has played a decisive role in undermining the protected realm of childhood by exposing it to those other realities of the world for which children are unprepared.⁴⁶

The most extreme examples of appalling television-watching habits (such as the horror movie violence mentioned below) may not be the main cause for concern for many commentators. Rather, it is often the everyday availability of adult content within mainstream programming that causes greatest protest. The content of soap operas such as *Eastenders* and *Neighbours*, both easily accessible to children of various ages, frequently provokes complaints, as do fantasy programmes dealing with occult subjects, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. All of these programmes are screened on mainstream television before the nine o'clock watershed and some, in this case *Neighbours* and *Buffy*, are specifically shown around teatime to gain a younger audience.

Of particular interest is *The Simpsons*, a show that blurs the lines between children's and adult programming with great success. By using a standard of children's television (animation) to tell stories about a family and their wider community which deal with numerous themes familiar to children and adults alike, the show has created its own niche in the world of entertainment. It looks like a children's show: it's a cartoon; it has children in it; it tells stories about those children

⁴⁵ Buckingham, *After the Death*, pp21-32.

⁴⁶ On a personal note, there is some force to this description of a new childhood reality. Some of the children I have worked with from Sheffield council estates have told stories of watching movies (generally either watching with their parents or with explicit or tacit parental consent) containing scenes of violence, horror and sexuality that I, as a fairly well-adjusted twenty-something, wouldn't want to watch myself. At first these claims may sound like childish bragging, but, upon further questioning, the children would be able to describe scenes and incidents from the movies in great detail. Interestingly, it often seems to be horror movies, such as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Scream* films, that hold the greatest fascination for these young children, rather than movies depicting graphic violence or sexuality, although, obviously, themes of violence and sexuality occur frequently within such movies. It may be that children watching these movies as children relate to themes we know to be common within myths of childhood, such as the thrill of suspense and fear of the unknown, the gross-out special effects, and the excitement of watching something forbidden, rather than relating to the adult content and themes of the films. Nevertheless, when told of such incidents of movie-watching within children's homes, often with older brothers and sisters, babysitters or parents themselves, I have to wonder whether any good can come out of exposing young children (under the age of 11) to such material, and whether there is the real possibility of lasting emotional, mental and spiritual harm being done to those children because of it.

with lessons and morals in that will be familiar to children everywhere. But it also looks like an adult show: it spoofs children's animated shows, it has adults in it, it tells stories with adult content that might be seen as unsuitable for children. *The Simpsons* often deals with sexuality, violence, addiction, even horror (the infamous Halloween specials), there is frequent nudity and violence, yet because it is packaged in what looks like an animated children's show, they can get away with far more than might be possible in a live-action show. The consistent popularity of the show ensures that few people, adults or children, remain oblivious to its presence. Yet, even its sternest critics have been unable to maintain their doubts in the face of the show's charm: 'George Bush the Elder once denounced it; his wife, Barbara, called it dumb. Former Education Secretary William Bennett questioned its values... [Yet] Barbara Bush and Bill Bennett eventually back-pedalled.'⁴⁷ (Incidentally, Rowan Williams confesses to being a fan of the show.)

It seems the well-established norms of adult-child relationships are being subtly altered. Children's greater access to the world through communications innovations such as television and the Internet is considered to be one of the most significant causes of this. Yet it may be that these changes reflect broader social movements, and that such technologies are as much victims of these movements as villains. Perhaps our nostalgic view of childhood as protective cocoon is now hopelessly outdated, a construction of modernity that makes young people subject to the world of grown-ups around them, rather than empowering them to understand it and influence it for themselves. 'From this perspective, the "death of childhood" might then be seen as a symptom of *postmodernity*, a reflection of the fate which awaits us as the "dream of reason" finally collapses... The blurring of boundaries, the demise of selfhood, the dominance of visual culture – all of these are ideas which occur frequently in the rhetoric of postmodernism.'⁴⁸ New media technologies, then, become part of a societal 'feedback loop' in which stories are told that respond to the changes in the world around, thereby reinforcing the validity and vitality of those changes in the hearts and minds of listeners, who, in turn, act and live in response to the changing world they perceive around them, which is primarily interpreted to them by the broadcast media. Television reflects society, society reflects television, and the

⁴⁷ Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p1.

⁴⁸ Buckingham, *After the Death*, p33.

boundaries between the two become increasingly blurred. So, in an interesting twist, when asked by a recent survey commissioned by the Mothers' Union, 'which mothers in public life do you most admire?', the most popular answer was Marge Simpson, the animated housewife and mother to Bart, Lisa and Maggie in *The Simpsons*.⁴⁹

This helps us to understand the response of most critics to these changes, which is to draw on the past and reinforce traditional values of parental authority in the home, morality and decency. Children are perceived as incapable of censoring or helping themselves so it is up to parents to intervene for the good of their children. This intervention is generally taken to mean submitting children to established hierarchies at home and school, and removing the potential for autonomy or responsibility on the part of children themselves. Indeed, the pursuit of any kind of autonomy for children is seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution.⁵⁰ In an unsettling, changing world, the standards of the past represent familiar stability. Ideas about the liberation of children from the institutions of childhood are perceived to be as threatening as the potential for children to come to harm through their increasing access to the 'adult' world. So the traditional boundaries between childhood and adulthood are reinforced, parents and teachers are empowered or pressured to more closely monitor children's activities and behaviour, and children themselves are held up to be a vulnerable people group requiring the control and protection of the adults around them. But is this an artificial reality, caught in its own feedback loop, which requires closer and closer control and management and, ironically, is interpreted to us by the media themselves, because it makes good copy?

A privatised, passive world?

The proliferation of technological tools within the home and school may contribute to changing leisure and play patterns within many children's lives. Elizabeth Stutz presents a stark view of these changes: '[play] used to be common in streets and open spaces, in the garden, the farmyard, by the village pond and in the school playground; wherever children had the space to pursue the kind of life that was their own. The concern of many people dealing with children now... is that they find

⁴⁹ 'Mothers' Union Survey says "More Sex Please, Mum"'. Details at <http://www.themothersunion.org/content.asp?iid=896> (as at 23 March 2004).

⁵⁰ Buckingham, *After the Death*, p39.

this kind of play has disappeared.’⁵¹ While her views tend to hark back to a ‘Golden Age’ of childhood which probably never existed, they do carry a resonance for many parents and other adults who remember their own experiences of childhood play and leisure time being quite different from the ‘electronic’ play of today’s children. They remember play as being much more communal, much less directed and located much more outdoors.

David Buckingham makes it clear that widespread changes have occurred in childhood patterns of play, which are more than just perceptions influenced by misguided nostalgia.

Broadly speaking, the principal location of children’s leisure has moved from public spaces (such as the street) to family spaces (the domestic living room) to private spaces (the bedroom). Anxiety about “stranger danger”, traffic and other threats to children has encouraged parents to furnish the home (and particularly the child’s bedroom) as a diverting, technologically rich alternative to the perceived risks of the outside world. This development has also been made possible by the overall increase in disposable income, and by specific innovations such as central heating; as well as by the decline in the average size of families, which means that children are more likely to have their own bedrooms in the first place.⁵²

Here we see a more complex picture being painted of changes in children’s experience. It is not simply that children have abandoned traditional forms of play in favour of electronic leisure, such as television or computer games. Different factors have been brought to bear on the family unit, and in some cases the primary school, which have resulted in substantial changes in the ways children choose to spend their leisure time, and are permitted to do so by the adults around them. These factors are external pressures, pushing children off the streets and out of public spaces, and internal pressures, drawing children into new forms of play and leisure activities.

Externally, there is a growing perception that the world outside the home is not a safe place for children. Whether this is true or not, in terms of the numbers of

⁵¹ Elizabeth Stutz, ‘Is Electronic Entertainment Hindering Children’s Play and Social Development?’ in Tim Gill (Ed.), *Electronic Children* (London: National Children’s Bureau, 1996), pp59-60.

⁵² *After the Death*, p70.

cases of children harmed, is not the point; parents and other responsible adults believe it to be true, and act accordingly, segregating children from potential dangers. These dangers stem from a number of sources. There is a real fear that children might come to harm at the hands of others, either through bullying from peers or older children, or from other adults who might wish to snatch, hurt or abuse them. There is also concern that, in our fast-moving, compact society, children might be the victims of traffic accidents or suffer from other kinds of injuries. Finally, there is the fear that children can be led astray outside the home, finding themselves involved in substance abuse, crime or other illegal or dangerous activities.

The other significant external pressure comes from society as a whole, who perceive children or young people outside the home, away from parents, to be a threat. Stories of gangs of young people, unregulated by their parents, terrorising communities are commonplace and new initiatives at local and national level have been called for to get these children 'off the streets' and into private areas, such as homes or youth clubs, where their behaviour and activities can be monitored and controlled, so the rest of society can feel safer.

Not only is there a push from the outside, however, but a pull from the inside too. Elizabeth Stutz, in somewhat polemical tone, explains:

Saturation entertainment has taken over children's playtime and home life... Children's leisure time has been made the subject of intense commercial competition. The richest and most powerful industries and interest groups, such as the ever-expanding communications industry, the electronic entertainments and music industries, Hollywood and Silicon Valley, the toy, computer and consumer goods and food empires, have together in a loose conglomerate taken over as their domain the market of children and youth.⁵³

While Stutz's personal feelings about what she perceives as a catastrophic change are clear. But children are targeted consumers who have a multitude of different services and products aimed at them for use and consumption, particularly during leisure time. Can parks, trees and the outdoors compete in a world of multi-million pound marketing and advertising?

⁵³ 'Is Electronic Entertainment Hindering', pp62-63.

But does this privatized, technological play provide children with a substantially different experience from that received from leisure time spent in 'the real world'?

Some commentators argue that 'virtual', technological play provides a level of *interactivity* that the 'real' world does not. 'At the heart of N-Gen culture is interactivity. Children today increasingly are participants, not viewers. They are incited to discourse.'⁵⁴ In this new world of interactivity, the older, broadcast technologies of television, radio and film, while offering a level of 'staged' interactivity, do not offer the potential for freedom and democratisation that the virtual world of computers and the Internet provides. 'The gist of the concept of the "virtual" appears to rest on the assumption that the use of electronic technologies allows the user to interact with elements in a space engineered and defined by the technology.'⁵⁵ So, a growing number of new computer games and websites (such as *Everquest*, produced online by Sony) offer virtual worlds ready to be explored without the usual clutter of quests, objectives, or missions. Even digital developments applied in broadcast technologies have allowed them to become more interactive, with some television and radio programmes making extensive use of viewers' phone calls, email and text messages.

The concept of interactivity has now become so embedded in the language of the digital age that any debate over the idea or benefits of digital interactivity may seem futile.⁵⁶ Yet there are some issues to be raised about the myth of interactivity and its place within digital culture that have a particular bearing on children's electronic play.

All social behaviour is inherently interactive. We all interact with each other and our environment constantly. Can electronic play, then, be taken to be more interactive than, say, playing leapfrog? Elizabeth Stutz goes to great lengths to explain the interactivity of leapfrog, emphasising the connection between players, the elements of trust, interdependence and skill, the inherent body contact and the opportunities for adventure and success.⁵⁷ It might then be argued that electronic play is less interactive than many traditional forms of childhood play.

⁵⁴ Tapscott, *Growing*, p78.

⁵⁵ Terry Hemmings, Karen Clarke, Dave Francis, Liz Marr and Dave Randall, 'Situated Knowledge and Virtual Education' in Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, *Children, Technology and Culture*, p98.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 'Is Electronic Entertainment Hindering', p60.

What is meant by this 'culture of interaction?' Very often, as we noted above, it is in response to the top-down nature of broadcast media, or the predetermined parameters of reader and text in print literature, that the individuality of computing and the Internet, in particular, are celebrated.⁵⁸ The dichotomy between the 'passive' viewer of television programmes and the 'active' user of a computer is encouraged: 'an online chat room is "interactive" in a very different way from a "beat-em-up" computer game, which is different again from a television talk show or a rave party.'⁵⁹ But, perhaps what the world of computers and the Internet (and television, to a lesser extent) offers children is access to a world of imagination and possibilities far beyond that of traditional forms of childhood play.. The bounds of virtual experience stretch far beyond that of the real world into worlds of fantasy and science fiction bounded only by the imaginations of the designers and users. The common motifs of childhood play, expressed in countless situations, such as power, good versus evil, gross-out scenes, silliness, courage, mastery and love (for boys), or beauty, glamour, mothering, silliness, mastery and adventure (for girls)⁶⁰ can be seen and experienced 'for real' in countless forms as television programmes and computer games. What previously only resided in children's imagination has now come to life, albeit in virtual reality: talking with friends across the globe; fighting evil aliens; building virtual cities, communities and households; pursuing the latest news and gossip about a favourite pop star; gathering and deploying armies across continents.

The interactivity within the digital culture promises a level of influence over events within the products that was impossible in earlier forms of media, such as print literature or the broadcast technologies of radio, film and television. 'If a fixed relation between writer and reader is the hallmark of the old literacy then an interactive dynamic is at the heart of the new literacies.'⁶¹ It is not a greater interactivity than that involved in, say, conversation or traditional forms of play, but offers considerably more avenues of possibility than the other literacies of childhood.

⁵⁸ Tapscott, *Growing*, p79.

⁵⁹ Buckingham, *After the Death*, p55.

⁶⁰ Gene Del Vecchio, *Creating Ever-Cool – A Marketer's Guide to A Kid's Heart* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican, 1997), pp35-61.

⁶¹ Julian Sefton-Green, 'Being young in the digital age' in *Digital Diversions*, p10.

Being digital, doing church

For the children who enter our church communities, the digital revolution is less a revolution, more a fact of life. Computers, consoles, mobile phones and so on are ordinary, unremarkable parts of their lives. Where does church fit into all this? Many churches will ignore these changes as irrelevant to the timeless truths of faith, grace and human need, arguing that pandering to the cultural winds of change might undermine the tradition that the church seeks to incarnate and promote. Other churches will try to compete on the world's terms with bigger programmes, better plant, and games consoles in the church hall, arguing that cultural relevance is the only way to earn the right to share the Gospel with today's children and youth. Is either group right, or is there another way altogether to approach the question?

1) Intertextuality

Obviously, culture is cool. It has to be, otherwise it wouldn't be culture. Culture, after all, is that assemblage of attributes and qualities thought to be desirable within a society. There will always be currents and counter-currents but most societies seem to move in identifiable directions, which individuals move in and out as they can or wish to. The aspirational life of our contemporary culture is firmly fixed on things of the here and now, rather than the hereafter. So technology, as a staple of our popular culture, is also cool. The prizes offered on children's television programmes indicate how much children desire technological artefacts: computers, games consoles, DVD players, digital cameras, televisions and various items of content are given away every week, often in bundle packages that would cost a family hundreds of pounds. Technology plays a part in the aspirational side of childhood, and constantly requires the latest hardware and content to keep up with the trends.

Churches, however, have a vested interest in the past, as much as the present or the future. As guardians of an inherited tradition passed down through the generations, the values of church life are often in conflict with those of the prevailing culture. Unfortunately, for many, cool is not only desirable, it is also authoritative. This means that something is deemed to be of value and significance only if it is cool. This can make things a little difficult for the church, sometimes, because most churches aren't cool.

There is great potential here for losing children before we have even won them. If life looks a certain way (technological, interactive, the new, the latest) but

church looks a different way (traditional, passive, the old, the inherited), the differences will be obvious. If learning and fun are found in television, computers and other such forms midweek, but faith truths are communicated on Sunday mornings through much less sophisticated forms, questions over the validity and importance of what is being taught will inevitably arise.

However, there is also great potential for positive steps forward. Traditional delineations made between different areas of life have been eroded in recent years.

Distinctions between videos, computer games, movies, TV shows, advertisements and print texts have become increasingly irrelevant; and the media have become much more firmly bound up with the merchandising of a whole range of other products. More and more media texts are somehow “spin-offs” or advertisements for other products or commodities.

As a result, *intertextuality* has become a dominant characteristic of contemporary media. Many of the texts that are perceived as distinctly postmodern are highly allusive, self-referential and ironic. They self-consciously draw on other texts in the form of pastiche, homage or parody; they juxtapose incongruous elements from different historical periods, genres or cultural contexts; and they play with established conventions of form and representation. In the process, they implicitly address their readers or viewers as knowing, “media literate” consumers.⁶²

In a church context, what this means is that the distinction between sacred and secular has become less fixed. This provides many possibilities for cultural reference and allusion within the context of faith learning and communication, with less of a jarring feeling that somehow the communicator is trying to fit a square peg (of cultural reference) into a round hole (of faith teaching). This also has the side benefit of making church look a little more cool, and allows leaders and teachers to treat their listeners as ‘knowing, “media literate” consumers’, which is how they are used to being treated. For an able communicator, with a good sense of what is current in children’s lives and culture, he or she can draw on texts from many different sources to teach or illustrate lessons about faith and discipleship without any incongruity. For

⁶² *After the Death*, p88.

instance, children's groups at a recent summer conference used portions of Disney films such as *The Lion King* as the basis for teaching lessons from the Bible. A simple tool like this illustrates how the group can make itself cool, by utilising elements of the children's world, but can also meaningfully communicate with them through texts with which they are familiar. It also has the benefit of helping the teaching to have relevance to the children's world and it means that whenever those children see the movies again, they are likely to remember the lessons taught through the films.

There will obviously be different kinds of intertextuality, and there will be examples that are little more than "window dressing",⁶³ which leads us to ask what might lie beneath the surface.

2) A relational priority

It is understandable for a sense of insecurity to grip those trying to minister to children, and for them to ask themselves what they really have to offer in our high-tech, digital age. It may be that, even with the best intentions, church children's groups are unable to compete with what children can discover for themselves in their bedrooms through television, computers and the Internet.

It is also tempting to believe that these technological wonders can meet every need, but is that so? The need for genuine relationships, expressed through the language of community, remains as real as ever, and in some cases it is deepened by the prevailing insecurity caused by society's sweeping changes.

Community in liquid modernity is in a state of continual change. This can be problematic for individuals, and as a result commentators can become pessimistic and proclaim that community is dead. In my view this is mistaken. Community has not died, but it has changed. People still want to be with each other, they still want to feel that they have significance, and they still want to make a difference in each other's lives.⁶⁴

Pete Ward continues this argument by using a technological innovation, the mobile phone, to demonstrate our ongoing need for human relationships and interaction: 'The result of this is that a culture of continual contact has started to

⁶³ *After the Death*, p89.

⁶⁴ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p88.

evolve.’⁶⁵ Technology is used here to create more personal connections, not less. (We can see a similar phenomenon with instant messaging via the Internet.)

Churches cannot replicate the experiences children receive through computer games or television programmes, but neither can such things replicate the genuine human contact that faith communities can offer. Ultimately, real relationships matter much more than time spent in front of a computer screen. So, children’s groups need to play to their strengths and make relationships a priority. The temptation to resort back to over-programmed meetings, in an attempt to produce something that has credibility, may be a disadvantage. Instead, an emphasis on a highly relational style of ministry, where interaction and learning together is encouraged, and discipleship and nurture become highly personalised issues, will speak to the deepest places of children’s hearts and lives, whatever their technological status.

Conclusion: Children and Choice

As we saw at the beginning, Rowan Williams couches his analysis of change within childhood in terms of children’s access to the adult world of choice. The two areas we have examined have each opened new horizons of choice within a child’s world. Children have greater financial power than ever before, leading to a range of choices available to them which were not available previously. And the world of technology opens up possibilities of communication, entertainment, work, leisure and relationships unknown to any previous generation. All of these developments have certainly produced greater opportunities for choice than ever before.

But is choice a good thing? As Williams says, ‘our society is set more and more to maximise choice.’⁶⁶ We see commodification entering areas previously closed to it, such as education and health, as if it is a good thing, so we are constantly assured that choice itself is a good thing. It is the expression of the consumer’s will, even if what is being consumed is not a product off a shelf, but education, healthcare or even a relationship. But our perception of choice may be deceptive because it is presented to us as morally neutral. As we are becoming increasingly aware, even our most banal choices (say, of clothing brands or hair products) reflect our support, informed or otherwise, of particular stances on work ethics, globalisation or animal welfare. In some ways, we are offered (through advertising and marketing) a childish

⁶⁵ Ibid, p89.

⁶⁶ *Lost Icons*, p31.

view of the consumer world, where the consequences of our choices, which might limit us in the choices we make, are conveniently ignored. So we choose in blissful ignorance, much like a child unaware of the consequences of her actions. Conversely, children are expected to act like adults from a younger age because they are expected to take a fuller role in the choice rituals, from families to clothing labels, than ever before.⁶⁷

In a moment we shall turn to how the Church has journeyed with children through these changing years. Not successfully it appears. And yet it still seems as if the Church is one of the few organisations able to give children the opportunity to critique the values of choice they are offered, and to give them that 'space for fantasy, a licence for imagination, where gradually the consequences, the self-defining knots, of adult choice can be figured, fingered and experimented with,'⁶⁸ which Williams believe children need. By presenting a tradition that is not subject to the whims of the marketplace, with values and morals that are not for sale, and by valuing the gift of childhood and the growth of the individual into adulthood, the Church still seems to have the ingredients necessary to form living faith in children of this generation.

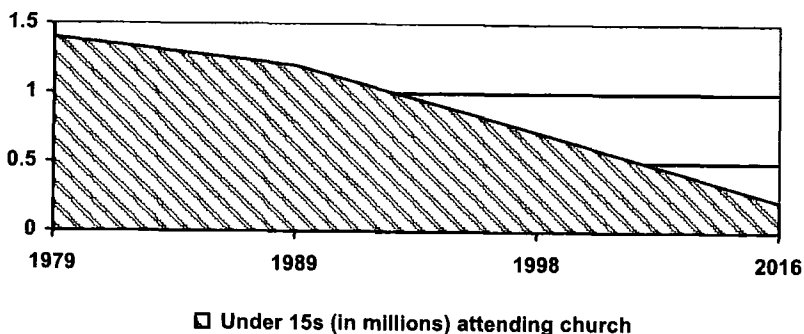
⁶⁷ Ibid, pp28-31.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p47.

Chapter 2: Children and the Church

Haemorrhaging Children?

In trying to see a picture of the state of children's ministry in England, it is helpful to look at some relevant figures. According to Christian Research, eight per cent of all children under the age of fifteen attended church on Sundays in 1998: this is 717,100 children and young people. So out of over nine million children and young people alive in the United Kingdom, less than one in ten attended church in 1998. This is a significant decline from 1989, where nearly half a million more under fifteens attended church regularly, that is 1,177,000 children and young people. This loss equates to an average decline of nearly a thousand under fifteens each week through the 1990s which, Christian Research believe, is nearly half of the overall decline in church attendance through that period.¹ This decline in church attendance among under 15s occurred in a period when there was an overall increase in the number of children in the general population.² Looking further back, we see that the decline in children under 15 in church through the 1990s is actually an acceleration of that which occurred in the 1980s. From 1979 to 1989, 200,000 fewer children attended church, more than double this number stopped attending from 1989 to 1998. Projecting this rate of decline forward gives us a figure of only 225,000 children attending church by 2016.³



¹ Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out* (London: Christian Research, 2000), pp93-101.

² An increase of 300,000: from 9,150,000 under 15s in 1991 to 9,440,000 in 2001. Peter Brierley, *Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers* (London: Christian Research, 2002), p4.

³ *Ibid*, p3.

If we can accept these figures, an uncomfortable picture emerges in which children are less and less likely to be attending churches on Sunday, especially in certain parts of the country such as South Yorkshire.⁴

In trying to understand the changes that have contributed to this decline, we need to look at the changing face of society. How have the demographics of childhood changed? Are the children of the United Kingdom much as they were a generation ago?

Nearly eight percent of the population in the 2001 census identified themselves as members of an ethnic minority group, an increase of fifty-three per cent from 1991 (from 3 million people to 4.6 million people).⁵ The National Statistics office also estimates that 2.6 million children live in low income households; this is a disproportionately high number compared to the population in general (twenty-one per cent of children, compared to seventeen per cent of the population at large).⁶ So the church faces a diversifying society, where children will come from many different backgrounds; and that diversity is set to continue to increase. There are also pockets of significant poverty within which many children will be found. Such places often have higher than average levels of mental health problems among adults, and behavioural and learning difficulties among children. If we add these demographic changes to the cultural changes we have already observed, we observe what seems to be a changing picture of childhood within the United Kingdom, with diversifying communities in villages, towns and cities. Some places will remain unchanged, much as they have for decades, but other communities will have seen economic and cultural change as ethnic groups move in and out. The Church's tendency to become fixed in time and space, through its adherence to its buildings and rituals, sometimes means that the world outside it can change quite substantially without those changes being reflected in its life and worship.

The numerical decline in childhood attendance at church is matched by a decline in positive attitude towards the Church and Christian faith through late childhood and adolescence, according to research undertaken by William Kay and Leslie Francis. Their research seems to indicate that, where there is no involvement in

⁴ In South Yorkshire, church attendance declined by 33% from 1989 to 1998. *The Tide*, p56.

⁵ 7.9% according to the National Statistics website (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cgi/nugget.asp?id=273> accessed on 3 May 2005).

⁶ National Statistics website (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cgi/nugget.asp?id=333> accessed on 3 May 2005).

religious activity, pupils' attitude towards religion and Christianity through the late primary and early secondary school years seems to deteriorate markedly.⁷ 'The declining attitude towards Christianity speaks of a general slide into religious indifference... Growing up means becoming indifferent to religion.'⁸ This decline in attitude towards Christianity seems to have worsened in recent years, from 1974-1994, a marked deterioration in attitude towards Christianity being found in fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds.⁹ One of the noteworthy things about this research is that the decline in attitude has little to do with adolescents' actual experience of church. A negative attitude towards church and Christianity may not be the product of negative experiences, but an appropriation of a prevailing attitude outside. However, where children and young people are regularly involved in religious activities, their attitude towards Christianity is raised significantly.¹⁰ Outside the church, young people are ushered into a grown-up, secular world that has left Christianity behind; they are drawn into a world in which to be irreligious is to be normal.¹¹ In this sense, those young people who retain their faith are swimming against the tides of culture.

What responses have churches made to these changes? A number of reports have been produced on the place of children within the church and the churches' responsibility for the children outside their doors.¹² But it seems difficult enough for many churches to keep the children they have, let alone reach out to those outside the church community. 'In terms of the present state of evangelism among children... the situation is appalling and the national church is in a state of almost complete lethargy.'¹³ Strong words indeed and there are also questions about whether churches are becoming welcoming places for children.

In spite of all the words, reports and resolutions, and of the prompting of many agencies, groups and individuals, the churches have not yet wholly been

⁷ William K. Kay and Leslie J. Francis, *Drift from the Churches* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp 25,28.

⁸ *Ibid*, p31.

⁹ *Ibid*, p43.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p28: 'The behaviour scale shows that weekly attendance at church and at a church-related youth group will tend to raise attitude toward Christianity by ten points, a highly significant amount.'

¹¹ *Ibid*, p144.

¹² Such as *All God's Children?* (London: National Society/Church House Publishing, 1991) and *Unfinished Business: Children and the Churches* (London: CCBI Publications, 1995).

¹³ Penny Frank and Geoff Pearson, *Too Little – Too Late! Children's Evangelism Beyond Crisis* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1998), pp4-5.

transformed into ‘child-friendly’ places either within their own life or as advocates for children in society.¹⁴

But are there any signs of hope for children’s ministry within the church? Penny Frank points to the increase in employed children’s workers within some churches, and the growth of training courses for those interested in taking children’s ministry forward as glimmers of light in the midst of a gloomy picture.¹⁵ Though she admits that the challenges ahead for churches committed to working with children are profound. New models of ministry to children, some of which are examined below, also offer hope to churches struggling to keep up in a changing world.

So we see here a picture of drift, decline and diversification. Within this context, ministry among children and young people appears very challenging. Indeed, the history of the most successful initiative to promote the Christian faith among children and young people, the Sunday School movement, is almost a case study of how these currents of change have adversely affected the Church.

The Sunday School Movement

For many years, since its beginnings in the 18th century, the Sunday School played a significant role in the nation’s Christian heritage and development, but today little remains of what once represented the singular method for the transmission of the Christian faith and values to succeeding generations. Tracing the development and decline of the Sunday School movement through the 20th century offers us a picture of a changing nation, but of churches and denominations seemingly out of step with those changes and unable to modify their approach to children and young people in the face of such social change.

Some Britons today will still remember the afternoon Sunday School, but most who attended as children will remember Sunday School as an *alternative* children’s programme that existed alongside the morning service. Yet the original aims of the Sunday School movement were to use Bible teaching as a means to teach illiterate and uneducated children how to read and write, not only to produce the next generation of

¹⁴ *Unfinished Business*, p1.

¹⁵ Penny Frank, *Every Child: A Chance to Choose* (Eastbourne: Children’s Ministry, 2002), pp207-213.

believers; it had a social agenda as well as a spiritual one.¹⁶ As education became more widespread, however, the social agenda was taken over by the state and the Sunday Schools had to rethink their reason for being. Bible teaching was considered to be of the utmost importance in discharging the churches' responsibility to children and young people, but increasingly the content and methods of the Sunday School material came second best to the education received at day school:

In a school a nine year old achieves much in the exploration of the world in which he lives; he finds great interest in television and learns from it; he can express himself both orally and in writing. When these achievements are contrasted with what he is often asked to do, to say and to sing in Sunday School, it is clear that he is insufficiently stimulated and his interest flags.¹⁷

Other social changes following World War II took their toll on the Sunday School's place of eminence in national life:

Better school religious education made the work of the Sunday School poor by comparison... National Service removed the so-called "elder scholar" at 18 from some schools. The moving of families to new high-rise flats away from their old social neighbourhood... the migration of workers from the rural to the urban areas in search of better-paid jobs. The family break in attendance was never restored in most cases. The return of fathers from military service, the purchase of a car, and the new round of visiting relatives, or the coast, made Sunday School attendances irregular, then brought about an ending.¹⁸

But, in spite of these hugely significant social changes, Sunday School attendance figures actually rose in the years immediately after the end of World War II, but by the mid-1950s, the reality was beginning to dawn that the numbers of

¹⁶ Frank Booth, 'Robert Raikes: Founder of the Sunday School Movement' in John Ferguson, *Christianity, Society and Education* (London: SPCK, 1981), p26.

¹⁷ R. Hiscox, *The Future of the Church* (Survey commissioned by the Diocese of Worcester, 1973), p9, quoted in Philip Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England 1780-1980* (Redhill, Surrey: National Christian Education Council, 1986), p289.

¹⁸ Cliff, *Rise and Development*, p279.

children in Sunday School were declining rapidly: from 47% of the day school population in 1950 to 35% by 1960 and under 30% by 1970.¹⁹

Callum Brown explains these disproportionately high attendance figures and the resulting decline as a symptom of the 'symbolic attachment' of the nation to the Church, marked by significant involvement in religious rites of passage such as weddings, funerals and baptisms but which contrasted with the population's general inactive church connections, becoming gradually eroded. As suggested above, attendance became irregular at first – 'a society of religious belonging without high worshipping' – and eventually ceased.²⁰

One of the continuing criticisms of those involved in the Sunday School movement at this time, both at a local and national level, was that their admirable commitment to the received vision and ethos of the movement prevented them from seeing new possibilities for discipleship and nurture, or from being able to navigate the currents of change in any effective way. Instead, the Sunday School seemed to see internal reform as the answer to its problems: better teachers, curriculum, resources and training. The 'Family Church' movement, which placed children's Christian nurture within the worshipping community and sought to bridge the gap between the church and the Sunday School, was not received warmly and, instead, the Sunday Schools were moved from the afternoon to the morning, which 'satisfied the personal habits of the middle classes, but children from non-churchgoing homes lost out.'²¹ The growth of more liberal perspectives, particularly on the nature and place of the Bible in the Christian faith, caused many to become more theologically conservative in the face of the enquiry and doubt occasioned by the publication of works by thinkers such as Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann in the early 1960s.²²

Through the second half of the 20th century, it became increasingly clear that the high days of the Sunday School movement were over. Numbers continued to decline and in 1967 the National Sunday School Union became the National Christian Education Council, reflecting not only a change in name but in emphasis.²³ Increasingly, Sunday School came to be seen as boring, old-fashioned and out-dated,

¹⁹ Ibid, p272.

²⁰ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp165-168.

²¹ *Rise and Development*, pp244-246.

²² Ibid, p274.

²³ The NCEC has recently combined with the Christian Education Movement (CEM) to form 'Christian Education'.

both by secular educators and within church circles.²⁴ Many churches responded to this by renaming their Sunday morning groups – out went Sunday School, in came Junior Church or Children’s Church. While changing the name of a group can be merely cosmetic, perhaps these changes owed much to the changing perspective of where children’s Christian education and nurture belonged – in the church community, not the school. By telling children they were part of the church community, was it hoped a greater ownership and participation would develop?

Because the Sunday School movement came to represent more than the church bridging the gap with the community, but a particular attitude towards raising children as Christians which placed Bible teaching at the centre and therefore tended to exclude other vital aspects of church and Christian life, it struggled to cope with social changes which needed more sophisticated ways of teaching and leading children into Christian faith and church membership. Too often, discussions surrounding the Sunday School were how best the Bible could be taught, rather than how a more measured and holistic approach to involving children in the life of the church community could be developed. It seems as if the Sunday School movement represented a moment in history when the church occupied such a place within society that it was able to reach out to huge numbers of children and families around it, with both spiritual and philanthropic motivations. But its huge success, as much as anything else, prevented it from seeing that the future might need new tools and different approaches. ‘The powerful institutionalisation of the 19th century Sunday School created a massive conglomeration of vested interests which were no longer in a position to respond with sufficient flexibility to the needs of a rapidly changing industrialised and pluralistic society.’²⁵ The losers were those children with no prior relationship to the Church, except that they were sent to Sunday School by parents or grandparents. These were the children who, when the Sunday School movement began, had contact with the Christian faith for the first time – it was something they did not receive at home – so, when the movement slowed, the lack of reinforcement within the family meant that their attendance dropped off and, eventually, ceased. Today, very few children from outside church families will be found in Sunday School and its successors on Sunday mornings.

²⁴ *Rise and Development*, p1.

²⁵ From John Hull’s foreword to *Rise and Development*, pvii.

But, since the decline of the Sunday School movement as the main vehicle for children's ministry in the UK, we have seen the development of different forms of church-based children's ministry. In what follows, we briefly examine some of the newer trends within children's ministry in the UK: the cell church movement; Kidz Klubs and Godly Play.

Children's Cell Groups

The Cell Church movement has grown substantially worldwide in recent years. It has been pioneered internationally by thinkers such as Bill Beckham²⁶ and Ralph Neighbour²⁷ and in the UK by Revd Phil Potter,²⁸ Revd Howard Astin²⁹ and Laurence Singlehurst.³⁰ The basic premise of the movement is that Christian community must exist fully in the small group life of the church, not just in the gathered Sunday services.

If you want to understand and identify a cell church, look at the cells. The small group defines a cell church. Everything that happens in a cell church – the weekly celebrations, harvest events, training and equipping retreats, camps, meetings for oversight – exists to support the cells. Everything relates out from and back to the basic cell community.³¹

The cell church movement derives much of its inspiration from the 'base communities' of South America³² and home cell group-based churches such as the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, the largest church in the world.³³ The life of the church is devolved into the small groups, which become places of worship, community and mission as much, if not more, than the Sunday services. This, then, reverses the established flow of responsibility and leadership where the smaller

²⁶ William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston, Texas: Touch Publications, 1995).

²⁷ Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., *Where do we go from here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church* (Houston, Texas: Touch Publications, 1990).

²⁸ Phil Potter, *The Challenge of Cell Church: Getting to grips with Cell Church values* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2001).

²⁹ Howard Astin, *Body & Cell* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Monarch Books, 1998).

³⁰ Laurence Singlehurst, *Loving the Lost: The Principles and Practice of Cell Church* (Eastbourne, Kingsway: 2001).

³¹ Beckham, *Second Reformation*, p31.

³² Ibid.

³³ Neighbour, *Where?*, pp23-25. See also Paul Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1981).

groups in the church's life serve to grow the whole. In a cell church, the supporting structures of Sunday services and so on exist to make the cell groups work as successfully as possible.

There are gradations of cell church. The underlying principles of the movement would be applauded by many church members and leaders, whether or not they considered themselves to be in a 'cell church' proper. These are: all involved (every member in ministry); becoming disciples (applying the Bible to everyday life); creating community (sharing lives and building relationships); doing evangelism and encountering Jesus (expecting the evidence of his presence and power in the cell group).³⁴ Then the cell group programme, the four W's (Welcome, Worship, Word, Witness³⁵), provides a helpful structure for many churches around which to build healthy, growing small groups. But some churches are 'cell churches' which take on the whole package, everyone (including the church leaders) is in a cell group and the church restructures itself to make the cells the heart of the church.

What is the place of children within the cell church movement? Unlike some church growth initiatives, children are actually given substantial attention within the cell church movement.³⁶ Children, it is argued, have the same need as do adults for inter-personal relationships, a trusted environment of faith and the intimate support of others on their journey in Christian faith, so the cell church model works for them too.³⁷ Two alternatives are generally offered for children in cell churches: children's cells or intergenerational cells.

Children's cells operate similarly to other cells. An adult leader is present, but the environment is more familial than educational – the cell is not a classroom. Learning is embraced in a much wider sense than just Bible teaching: 'In the family context, the teaching material is wide, varied and interesting... No one can say exactly when a lesson was learned, but the growth into maturity is observable. There is no need to teach everything on a subject in one day.' The group exist as a collection of peers, learning from one another as much as from the leader – the leadership role is

³⁴ Phil Potter, *The Challenge*, pp37-38.

³⁵ Howard Astin, *Body & Cell*, pp22-29.

³⁶ The subject of children in cell churches gets 3 chapters in what is arguably the key text on cell church, Neighbour's *Where do we go from here?* (Chapters 19-21).

³⁷ Neighbour, *Where?*, pp267-268.

one of kinship rather than teacher/pupil - and everyone's contribution is valued.³⁸ Children even have the opportunity to grow into cell leaders themselves.³⁹

Intergenerational cells involve children in their parents' cell. Much of the work on intergenerational cells has been done by Daphne Kirk, who argues that intergenerational cells restore a natural order within families, churches and communities that has become fragmented in modern society.⁴⁰ Within the intergenerational cell church, children are full members of ordinary church cells, though they may have some supporting structures or even children's cells as well. In the intergenerational cell itself, children are encouraged to take as much responsibility as possible. The different needs of the group have to be considered so there may be particular teaching for the children (a 'Kids' Slot') or the children may not spend the whole meeting in the group but have separate activities in another room.⁴¹ Interestingly, Daphne Kirk believes that while children may not need their own cells, young people (aged 13+) do, so youth cells exist alongside the intergenerational cells and young people have the opportunity to opt in or out of the intergenerational cells.⁴² The intergenerational cell movement is an official offshoot of the cell movement as a whole, and so has similar values. The basic premise of much of their teaching is 'as with adults, so with children' when involving children in the life of the intergenerational cell.⁴³

Very often, the criticisms of the cell church movement are less of what is said than of how it is communicated. 'There is a big difference between saying on the one hand: "Here in the cell church movement we have things that are helpful and necessary..." and, on the other, "This is the answer in this way to all the Church's problems and needs..." Different again, and more dangerous, is the move to saying, "This is *God's* answer to all the Church's problems and needs.'" ⁴⁴ Cell church proponents offer not only values and principles but detailed practices and programmes, all of which are considered indispensable for a church to become a cell

³⁸ Ibid, pp270,276,274.

³⁹ See, for example, the example given by Penny Frank in *Every Child a Chance to Choose* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2002), pp189-192.

⁴⁰ Daphne Kirk, *Heirs Together: Establishing Intergenerational Cell Church* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 1998) pp17-29.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp57-69.

⁴² Ibid, pp62-65.

⁴³ Ibid, p31.

⁴⁴ From an edited transcript of a talk by Revd Steve Croft, entitled 'Developing a Healthy Anglican Cell Movement', given at a day conference for Anglicans engaging with the cell church movement, June 1998.

church. It is the whole package that is offered, not just the principles, backed up by divine mandate.⁴⁵

But the cell church movement as a whole has much to offer, particularly in the importance it places on children within the life of the cell church. As many who teach children will testify, a small group environment for friendship and learning can be as valuable for a child as for an adult. The cell church value of giving children responsibility is an important corrective to the tendency to wait for children to grow up before giving them opportunities in ministry and leadership. The family setting has the potential to be a welcoming and non-confrontational environment for the child's friends to experience church in the home, and to make it easier for that child to bring a friend rather than having to take up a Sunday morning. It may be that intergenerational cells become too much hard work in the longer term for anyone other than those convinced of its divine mandate to maintain, but the children's cells, in particular, could offer real hope to those looking for new ways to grow the Christian faith within their children.

Kidz Klubs

Over the last ten years, the Kidz Klub model of children's outreach has become championed by many as the answer to churches' difficulties in reaching out to unchurched children, especially those from poorer backgrounds. One publication even asks if Kidz Klub is as significant for children's evangelism as the Alpha Course has been for adult evangelism.⁴⁶ What is Kidz Klub, and why does it seem to offer so much hope for children's evangelism and outreach?

The roots of Kidz Klub can be found in Metro Sunday School in New York, an urban mission reaching out to some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. Metro Sunday School (which actually runs meetings on Saturdays and Sundays) was developed by Bill Wilson, a children's worker in the Assemblies of God Pentecostal denomination, in the 1980s and has grown dramatically since that time. They report that currently over 20,000 children aged 12 and under attend a weekly Metro Sunday School meeting.⁴⁷ The model was adopted by Frontline Church in Liverpool in 1994,

⁴⁵ See, for example, the Preface of Neighbour, *Where?*, pp6-8.

⁴⁶ Philip Clark and Geoff Pearson, *Kidz Klubs: The Alpha of Children's Evangelism?* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999).

⁴⁷ Reported on Metro Ministries' website: <http://www.metroministries.com/default.asp?ID=2> (18 August 2005).

where there has also been notable growth in the number of children attending the club.⁴⁸ Since 1994, other churches and groups have used the same model and the Kidz Klub network now numbers over ninety clubs in the United Kingdom.⁴⁹

The two main aspects of this approach to children's ministry are the weekly club and regular home visitations from team members for all children who attend.

The club is a high-energy hour of songs, games and teaching. It follows the same pattern every week – the club is broken down into three sections: praise, games and teaching time – and uses a variety of media within a fast-paced programme, where no item lasts longer than three or four minutes. The content of the teaching is very simple: one key truth illustrated and explained in three or four different ways, with a memory verse to remember and take home.⁵⁰

Behind this meeting is the home visitation programme, where team members visit each child in their homes every week. The home visits are to deliver the following week's memory verse sheet, which has puzzles and pictures to colour (the children colour and decorate these sheets to win prizes at the club), but the visits also build relationships with the children and their families away from the loud, fast-paced club. These 'doorstep encounters' may be very brief but often grow as the team members become family friends.⁵¹ For many involved in Kidz Klubs, the home visitations are the highlight of their experience:

Everyone in our community knows about Kidz Klub [through the home visitations]. Our visitors are recognised, respected and welcomed. Our buildings, vehicles and staff suffer less from vandalism... Personal visiting has proven to be an extremely effective way of bringing the love of Christ into our desperate community. In three months we have seen an increase in families bringing children for baptism and thanksgiving, have shared in the pain of bereavement, depression and unemployment, have been able to greet

⁴⁸ There have been varying reports of attendance figures at Frontline Church's Kidz Klub of anything up to 2,000 children. Frontline's own latest figures show that about 650 children attend the weekly clubs (Kidz Klub Newsletter - September 2005. Kidz Klub, Frontline Church, Wavertree, Liverpool.)

⁴⁹ Reported on the Kidz Klub website: http://www.kidzklub.biz/network/net_members.html (18 August 2005).

⁵⁰ Dave Roberts, *God's Plan for Children* (Eastbourne: Children's Ministry, Kingsway, 2003), pp62-63. For a more detailed explanation of the programme, see Appendix A.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p63.

new arrivals into our community, have offered hope, comfort, love and vision to a despairing, hurt, empty and abandoned community.⁵²

Clearly, exponents of this approach to children's evangelism think very highly of the Kidz Klub model, and it has certain aspects that are remarkable. The home visits provide an avenue of relationship- and community-building outside the church family that many churches sadly lack. It pushes team members into relationships with many people who will have little prior relationship with the church and therefore significantly widens the 'fringe' of the church. The commitment required of team members is unusually high (one session a week for the club, another for the visits, perhaps more for planning, preparation and team meetings) but, for those who can manage it, the rewards of the relationships built with children and families are clearly tremendous.

The club itself is an interesting mix of conservative Christian values and a modern, high-tech, fast-paced experience. Coming out of American Pentecostalism and faced with the bleak, inner-city New York environment, a very black and white version of Christianity is offered as an means of escape from violence, addiction and hopelessness. It is this difficult, urban environment (very different from even the worst inner city areas of the UK) that has produced both the tightly-managed environment of the club (the rules and their rigid reinforcement) and the simple, clear Gospel message that is consistently taught. The reality of evil, the person of the Devil and the presence of sin are assumed, and the need for repentance and change, in the context of God's love and grace, consistently emphasised. This theological conservatism is reflected in the four most important things that are taught every week⁵³, and may be uncomfortable for some.⁵⁴ While the teaching reflects the experience of the children in the club⁵⁵, it doesn't provide opportunities for children to draw their own conclusions from what they hear. So, the teaching time includes the Bible lesson and the specific applications to the children's own world.

It is a high-maintenance approach to children's outreach, and requires an investment of time, money and energy that may be beyond the reach of many small

⁵² Clark and Pearson, *Kidz Klubs*, p15.

⁵³ 'God loves me. I have sinned. Jesus died for me. I need to decide to live for God.'

⁵⁴ I have heard it expressed, in relation to this model, that teaching children they are sinners from an early age is not the best way to develop a positive image of themselves and God.

⁵⁵ Some of the curriculum produced in conjunction with the Kidz Klub model deals explicitly with drug-taking, violence, and alcoholism in the 'life stories' it uses to reinforce the Bible teaching.

churches. It offers what most churches seem to believe their children's work should be like: a dynamic, exciting, high-tech event, but to work well it requires high skill levels in organisation, management and presentation. This model is targeted at children from more needy background, who often have higher levels of educational and behavioural difficulties. Large numbers of such children present challenges of their own. However, the well-structured programme of the club means that, if the commitment and resources are present, it is likely that an excellent programme can be produced. The simple, fast-paced programme, with no item lasting longer than three or four minutes, means that even those with short attention spans can participate and the competition between the teams (which even runs through the teaching time) means that high levels of enthusiasm and involvement are generated among the children. Needless to say, this is often a far cry from many children's experience of the traditional Sunday School.

One aspect of the programme that often disturbs those new to the Kidz Klub model is the rewards system employed to help maintain order. Rewards are given out every week for participation in a game, bringing a friend to the club, good behaviour (including enthusiastic participation during the praise time) and being quiet during the teaching time. Whole teams can lose their reward for being quiet during the teaching to the opposing team if they behave poorly. The rewards themselves are usually sweets (for the whole team) but individual prizes can be toys, trips out and even money.⁵⁶ The frequent use of such prizes is open to the accusation of bribery, which implies that children attend the club because they might win something, rather than because they want to be there to learn. It is one aspect of what is described as the 'whatever it takes' attitude of those involved in New York⁵⁷ - if it takes offering money or big prizes to get children excited about attending a Christian club, then that's what gets offered. The rewards system is effective, however, especially during the teaching time, because there is both positive and negative reinforcement of the discipline boundaries— good behaviour is rewarded while bad behaviour is punished. Such a rewards system and prize-giving is perhaps unfamiliar in a church culture more used to children attending Sunday School or other groups out of duty. But it

⁵⁶ Giving money as a prize is unusual in the Kidz Klubs in the UK, but common in New York, where children can win \$5 or more for participating in games and competitions or bringing children to the club. We once taught the Ten Commandments and gave every child who memorised all ten £1, but it wasn't a very good incentive, as only about five children could do it.

⁵⁷ Clark and Pearson, *Kidz Klubs*, p5.

might be argued that it reflects the growing consumerism within the child's world where organisations have to work to win children's attention and participation, it cannot be assumed. Such a rewards system would do this.

The style of the club (front-led, fast-paced programme with multiple sources of content and involvement) seems to resemble children's television programmes on Saturday mornings more than the traditional Sunday School methods of teaching children. Metro Ministries argue that this reflects the increasing influence of technology and multiple media in children's lives.⁵⁸ The immediacy of entertainment and information through communications technology means that children exist within constantly changing panorama of experience and stimuli. Expecting them, then, (especially children from more difficult backgrounds with few instilled discipline values) to sit and do craft for twenty minutes is unrealistic and often leads to disorder. So the constantly changing experience of the club tries to help children enjoy themselves and learn in an environment that they find stimulating and exciting.

The Kidz Klub model is clearly generating much interest and enthusiasm in the UK, but the high levels of skills, resources and commitment needed by a team and its faith community to develop such a club need to be recognised.⁵⁹ Integrating children from the kind of backgrounds the Kidz Klub model works for is often challenging for churches⁶⁰. Such a club may not work for better educated children from church families, who will be familiar with the content of most of the teaching and will approach a Christian group with a very different set of questions about their faith and what it means from unchurched children unfamiliar with even the basics of the Christian tradition. But, for those prepared to embrace the commitment level required and who want to reach out effectively to children from poorer urban or rural communities, the principles and programme of the Kidz Klub model offer tangible ways to engender enthusiasm and commitment among unchurched children. The accompanying home visitation programme then helps to draw such children and their families into real friendships with team members who can help the families discover the Christian faith for themselves, not just through their children.

⁵⁸ Bill Wilson and Chris Blake, *He Gave Teachers* (video training material from Metro Ministries, New York).

⁵⁹ We have had a number of such clubs opening and soon closing in Sheffield due to the high demands this style of children's work requires.

⁶⁰ See 'Where is the Church?' in Chapter 5 for a discussion of this issue.

Godly Play

Godly Play is a relatively new approach to children's spiritual education and nurture, only introduced into the UK in the last five years. Its particular methods and values of teaching have been developed by Jerome Berryman, drawing on the principles for teaching children Christian education of Maria Montessori. Since its introduction to the UK, it has become very popular for use in children's Sunday groups and other settings, such as midweek clubs and school assemblies. In the first year alone, the Godly Play project based in Cambridge has reported training over 400 people at its sample classroom in Trumpington and over 1,500 more at other venues around the country, with further demands for more training and exposure to this new approach to children's spiritual growth and nurture.⁶¹

The Godly Play approach aims to help children respond to the Christian tradition (though it could be any faith tradition) through the work of play. It values the child's own, creative response to the tradition, rather than any given response dictated by teacher or programme, and seeks to help children find self-expression rather than the repetition by rote of facts or concepts impressed on them by others. The tradition is learnt through story and parable, presented simply by the storyteller, and all are invited to wonder together at the meaning or significance of the lesson, and where they might find themselves within it. The experience of Godly Play is its own end, as Berryman argues that we discover God through the indirect effort of playing the game, rather than by treating the game as a means to a higher end.⁶²

There are six objectives that help meet the goal of Godly Play, which is to 'teach children the art of using the language of the Christian tradition to encounter God and find direction for their lives.' These objectives are:

1. To show children how to 'wonder' about the tradition, so they can enter its language, rather than parroting it or merely talking about it;
2. To help children create meaning with the language of the tradition, so they can connect this language with their own creative process and an experience of the Creator;

⁶¹ Rebecca Nye, 'Annual Report for the Halley Stewart Trust, February 2003' (available at <http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/About/Annual%20Report.htm>, 2nd September 2005.)

⁶² Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), pp7-8,60.

3. To show children how to choose their own 'work' (the play-response to the story or parable), rather than work on problems or projects assigned by others – thus enabling them to confront their own, inner limits and issues;
4. To place this educational time within the pattern of worship most used and accepted by the Christian community (in Berryman's case, this is Holy Eucharist);
5. To demonstrate community within the Godly Play environment through respect and love, and a mutual encouragement of each one's quest and work; and
6. To organise the educational space (the room) so that all of the elements of Christian language are present (the parables, Christmas, Easter, New Testament, Old Testament and more), so children enter the language domain when they enter the room and are able to make connections among its various parts as they work.⁶³

Perhaps one other objective is missing from this list, but which is clearly present within this approach, which is that the whole class learns together, and the teacher may learn as much from the lesson as the children.

The experience of children in a Godly Play environment is regular and consistent, to allow them to develop their creative skills of self-expression in a safe and 'known' context. The environment is carefully managed to create a world within which the child feels safe to wonder and learn.⁶⁴ The elements of the time together are:

Gathering and preparation. Children leave their parents outside the classroom, where the door person welcomes them. They enter the classroom and sit with the storyteller in a circle in the middle of the room. The storyteller also welcomes them and talks quietly with them as they all prepare themselves for the lesson.

The lesson. The storyteller introduces a parable or story to the group. A coloured box usually contains the teaching elements of the lesson, which are

⁶³ Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p17. See also an earlier version of these objectives in Berryman, *Godly Play*, p60.

⁶⁴ For a detailed description of the environment, see Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp19-23.

gradually revealed as the story or parable unfolds. The whole circle is involved in telling the story or parable through assisting the storyteller.

The response of wondering together. The storyteller leads the group into wondering about what the parable or story and its different elements are and what their significance might be. This time of wondering opens up the group for different responses to what they have heard. It lasts as long as the children's attention and imagination can hold.

The play and art responses. After the lesson and its wondering is over, the children are invited to get out their 'work'. This work uses the range of materials and resources at hand and is directed by the children's own responses, not the storyteller. The children are free to start new work or carry on uncompleted work and to draw from the day's lesson or previous ones. There are various coping mechanisms for children who can't or won't decide what to do.

The feast. The children gather back in a circle, where they celebrate the 'feast' of juice and biscuits. Once the children eat, there is a time of prayer, where the storyteller invites each child around the circle to pray if they wish.

Saying good-bye. Once the children have tidied up their cups and napkins, they gather a last time in a circle to say good-bye. The storyteller bids each child farewell and encourages them as they leave.⁶⁵

The classroom environment is a lot quieter than many children's groups – there are no games or raucous activities to expend the children's energy – and in many ways the children are expected to enter the room and quieten themselves to anticipate God's presence in the same way an adult might quietly prepare him- or herself for worship in a church service. Berryman identifies two overlapping arenas of teaching and learning, which he names 'the spoken lesson' and 'the unspoken lesson.' In a similar fashion to Westerhoff's discussion of 'the hidden curriculum' present within any educational setting⁶⁶, Berryman believes the organisation of the space, the use of time and the interpersonal relationships between the storyteller, the door person

⁶⁵ Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp29-40.

⁶⁶ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will our Children have Faith?* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), pp16-19.

and the children teach as deeply as the concrete aspects of lesson and response.⁶⁷ So, attention to these facets is encouraged as much as learning the pattern of the time together.

Evaluating Godly Play

In the UK, Rebecca Nye has worked to establish Godly Play as a significant tool for church-based and other children's workers. She has also tried to evaluate Godly Play's significance and what it offers to churches and communities. She offers four ways in which this approach has particularly touched those who received training on it between 2001-2003:

- 1) The support structures. This is a specific reference to the issues of the 'unspoken lesson' mentioned above. By paying attention to the details of the environment, time management and the encouragement of the child's creativity, the right supporting conditions are created for the group to learn and grow. This is in contrast to many teaching methods, which pay attention to the details of the content and providing the correct 'direct message', and often neglect the indirect messages given by the surroundings and style of the group.
- 2) The teaching style. The teaching style in Godly Play encourages spiritual nurture and the development of the skills to use religious language, rather than treating Christian education as comparable with any other subject. It moves from a didactic teaching style to a participatory one, in which storyteller and children learn as they wonder together about the meaning and significance of the lesson. In this way, the storyteller expects to learn as well as the children and it is suggested that the outcome of the lesson relies more on the Holy Spirit speaking quietly to each member than on fulfilling the teacher's learning objectives.
- 3) The attitude towards children's spirituality. Godly Play assumes that children are spiritual and religious beings. Berryman argues that children, in their own way, wrestle with existential issues and have religious experiences, but that too often the language barriers between their

⁶⁷ Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp79ff.

interpretation of their own experiences and what they find in traditional religious settings are what prevent children from appreciating and plumbing the depths of such things.⁶⁸ So, within Godly Play, children are treated as inherently spiritual, rather than needing the teacher's input to make them so. They are considered to be aware of existential and religious issues and the Godly Play environments seeks to give them the tools (the language) to begin to express themselves this way.

- 4) The understanding of 'faith.' Godly play views a child's faith development as a personal journeying within which each moment of experience and understanding is valid, even if it might seem limited to others (adults). Ongoing discovery and meaning-making is therefore valued over specific end-points of knowledge or experience. This is similar to much adult education, but in contrast to much Christian education of children, which tends to proscribe discrete learning outcomes for each lesson taught.⁶⁹

So, the principles and practice of Godly Play certainly seem to challenge some of the implicit values in much Christian education of children. The children become active participants in the learning process (along with the teacher), rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled with spiritual or religious information. Each child's own journey is valued highly and the environment tries to give each one the tools to express her- or himself.

There are challenges, though. Godly Play offers principles of teaching (the storytelling style, for example, or the attention to the detail of the learning environment), which could easily be adapted to different contexts, but to adopt the whole package of this approach requires a considerable commitment of resources. There are very particular skills necessary to prepare and manage the learning environment, and then to lead the group in the meaning-making responses to the parables and stories. Berryman's example account of twelve Saturday mornings with a class including his two sample boys, Bobby and Jimmy,⁷⁰ gives a fascinating account of the development of the boys over the twelve weeks. But it also reflects Berryman's own skill as a storyteller and meaning-maker and his expertise in the

⁶⁸ Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp139ff.

⁶⁹ Rebecca Nye, *Evaluating Godly Play* (University of Cambridge: Report on questionnaire study), pp7-9.

⁷⁰ Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp42ff.

areas of theology and psychology that help him draw the existential issues out of the boys' pictures. He offers the two boys' responses over the twelve weeks as evidence of the fruit of Godly Play, but it is questionable how many teachers would have been able to make the same connections he did.

The desired outcome of Godly Play is to 'teach children the art of using the language of the Christian tradition to encounter God and find direction for their lives.'⁷¹ But many educators and parents may find it difficult to see the concrete outcomes of such an approach. The method draws the children deeply into the stories and parables of the Christian tradition, but would it be possible to produce any kind of specific, shared outcome, such as a commitment to evangelism or a deeper prayer life? It is also slanted towards a particular expression of the Christian tradition (Berryman is Episcopalian) and this is reflected in such things as the choice of the content of the room and the commitment to Holy Eucharist as the guiding pattern for the lesson time. How might groups from other traditions draw on Godly Play? What sacrifices would they have to make or how could they adapt it to more authentically reflect their own faith-expression?

There are other practical challenges to adopting this style. It is teacher-intensive as it works best with smaller groups of children (up to ten or twelve), so larger church with more children will have to duplicate groups. There must also be questions over whether any number of children from difficult backgrounds, with the associated educational and behavioural difficulties, would be able to get the most out of their experience in a Godly Play classroom. Maintaining the self-discipline and focus necessary to participate meaningfully in the experience seems unlikely. However, giving children from any background the chance to question and wonder their way into a story or parable does seem a good way to encourage their attention and involvement.

There is much here that is illuminating and challenging. Certainly, whether adapting the principles or adopting the package, the experience of Godly Play seems to offer opportunities for children to enter the faith stories and parables in ways that are uncommon in most Christian educational settings. As such, it is something worth celebrating.

⁷¹ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, p17.

Children in the Church

That fundamental, and perhaps irreversible, change has occurred in the relationship between the children and the church of the UK is undeniable. Fifty years ago over half of primary and early secondary school children regularly received some introduction to the Christian faith through the Sunday school. The present situation represents a decline that would have been almost unimaginable fifty years ago. It seems a matter of deep regret that the remarkable situation that had developed through the Sunday School movement could not have been furthered. Large numbers of families who rarely went to church themselves sent their children to Sunday School every week to receive a basic education about the Christian faith, which seems unimaginable in today's climate.

Yet, did the Sunday School truly represent an initiative of churches towards children? The churches had to take greater responsibility for their children when Sunday School moved from Sunday afternoons to Sunday mornings but this move did little to stem the decline of the movement. Many individuals and congregations undoubtedly placed great importance in their Sunday School children. But I would suggest that the Sunday School movement did not represent a shift in the fundamental attitude that matters of Christian faith are primarily for adults but an exercise in charity and education that largely sat outside the life of the local church. So, when churches had to take more direct responsibility for the Sunday School children the prevailing attitudes remained. Children were not welcomed into the heart of church communities but remained on the fringes, which undoubtedly contributed to the subsequent decline.

The paralysis of the Sunday School movement through the social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s is regrettable, but few other church institutions seemed to fare much better. The present challenge is whether poor attitudes towards children and young people are changing within the church or whether adults still take priority over children. The new trends within children's ministry examined here each represent significant moves forward in valuing children, whether children from inside or outside the church. But, ideally, the adoption of any of these models by a local church should represent a commitment of the whole body to their children, not just the efforts of a dedicated few. The high points of Sunday School attendance are unlikely to be repeated in the near future, but perhaps a diversity of models and a fresh commitment

to the next generation can see children within our churches prosper and more children from outside our churches find faith.

Chapter 3: Approaches to Christian Education

What is Christian Education?

Across Sheffield, numerous examples of activities that could be described as Christian education of children and young people can be found. There is the Bethany School, a small, private Christian school offering explicit Christian education with a distinctly Christian curriculum; then there is Birkdale School, a larger private school with a Christian foundation that expresses itself in gatherings such as assemblies and the overarching values of the school, but which teaches the National Curriculum and is one of the outstanding examples of academic performance in the city. Other schools, perhaps Church of England or Roman Catholic schools, though state-funded, would understand part of their role to be Christian education through the transmission and modelling of Christian ethics and values. On Sunday mornings, many children will be found in church groups learning about the faith they have inherited from their parents; while during the week, more children, many from outside church communities, will be gathered across the city in children's clubs or other groups where they will learn Bible lessons and have the chance to make the decision to accept and internalise what they have learned.

Without even touching on the issues surrounding adult Christian education, we can see a spectrum of activity that can be described as Christian education. On the one hand, there is Christian education that draws on a general approach to or philosophy of education. This is education that is implicitly Christian, in its approach, perspective or values, and may or may not teach explicit Christian lessons or values. A church school, then, may not teach explicit Christian truths, about the person of Christ, say, any more vigorously than a state school, but provides a Christian environment within which the general process of education can continue. The perceived outcome of such an arrangement may be a general openness to the matters of Christian faith in the lives of the students, or it may be the development in the students of those values for life which are considered to be 'Christian' (forgiveness, love, humility, tolerance, etc.) It may be that this should be thought of more as 'education with a Christian perspective' than 'Christian education.'¹

¹ 'Some problems with the expression "Christian education"' by Evelina Orteza y Miranda in Jeff Astley and Leslie J Francis (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1994), p27.

But even within a non-faith based, state school, there is Christian education that occurs through the wider remit of religious education. This is education about Christianity and its adherents. It is designed to inform, to create tolerance and respect, even, but not to proselytise or convert into a personal Christian faith. Most schools will teach about Christianity through the lens of observable realities about Christian belief and practice (what happens in church, Christian rites of passage, the creeds), rather than the less tangible matters of Christian belief about God's character and interaction with the world.

In addition to this learning about Christianity or other faiths, there is a second 'attainment target' specified for religious education in community schools. This is 'learning from religion'.² The outcomes of this attainment target include 'developing pupils' reflection on, and response to, their own experiences and learning about religion.' Pupils are encouraged to apply, interpret and evaluate what they learn about religion, and the questions of identity, belonging, purpose, truth, and so on, that religious ideas may generate; as well as to communicate their responses to such questions. It might be argued that such non-confessional learning outcomes could be regarded as a form of 'Christian education', where the religion from which the pupils learn is Christianity. Certainly 'learning from religion', as described above, overlaps with earlier aims for religious education that were variously described as an 'implicit religion' approach or a 'personal quest' approach;³ and Astley makes a similar point with regard to Michael Grimmitt's use of the phrase 'learning from religion'⁴

We can also see Christian education that is education in or into the matters of personal Christian faith. This is education about explicitly Christian matters, whether for those already involved with a Christian community or not. Within explicit Christian education, we might find education about the beliefs-about and the beliefs-in of the Christian faith. We might also find education into matters of Christian lifestyle and experience (such as worship, service or forgiveness).

Within the scope of Christian education, there are a number of distinct approaches to the task. The different approaches express different models of education

² Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *Religious Education: the non-statutory framework* (London: QCA, 2004), p34.

³ Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, Carolyn Wilcox and Linda Burton, 'How different is religious education in Catholic schools?', *International Journal of Education and Religion* Vol.1, No.2 (2000), pp269-270.

⁴ Jeff Astley, 'Theology for the unchurched? theology, philosophy and the classroom' in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds.), *Christian Theology and Religious Education* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp62-63.

and expect different outcomes. Three approaches – faith community, faith development, and interpretation – are discussed in some detail, followed by an overview of the remaining approaches.

The Faith Community Approach

The modern concept of education places its remit firmly within the classroom environment, but certain thinkers on Christian education believe that Christian faith cannot be learned effectively in such an environment but that there are certain aspects of Christian faith and life that can only be learned within the context of a local faith community, a group of people among whom faith is lived out. Chief among those who support this view is John Westerhoff III, who argues that a schooling-instructional approach to Christian education is essentially bankrupt and that a new paradigm must emerge which deliberately places learning within the life of the local faith community.⁵

What caused the deep discontent Westerhoff obviously felt with the status quo in American Christian education? He argued that the ecology of relationships within communities that produced the next generation of believing citizens had so broken down that a new approach to keeping and transmitting the faith was necessary. The family, school, church, community and Sunday school no longer combined to engender an overarching set of values. Facing the increasing diversity of a religiously pluralistic, denominationally non-committal society, where public schools had become strictly secular, it fell, he believed, to local congregations to become ‘countercultural’ communities which provided their own overarching sense of identity, meaning and purpose.⁶ Osmer and Schweitzer paint this response as a natural one to trends within church and society at the time: in an expanding pluralistic society, congregations need to have strong identities and clear boundaries – ‘unity in essentials... a congregation possesses a clear identity’⁷ - and in a time when the individual, not the denomination, was seen as the anchor of American religion, a greater emphasis on the individual’s commitment to the congregation, the denomination’s traditions and rituals (in Westerhoff’s case, the American Episcopal denomination) and the received Christian story was imperative, no prior familiarity

⁵ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), pp23-25.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp13-16.

⁷ *Ibid*, p52.

could be assumed. In short, they see Westerhoff as part of the trend within American Christianity towards congregationalism, the congregation as the chief place of religious identity and service.⁸

Westerhoff's other significant contribution to the debate was his belief that an instructional paradigm to Christian education should be replaced by an enculturation one. By participating within the life of the faith community, its stories, relationships and rituals, an individual would come to learn about the heart and values of the faith community more deeply and in a way that connected belief, action and lifestyle more meaningfully than in a classroom. This changes not only the context of the learning experience, but also its content: 'the schooling-instructional paradigm works against our necessary primary concern for the faith of persons. It encourages us to teach about Christian religion by turning our attention to Christianity as expressed in documents, doctrines, history and moral codes. No matter what the rhetoric of our purposes, the schooling-instructional paradigm... leads us to focus on religion rather than faith.'⁹ Instead, Westerhoff encourages a greater emphasis on the experience of the individual within the community, the community itself, and then the received stories and signs which allow for more sophisticated reflection.¹⁰

An enculturation paradigm, based on everyone learning together within the faith community, also challenges the 'hidden curriculum' within the congregation's life. By bringing the whole of the faith community's life within the sphere of Christian education, particularly for the community's children, the faith community has cause to examine those situations which might lead to children learning unintended lessons through their participation within the faith community. 'Whatever are the actual beliefs of the community about such things as worship, mission, the place of children, what it means to be a Christian, these will be reflected in the patterns of interaction which make up the life of the community and will be communicated to its members far more effectively than the explicit teaching from the pulpit or in the Bible class.'¹¹ A schooling-instructional paradigm, Westerhoff argues, focuses on the manifest learning that occurs in set contexts, but ignores the hidden,

⁸ Richard R. Osmer and Freidrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), pp179-186.

⁹ *Will Our Children?*, p23.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p63.

¹¹ David Heywood, 'Christian Education as Enculturation' in *British Journal of Religious Education* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1988), p66.

unintentional learning experiences that occur in and around the educational context.¹² By drawing together the whole of the faith community's life and practice, the whole community benefits by bringing their unintentional practices and values into full view. For instance, if a child is taught in Sunday school that they matter to Jesus, but is then ignored or harshly criticised by an adult after church, the manifest learning concerning their value and self-worth is undermined and different lessons are taught by the experience. But by deliberately bringing the children into the community life, and by giving them the opportunity to participate, this unconscious learning is brought to the fore so that it can be challenged and, if necessary, changed.

Reflections

It is hard to argue with Westerhoff's passion and commitment to the principles he espouses, but does the vision of the faith community approach offer real answers to churches in the UK? Some cultural readjustment is certainly necessary at this point. The 'church school' as it occurs in the US is much more of a rarity in the UK, but it might be argued that Sunday School and its variants just as effectively remove children from the faith community and tend towards a schooling-instructional paradigm for learning Christianity. One of Westerhoff's criticisms of the US system is that many smaller churches lack the resources, human or financial, to run the kind of church school they perceive they need to properly educate their children.¹³ If we again apply this point to children's ministry in the UK, not church schools, it is well made. Many churches have a dream of Sunday morning children's ministry with an all-singing, all-dancing children's team, but lack the necessary resources to reach this goal. We might ask whether Westerhoff would say something similar to us: does our model of children's ministry need to change? Do we need to embrace a vision of church life, based in the shared life of the faith community, which places the education of all, children included, at its heart? By trying to maintain a divided approach to education and nurture (adults in one room, children in another), we may solve one problem (how to keep everyone happy), but do we create other problems for ourselves because we develop an unsustainable model where shared learning and community life lose their way?

¹² *Will Our Children?*, pp16-19.

¹³ *Will Our Children?*, pp10-12.

There are indeed only certain aspects of the Christian faith that can be learned in a classroom environment, particularly a school classroom. Access to and involvement in a faith community will become a necessity at some point in the child's journey in faith. But has Westerhoff created a false dichotomy between children's work and community life? The assumption that responsibility to the next generation has somehow been abdicated by the faith community and handed over to a few specialist teachers may well be the case in some places, but does that mean it is impossible for children to have both their own learning space and meaningful interaction and involvement with the whole faith community? 'His (Westerhoff's) criticism of the schooling-instructional paradigm offered a false alternative – either schooling or enculturation – when in fact it is apparent that those Protestant congregations doing best in the pluralistic context emerging since the 1960s find ways of attending to both of these tasks.'¹⁴

What of Westerhoff's vision of the kind of congregation that might become such a faith community, and of the cultural circumstances surrounding it? He offers four key qualifications for the faith community: it should have a strong identity and unity in theological essentials; it should be smaller than three hundred members; it should count representatives of all three generations – parents, grandparents and children – among its members and, finally, it should demonstrate diverse roles and ministries and encourage involvement regardless of race, class or gender.¹⁵ Such a faith community provides the sense of belonging, the overarching vision and identity for the individual's life. The contractual, consumer relationships common in our divided, pluralistic society are subjugated to the ideal of a single loyalty to the faith community, from which the individual derives their identity and values for life and faith.¹⁶

The criticism of this vision is that represents an impossible reality, certainly within such a culturally and religiously diverse background as the UK. Westerhoff's work with Gwen Kennedy Neville in *Generation to Generation*, where they examine the geographically and theologically bounded smaller Protestant denominations in the

¹⁴ *Between Modernization and Globalization*, p187. Piveteau and Dillon make the point that by contrasting education and enculturation we risk 'transforming a conceptual dichotomy in effect into two separate realities' which can be studied and argued for or against, but we miss the significance of the relationships between them (Didier-Jacques Piveteau and J. T. Dillon, *Resurgence of Religious Instruction* (Mishawaka, Indiana: Religious Education Press, 1977), pp153-154.).

¹⁵ *Will Our Children?*, pp54-56.

¹⁶ 'Christian Education as Enculturation', p69.

southern USA offers a picture of what this model for faith community life might look like.¹⁷ In Westerhoff's analysis of the problems of rootlessness in American society, 'the main element is a stress on continuity and permanence. Despite appearances to the contrary, [he] maintains that most people maintain their geographical, ethnic and religious roots, that they remain members of communities with a common heritage, a shared memory and a shared vision.'¹⁸ Within the small denominations in the USA they analyse, this may well be the case, but 'the fundamental objection to this analysis is the legitimacy of applying the picture of socialisation drawn from stable, self-contained, geographically bounded communities to the analysis of modern western pluralist society. Is the insistence on stability and continuity really credible?'¹⁹ Does this approach to the Christian education of children therefore assume that the children present have a *vested interest* in the faith community? For instance, if children are present with their parents and grandparents, their sense of belonging, commitment and 'ownership' of the group is likely to be much higher than if they are present on their own. A family friend who attends apart from his or her parents may be considered part of that extended family, but what about the situation where significant numbers of children are present who have no prior relationship with the faith community, and therefore no vested interest or personal ownership can be assumed? Can such children be dropped straight into the life of the faith community or is some kind of first step group necessary, which mediates the life of the faith community to such children in a way that is accessible and meaningful to them? Other social factors mitigate against Westerhoff's vision of the faith community as a stable, ongoing unit. Increased mobility means individuals and families stay in one place for less time, and the increasing incredulity and ignorance towards institutions and their heritage means that less people place value on the community markers, such as liturgy and shared experience, that Westerhoff considers important. In his quest for 'counterculturalism', Westerhoff's vision of the faith community faces the considerable danger of such a congregation becoming an insular, inward-looking group, unconnected and unconcerned with the world around, and unintelligible to it.

¹⁷ John H. Westerhoff III and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation to Generation* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979).

¹⁸ 'Christian Education as Enculturation', p69.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p70.

So, we have questions about the social realities within which this approach to Christian education should operate.²⁰ Also, if the faith community approach is to work, it has to be concerned with mission, as well as nurture. In a culture such as the USA, where many have some background in church attendance Westerhoff's approach to the faith community could not only be important to renew the life of the members, but attractive to non-members too. But in our culture the 'folk memory' of church attendance and involvement has all but dissipated and the presence of considerable numbers of members of non-Christian religions has altered the social landscape. So the heritage, rituals and relationships of the faith community may be alien and unintelligible to non-members, especially children. Involvement in the life of the faith community, then, continues to be indispensable, but the life, practices and values of the community need to be explained to new or non-members in such a way that they can participate fully. Participation itself and learning through the process of enculturation may not be enough. But there is no doubt of the power of the faith community to draw non-members to faith in Christ. By finding acceptance and involvement within the faith community, it may well be that new members are drawn to Christ, the centre of the community's faith and life, without even realising it at the time. The difficulties arise when the community looks so different from the prevailing culture that unnecessary boundaries are created between it and those who don't belong to it. The concern with the way Westerhoff approaches the idea of faith community is that it is essentially institutional, hierarchical and backward-looking in ways that will make it unnecessarily incomprehensible to those with no church background.

In conclusion, the faith community approach to Christian education has much that is commendable and challenging. Problems arise in its outworking, however, particularly in a context like the UK which is more diverse and pluralistic than the USA. The potential conflict it creates between the manifestations of the schooling-

²⁰ Heywood, in his critique of Westerhoff, argues that the church cannot become the 'all-pervasive source of meanings and values' for individuals and families, in the light of the competing social and cultural influences. Instead he sees the church as one 'reference group' among many others. He differentiates between Christian people and Christian perspectives and argues that the role of the faith community is not just to care for Christian people but to try to represent and cultivate the Christian perspective within the marketplace of ideas and experience that is our modern culture. But in reducing the role of the faith community to that of one reference group among many others, does he not accept the status quo too readily? Christian faith is usually at odds with the prevailing cultural winds, and the object of discipleship is surely to make one's relationship with Christ the 'single, all-pervasive source of meanings and values' which he argues it is impossible to maintain? 'Christian Education as Enculturation', p70.

instructional and enculturation paradigms is a false one. Specialised children's groups and faith community life are not necessarily in conflict with each other but can, if understood and appreciated, be complementary parts of the growing faith experience of children. That there should be a time and place for all ages to gather and grow together cannot be disputed, but that there can also be a time and a place for adults to learn as adults and children as children should not necessarily undermine the values of shared life and learning. The children's groups should not be seen as somehow divorced from the community life and learning, but as an expression of it – the community teaching and raising its children in its faith and experience.

A narrow, programmatic approach to the Christian education of children along faith community lines cannot work in every environment, particularly in a diverse, urban setting, such as Sheffield. The shared values of life and faith necessary for the application of this approach will not be present across the macro-culture of a church community. Within the storms of cultural change and diversification, it may be that much of this approach is focussed on building a stronger ship, with strong sides, that can withstand the wind and waves and protect its passengers, but the better picture of faith community life may be a group of people who, with all their differences, have learned how to set their anchor fast and gather around the security it, their faith, provides.

Education as Interpretation

A tension exists within Christian education concerning the exact relationship between the *tradition* of the educating body and the *experience* of the learners.²¹ This tension can be particularly observed within discussions about the starting point of the educational process, and the outcome. One might argue that the starting point of the Christian educational process should be the tradition – whether that be the Bible, the liturgy or something else – and that the learners' experiences of life should be informed by and even located within the tradition. Another might say that such life experience should be the starting point, from which appropriate elements of the tradition can inform the learners' experience, provoking reflection, discussion and change.

²¹ Jack L. Seymour & Donald E. Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p123.

When considering the appropriate outcomes of the Christian learning process, we can observe a similar divergence of opinion. For one, simple knowledge of the tradition – stories, symbols and practices – would be the desired outcome of the learning experience; for another, the tradition should be understood in the context of what it means in life experience. The extremes of the views are represented here and within most streams of Christian education there will be a drawing from both sources in the development of learning experiences and curricula.²²

The interpretation approach to Christian education concerns itself with the dialectic, the ‘conversation’, between tradition and experience. This approach is concerned to reflect the growing gulf between Christian expression within an increasingly secular culture and the consequent difficulty many have in uniting their Christian faith and their everyday lives. ‘It is too easy for persons to be Sunday Christians and everyday secularists.’²³

The language of this approach is that of story and of journey. Participants in such an educational setting are involved in discovering the connections and the conversation between the tradition’s stories (and symbols) or Story and the story of their everyday lives. ‘The Story that is the past tradition and the stories that undergird our present experience interact like conversational partners.’²⁴ There is also a sense of a journey into meaning. The process of becoming ‘educated’ is almost a pilgrimage during which greater vistas are revealed as the pilgrim’s life, attitudes and experiences are gradually changed by exposure to the greater Story to which he or she belongs.

The Interpretive learning experience

Thomas Groome, an exponent of the interpretation approach, offers a model of a group meeting within which ‘*a group of Christians [share] in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith.*’²⁵ The model contains five movements, which

²² Jeff Astley, ‘Tradition and Experience: Conservative and Liberal Models for Christian Education’ in Jeff Astley and David Day (Eds.), *The Contours of Christian Education* (Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons, 1992), pp45-46.

²³ Jack L. Seymour, ‘Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education’ in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Eds.), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), p9.

²⁴ Astley, ‘Tradition and Experience’ in *Contours*, p45.

²⁵ Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p184.

represent stages on the journey within which the tradition and the learner's present experience can be fused. The five movements are:

Present Action – as Groome describes it, 'the participants are invited to name their own activity concerning the topic for attention.'²⁶ The experiences and actions of the participants are honoured as the context within which God speaks and learning occurs.²⁷ The present within which participants share their experiences is described by Groome as being more than a functional present reality ('what I do/believe/think about this *now*') but as the whole reality within the participant lives, that is the present of past experiences, hopes and desires; the current state of action, belief and experience and the present of future aspirations and dreams.²⁸ So, for instance, the subject of prayer might not only evoke the present realities of struggles in or styles of prayer, as well as present convictions about the place and value of prayer. Past experiences, fulfilled or shattered hopes of prayer and future dreams and their consequences would also be brought to light.

Critical Reflection – 'they are then invited to reflect on why they do what they do and what is the likely or intended consequences of their actions.' This critical reflection, as the presentation of action, encompasses past, present and future – Groome calls it 'critical reason to evaluate the present, critical memory to uncover the past in the present and creative imagination to envision the future in the present.'²⁹ The responses to such critical dialogue and reflection should be viewed with both respect and suspicion: respect that such reflection reveals truths learned, but suspicion that other or deeper truths can remain concealed.³⁰

Story and its Vision – the Christian Story is then mediated to the learners by the teacher (or 'lead learner'). 'Story' represents all the facets of the Christian faith tradition and means more than simple narrative. 'Vision' represents the invited response the Story makes and the promises God makes within the Story. 'Story and Vision are not separate realities, but two aspects of the same reality. The Story is the Story of the Kingdom; the Vision is the Vision of the Kingdom.' So, the Story and Vision are embraced at an affective, as well as a cognitive and intellectual, level.³¹

²⁶ Ibid, p207.

²⁷ Seymour & Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*, p137.

²⁸ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p185.

²⁹ Ibid, pp 207, 185.

³⁰ Seymour & Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*, p137.

³¹ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, pp 191-195.

Dialectic – the Story is then appropriated to the learners’ lives and a conversation begins between the Story and their stories. This conversation involves affirming what is good and true in both Story and stories, but refusing that which limits our understanding or we do not wish to inherit from the Story and moving beyond our current understandings, taking fresh insight into our present praxis.

Decision – ‘an opportunity to choose a personal faith response for the future.’ Just as the last movement represented the dialectic between Story and stories, so the final movement is the conversation between Vision and vision. Our limited understanding and expression of the Vision of the Kingdom has been explored and new choices (though still limited in their own ways) can be made to appropriate the Vision of the Kingdom more deeply.³²

Using the Interpretation approach

There is clearly much that is useful here. Such an approach challenges many of the traditional values associated within much education, especially Christian education. The given value of ‘I teach, you learn’ which places the power and responsibility within the teacher’s hands is converted into a shared learning experience, where the teacher becomes someone participating in the same journey, even if they are a step or two ahead. ‘He or she travels with the learner, rather than standing ahead, beckoning, as someone who has already completed the journey; or behind, pushing the learner on, as someone who does not need to go on this journey.’ The power relationship is also altered. The teacher no longer has exclusive access to the knowledge to be learned, thereby giving them power over the learner. But learner and teacher together make sense of the tradition and its relationship to their experience.³³ The learner, then, is someone who has chosen this journey – it has not been forced on them – and who walks with fellow pilgrims, on a shared quest for greater meaning and a deeper life. He or she is prepared to brave the danger of being unsettled, challenged and even having the landscape of their interior life considerably altered.³⁴

By offering a systematic process for change, Groome also gives learners and guides something to aim at. For Groome, the content of the process seems less

³² Discussion of dialectic and decision is in Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, pp 195-197.

³³ Jeff Astley, ‘Dimensions of Christian Education’ in Jeff Astley, *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1999), pp 46-47.

³⁴ Seymour & Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*, pp 131-135.

important than that the process itself be embraced, though he makes it clear that this is a Christian process, not just self-help – ‘There is nothing uniquely Christian about such a process [of critical reflection]... However, when our reflective activity is in response to the Christian Story and Vision, then our praxis is specifically Christian.’³⁵ Groome’s vision is of the Kingdom, offered through Story and Vision, and producing Christians able to live more deeply in its reality.

There is a question, however, of whether this process is suitable for all. The principles can be used and adopted in different contexts, but can the Five Movements be strictly adhered to in every setting? The level of self-awareness and –expression and the attention span necessary to successfully use the Five Movements as a model for a meeting may not be present in some learners, such as children. ‘A particular stage of adult maturity is required for this hermeneutic to be possible.’³⁶ It is also questionable as to whether the model could work for larger groups, which are often the setting for educational activity, especially among children. A smaller group, or even personal mentoring, seems the appropriate setting to closely apply this method. But, as Seymour & Miller suggest, the principles of the interpretation approach may be used to build what they describe as an ‘interpretive community’ by informing and shaping the myriad learning opportunities within the life of any faith community.³⁷

Another limiting factor of this approach is the quality required in the teacher. While the teacher is committed to the same journey as the learner, and to sharing that journey, the teacher must still be a skilled guide to help the learner negotiate the landscape meaningfully. Clumsy teaching, or guidance given in ignorance of the teacher’s own assumptions and presuppositions, in an environment of trust and vulnerability, can have damaging consequences. There is also the challenge to ensure that the natural human tendency towards introspection is tempered by the group or community maintaining a healthy outward-looking aspect. The journey inwards and upwards to deeper faith and a more holistic life must be matched by a deeper commitment to the world around and those not yet involved in the community life. But this challenge is not unique to this approach.

In a similar way to the faith community approach, implementing the interpretation approach along fixed, programmatic lines cannot work in a diverse

³⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p191.

³⁶ Seymour & Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*, p137.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp 140-143.

setting where young and old alike need Christian education. But the principles of the approach offer much that is challenging and encouraging. The picture within the Five Movements of the critically constructive dialectic between tradition and experience, where a deeper faith is fused from the two, gives insight into how Christians may learn to live with greater integrity one life of pilgrimage.

Faith Development Theory

In trying to understand the processes of growth and development individuals can go through as they proceed through life, James Fowler has drawn on the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, among others, to develop his theory of faith development. Fowler offers six stages (and one pre-stage) of faith development that represent distinct seasons within a person's life as they try to 'make-meaning' of their experiences, relationships, beliefs and values.

But, when Fowler speaks about faith, he does not mean it in a strictly religious sense: this is not a theory of Christian religious formation. Rather, faith is

The process of constitutive knowing

Underlying a person's composition and maintenance of a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning

Generated from the person's attachments or commitments to centres of supraordinate value which have power to unify his or her world

*Thereby endowing the relationships, contexts, and patterns of everyday life, past and future, with significance.*³⁸

Faith, then, is described as 'human faith' and has universal dimensions, not specifically religious ones. Religion may provide some of the 'centres of supraordinate value', but faith is as much a verb as a noun. It is something we do to make sense of the world around us. As we grow, so our 'faith-ing' grows and develops.

What might the content of such faith be? Faith development theory offers seven constituent parts of the individual's faithing activity:

- our reasoning (the way we think),

³⁸ James W. Fowler, 'Faith and the Structuring of Meaning' in Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Eds.), *Faith Development and Fowler* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1986), pp25-26.

- our perspective-taking (our ability to adopt another's perspective),
- our moral judging (the way we make judgments about moral situations),
- our social awareness (where and how we set the limits to our 'community of faith'),
- our relation to authority (where and how we find the authorities on which we rely,
- our forming of a world-view (our way of 'holding it all together'), and
- our relation to symbols (our understanding of, and response to, symbols).³⁹

So faith has both horizontal and vertical elements to it. We relate horizontally to other people, the circumstances and situations around us and vertically to our 'ultimate environment' – the things about which we are ultimately concerned.⁴⁰ It is the structure of faith that concerns faith development theory more than the content – and it is the conviction that faith is structured as much as received, that individuals make meaning of their relationships and the way that meaning-making process happens changes and develops as the individual grows.

The six stages (and one pre-stage) faith development theory offers to explain the way individuals understand their world describe distinct ways in which that understanding takes place. Each stage is of equal value, and has great significance to the person at it, and new stages do not displace what has gone before, but rather add to it, reinterpret it and clarify it, so that the older forms of faith are still present, but in adapted form. A helpful picture is of a series of lenses, gradually being placed one over another so that the desired image comes into sharper focus as each new lens is added, though the previous lenses remain to help bring greater clarity. Individuals may not move through all six stages, however, but settle at a stage that suits them (usually stages four or five). Nevertheless, each subsequent stage opens up new vistas on life and faith so development is desirable, if not necessary.⁴¹

The pre-stage is **Undifferentiated Faith**. This is the stage where very young children (0-4) have seeds of trust, hope and love sown into their lives, which contend with threats of abandonment, inconsistency and deprivation. It is impossible to

³⁹ Jeff Astley 'Insights from Faith Development Theory and Research' in Astley (Ed.), *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), p129.

⁴⁰ Jeff Astley et al., *How Faith Grows: Faith Development and Christian Education* (London: National Society and Church House Publishing, 1991), p4.

⁴¹ Jeff Astley, 'Faith Development: An Overview' in Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (Eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1992), pxx.

empirically measure the evidence of faith at this age. Transition into stage 1 begins with ‘the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and ritual play.’

Stage 1 is **Intuitive-Projective Faith**, the stage of imagination, fantasy and the beginnings of self-awareness. The young child (3-7/8) does not think logically but experiments with the world. It is a stage of lasting impressions for the child is ‘continually encountering novelties for which no stable operations of knowing have been formed.’ Transition into stage 2 is precipitated by ‘the emergence of concrete operational thinking... the child’s growing concern to know how things are to clarify the bases of distinctions between what is real and what only seems to be.’

Stage 2 is **Mythic-Literal Faith**, when the older child (6/7-11/12) begins to appropriate the stories, beliefs and practices that constitute the tradition of his or her community. This is the age when narrative, story, myth and drama give meaning to experience, though they are interpreted strictly and literally. At this stage there is an emphasis on natural justice. Moving to the next stage begins when the stories and narratives start to conflict and literalism breaks down. Questions about authority and trust arise which must be answered personally.

Stage 3 is **Synthetic-Conventional Faith**. At this stage, individuals begin to develop a synthesis of the values, information and stories available to them. There is a sense of the conflict between different influences – family, media, friends – and the individual must find a ‘coherent orientation’ in the midst of these more complex involvements. This is typically the stage of adolescence (11/12+) but many adults will remain at this stage. Identity is a strong theme, and most individuals will not have a strong grasp on their own identity, so will derive it from worthy sources of authority or interpersonal relationships – typically a small group of friends, with whom they will conform. Moving to the next stage is often precipitated by a ‘leaving home’ experience or a breakdown in trust with established sources of authority or interpersonal relationships.

Stage 4 is **Individuative-Reflective Faith**. This is the stage at which the young (18/19+) or older (30s/40s+) adult has to own his or her faith. Conscious of the burden of responsibility for one’s own beliefs and actions, and of the presence of previously strongly-held but unexamined feelings, the individual tries to make his or her own story and faith for which he or she can be held responsible, rather than solely deriving it from the traditions and relationships around. The individual lays claim to

an identity of his or her own construction. The transition to the next stage may take many years, or may not occur at all, and may be provoked by a restlessness breaking in on the neatness of one's own faith, causing a recognition that life is more complex than previously comprehended.

Stage 5 is **Conjunctive Faith**. At this point, clear definitions begin to break down somewhat.⁴² But Fowler explains Conjunctive Faith as a making 'porous or permeable' of that which was sure and certain in Stage 4. Here, the individual has come to realise the limitations of any single worldview and becomes open to others' experiences and perspectives. Unusual before midlife, this stage is alive to paradox and contradiction prepared to embrace that which is other and may have previously seemed threatening. But living within such paradoxes and conflicts may produce a tension which propels the individual into the final stage, where they yearn to see real transformation in the world around them.

Stage 6 is **Universalizing Faith**. We lose further detail in the description of this stage, as Fowler claims that very few people ever reach it, and numbers among its members such people as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa. Those at this stage have become 'incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community.' They have committed themselves to a vision of humanity and transformation that leads them to action.⁴³

Criticism of Fowler tends to focus on two areas: his presentation of what he understands faith to be and how we construct it and the final stage of faith development where research gives way to what seems little more than theological imagination based on the lives of a few notable historical characters (Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.). Ellis Nelson goes further and suggests that, in the light of Fowler's theories, 'human faith' (the term used to specifically explain Fowler's attitude towards faith) does *not* go through distinct stages of development but is a 'general affective state... [that] deals with life situations as they occur.' So, faith does not develop but our 'understanding of life and our formation of meaning become

⁴² Fowler writes, 'I have not found or fabricated a simple way to describe Conjunctive faith,' in James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p184.

⁴³ For the descriptions of the stages of faith, see Fowler, *Stages*, p119ff.

more adequate for the complexities of life as we mature in the ability to make judgments and to respond to a variety of life experiences.⁴⁴

While Fowler's description of what he believes faith to be in this context is certainly open to criticism (as Fowler himself acknowledges⁴⁵), there is something appealing about using the language of faith to interpret our ability to make meaning. It claims that we are all constructing our worldviews of certainty, belief and action, whether or not those worldviews reference any kind of religious or spiritual content. For Christians, this helps validate and dignify the faith of those outside the Christian community. It is not simply a question of the 'faithful' and the 'faithless', but of individuals trying to make meaning and coming up with different contents for those structures of meaning. This, then, might help the Christian find out what they have in common with the faithing experience of those they meet, rather than assume that faith is not present, or lies dormant, which would therefore require them somehow to impart it.

The final stage of Fowler's theory is much more problematic. While continuing to emphasise the intrinsic value of each stage, and of the people in it, 'the theory clearly argues that, other things being equal, it is desirable for persons to continue the process of development, engaging in the often protracted struggles that lead to stage transition and the construction of new and more complex patterns of meaning making.'⁴⁶ So, the final stage must have special significance as the desired endpoint of the process. But it is the least well defined of Fowler's stages and, unlike any other stage, he has to resort to overtly religious language to explain it. Stage 6 faith is compared to a 'radical monotheism' seen through the metaphor of the Kingdom of God, which Fowler describes as the reality that the Stage 6 person apprehends, towards which their efforts are directed. 'The bearers of Stage 6 faith, whether they stand in the Jewish, Christian or other traditions, embody in radical ways this leaning into the future of God for all being.'⁴⁷ As a Christian, I might applaud Fowler's ultimate conclusions about the desired outcome of the faith development process, but it seems internally inconsistent. Faith, as it is explained here, is not explicitly religious but then the ultimate expression of the development of

⁴⁴ C. Ellis Nelson, 'Does faith develop? An evaluation of Fowler's position' in Astley and Francis (Eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, pp72-73.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Fowler's foreword in Astley and Francis, *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, ppixiii-xiv.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pxi.

⁴⁷ Fowler, *Stages*, pp204-211.

a person's faith-life is depicted as intrinsically religious and monotheistic. Fowler argues that the images he uses are universal and that we should not concern ourselves overly with the particulars, but these are the particulars he chooses and, as such, carry significant weight.

It also seems problematic to present something as the ultimate destination of faith development that is so unreachable. Stage 6 cannot be thought of as the natural or normal process of development because it is so unusual. The normal faith destination (i.e. where most people end up) seems to be somewhere between Stages 4 and 5, or perhaps an ongoing cycle of the two. Stage 6 perhaps represents those notable individuals who cannot be defined by the faith development theory as presented and must sit outside it. But Fowler, rather than noting the presence of such individuals as examples of those who have transcended the system, chooses to make them the ultimate expression of the system, thereby skewing the whole towards what seems an unattainable end.

However, when dealing with the more concrete aspects of the faith development theory, there is much here that instantly resonates with those working with children, young people and young adults. The description of Stage 3 faith (through puberty and beyond) is particularly helpful in understanding a young person's relationships with themselves, the sources of authority and their peer groups. The typical teenage rebellion is here seen as the testing of sources of authority (family, church, school) to find their worthiness, and the birth of a personal story (or 'myth') through seeking out like-minded peers with whom to construct the individual's identity.

The notable difference between this approach to Christian education and the others studied in detail (the faith community and interpretation approaches) is that it lends itself to numerous learning environments. Because Fowler has not tied down his theory to a particular set of practices, it can inform a wider variety of educational practices and settings. This makes it a much more useful tool for a variety of educators: it does not have to have a specific setting (such as the gathered faith community), nor does it have to use a specific pattern for learning (such as Groome's Five Movements). It does not even have specific aims, other than to help people move

through the stages as appropriate,⁴⁸ because the content of the faith is not defined. So faith development theory can be used as a tool of observation, reflection and planning in a variety of settings.

Other Approaches to Christian Education

A number of other approaches are offered within Christian education theory. Some are distinct approaches; others reflect values considered to be significant to all Christian education, and thus may transcend any particular method of learning. Among the latter are the religious instruction approach and the critical Christian education approach. The religious instruction approach, developed by James Michael Lee, argues that teaching religion is no different from teaching any other educational subject, such as science or driving. The emphasis is placed on using the best of educational theory and practice in a religious education setting, thereby empowering the teacher to structure and control the learning environment appropriately, so that students' needs are met and the desired outcomes are achieved. This approach is often presented as slanted towards the classroom and church school, but Lee's intention is to make it all-embracing. The value of best practice in Christian education has clearly been adopted, at least at face value, across the spectrum of Christian education, but the emphasis on the formal classroom environment has not helped those churches working with less formal situations. Volunteer leaders with few resources on a Sunday morning may aspire to such professionalism and expertise but will rarely be able to achieve it.⁴⁹

The critical Christian education approach has been promoted by John Hull, who argues against an uncritical acceptance of inherited dogma. This approach looks for dynamic Christian learning that shows a 'critical openness' that seeks a creative fusion between tradition and present realities, rather than conformism. It clearly has a relation to the interpretation approach but is more polemical in nature and somewhat deconstructionist, being inclined towards undoing passive acceptance of ideologies stuck in yesterday's (irrelevant?) concerns, values and beliefs.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Though even this is handled cautiously. An individual, it is argued, will move through the stages at their own pace, so intervention by an educator to produce any kind of stage transition would be very unusual. See Astley *et al.*, *How Faith Grows*, pp40-41.

⁴⁹ Jack L. Seymour, 'Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education' in Astley, Francis and Crowder, *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, pp3-4.

⁵⁰ Jeff Astley, 'Aims and Approaches in Christian Education' in Astley, *Learning in the Way*, pp20-21.

The liberation approach to Christian education echoes some of the themes of the critical Christian education and the interpretation approaches, but politicises the education process. Where critical Christian education construes criticism as a philosophical and rational skill, in liberation Christian education the focus is on a more political critique. The themes of such an approach are teaching people to think for themselves, that true education ends in action, that there must be a meaningful dialectic between the Christian tradition and the realities of injustice, oppression and poverty, and that such education may end in moves towards social reform, or, even, revolution. The cradle of liberation theology is Latin America, where the realities of the oppression and poverty it seeks to address are keenly felt. Consequently there are shortcomings in the developed West becoming a fertile ground for its development. A certain nervousness about the West adopting liberation education is understandable: ‘any attempt to renew Christian education by appropriating the liberation idea runs the risk of trivialising the concept.’⁵¹ Using the language of liberation to encourage greater social involvement, concern for the poor or a better appreciation of the global realities of poverty and oppression misunderstands the gravity of the issues. It may also serve to make those whose lives are thoroughly invested in Western institutions erroneously believe that they are on the side of the poor. In the UK, we do see the fruit of the themes of liberation in a greater awareness of trade issues, the plight of the poor (with particular attention on Africa recently), and the responsibilities of the developed West to deal honestly and charitably with developing nations – perhaps these are examples of ‘conscientisation’, as individuals and society as a whole take greater interest. But Freire argues that action must be accompanied by reflection for conscientisation to be meaningful.⁵² There is a connection here to the interpretation approach, but in a very different context, and a desire for a thorough dialectic between the tradition and the present experience of the poor and oppressed which does more than act as a salve to the Western conscience.⁵³

Finally, the educational system approach⁵⁴ also draws themes from other approaches – particularly the faith community and interpretation approaches – and sees education as one of the primary vehicles in moving congregations forwards in

⁵¹ Allen J. Moore, ‘Liberation and the Future of Christian Education’ in Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p105.

⁵² Paulo Freire, ‘Education, Liberation and the Church’ in Astley, Francis and Crowder, *Theological Perspectives*, pp171-172.

⁵³ Moore, ‘Liberation and the Future’, pp103-122.

⁵⁴ Seymour, ‘Contemporary Approaches’, pp7-9.

their vision. The concern over a growing rift between churches and church schools – a particularly North American issue – leads exponents of this approach to place education back at the heart of the worshipping community, much as does Westerhoff. The educational system approach then seeks to co-ordinate the educational settings within the community with the aim of congregational development. Positive engagement with the issues of the congregation's life and faith is encouraged, along with planning for the future through educational development. Some kind of educational or developmental manager orders these settings accordingly. But churches are diverse groups, as much organic as organisational, so the level of central control necessary for such an approach to succeed thoroughly must be difficult to obtain. There is also the question as to whether any system, no matter how well intentioned or managed, can adequately respond to the educational needs of any group, especially when the educational priorities are spiritual as well as intellectual and emotional. 'The most serious weakness in the developmental framework is the assumption that a human being reaches its incrementally described destiny by virtue of some internal capacity or through the sponsoring of its holding environments.'⁵⁵ However any human system of education can be argued to be inadequate in containing divine revelation or bringing the best out of every person in its structures.

We see a wide scope of values and methods in the different approaches to Christian education outlined above. Some of the approaches are concretised in particular styles or programmes, others express more general hopes and aspirations for the Christian education process that can be realised in a variety of settings and methods. Most are grounded in frustrations with the status quo, or a sense of dissonance that much which is described as Christian education does not produce better Christians. Each approach offers a window onto different vistas of the Christian learning experience.

The next section gives an account of the case study, St Thomas' in Sheffield. In the section after, there is dialogue between the case study and aspects of the different approaches to Christian education. Just as the case study critiques the appropriateness and helpfulness of several of the approaches, so the approaches critique the case study to find areas where a rounded experience of Christian education might be lacking.

⁵⁵ Carol Lakey Hess, 'Educating in the Spirit' in Astley, Francis and Crowder, *Perspectives*, p125.

Chapter 4: A Case Study of St Thomas' Church, Sheffield

On Case Studies

Bill Gillham explains a case study as that which investigates a 'case' (a 'unit of human activity in the world') to answer specific research questions, drawing from a range of evidence, within the specific context of the case.¹ A case study is primarily qualitative research, although it may make use of quantitative tools, because it seeks to understand the meaning of what is occurring within the case and its wider context. '[The case study researcher] looks for patterns in the lives, actions and words of people in the context of the overall case as a whole.'² Gillham uses the term 'participant observer' to describe the case study researcher who 'acknowledges (and looks out for) their role in what they discover.'³

It is the evidence gathered in the case study that is the key to understanding it and addressing the research questions. Travers offers five methods of qualitative enquiry (evidence gathering): observation; interviewing; ethnographic fieldwork (immersion within the research setting over a period of time); discourse analysis (analysing the language in conversation) and textual analysis (studying the literature of the case.)⁴

There are, however, a number of problems in trying to place the case study that follows within this understanding of case study research.

The first problem is with the role of the researcher. In this case, the researcher (which, in itself, may be an inadequate description) has not only participated in the life of the case study, the children's work at St Thomas' Church in Sheffield, but has been responsible for it for the most part of the period of the case study (1998-2004). But this case study is to produce theological reflection, not social science, so can the source of the evidence necessary to formulate research questions and conclusions be someone so intimately connected to the case study? Stake outlines five roles of the case researcher: teacher; advocate (of the conclusions reached); evaluator; biographer and interpreter.⁵ Of these, the last two best explain the role in the present study. Though the case is not an individual, a biography of the children's ministry within the

¹ Bill Gillham, *Case Study Research Methods* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp1-2.

² W. Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), p321.

³ Gillham, *Research Methods*, p7.

⁴ Max Travers, *Qualitative Research through Case Studies* (London: Sage, 2001), pp2-5.

⁵ Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (London: Sage, 1995), pp91-99.

church is offered, followed by a series of reflections on how the case study 'fits' within the approaches to the Christian education of children outlined earlier.

The second problem is with the evidence itself. Gillham offers six kinds of evidence, and advises that multiple sources of evidence should be used in the case study. The different kinds of evidence are: documents; records; interviews; 'detached' observation; 'participant' observation and physical artefacts.⁶ Because this case study is concerned with constructing a biography of the children's ministry at St Thomas', it has been drawn primarily from interviews with those who have been members of the children's team in recent years. There are some records (particularly of the numbers of children receiving home visits) but these are patchy at best and many have been consigned to an electronic afterlife and therefore are unavailable as evidence. So, much of the record has been constructed from the 'participant' observation of the researcher and the recollections of others. But, again, for the purposes of this case study, in which exact figures are less important than an outline of the different approaches and a sense of the journey of the children's ministry in that time, are these gaps in evidence acceptable?

The final problem is with the development of research questions. As we saw above, a case study is begun in order to answer certain questions, which may be quite broad and may grow, change or die as the study continues, while new questions may emerge. But the account that is this case study was not embarked upon with such aims; there were no research questions to be answered when the children's ministry at St Thomas' was relaunched in 1998. Additionally, we might argue that it is not even the case study itself that is being questioned,⁷ but it is the relationship between the case study and its wider context of cultural change and Christian education theory that is under scrutiny. Stake says, 'in qualitative case study, we seek greater understanding of Θ , the case.'⁸ But here, we seek to understand how St Thomas' children's work, which exists within the changing world of childhood examined previously, sits within the differing approaches to Christian education explained above. In some ways, it could be any church, except that it is the researcher's church and, coincidentally and

⁶ Gillham, *Research Methods*, pp20-22.

⁷ Although it certainly could be questioned, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, to discover such things as the numerical growth of the children's ministry, or its effectiveness in giving children a greater sense of their connection to God, for example.

⁸ Stake, *The Art*, p16.

helpfully, a church which has sought to respond to the changes in its surrounding culture and has done so through a variety of means.

But, as Stake says, ‘all research requires conceptual organisation.’⁹ So, it is important to offer some kind of conceptual framework for our understanding of the case study and subsequent reflections that follow. These are:

1. We have examined how changing social structures might impinge on the world of childhood and the ‘felt experience’ of children.
2. We have painted a picture of the changing relationship between children and the church in the UK.
3. We have examined the different approaches to the Christian education of children.
4. We take the case of a single church, aiming to reach out to children in a changing environment, using some of the methods mentioned in 2).
5. We reflect how the different approaches to Christian education might inform, and be informed by, this concrete example of a church pursuing similar ends.

Within this understanding of the case study, it is the story of the case – the experiences of those in it, of children, families and team members – which offers most opportunity for theological reflection. So the story and experiences are shared, and help contextualise the reflections that follow. As a guide, some figures are offered for the case study in Appendix B but these figures offer a general picture of periods of growth and decline; they are not hard data suitable for detailed analysis.

It may quite properly be argued, particularly in a social scientific context, that what follows does not meet the stringent scientific criteria for a ‘case study’. But a broader understanding of a case study is often used in the field of theological studies, particularly in practical theology. The broadest possible interpretation of case study approach may be found in *Christian Theology: a case method approach*¹⁰ and even in *Pedagogies of Christian Education: case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE*¹¹. Indeed, ‘the phrase “case study”... is not used in

⁹ Ibid, p15.

¹⁰ Robert A. Evans and Thomas D. Parker (eds.), (London: SPCK, 1976).

¹¹ Michael Grimmitt (ed.), (Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons, 2000).

any standard way by scholars in different fields and disciplines;¹² its understanding and development depending very much on context. In some disciplines, a case is simply defined as the unit of analysis, rather than in terms of process or methodology. The format adopted here may be paralleled by studies within practical theology where the main emphasis is on the ‘hermeneutical conversation’ between a particular situation (described very generally) and the traditional sources of theological thought.¹³ So, when Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore discusses case studies, while she does outline the technical methodology of data gathering and analysis, she places a particular emphasis on the step of ‘asking theological questions.’¹⁴ This broad interpretative approach, which is often described as ‘theological reflection’, focuses on particular examples (‘cases’) of ‘Christian life and practice within the Church and in relation to wider society’,¹⁵ which constitute the field of practical theology.

The Case Study

St Thomas’ Church, Sheffield

St Thomas’ Church, in the community of Crookes in south-east Sheffield, has been well-known in evangelical and charismatic church circles, particularly within the Anglican church, for many years. In 1982 the church formed an LEP (Local Ecumenical Project) with Crookes Baptist Church, after the parish church building underwent a reordering during which the congregation used the Baptist church’s premises. The two churches came to realise they had much in common, particularly a growing appreciation for the values and worship style of the charismatic movement,

¹² M. Hammersley, R. Gomm and P. Foster (eds.), *Case Study Method* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2000), p1.

¹³ For some examples of this ‘hermeneutical conversation’, see Thomas R. Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), chapter 3; Leanne Van Dyk, ‘The Formation of Vocation – Institutional and Individual’ in L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (eds.), *The Scope of our Art: the vocation of the theological teacher* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp225-239; Jack L. Seymour, Margaret Ann Crain and Joseph V. Crockett, *Educating Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), *passim* and Gilbert I. Bond, ‘Liturgy, Ministry and the Stranger: the practice of encountering the other in two Christian communities’ in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp137-156.

¹⁴ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart: theology and educational method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp48-49.

¹⁵ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 1996), p1. On practical theology and theological reflection, see also Patricia O’Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp68-69; Laurie Green, *Let’s Do Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1990), pp91-96; and Edward Farley, ‘Interpreting Situations: an inquiry into the nature of theological reflection’ and Stephen Pattison ‘Some Straw for the Bricks: a basic introduction to theological reflection’ in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), chapters 7 and 9 respectively.

and felt that by joining together in an LEP they could offer a more vital witness to their community.¹⁶

During the 1980s, the new LEP (still called St Thomas', Crookes) strongly adopted the values of charismatic movement and was particularly influenced by the ministry of John Wimber, the founder of Vineyard Ministries International. The church also moved to a 'congregational' model of ministry, whereby the three Sunday services became distinct congregations with their own clergy oversight and lay leadership. This period also saw the establishment of a new congregation for students and students and young adults, which used the images and music of contemporary culture in its worship style. Meeting at 9pm on Sunday nights, it was called the Nine O'clock Service (NOS).¹⁷

Robert Warren, who had been rector of the church through this period, left in 1993 and, six months later, Mike Breen became the new rector. At this point, Mike Breen began to develop the church's vision, from focussing mainly on the parish and local community to embracing a wider mission to the whole city. This change of focus reflected the presence within the church of many members who lived and worked right across Sheffield, not just in the parish, and a sense that the church should act as a resource to the whole city. The biblical model for this was suggested to be the church of Ephesus mentioned in Acts 19, which seemed to act as a centre for mission and ministry to the whole region.¹⁸

This developing vision to become a church for the whole city led to a number of changes in the life of the church. Firstly, an intermediate level of gathering (between small group and Sunday celebration) was introduced, called 'clusters'. The clusters were to serve as places of belonging and mission which could reflect the church's growing diversity. Each cluster would develop a distinct 'vision' for who they could reach and how they could do it, for which they were responsible and accountable to the church's leadership team. Then in 1999 two-thirds of the church members moved out of the parish church to effectively plant a new church in the city

¹⁶ Paddy Mallon, *Calling a City Back to God* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2003), p21.

¹⁷ The ultimate fate of NOS has been well documented. After moving out from St Thomas' in 1991, it was established as an extra-parochial Anglican congregation, meeting in a nightclub venue in Sheffield city centre under diocesan oversight. But a culture of secrecy and abuse developed within the congregation that was exposed in 1995 after allegations of harassment and inappropriate conduct by a number of the congregation's members. The service was quickly closed, though a group calling itself NOS still holds meetings in Sheffield.

¹⁸ Mike Breen, *The Body Beautiful* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1997), p25.

centre. This church would be the church for the city, with those left behind at St Thomas', Crookes able to replant a meaningful parish church without the encumbrances of the wider church's agenda and problems. The new city church (still called St Thomas') met at first in a leisure centre, then in 2001 the lease was obtained on a redundant nightclub called the Roxy. At the Roxy, a more meaningful citywide ministry began to develop, including youth and children's work, and ministry to the homeless and drug addicts. A number of clusters also began to meet away from the building among the communities they were trying to reach.

After two years at the Roxy, a visit from the Health and Safety Executive discovered that the building had serious problems. So with a month's notice over Christmas 2002, the church had to leave. The decision was made not to seek another central venue, but to release the clusters to establish themselves in the communities or people networks they were trying to reach. So, in one memorable Sunday St Thomas' effectively multiplied from two Sunday services into seventeen smaller gatherings, which met across Sheffield in venues including a converted garage, a cinema and a pub. The church then gathered as a whole for a celebration once a month at a hired venue.¹⁹

This dispersed season placed enormous strain on the church as a whole. Many ministries were severely cut back or had to be suspended and the whole of the staff team's time and energy were spent trying to help the newly-planted clusters. But most clusters prospered (the number of clusters nearly doubled in the year) and it certainly encouraged the whole of the church body to take responsibility for the church's mission, rather than leave it in the hands of the 'professionals'. After a year of scattered groups meeting across Sheffield, the opportunity arose to purchase an ex-industrial site in an area of Sheffield historically known as Philadelphia. In spring 2003, the city church moved into its new home, a campus of warehouses. The dispersed model was maintained for a further eighteen months, with clusters gathering monthly at St Thomas', Philadelphia (as the new church was named). In 2004, Mike Breen left to take up a post at a church in Phoenix, Arizona and St Thomas', Crookes and St Thomas', Philadelphia became separate legal entities, under the leadership of Mick Woodhead and Paul Maconochie at Crookes and Philadelphia respectively.

¹⁹ For more detail on this period of the church's life, see Mallon, *Calling*, pp36-40.

Children's ministry at St Thomas'

The case study covers the period from 1998-2003 when I was responsible for the children's ministry at St Thomas'. My previous experience of children's work had been at an inner city parish church in Sheffield while I was an undergraduate. A group of students, with St Thomas' support, helped establish a midweek children's club at this parish church. The club ran for just over an hour immediately after school on Wednesday afternoons and was launched with much enthusiasm. The programme usually started with a games time (running around in the church's worship area) followed by songs and a talk and then craft or activity time. But as the club progressed, a number of problems developed which seemed to handicap it. Firstly, there were constant discipline problems, which sapped the team's energy. The relationships between the team and the children did not seem strong enough to engender any depth or respect. Secondly, the children struggled to participate in the songs or listen to the talk. None of the teaching seemed to help them nor did we see any evidence in them of a leaning towards the Christian faith. Finally, we struggled to integrate the children into the church's Sunday worship gatherings. The children found their time in the services boring and were often disruptive; the Sunday children's groups could not manage the larger numbers and the existing children (who did not attend the weeknight club) found the newcomers threatening. The church also struggled to provide carers for the new children on Sunday mornings and increasingly looked to the student team to come with the children on Sundays too (the children's parents did not attend on Sundays with them). This raised tensions for the team, many of whom were already members of St Thomas' or other churches in the city.

This experience seemed very unsatisfying. The good intentions with which the project had been set up seemed to result in very little evidence of any lasting change. Eventually the club folded with much general disappointment in both the students and involved and the church community who had placed their faith in this new initiative. I was left with more questions than answers about how ministry to children from Sheffield's estates might meaningfully occur. The discipline problems seemed insurmountable; the children didn't seem to want to learn and integrating them into a church community also seemed impossible.

Just before Easter 1998, I was invited to take on the leadership of STOMP, an ailing children's club run at St Thomas'. Upon visiting STOMP with some potential new team members, we found a small group of boys playing football in one of the

church's halls. This, we were assured, was what normally happened at STOMP. There was no Christian teaching or input, apart from the occasional 'God-slot' and few of the boys were involved with any other aspects of the church's life. The club was run by the church's youth worker, who freely confessed that primary school children were not his preferred age group.

By now, I had become aware of Bill Wilson and Metro Ministries in New York (see Chapter 2) and of a similar work being developed in Liverpool. This model seemed to address many of the questions my previous experience had left me with and I wondered whether it might work for STOMP. So we took on responsibility for STOMP and began changing the structure so that it looked more like a Kidz Klub (for a detailed explanation of the Kidz Klub structure, see Appendix A). We began home visitations and I did a few assemblies at local primary schools. The changes met with resistance from the boys who had previously attended the club and we were frequently asked questions about whether they could play football or not. But new groups of children began to attend. These were mostly children from within the church who appreciated a weeknight club and enjoyed the style. Some soon began to bring friends who were not from church families. The club grew to a weekly attendance of over thirty children and the home visitation lists grew so we had to divide the 'rounds'. Soon there were three different pairs of team members visiting over fifty children in Crookes and Crosspool, an adjacent area of Sheffield.

However, from the inception of the new club, the STOMP team had discussed whether ways might be found to open STOMP to children from different backgrounds. Sheffield has significant areas of disadvantage and need so there was a desire within the team to follow the example of Bill Wilson and the Kidz Klub in Liverpool and see whether children from such areas might come to STOMP. One team member began to bring some children she had met from Broomhall, a deprived area on the edge of the city centre. These children enthusiastically got involved but some struggled to maintain good discipline and a number had distinct behavioural difficulties. One little boy in particular found keeping to the rules very hard. For a period of months he had to be taken out, and sometimes taken home, every week.²⁰

But, it seemed that the Kidz Klub model really did have something to offer such children. The time commitment was significant (weekly planning meetings,

²⁰ His bad behaviour was by no means confined to STOMP. There were regularly serious problems with his behaviour at school.

home visits, setting up, running the club and clearing down) but the combination of a high-energy programme, clear, well-reinforced boundaries, simple teaching and the home visits seemed to give children from different backgrounds the chance to grow into full participation.

In the summer of 1998, I was invited to join the staff team at St Thomas' in a part-time capacity and take on the Sunday morning children's groups too. At this point, St Thomas' ran two Sunday morning services at 9.15 and 11.15. Most children attended the earlier service. The groups had been run on a rota basis but, to my surprise, when given a free choice to stay and join a new children's team or leave, all the existing teachers chose to leave. To begin with, we tried to replicate the STOMP model on Sunday mornings with a front-led programme and simple Bible teaching. But it soon became clear that Kidz Church (as it was renamed) children needed something more personal and relational. There were no home visits from the Sunday morning groups, though many children also came to STOMP and so received visits.

In autumn 1999, as mentioned above, the church planted a new city centre congregation. Two-thirds of the church's members left the parish church to participate in the new congregation. The new church initially met in Ponds Forge leisure centre. Ponds Forge is near Park Hill, a notorious inner city community of high-rise flats behind Sheffield station (some of the children who had attended the club run at the other parish church had come from Park Hill.) The decision was made to invite children from Park Hill to join the children's groups at Ponds Forge. Generally, however, the experience was very unsatisfactory. The children from Park Hill came regularly but did not seem to enjoy their experience of the service (which was held in a large sports hall) or of the children's groups during which they struggled to concentrate. Only a handful of children ever came and few came more than once or twice.

After a year at Ponds Forge, the city centre church took out the lease on the empty Roxy nightclub. The children's team had been planning to plant new STOMP clubs in Broomhall and Park Hill to attend to the needs of the growing number of children attending the club in Crookes from Broomhall and the few Park Hill children who came to Ponds Forge. But we retracted that decision and instead opened a new club at the Roxy, which was particularly for the children from disadvantaged communities. The Crookes club kept going with smaller numbers from the immediate community. STOMP at the Roxy grew substantially; two other parish churches started

to bring children from their communities of Netherthorpe and Norfolk Park. But we battled against continual discipline problems. The children from Park Hill found it particularly hard to maintain good behaviour. This, however, was our period of greatest growth, when numbers at the Roxy reached over seventy and we were visiting nearly two hundred children across six separate Sheffield communities: Crookes, Crosspool, Broomhall, Park Hill, Pitsmoor and Shiregreen (as well as teams from other churches visiting in Netherthorpe and Norfolk Park).

By this time, we had had to change the format of Sunday mornings. We rarely had STOMP children attending and found that the church children needed a very different approach. Numbers were small and behaviour was generally good, so the boundaries were changed and a more interactive, less upfront style was developed. These groups became more about exploring the Christian faith and what it meant for the children, rather than re-laying foundations they had already been taught. Small group times became important and creative approaches to worship using art and drama were explored. Children also began to be included more meaningfully in the services. There was no token time together at the beginning, but children would occasionally join the service to take communion with their families or receive prayer ministry.

During the time at the Roxy, we began to have children attend STOMP from Shiregreen in the north of Sheffield. This presented challenges as the journey time was much longer and the team encountered numerous discipline problems on the minibuses we used to transport the children. Problems on the buses usually translated into problems at the club which became very draining for the relatively new team. So the decision was made to stop bringing the children to the Roxy but take steps to establish a new club in Shiregreen itself.

Over the summer of 2001 we held a week-long holiday club for the STOMP children and others. It became clear that real progress had been made with children from Broomhall and Shiregreen. The Broomhall children behaved excellently, some had made the transition into helpers and one or two families had even made the move to Sunday mornings. The Broomhall team had also bravely taken six children to New Wine, the family conference, and it proved to be a time of spiritual enrichment for all the children. The Shiregreen team were also building good relationships with the growing number of children they were meeting as they maintained the home visits even though they were not attending the clubs. But the Park Hill children were finding

it as difficult as ever. One new child from Park Hill even attacked a leader (twice his height) during one of the sessions. It became apparent that the commitment to Park Hill was reducing the effectiveness of the whole work.

In retrospect, this was perhaps inevitable. Park Hill is a very needy community, with numerous social problems. The fabric of the flats is failing but they have been Grade 2-listed (as a fine example of the architecture of the 1960s) so Sheffield City Council, which would like to pull them down, has to maintain them.²¹ The flats' population is very fluid as few people want to stay there long-term (apart from some remaining members of the original 1960s community); Park Hill is a place you try to leave. We had no other forms of local contact in Park Hill apart from the children's work, whereas Broomhall had its own cluster and Shiregreen had a number of church members living nearby. It had also been a struggle to recruit team members for Park Hill and we often had teams comprised only of women. Typically, teams comprising both men and women found dealing with discipline issues easier.

As 2001 drew to a close it became clear that STOMP at the Roxy was also coming to a natural end. So when we found out the building was about to close we were already preparing to take the clubs back out to their communities. The original STOMP club at Crookes also closed as we struggled to maintain enough team to run both a weeknight club and Sunday morning groups at the parish church. Through 2002 there were no weekly gatherings for the city church, only monthly celebrations. We tried to establish STOMP in Broomhall but it never started, though many of the relationships were continued by the cluster meeting there. STOMP started in Park Hill with a much more low-key style. We abandoned the Kidz Klub model in favour of a smaller, more intimate club with more space for craft and other activities, but it never really took off and closed a few months later. The new club in Shiregreen did eventually start, however, in a local community centre with a new team.

Through the dispersed period of 2002, the church's children were cared for in their clusters and by a number of cell groups run centrally on Monday evenings. It was undoubtedly a very difficult year for the children's ministry as any sense of consistency that had been built up at the Roxy was lost through the changes. Families that had been used to bringing their children to Sunday groups staffed by volunteer

²¹ While visiting a school in the area, I was shown a City Council policy document that suggested that the flats would be uninhabitable within 10 years. This was 5 years ago.

teams now had the whole care of their children thrust back on them and their immediate community. Some prospered; others did not.

The city church moved into Philadelphia at the beginning of 2003. However, it took many months for any semblance of normality to return. Sunday morning groups were restarted in 2003, but only fortnightly and most children still attended their clusters every week. The cell groups came to an end, which upset many families whose children had found them so important in the midst of all the change. But Shiregreen STOMP continued to prosper, growing and starting a group for older children called Engage. In the summer of 2003, I handed over responsibility of the children's ministry. Since then, STOMP has started at Philadelphia, drawing in children from Crookes, the immediate community and Firth Park (in the north of Sheffield). Another parish church in Grenoside is also bringing some children to the club. The Sunday morning groups finally began to meet weekly in September 2005.

In Appendix B, there are some very basic statistics about the numbers of children in our groups between 1998 and 2003. These are approximate figures but should give an indication of periods of growth and decline.

This is not, as should be clear, a success story but represents an attempt to negotiate the challenges of reaching out to Sheffield children within the context of a changing church. In the next chapter, we reflect on some of the issues raised by the journey of the children's ministry at St Thomas' in the last seven years. What follows is not an analysis of the successes and failures of our work but are reflections on how the example and experiences of our church can help us better understand and respond to our world in the light of God's grace. The reflections generally present a positive picture of the ministry and focus on some of the particular challenges and issues faced over the years. As we have seen, there have been setbacks as well as successes, and it is important not to paint a picture of a ministry going from strength to strength. Our church as a whole has undoubtedly moved forward in its consideration of and commitment to the city's children since 1998 though many future challenges remain. I hope that what follows will provide constructive reflection on the challenges of the past and how they might better inform us for the future.

Chapter 5: The Case Study in a Christian Education Context

1) The Mission Context

In trying to reflect on the significance or otherwise of what has happened at St Thomas' in recent years, we must try to understand the context of the church's mission to children. 'It is important for us to see what our culture looks like, so we can see the possible shape, or shapes, of church to which God is calling us.'¹ This will also help us to understand the dialectic between the specific situation of the church and the different approaches to Christian education, which come from different contexts.

Sheffield children

As we have seen, the children's team made a decision to direct their efforts towards the large number of children who have little or no contact with Christianity or the church. This brought us into contact with children from different backgrounds to those children who were already members of the church community. The work was also extended to involve children from more deprived communities. While church children continued to be involved in their Sunday morning groups, and many attended the midweek clubs and brought friends, new groups of children began to be involved in the church's life. These children represented the mission context of the children's ministry, therefore understanding them, and any differences between them and the children already in the groups, was a significant priority.

Firstly, there were greater numbers of children becoming involved in the church's life. Children now had the opportunity to be involved in the groups themselves, whether they came from churchgoing families or not. The STOMP club offered children lots of fun and the chance to explore the Christian faith in a dynamic setting away from their parents. There were also specific incentives to bring friends and other children. At its peak, over a hundred children were attending STOMP weekly.² The model we were using (the Kidz Klub model, discussed in Chapter 2) was directed at working with large numbers of children, so this growth was what the team had hoped for.

¹ The Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p1.

² This was when we held two clubs concurrently, at St Thomas', Crookes and at the Roxy.

Secondly, many of these children came from what we might describe as unchurched backgrounds. They had had no prior experience of the Christian faith, other than what they might have picked up through school (RE lessons and assemblies) the popular media, or occasional attendance at a wedding, funeral or christening.³ Research suggests that this group makes up forty per cent of the population, but 'in urban areas the proportion of [unchurched] is likely to be much higher'⁴ – just the kind of areas from which children were beginning to attend STOMP. In South Yorkshire less than 7 per cent of children and families attended church on Sundays in 1998.⁵ One of the characteristics of those who come from an unchurched background is that they lack a familiarity with the stories of the Christian tradition. Basic knowledge about the Christian festivals and perhaps some familiarity with the stories and parables of the New Testament could once have been assumed of most children in the UK. 'Even though such information may have been poorly communicated and imperfectly understood, it was truly part of the texture of life. It no longer is, and its absence is significant.'⁶

Finally, with more children attending, and more children from disadvantaged backgrounds, maintaining appropriate standards of behaviour became much more challenging. We found ourselves dealing with a higher level of general bad behaviour and more instances of children with specific learning or behavioural difficulties. This is a sensitive issue, and it would be wrong to suggest any kind of causal link between disadvantaged backgrounds and bad behaviour or learning difficulties. But according to the Foundation for People with Learning Difficulties, 'Mild learning disabilities are more common among boys/men, young people, people who are poorer and people from adverse family backgrounds'⁷ It seems to be an observable trend that children from poorer or more difficult backgrounds will also experience a greater incidence of behavioural or learning difficulties. Obviously, children who have grown up in church will have a much clearer understanding of what behaviour is appropriate in a church meeting (even a weeknight club) than those who have not and challenging behaviour is not confined to children from difficult backgrounds. But bringing larger numbers of children from such backgrounds certainly brought with it more challenges.

³ This group is also called 'non-churched', see, for example, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p37.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp36-39.

⁵ Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, pp55-60.

⁶ Penny Frank, *Every Child a Chance to Choose*, p40.

⁷ Foundation for People with Learning Difficulties, 'Statistics on learning disability' (10 June 2004). <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/page.cfm?pagecode=ISBISTMT> (22 September 2005)

Working with Sheffield children

Each of these issues presents challenges for those trying to run groups that can effectively care for the children in them and those trying to teach the Christian tradition.

Larger numbers of children, especially children without the moderating influence of their parents' presence, need to be carefully managed. There are numerous practicalities to be examined and the approach of the meeting and the style of the teaching need to be carefully thought through. The interpretation approach, Godly Play and the cell church model rely on small numbers of children. Such groups can think more deeply through the issues of the tradition and build strong relationships within the group. So, to adopt any of these models would require establishing a number of smaller groups which would each need their own leaders, resources and space to meet in. But this is not an impossibility. Involving larger numbers of children in the wider faith community would need to be carefully thought through too. In Westerhoff's vision of the faith community (a church of less than three hundred members)⁸, the introduction of up to seventy children without their parents would be a significant challenge to any community, no matter how open and welcoming.

Addressing the needs of unchurched children also needs careful thought. How much do they need to be taught, or how much will come from within them, regardless of how little their experience of the Christian tradition? Berryman argues that children, no matter what their background, possess the creative processes necessary to engage in Godly Play and that they wrestle with existential issues.⁹ The key for them is to be given the appropriate (religious) language to be able to engage with the existential issues, but Berryman assumes that the children in Godly Play have some prior involvement:

What is needed today more than ever is a strong sense of what one's tradition is. It is difficult to have an appreciation for the complexity of someone else's tradition if one's own is unknown. How can we even know what religion is, when its language blends with together with other domains that have nothing

⁸ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children?*, pp52-53.

⁹ Berryman, *Godly Play*, pp131, 137.

to do with existential issues or religious experience? Such pressures and questions call attention to the need to give children a deep but open and flexible grounding in their own tradition.¹⁰

The sense of the tradition in Godly Play is very significant and affects even the environment and layout of the room. But, as we have seen, we are dealing with children who have no tradition. What then? Does Godly Play attend to the needs of children who have no history in the Christian tradition? In a similar way, the interpretation model deals with the dialectic between tradition and experience, but we can ask the same question: what if there is no sense of the tradition? When dealing with children who have no background in the Christian tradition, is there an imperative to tell the story and offer at least a simple introduction to its meaning? Or do we view the stage of life of children at STOMP as a time to learn the tradition together, assuming that the critical reflection and wondering will come later? Is there any sense in which instruction is an appropriate activity for such children –not to box them with fixed assumptions, but to give them enough information about the Christian faith that they can make informed decisions and have a chance to wonder about it for themselves? Westerhoff is nervous of instruction:

The language of instruction can too easily lead us astray. It encouraged us to be concerned for what we want our pupils to be or become. When we think “instruction,” we focus our attention on what we want someone else to feel, or how we want someone else to behave. We establish learning objectives for others, while parents legitimately ask us when we are going to teach their child about the Bible or what Christians believe or what is right and wrong.¹¹

The last sentence explains Westerhoff’s context: he is seeking reformation of children’s place within the church. He is not acting as an advocate of those children who have never entered a church; such a thing would have been uncommon when he was developing his theory. His answer is enculturation within the faith community, where the ‘interactive experiences among people of all ages... best describe the

¹⁰ Ibid, p154.

¹¹ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children?*, p85.

means of Christian education.’¹² But, for an unchurched population, the faith community (in the form of the local church) ‘is either an utterly foreign culture, or one they have decided to reject.’¹³ The principle of enculturation assumes saturation within the faith community, its relationships and rituals. For an increasingly unchurched population, however, it is unlikely more than a handful would ever make the choice to cross the threshold and involve themselves in the faith community in such a way.

It seems that the material on Christian education examined here actually represents efforts to reform the education of Christians, rather than educate members of a secular, Western culture into the Christian faith and tradition. As such, a number of the approaches and models are found wanting when contextualised into an evangelistic setting. Larger numbers of children attending away from their parents mean that strategies and models of children’s ministry will need to be well thought through in order to attend carefully to the children’s needs.

2) What about the Family?

In making the choice to work with children from the more disadvantaged areas of the city, the children’s ministry team had to face up to the social environment of such communities. One factor of these areas is the reality of family breakdown and the complex way household relationships are organised. Over the years, it has not been uncommon to experience a wide diversity of family situations. Children live with siblings who may have different biological parents; they live in households which may suddenly change when relationship breakdown occurs. Children may have a relationship with a parent (usually the father) with whom they don’t live, thereby living between homes. Through many estates, extended families of step- and half-siblings, cousins and other relationships are common, so that children may be (theoretically) a generation above or below other children of similar ages (‘I’m Lewis, I’m seven. This is Alicia: she’s six. I’m her uncle.’) or biologically related to children of a different ethnic background.

¹² Ibid, p80.

¹³ *Mission-Shaped Church*, p39.

Official government statistics say that the incidence of divorce in the UK has increased dramatically in recent decades, from 27,224 in 1961 to 167,116 in 2004,¹⁴ one of the results of which is that more children live with a single parent (the incidence of this has tripled since 1972).¹⁵ Coupled with the rise in cohabitation and the increase in children being born to unmarried couples (or even those no longer in any kind of relationship), we see a much greater diversity of family experience and household organisation. It seemed that the lives and households of most children we met in such circumstances were organised around the mother, who owned or occupied the home, with male figures (fathers, partners or boyfriends) being more peripheral and temporary. This was not always the case (just as there are many examples of nuclear family unit – biological parents and children living together – in such areas) but certainly seemed a common experience.

The changing nature of the family and household unit is a topic of much discussion, both in popular and more reflective circles. Some commentators argue that we are witnessing appropriate social evolution, reflecting the emancipation of women from previously repressive social expectations and a greater freedom of choice about how an individual organises his relationships. But others claim that what is occurring is a regression, a failure of society to live up to the values of the past. Our new ways of living together should be seen as movement downwards and backwards, not upwards and onwards.¹⁶

Can we perceive what the consequences of living in such circumstances might be for the children the children's team encountered? Fowler suggests that the family has a role to play in meeting the 'ontic' needs - needs associated to human being and well-being – of its members. He describes these needs as:

- a) a primal experience of communion and valued place;
- b) appropriate boundaries and encouragement to develop agency and personal autonomy; and

¹⁴ Source: Office for National Statistics; General Register Office for Scotland; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, published at www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=170 (21 September 2005).

¹⁵ Ibid, published at www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1044 (21 September 2005).

¹⁶ For examples of both sides of the debate, see Miriam E. David (Ed.), *The Fragmenting Family: Does It Matter?* (Choice in Welfare No. 44, London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1998).

- c) assurance of meaning and participation in rituals of shared meaning. Bodily sustenance, shelter and sexual identification.¹⁷

Fowler is careful not to narrowly define the family as the nuclear family unit, and so must we be. But in unstable or temporary family and household situations, is it too much to suggest that these 'ontic' needs might not be met, leaving children subject to anxieties and insecurities?

Another aspect of the family's purpose is in faith development, where we understand faith very broadly (as in faith development theory – see Chapter 3). Astley suggests that families help children make meaning of their lives in three ways: through the development of a sense of the individual and his or her interdependence on others; through the modelling of behaviour and through the learning of a 'faith language' that expresses the values of the family unit.¹⁸ But the learning context may not be a positive one: 'Families can fail, of course, while remaining powerful educational contexts. Failing families teach the wrong lessons, nurturing distrust, insecurity and selfishness.'¹⁹

Bonnie Miller-McLemore suggests that all this change within the family unit means that children no longer occupy the central place in the family's life. 'Its [marriage] primary focus shifted progressively [through the early twentieth-century] from the parent-child relationship to the couple. Marriage and family were expected to bring love, emotional connection and fulfilment rather than property, security and sustenance. These redefined goals did not fit all that well with one of the results of such intimacy: children.'²⁰

While it is important to be aware of such issues, it is also important not to let them colour our perception of the families we meet. Few parents, no matter how chaotic their household relationships may seem, want to do anything other than give their children the best start they can. Many, mothers especially, are already overburdened with the expectations they feel society has of them. In choosing to enter their world with the message of Christ, we have to choose to offer hope, not add to any burden or condemnation that might already be present.

¹⁷ James W. Fowler, 'Perspectives on the family from the standpoint of faith development theory' in Astley and Francis, *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, pp320-321.

¹⁸ Jeff Astley, 'The Role of the Family in the Formation and Criticism of Faith' in Stephen C. Barton, *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), pp193-198.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p200.

²⁰ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp9-10.

What might an appropriate response to such families and communities look like? Does the church have anything to offer that actually helps people like the members of the Sheffield estates and inner city areas encountered by the children's team?

An abiding community

Understanding the fluidity of many children's immediate relationships places a greater burden on churches working with such children to be constant in the face of inconstancy in relationships and circumstances, and to be places of stability and security in the midst of what can be very unstable and insecure family environments. Many churches and church families live with the same tensions and problems of divorce, separation and other difficulties as families outside the church. But churches, by how they care for children in their work with them, have the opportunity to demonstrate an attitude of openness and welcome. If a child has a difficult, uncomfortable experience of family life, where there are few constants, a loving, consistent experience of Christian community can be a powerful witness to them of the abiding presence of Christ in a changing world.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of presence in mission and discipleship. If the church is not present, there can be no meaningful interaction with those around it. 'The Christian faith is intrinsically incarnational; therefore, unless the church chooses to remain a foreign entity, it will always enter into the context in which it happens to find itself.'²¹ If the church's presence is erratic and inconstant, then so is its witness. The image of Christ we then present to the world is of a God little different to their own experience, and certainly not worthy of devotion or commitment. In an ideal world, a child's experience of a loving, supportive family will prepare them to understand and experience the loving care of a heavenly Father. But children who rarely if ever experience such consistency need other human relationships to point to the same heavenly reality. As we often say, 'You just have to be there.' Ivy Beckwith speaks of the 'soul care' that a faith community can provide through consistent, accepting relationships, even in the face of difficult family circumstances.²² Our experience has taught us that an ordinary children's worker can

²¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), pp190-191.

²² Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp120-121. It is interesting to note that families in difficult circumstances only get a post-script in this chapter, which



be the most effective example of Christ's love to children by being prepared to turn up every week, give the children a smile and find out how they are. This kind of consistent interest and care conveys a powerful message, and provides a context within which communicating God's love in Christ becomes believable, because it can be observed in the people around.

Perhaps such an abiding community has the opportunity to meet some of those 'ontic' needs outlined above. In a very different context, we once gave children from church-going families at a large Christian family conference the opportunity to talk about their experiences of divorce in safe and prayerful context. A number of children responded and later shared how the breakdown of their relationship with a parent (usually their father) had affected their sense of wellbeing and influenced their view of the character of God. While the church cannot replace the family as the primary context of identity and security, certainly in situations of change and difficulty, it can offer relationships that can complement the family and help meet some of those real needs.²³

The family as a model for the church

Driver argues that the picture of the church as the family, or household, of God, while used sparingly in the NT, 'constitutes one of the major biblical figures for understanding the nature and mission of the church... In Pauline thought, the family image occupies a primary role in his reflection on the nature and mission of the messianic community.' Significantly, this image became reality in 'the concrete familial forms which the early Christian groups took.'²⁴ So, the theory of the family or household of God was commonly expressed through churches that functioned as, or were literally, family or household units. 'The household, once the gathering place of the powerless and marginalised, eventually emerges as the institution where God's

focuses on the needs of church families. This would seem to reflect a very different experience of children's ministry.

²³ We have particularly found how having young men on our teams speaks to a very deep need in young boys to have affirmation from older males. This is an area that obviously needs to be handled carefully, with strict adherence to appropriate Child Protection policies. But with the temporary nature of many of the male relationships in such communities, the regular, consistent presence of male role models can help younger boys develop a sense of self and personal responsibility.

²⁴ John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1997), p139.

spirit is truly active and where familial relations, shared resources and communal values concretise the vision of a salvation to all the families of the earth.’²⁵

What we mean by church as family needs to be carefully considered, however. ‘The fact that we are a family of faith does not always mean we are one big happy family.’²⁶ Peter Selby raises two specific objections to the use of the language of church as family. He first argues that those who freely use the language of family in church must ‘recognise at the same time the effect... on those for whom life in families is either not a present reality or had for them been times of profound distress or even damage.’ His second point is that ‘family terminology is used for what appears the express purpose of achieving certain feelings or responses on the part of church members... words which are so evidently intended to engender a sense of belonging bear an inescapable witness to its absence.’²⁷ For example, the tendency of those in leadership to play the ‘after all, we’re a family’ card at times of particular (usually financial) need indicates an emotive use of the metaphor without a proper appreciation of the consequences, which could appear quite manipulative to the outsider.

But is there a way we can understand church as family structurally, which might help the church meet the needs of children and families around it? Extending the family metaphor into a model for describing the units of church life is common among church growth researchers. The three-tiered model of church life of cell, congregation and celebration, as found in many growing churches, can be described in familial terms as *immediate family* (nuclear family and immediate relations), *extended family* (the immediate family together with distant relations and family friends) and *tribe or clan* (all those associated with the family name). Biblical imagery, from both Old and New Testaments, is often invoked here:

The *celebration* level of community life was expressed in the major festivals and temple worship. It was definitely a special occasion or outing – if not a pilgrimage sometimes! ... However the *congregation* level of life of the community of the people of God is more typified by the ‘elders meeting in the

²⁵ Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), p217.

²⁶ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2000), p175.

²⁷ Peter Selby, ‘Is the Church a Family?’ in Stephen Barton (Ed.), *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp151-152.

gate' or the synagogue in Jesus' day and the New Testament mission period of Acts. This is altogether a more familiar group where everyone would know each other ('Isn't this Joseph's son?'). It was also an interactive gathering – that's why Jesus and Paul could read and preach/interpret – it was quite normal for anyone to freely contribute... Finally, the *cell* level of life was wonderfully expressed in the ideal of the Jewish extended family. Worship, word and prayer were natural in this context too – with the weekly Sabbath rituals including the sharing of bread and cup and of course the Passover meal.²⁸

This description seems very similar to Gwen Kennedy Neville's study of some of the cultural subgroups within Protestantism in the American South. Following her observation that 'in the face of great assimilation pressures and the recurrent waves of so-called "secularisation," it seems astounding that denominations have persisted as cultural entities', she describes the pattern of life for many of these communities:

The residence pattern for all of these [groups and subgroups], however, appears to be that of the scattered nuclear family household with only two generations present. On Sunday or other weekly church gathering days a wider network of families emerges at the congregational level, with a three-generational depth but not necessarily kin-based. At yearly kin-based gatherings, which often are connected with religious holidays and events, an even wider net appears.

Her conclusion is 'that the mainstay of transmitting ethnicity and group values within white Protestant America is in the recurrent gatherings and ceremonial events that are celebrated by a people'²⁹. Something within the pattern of gathering at the weekly congregation and yearly celebrations and scattering to the immediate, nuclear households ensures the continuity of the inherited way of life. It is church lived out as community, as family.

²⁸ Mike Breen, 'Forming Pastoral Bases in Brixton' in Bob Hopkins (Ed.), *Planting New Churches* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1991), p133.

²⁹ John H. Westerhoff III and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation to Generation*, pp53-57.

In a contemporary context, this familial model (cell, congregation, celebration) for different levels of church can indicate something of the size of each group and the purpose of its gathering, without being overly proscriptive about the nature of the relationships within the groups. Presently, many churches operate only on a celebration level, at the Sunday meeting, no matter how many people are present; so 10-20 attendees participate in exactly the same kind of service as 100+ would, even though there are so many more opportunities for different kinds of interaction and expression in a smaller setting. Other churches function with two levels of church, usually the cell and celebration level, with midweek groups variously described as home groups, house groups, cell groups, Bible study group, fellowship groups and so on. Yet, very few churches function effectively at all three levels, probably because 'our ideas of congregation have been formed by 1,500 years of church history and tradition that has distorted the original biblical communities of which "church" should be composed... perhaps our ideas of Sunday "congregational" services were more truly in the celebration category. Through history we have focussed all the proceedings on one or two "upfront" leaders and created an expectation of anonymity.'³⁰ Many today unwittingly replicate the experience of the churches in the American South by attending yearly conferences (such as Spring Harvest or New Wine), which provide the celebration experience that contrasts with their weekly congregational life. However, the temptation is to try to reproduce this yearly experience every Sunday morning, rather than appreciating the opportunities provided by experiencing church in different ways.

A three-tiered community would expect to negotiate roles and relationships in different ways at the different levels of church; for instance, the smaller the group, the more people can participate individually, whereas the larger, celebration-style meeting will always be led by fewer people. However, this vision of diversity of groups and congregations, within an overarching purpose, certainly offers the chance to fulfil 'the immediate objective [which] is to procure and maintain a "contact area" between the church and a geographically extremely mobile population that is culturally diverse and more or less ideologically uncommitted.'³¹ 'One size fits all' churches stand much less chance of engaging successfully with the population that

³⁰ Breen, 'Forming Pastoral Bases', pp132-134.

³¹ Jean Bouteiller, 'Threshold Christians: A Challenge for the Church' in William J. Reedy (Ed.), *Becoming a Catholic Christian* (New York: Sadler, 1981), p69.

Jean Bouteiller describes, or of providing sufficient opportunities for them to find meaningful interaction and spiritual experience within their doors. These are the 'threshold Christians' who may be, by childhood initiation or general inclination, sympathetic to the church, but remain uncommitted to church life.

We accept that families and communities are changing and diversifying. So it may be that internal reform of church structures along what might be described as family and community lines can help attend to this issue. Different sized groups offer distinct contact points and experiences for individuals and families seeking to find ways to express their faith, and to engender some sense of family and community that has been lost.

A new apologetic

With such change and flux within family arrangements, it is understandable that a certain amount of insecurity exists within families. Parents can struggle to build a happy, healthy family within a society where having children is now seen as a lifestyle choice for couple, rather than a social obligation. Without a clear vision of the imperative for family life, and how to order and manage families well, it may be difficult for families, or single parents, to do so successfully. Our television screens currently abound with programmes aimed at helping families raise their children well (*Supernanny*, *Nanny 911*, *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, to name but three).

This is not the place to discuss the theology of marriage and family. But suffice to say that, because there are such theologies within the Christian tradition, it may be that the church does have something to offer for families and households where parents and children are struggling to live well. Both for families struggling today, and for children growing up tomorrow, good reasons are going to be necessary for choosing lifelong marriage relationships and building families around them. Any appeals to historical precedent or the arbitrary will of God may not succeed. The church has two significant contributions to make. Firstly, a vision of faithful marriage and child-rearing that reflects the covenant character of God and His parental qualities. Secondly, the example of Christian households and families who try to reflect this vision in the way they organise themselves.

As one Christian leader who grew up in a situation of much family difficulty recorded, 'We did not see much functional family life on the estates so [a local church member's] home and family were an inspiration to us. We lived in grinding poverty

quite often – shared beds, outside toilets, graffiti-covered walls. In the midst of that, I was being helped to see a better model of marriage and family and stability and faithfulness. It influenced me much more than I realised at the time.’³² A vision of family life incarnated in homes of faith has much to commend it: ‘Christian families have a unique opportunity of witnessing to the world at this present time by just being different.’³³

Conclusion

Many of the team members involved with the more deprived areas of Sheffield were from vastly different backgrounds than the families they were encountering. Any tendencies to make judgments about the people they met based on social factors such as divorce, lone parenting, and so on, had to be suspended in the face of the obviously difficult and painful family situations they found. Instead, a much more practical response to the real needs of the children and their families was needed, one that demonstrated compassion and the faith that Christ, through His people, could meet children and families where they were, regardless of how difficult or messy that was. While constantly meeting ‘interesting’ family situations, the first priority had to be to embrace the family, and begin to demonstrate that consistency and security within relationships was possible. In one case, the weekly home visitations from team members were described as the high point of that family’s week. Involving families within the church ‘family’ and beginning to offer them some vision of what families can be will certainly have a place in ministering hope to needy communities. But, it will flow from the depth and significance such families have with Christians who love and accept them in the midst of their world.

3) Dealing with Discipline

As we have seen, one of the challenges of working with today’s children is learning how to manage the behaviour of children from various backgrounds in our groups. Discipline, as understood here, has both positive and negative implications. Firstly, how to take positive steps to ensure there is as little disruption as possible in

³² Interview with Paul Scanlon from ‘The Common Sense Church’ by Dave Roberts, *Christianity & Renewal*, Oct 2003, p22.

³³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit (In Marriage, Home and Work)* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), p240. Quoted in Michael Botting and John Tigwell, *Reaching the Families* (London: Falcon/CPAS, 1976), p96.

the meetings where numbers of children are gathered away from their parents, and church volunteers and staff members are responsible for the well-being of those children. Secondly, how to deal with the problems that will arise when one child or more decides to act in such a way as to undermine those responsibilities and adversely affect the group's well-being. What we believe about discipline may reveal what we believe about children, because how we believe children are will determine how we decide to deal with them, especially when they are badly behaved.

Theology informs discipline

The church has a somewhat chequered history with regard to the discipline of children. Scriptural passages such as Proverbs 13.24, 22.15 and 23.13-14 have been used at times to justify physical beatings at home and in other settings, such as school and work: '[belief in] the intrinsic corruption of human nature led to the view that children needed regular discipline in order to "beat the sin out of them"' But an overreaction to this style of discipline may be equally unhelpful. The belief does exist that unrestrained freedom of self-expression is what children require, therefore no disciplinary framework. But, 'what [parents and other responsible adults] are really doing is refusing to take responsibility for [the children in their care] and abandoning them to a life with no structures, limits, or values.'³⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore identifies a theological prerogative for discipline as a positive response to God's gift of children. Citing John Calvin's remarks on Psalm 127, she concludes, 'Seeing children as God's special favour should temper parental abuse of authority. The demand for obedience, in fact, should be closely coupled with convictions about care of children as gift. Disciplinary problems arise when this is not the case and when obedience is coupled instead with beliefs about a child's depraved nature.'³⁵

Jay Bakker, son of the infamous televangelist Jim Bakker of the PTL (Praise the Lord) network, describes the approach taken by the church in which his father was raised:

'My dad grew up in a church that had a big eye painted on a wall near the youth room. A huge, staring eye. God's eye. Always watching. Always

³⁴ John Drane and Olive M. Fleming Drane, *Family Fortunes* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), p45.

³⁵ *Let the Children Come*, p104.

judging. Underneath the picture, words were painted: *Be careful little feet what you do*. It was enough to scare the hell out of a kid – literally.³⁶

This story reflects a church with particular views about the character of God – righteous Judge – and the character of children – fallen creatures – that lead them to conclude that a certain approach to discipline is necessary, in this case coercing children to suppress the more inappropriate or badly behaved aspects of their nature. The consequences can be profound. As Jay Bakker describes of his own upbringing, ‘To me, God was keeping a giant in-the-sky scorecard, so I’d better live up to his standards or get hit on the head with his big ol’bat. I’d better do everything just right, or I was dead meat.’³⁷ Later events in his life caused him to reflect critically on the views of God, and of himself, that he had inherited through his upbringing, and amend them considerably.

This kind of approach reflects an almost pre-modern attitude of the intrinsic sinfulness of children and the absolute authority, even to the point of abuse, of the adults around them. The prerogative is placed on those adults to use whatever means necessary, even invoking fear, guilt or shame, to suppress the children’s natural instincts, which would surely lead them into further sin. But, sometimes, similar attitudes co-existed with a deep respect for children’s capacity for faith, which could sometimes surpass adult belief. Miler-McClemore gives the example of Jonathan Edwards, the well-known New England revivalist, who seemed to consider children this way, and as a result, ‘he pummelled them with fearful, anxiety-provoking accusations about their damnation. Yet he also had extraordinary respect for their moral and spiritual lives. For a time, in contrast to others of his era, he admitted converted children to full communion.’³⁸

Society informs discipline

These kinds of extreme attitudes exist in sharp contrast to the contemporary language of children’s rights, which seeks to find the places where children’s rights of self-determination are the same as those of the adults around them, and where, for various reasons, those rights might need to be limited for those same children’s good.

³⁶ Jay Bakker, ‘Shocking, Unexpected Grace’ in Mike Yaconelli (Ed.), *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: EmergentYS, 2003), p182.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Let the Children Come*, p74.

The two principles of Autonomy and Paternalism are at work in this discussion. The Autonomy Principle seeks to allow rational individuals to be self-determining; the Paternalism Principle asks where it might be appropriate to limit that autonomy in the individual's interest.³⁹ Very often, debates over discipline, whether in the home or outside, centre around the tensions between these two principles.

Similar discussions over the discipline of children exist in society as in church, though very different rationales are used to justify the positions held. The most common rationale asks what is best for the child itself. This can be used to support practices of discipline even up to the reintroduction of national service as a means towards helping society fashion young people into responsible citizens. Finding a balance is not easy, but a middle road seems to be the way most commonly offered: 'Research evidence suggests that firm but caring upbringing is most likely to foster social competence and concern for others, whereas both excessive indulgence and authoritarian modes of parenting are often associated with children who have social problems.'⁴⁰ Yet, it is all too easy for society to veer towards a perception of children that skews attitudes towards discipline. Children seen as little angels are over-indulged, and under-disciplined; children seen as little devils are over-disciplined and harshly dealt with, so that freedoms of expression and self-determination are suppressed, often resulting in later behavioural or social difficulties. Maintaining a balanced view of children's nature that leads to firm but fair discipline, as any parent knows, is not easy.

Belief informs practice

In most ways, churches have a much easier job than either parents or schools, because the amount of time children are in their care is much shorter. A few hours a week does not compare to the time children spend at home or at school, and means there are fewer opportunities for problems. Yet many churches struggle with discipline problems in their children's groups. In my experience of training other church-based children's workers, issues of discipline are one of the most common problems within church-based children's work. Fears about what might happen if children don't feel well-treated combine with uncertainties about what church should

³⁹ Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp69-70.

⁴⁰ Malcolm Hill and Kay Tisdall, *Children and Society* (London: Longman, 1997), p43.

be like for children to create a grey area that many volunteers and professionals find difficult to deal with. There is often an expectation that churches should be able to sustain a high quality programme with few resources. But this is coupled with a fear that if the children don't feel well-treated they will vote with their feet at the first opportunity.

So what is discipline? Is it sin-management, or something else? Miller-McClemore notes that it was child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, rather than any theologian, who placed discipline within a wider context, and did so with reference to the gospels: 'The word *discipline* itself is integrally connected to Jesus' relationship with his disciples.'⁴¹ Discipline is part of discipleship, not just attempts to rein in a child's wayward nature.

It might be suggested, then, that the grey area churches often feel they occupy stems from a tendency to default to models of children's ministry that involve education or entertainment, rather than beginning the process of lifelong Christian discipleship. Every Christian has to deal with his or her tendencies towards doing what is unhelpful or unhealthy for their growth and maturity, children are no different. So, just as motivating this growth through fear of punishment would be unacceptable for adults, it is for children, too. A children's worker from Norway was quoted to me as saying, 'We don't do children's work – we make disciples.' Taking positive steps to create an environment in which children can learn and grow, and where distractions are minimised, is absolutely consistent with this perspective of children's ministry, as is creating a positive, exciting attitude towards this learning and growth. Dealing appropriately with those who might otherwise distract or divert this process of discipleship also makes good sense: each incident of discipline becomes an opportunity for growth, where boundaries are reinforced while appreciation and acceptance are demonstrated, there is the chance for repentance and confession, forgiveness and absolution, and no one need be written off, even if strict sanctions need to be invoked to help develop further opportunities for discipleship, growth and maturity.

How might good participation and discipline be nurtured? Developing a good structure for the time together will be important. Children, like most people, are creatures of habit, and will respond to stability and routine more than an atmosphere

⁴¹ *Let the Children Come*, p77.

of constant change. Developing working structures for children's discipleship, which contain the necessary elements of play, education, sharing, activity and so on in meaningful relationship with each other and with the children, is an ongoing challenge and priority for anyone involved in children's work. Structure does not imply rigidity, however, but flexibility within its bounds.

But within an effective structure, there must be an engaging programme. Adults may be able to suspend their boredom for a time, but children rarely can, and a poorly prepared or presented gathering can often be the single most important cause behind discipline problems. 'Bad behaviour can be a helpful sign that something is not quite right [with the programme]... We should first look to our programme to see if it is not stimulating the children enough and thereby causing boredom to turn into disruption.'⁴² Misplaced expectations over children's attention spans, or ability to settle for a quiet activity or Bible lesson after a boisterous game, can often mar otherwise well-planned sessions. One children's club I was involved in found it difficult to engage the largely unchurched children in any kind of Bible teaching because they had spent the previous 30-45 minutes running around the hall playing games, and found it hard to settle down and pay attention.

Finally, clear boundaries are necessary to help cultivate good habits of involvement. 'It is important to establish some club ground rules from the very first meeting, and for the children at all times to be aware of the standards of behaviour required and the things that will not be tolerated.'⁴³ This is important because most adults are able to construct their own boundaries for appropriate behaviour, but many children are either not able to do so or in a process of actively and consistently testing the boundaries placed around them. Very often, groups do not put boundaries into place until after discipline has broken down in an effort to regain control of the gathering, but boundaries are much easier to enforce than create.⁴⁴ Boundaries should be taught and rehearsed regularly. At many groups we do them every week. This reflects the changing nature of the group's membership and the tendency of some children to test boundaries that are not reinforced. But boundaries should be part of

⁴² Gill Dallow, *Touching the Future: A handbook for church-based children's leaders* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2002), p203.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p202.

⁴⁴ The Kidz Klub model, with its Rules and Silent Seat protocol, is a good example of clear boundaries laid out and reinforced.

the positive culture of a group, making it a safe, happy place that is conducive to meaningful learning and growth.

However, even the best structure, most exciting programme and most clearly defined boundaries may not account for the behaviour of some individuals. Children often lack the ability or will to censor their own behaviour as adults can, so some may misbehave even when clearly told not to. Peer pressure can play a contributing factor, where individuals misbehave in order to earn repute among other children. Then there are also the numerous special cases, children who for various reasons are unable to regulate their own actions, either through behaviour dysfunctions, emotional or mental health problems or other social or clinical issues. Sometimes, just one or two individuals can adversely affect the whole group's wellbeing. Being able to effectively reinforce the boundaries that have been set for the gathering means being able to deal with the negative behaviour that sometimes arises, while still maintaining the desire for all the group members, including miscreants, to have the best opportunity possible to grow in their discipleship and nurture. This will require a carefully planned system of discipline.

But such incidents can be dealt with in an attitude of compassion and invitation. Very often, those children who seem most difficult can be those who grow the most once they have accepted the boundaries within which they should operate. We have found that the difficult process of enforcing boundaries to ensure good discipline can actually build trust between children and leaders. Once the boundaries are consistently reinforced the children begin to feel safe and can enter a deeper level of trust because they know that the leaders will be consistent in their treatment of them. One little boy at an early Stomp club, who regularly demonstrated severe behavioural problems at home and school, found it almost impossible to behave when he began to attend. A very difficult period ensued when hardly a week went by without his behaviour being addressed in some way and he regularly had to be taken home on the bus. But, through this time, he began to develop a deep relationship with the club and especially with the leaders who dealt with him directly. His behaviour began to change and he began to take a much greater part in the proceedings, as well as beginning to take the club's Bible teaching into his own life.

Discipline can be a redemptive process, not just a punitive one, when conducted within a context of acceptance and love. Within the groups that we run, we have encountered numerous children with behavioural problems, and many others

who are simply naughty. Working with such children necessitates an effective discipline management process. It also shows love to them. Bad behaviour unchecked can quickly become self-destructive and children can grow up into adolescents with little sense of appropriate boundaries. Our groups can never take the place of the family or school for providing a model of good discipline. But it is important to us to invite children into an environment where they feel safe and to provide practical support for even those who struggle to manage their own behaviour.

4) Where is the Church?

Success brings its own challenges. After a few years, the relative success of STOMP's ministry among children from outside the church family raised a new set of questions. Larger numbers of children were coming to the clubs and groups, with many making responses to the teaching they heard and beginning to demonstrate real changes in their lives and families. However, only a very small percentage of STOMP children were making the jump into church 'proper' – that is, the Sunday services. Practical difficulties contributed to this gap: transport was provided on Thursday nights, but not on Sundays; Sunday services were not unchurched child-friendly; Sunday service attendance usually needed some kind of family involvement, which was rarely forthcoming; many children were still in bed or staying with separated parents or other relatives. While it was important to have as many children attend the club as possible, the unspoken hope was that these children and their families would eventually become active members of the church community. So, the possibility to become frustrated and feel a sense of failure was very real.

Beneath these practical difficulties, however, was a deeper questioning about what joining the church really means, and whether the perceived aim to integrate STOMP children into the traditional practices of the local church body reveals an inadequate understanding of what and where the church really is. These questions were important ones to address, because the answers would help define what STOMP's outcome should be and therefore give a measurable indication of what success in achieving them would be. There was an instinctive reluctance to adopt an approach to ministry that focussed purely on individual responses to the teaching given in the clubs and groups without a wider appreciation that such a response should lead to a greater membership of the body of the church. Hands raised or prayers prayed at an altar call or other moment of response certainly have a place

within such an approach to teaching children, but they represent the beginning of a journey, not the end. A journey with Christ should not be undertaken alone but within the context of a Christian community. But how could that work when STOMP children and their families showed no inclination to move from the club into the church proper and when the existing patterns of worship and gathering seemed to have little relevance for them?

St Thomas' is an informal, Charismatic, Anglican-Baptist church, with little in the way of ritual. But even this open style of worship was alien to our STOMP children. Few had any previous church experience or were used to any kind of similar public gatherings. The most recognisable context for them would have been their school assemblies, but even these were very different from a Sunday morning service. A school assembly is much shorter, aimed at the children themselves and generally has much clearer behavioural boundaries, with teachers present to reinforce them. A Sunday service is longer, aimed at both children and adults and happens in a large building with plenty of space to run around and people standing up and sitting down as they wish during the worship. The children's groups at services used a similarly informal style, with few disciplinary boundaries being necessary. So, introduce more than a handful of STOMP children into this environment and most would struggle to participate in the service or receive anything meaningful from their experience, as well as finding it hard to behave well and consequently becoming a nuisance to other church members. Even with the best intentions, the situation was not helpful to anyone involved.

Yet, meaningful involvement in a faith community remained an aim for those children making responses to the teaching at STOMP. But how could that be realised? Could the club itself act as that faith community? Could STOMP be viewed as a church for unchurched children, a limited version of the church, which connected specifically with the faith and discipleship of inner city children in Sheffield, without burdening them with participation in the alien, inherited church culture? Or would a radical overhaul of the current church structures be necessary to include a group of people whose background and expectations would be very different from the current membership?

Imagining the faith community

In some ways, STOMP fits within the growing trend within the UK church towards providing expressions of faith community specifically tailored to the needs of particular people groups. Gone are the days when a single congregation could be expected to provide for the spiritual needs of its whole community; crossing the cultural divides between age, background and ethnicity has become increasingly complex. Perhaps the most comparable example of group-specific faith communities is the increasing number of youth churches and youth congregations. Graham Cray sums up the attitude of these groups: 'Youth ministry is understood to be incarnational. It involves entering young people's world(s) in order to plant the gospel and the church there. It does not necessarily intend to draw young people back into a church culture which is alien to them if that culture is dying.'⁴⁵ The presence of such homogenous groups creates a tension between an ecclesiology that draws together 'in Christ' regardless of social factors, and a missiology that seeks to find the most practical and effective ways to reach out to unchurched populations who, now, make up the overwhelming majority of the general population. This 'pragmatic missiology' recognises the presence of young people in their own congregations and the struggle for those young people to cross the cultural gap into 'adult church', leading to the result that for many young people 'the youth congregation may well be [their] only church.'⁴⁶ A strikingly similar situation to the children from STOMP.

But do such initiatives reflect genuine ecclesiological conviction, or are they a response to an increasingly fragmentary culture, where different generations and backgrounds find it impossible to live together? As we saw earlier, the faith community approach developed by John Westerhoff, among others, saw the faith community as the antidote to the increasing individualism and tribalism of the age. Westerhoff's vision of the faith community deliberately draws generations and different social backgrounds together in mutual learning and participation – the antithesis to the idea of the youth congregation. The presence of different groups within the congregation, Westerhoff believed, would confront the 'hidden curriculum' of values and attitudes, which any group left to its own devices constructs, and engender a more holistic, Christ-like attitude towards life together. Some youth

⁴⁵ Graham Cray, *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Culture* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p10.

workers would agree: 'Different age groups stimulate changes and challenge mind-sets, while providing a depth to life.'⁴⁷

Charles Foster offers three key characteristics of the faith community as it tries to raise the next generation in its beliefs and practices. Firstly, they will make known to their children and youth how they understand the 'past, organising event' (the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ) and what it means for the faith community and its future. Secondly, they will try to transmit the lifestyle that marks them out as members of that faith community and, finally, they will try to find ways to recreate the significance of the organising event for the 'ever-new' context in which they find themselves.⁴⁸

There are significant difficulties with this approach, however. As we have discussed above, the faith community approach works best with children and young people who have a stake in the community through meaningful (probably familial) relationships. Small numbers of family friends or other contacts may be drawn into the faith community's life, but it is questionable whether larger numbers ever would. Secondly, any understanding of the 'organising event' of the faith community will have cultural prejudices of its own, and the temptation to imbue these emphases with the same significance as the event itself is often too strong for such faith communities to resist. When the surrounding culture develops and changes, which usually occurs first among the young, this inherited church subculture seems increasingly irrelevant and out of step to those young people. These generational gaps are exacerbated in the UK by the decline in church attendance and the emergence of a popular, post-Christendom culture in which young people are less and less likely to grow up with any understanding of the Christian faith or the heritage and traditions of the church. This doesn't make the transmission of the organising event envisioned by Foster impossible, but it does mean that greater skills are necessary to speak from one generation to the next, and from churched to unchurched. Therefore the context of such transmission moves from the general gathering to a specific one (youth meeting, congregation or church), professional communicators are needed (youth workers) and

⁴⁷ Russ Oliver, 'Youth Congregations or Youth Churches?' in Leslie J. Francis, William K. Kay, Alan Kerbey and Olaf Fogwill (Eds.), *Fast-moving Currents in Youth Culture* (Oxford: Lynx Communications, 1995), p228.

⁴⁸ Charles R. Foster, 'The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education' in Seymour and Miller, *Contemporary Approaches*, pp59-60.

much of the trappings of earlier understandings of the tradition may be immediately removed.

Graham Cray argues that it is too much to expect existing congregations to so profoundly change to accommodate the needs of unchurched youth, and the same might be said of unchurched inner city children and families. Because the existing congregation's members have not been nurtured within the emerging culture, it would be as inappropriate for them to try to express their faith in the language and trappings of youth culture as for young people to take on the faith-expression of the older, churching culture.⁴⁹ There will always be leaders and 'missionaries' to new or emerging cultures, but few whole faith communities will be able to make such a transition.

Where is church?

How, then, can we move forward? The discussion above has clarified some of the issues, and leaves a number of options for the future of such a specific group as STOMP.

1) Radical reform of the existing congregation

If STOMP children don't share in the life of the gathering faith community, then should the faith community change to reflect more meaningfully the children's culture? If STOMP works for such children, should church become more like STOMP so that these equally valued members of the faith community can express their faith fully and be drawn into its traditions and values? Does the gap between club and church indicate a need for the church to reform itself because it is failing one part of its body? Not every thinker on youth congregations agrees with Graham Cray's assessment: 'As churches, we need to face up to the challenge [of changing youth culture], providing a positive alternative to individual church groups for different social classes and ages.'⁵⁰ Westerhoff's vision of the faith community was specifically a place where diversity could exist in harmony through every member being involved regardless of background or education. Does, then, the 'hidden curriculum' of our life together extend to things that we consider good and helpful, but which may be inadvertent barriers to others experiencing the Gospel through the church? Should the

⁴⁹ Cray, *Youth Congregations*, p25.

⁵⁰ Oliver, 'Youth Congregations?', p229.

existing congregation, as the stronger partner, sacrifice to make the more vulnerable group, in this case inner city children and families, welcome in a shared context that makes sense to both parties?

A good example might be church music (a common battleground within congregations). At STOMP, a certain type of song was used (loud, fast, action songs), which was thoroughly enjoyed by the children. Such songs are fun, involve all the children and usually teach something about following Christ (though some are quite silly, and have debatable theological or educational merit.) Such songs go down well on Sunday mornings at church, when used sparingly, but most church members would struggle if they became the staple diet of the church's music. So, who wins? The children love their songs; singing four or five in a row with lots of jumping and dancing is an important ingredient in their 'worship time'. They are relevant to the children and important to them; the children usually have favourites which they sing with great gusto. Few unchurched children would be able to understand, let alone enjoy, the contemporary worship songs or classic hymns used on Sunday mornings. But asking the congregation to give them up would be asking them to give up the way they express their worship and songs they enjoy.

The difficulty with this approach is that the existing congregation would have to sacrifice things of genuine worth to them to draw in the newer group. Forcing through such change is often difficult and may be, in the long-term, untenable.

2) Releasing a new congregation

Could STOMP be considered a congregation of St Thomas', the wider church? In the same way we have considered youth congregations, could this to be taken to be a 'children's congregation?' It bears some of the hallmarks of the church: appropriate oversight and accountability, worship and teaching, a gathered community, the clear presentation of the Gospel and an identifiable mission. But it lacks other hallmarks, most notably a sacramental life. When we talk of 'pragmatic missiology', this seems an obvious example: if such children won't come to church, let's take the elements of church to them, but re-imagined in such a way that it will make the faith story sensible and exciting. It could only ever be a limited version of the church: 'can there be any basis for a one-generational church? Ultimately there cannot... *But to plant the*

*church in an emerging cultural era has to begin with the young.*⁵¹ Perhaps, then, the limitations on such an expression of church might be acceptable at this point in re-evangelising such an unchurched population. And through its meaningful connection to the wider body of St Thomas', could it be one expression of a diversity of approach and method to planting the church in such a diverse culture? Some believe so:

Kidz Klub (the ministry STOMP is based on) does not look, feel or sound like church as we know it. But should we expect or demand that it does? After all, Jesus commanded us all to 'become like little children' (Matthew 18.3). Traditional church? Certainly not. But an authentic, biblical, relevant model of church? Absolutely.⁵²

But is this short-term thinking? Can such a group on its own fulfil the functions of a faith community that will lay foundations for the future in areas such as work, marriage and family.⁵³ What happens to members as they age? Can 'cross-over' into an adult congregation occur, or is a precedent set for non-participation in any kind of shared, faith community life?

3) Beginning with the children

The temptation with groups such as STOMP, or youth congregations, is to see them as the end of a process, rather than a beginning – in this case, the re-evangelisation of urban, inner city areas. Starting with the young, as mentioned above, is a logical step when confronted with new cultural dynamics, but should only be the first step. To continue to plant the Gospel and the church into such an un-evangelised culture would require the development of further groups and congregations as the children grow and as families develop a greater interest in and relationship with the existing groups. So, STOMP might not be an isolated faith community, or a distinctly different part of the wider faith community of St Thomas', but the beginning of an authentic faith community planted into a different part of Sheffield's urban world. Responding to the needs of urban communities, such a faith community might, in time, develop all the hallmarks of Westerhoff's vision of the faith community and

⁵¹ Cray, *Youth Congregations*, pp14-15.

⁵² Philip Clark and Geoff Pearson, *Kidz Klubs*, p22.

⁵³ Oliver, 'Youth Congregations?', p228.

even grow into a distinct congregation with its own leadership, worship, mission and sacramental life.

But this is a long-term approach, heavy on resources and commitment. Such planting and development of a new faith community cannot be undertaken lightly, especially considering the needs of such urban communities. There are many bridges to be crossed to develop a meaningful, recognised faith community, and such a long-term process is constantly vulnerable to changes in leadership, direction and circumstance.

The way ahead

It is difficult to reconcile the ideals of the faith community with the reality of differences in background and expression. There is a real tension between an ecclesiology that tries to draw together regardless of such differences and the 'pragmatic missiology' that is content to release new expressions of faith community among distinct people groups. As we have seen, theorists and practitioners alike disagree on how to respond to such narrowly defined versions of faith community, whether it be a 'children's congregation' like STOMP or the youth congregations championed by Graham Cray.

Equally, it is difficult to argue absolutely for any one of the possibilities for moving forward mentioned above. Each has its own benefits and problems. At an emotive level, transforming the existing congregation into one that is accessible and meaningful for STOMP children and their families seems the 'right' thing to do, but the challenges are enormous. Certainly, STOMP has reformed the way St Thomas' involves children, especially at family services – we now have STOMP-type games, more STOMP songs and a brief, STOMP-style talk – but it has not transformed the church, and still few STOMP children and families attend. But there have been moves to develop a more complete approach to the STOMP communities: a youth ministry has begun for older children and local, lay-led faith communities (examples of St Thomas' 'clusters') work with the children and their families. An inner-city celebration, meeting termly on a Saturday night, has also begun to offer worship and teaching for the children and their families, as well as other groups from similar backgrounds. But such a gathering is high-maintenance, difficult to sustain, and moving from an occasional gathering to something more regular seems unlikely at present. Yet, both the local clusters and the gathered celebration have the potential to

become authentic faith community, gathering different generations and backgrounds in a genuine environment of learning and worship.

The faith community approach challenges the STOMP model to draw children into something that will grow with them and give them an experience of faith and community that will serve them for life. But the diversity of background and experience of Christianity within which STOMP operates challenges the faith community approach to accept the profound difficulties involved in bringing diverse groups together. Middle America may respond well to such values, but unchurched, multi-cultural Sheffield needs an approach that offers values and principles of life together, but is flexible in its application. There will be environments of nurture and learning that can only be for particular groups, such as inner city children. By expecting such children to participate in a middle-class church risks losing the ground gained in relationship and understanding through the club. But the club itself is not enough; it is, at best, a limited example of a faith community. For the children to grow, they need more. Providing that, then, becomes the challenge.

5) Education, Evangelism and Discipleship

In drawing towards a conclusion, it seems appropriate to try to understand evangelism and discipleship within the context of Christian education, and perhaps see how the concepts interrelate. While the term 'Christian education' is a theological one, it is not one commonly used in a local church context, where evangelism and discipleship have more popular usage. But Christian educationalists argue that Christian education, understood broadly, should incorporate acts of evangelism and discipleship:

We define Christian education here as *education into Christianity*. On this definition the phrase marks out those *educational processes through which people learn to become Christian and to be more Christian...* On this broad account, Christian education can include both Christian *evangelism* and *Christian nurture or formation*.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Astley, 'Aims and Approaches in Christian Education' in Astley (Ed.), *Learning in the Way*, p2. Emphasis the author's.

While we have already explored the nature of Christian education (in Chapter 3), it is worth reminding ourselves what the end results of the Christian educational processes might be. Jeff Astley suggests eight learning outcomes:

- 1) *Christian beliefs-that, understanding and knowledge* (fundamental beliefs about the existence and nature of God, the person and character of Christ and theological beliefs about the church, human nature and the world);
- 2) *Christian beliefs-in* (faith and trust in the elements of the Christian faith – for example, God, Jesus, salvation or the sacraments);
- 3) *Christian attitudes and values* (being concerned for others, trusting God, and so on);
- 4) *Christian emotions and feelings* (awe, joy, peace, remorse);
- 5) *Christian experiences* (experiences of God, Christ or the Spirit);
- 6) *Christian moral actions* (examples of *active love*: forgiveness, honesty, kindness)
- 7) *Christian religious actions* (prayer, evangelism, worship); and
- 8) *Christian reflection and criticism*.⁵⁵

The final category is somewhat forced upon the rest of the list, to ensure that it does not unwittingly create a checklist of qualities for uncritical believers. Within a liberal education tradition, education only partially fulfils its mandate if it does not create learners able to critically reflect on what they have learned, so ‘some would argue that Christian education is not truly “education” if this learning outcome is neglected.’⁵⁶

If we were trying to relate these learning outcomes to concepts of evangelism and discipleship, perhaps evangelism would take as its purpose proclamation of 1) to achieve the outcome of 2), where the audience are taken to be non-believing. ‘The prevailing conception of evangelism in Western Christianity ties it intimately to the proclamation of the Christian gospel... announcing or communicating or proclaiming to those outside the Christian faith.’⁵⁷ Discipleship and nurture might be understood to include developments in 1) and 2) but also the introduction of 3)-8), which would not be expected of a person who had not yet believed.

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp6-7

⁵⁶ Jeff Astley, ‘On becoming a Christian through education’ (transcript of conference session, *Socialisation and Discipleship*, 2001), p7.

⁵⁷ Billy Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p41.

But, this 'prevailing conception' of evangelism solely as proclamation has been increasingly called into question. Billy Abraham argues that evangelism should be redefined as 'that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the Kingdom of God for the first time.'⁵⁸ By deliberately widening the scope of the definition and by using the language of initiation and Kingdom, Abraham is trying to move the understanding of evangelism away from proclamation alone:

Evangelism is necessarily a polymorphous activity... Evangelism will involve such acts as proclamation, basic instruction, prayer, and ensuring that those who respond are brought to baptism or confirmation. It may require acts of mercy, patient conversations, stern rebuke, or the organisation of mass meetings.⁵⁹

The concern here is that evangelism should provide a wider base for discipleship to build on, not a 'reduced version of the Gospel' that does not initiate people into serious commitment.⁶⁰

Anne Richards uses different language but is also keen to widen our understanding of evangelism from proclamation alone: 'Evangelism starts in the deepest heart of a pastoral relationship. The impetus to pastoral care is the beginning of the gospel, before we have proclaimed anything at all.'⁶¹

Within the process of evangelism, Steve Croft suggests that our understanding of evangelism needs to develop from a 'linear' model, which assumes that the beliefs-about should be presented in their entirety to the listeners. Instead, a 'dynamic cycle' is envisioned. The cycle begins with listening to the individual and discerning the questions and issues being raised. These questions and issues are then related to whichever aspect of the Gospel seems appropriate and the insights gained applied back into the person's life. Over time, a gradual picture emerges of the scope of the

⁵⁸ Ibid, p95.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p104.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p108.

⁶¹ Anne Richards, 'Reflections' in Steven Croft *et al*, *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), p67.

Gospel in the person's life, though they might never hear the whole 'Gospel package' in one go.⁶²

By now, we have significantly blurred the lines between evangelism and discipleship. Billy Abraham still wants to distinguish between evangelism and discipleship, though. In his view, evangelism establishes or grounds individuals in the Kingdom, while discipleship nurtures and sustains them.⁶³ But Steve Croft describes the evangelistic process mentioned above as helping people see the 'picture of Christian faith and discipleship.'⁶⁴ Here, there is an invitation to discipleship in Christ even to those who might not yet be considered to be followers of Christ. Dallas Willard questions whether we can even make converts without making disciples.⁶⁵

So, what is discipleship? The term 'disciple' (Gk.: *mathētēs*) literally means a learner or a pupil: 'A man is called a *mathētēs* when he binds himself to someone else in order to acquire his practical and theoretical knowledge.'⁶⁶ It is apprenticeship; so, in Christian thought, discipleship means apprenticeship to Christ or simply 'being a student of Jesus.'⁶⁷ Discipleship implies more than followership (Gk.: *akoloutheō*); there is an intimacy, a 'close following' assumed in the term. '*Akoloutheō* denotes the action of a man answering the call of Jesus whose whole life is redirected in obedience. A *mathētēs* is one who has heard the call of Jesus and joins him.'⁶⁸ Following redirects the life of the person who chooses it, but discipleship assumes they join the teacher on the journey.

The end result of discipleship is to be like the discipler. This is often described as Christian maturity: 'the measure of maturity for a Christian is the character of Jesus Christ. Our goal is to be just like him in every way.'⁶⁹ Very often, the language of discipleship also assumes an intimate setting, in a similar manner to Jesus' intimate relationship with his twelve disciples. 'In his three years of intimate relationship with his disciples, Jesus has given us the model for the church.'⁷⁰

⁶² Steve Croft, 'Transforming evangelism' in Croft *et al*, *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, pp139-40.

⁶³ *The Logic of Evangelism*, p108.

⁶⁴ 'Transforming evangelism', p140.

⁶⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: rediscovering our hidden life in God* (London: Fount, 1998), p333.

⁶⁶ D. Müller, '*mathētēs*' in Colin Brown (Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1976), Vol. 1, p484.

⁶⁷ *The Divine Conspiracy* p297.

⁶⁸ C. Blendinger '*akoloutheō*' in Brown, *New International Dictionary*, p480.

⁶⁹ Steve Croft, *Making New Disciples* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p24.

⁷⁰ David Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), p36.

What might the process of discipleship be, the means by which the deeper life of followership and maturity is entered? Whatever else it is, it is undoubtedly a process of change. The life of discipleship Jesus offers involves an invitation to continual and deepening life change. Indeed, the first pronouncement of the nearness of the Kingdom of God by Jesus is accompanied by an invitation to enter the Kingdom through a process of change: 'The time has come... The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News!' (Mark 1.15, NIV). Repentance (Gk.: *metanoia*) is usually associated with dealing with sin, and therefore equated with conversion.⁷¹ But does this reduce Jesus' words to the equivalent of a modern-day altar call, where you can be 'saved' as a one-off act by repenting of your sin, at which point you become a Christian and are assured of an eternal place in heaven when you die? Jesus' words imply that true repentance – understood as *metanoia*: a change of heart and mind – followed by a demonstration of active faith ('believe') should be the response of the individual to the nearness of God's Kingdom.⁷² Repentance and faith are how the Kingdom is entered and received, but also how the Kingdom grows in the believer and how the believer more fully takes on the reality they have experienced.

The disciplined life is one that embraces the ever-deepening life changes of repentance and faith, so that the disciple can experience and make known the nearness of the Kingdom of God. But in the Gospels this process is not confined to those who have already chosen to follow. For example, in Luke 11, Jesus' harsh words to the Pharisees could be construed to be as much a call to repentance and faith as a public assault on their traditions.⁷³ Within such an exchange there is both discipleship (the action of the wiser Master speaking to wayward apprentices) and the call to the life of discipleship. The Pharisees are given the opportunity to repent of their religiosity and believe in the grace of the Kingdom. If they choose, they can then begin the process

⁷¹ See, for example, J. Goetzmann, '*metanoia*' in Brown, *New International Dictionary*, pp357-359.

⁷² "'Repent' has been not only much used, but probably also greatly misused, by being used too narrowly," Donald English, *The Message of Mark* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), pp50-51. On repentance and faith as the response to the nearness of the Kingdom see, for example, Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad, *The Passionate Church: The Art of Life-Changing Discipleship* (Eastbourne: NexGen, 2005), pp41-42 or Derek Morpew, *Breakthrough: Discovering the Kingdom* (Cape Town: Vineyard International Publishing, 1991), pp82-87.

⁷³ For those so completely invested in their religious systems, such shocking indictments may have been the only way they could see themselves as Christ saw them. So we might argue that condemnation is not the sole point of Jesus' words, but repentance too. Not many commentators agree with this, though E. J. Tinsley remarks that 'there is a remedial note in it.' (E. J. Tinsley, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p134.)

of discipleship for life, the keys to which have already been given to them in their initial encounter with Christ.⁷⁴

In understanding discipleship this way, we blur the lines further between discipleship and evangelism. Dallas Willard even suggests that presentation of the nearness of the Kingdom through the person of Christ should make 'whole-life apprenticeship' the next step in a process he calls 'discipleship evangelism.'⁷⁵ After all, we might argue that Jesus began to disciple the Twelve before they properly believed in him. In fact, whether he evangelised them at all (in the sense of evangelism as proclamation) is debatable. So we find ourselves beginning to wonder whether the processes of discipleship might be as appropriate for those not yet in the faith as for those pressing forward into Christian maturity. While Billy Abraham seeks to widen the ministry of evangelism to include factors such as worship and catechesis within an understanding of evangelism as initiation into the rule and reign of God,⁷⁶ we might widen our understanding of discipleship to include all those activities that produce repentance and faith in the lives of people, whether inside or outside the church. However limited the expression of that repentance and faith might be, it is movement along the path, even if the company of Christ on the journey is not even presently realised.

But does it help us to widen our definitions this way? Abraham acknowledges the charge that widening the understanding of evangelism might cause confusion. And Jeff Astley wonders if Abraham risks losing a *practical* definition of evangelism by widening it to include any and all activities that lead to initiating people into the Kingdom of God.⁷⁷

This last comment is a relevant one. It is all very well to be able to widen our definitions of evangelism or discipleship, but it will only be helpful if it has some

⁷⁴ It should be noted that most material on discipleship deals less with the process of discipleship than with the content or practices of discipleship. Books on discipleship, such as *Making New Disciples* or *Discipleship*, tend to answer the question 'how does discipleship happen?' by analysing the things we must do (prayer, Bible study, accountability, regular Sunday worship) or believe (the character of God, the work of salvation) to become better disciples. Here, I have tried to offer how I believe the process of being disciplined by Christ occurs. The practices of discipleship may act as catalysts for that process and should ensure that any changes remain in place. But the essential process of discipleship, I believe, is this process of repentance and faith that leads to change and growth.

⁷⁵ *The Divine Conspiracy*, p333.

⁷⁶ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, p164ff.

⁷⁷ Astley, 'On becoming', p5.

practical use. After all, Christian education is all about change, too.⁷⁸ We cannot make the claim that discipleship alone promotes change (indeed, I am not making the claim, merely suggesting that change through repentance and faith is one of the distinguishable marks of the process of discipleship).

Let me make some suggestions why I believe the language of discipleship to be more helpful than that of evangelism when trying to understand what ministry to children should look like.

Firstly, it is because, as we have seen, the experience of childhood is changing. It seems that the world has become a more complicated place for children. They have greater access to financial and technological resources and therefore greater choice in what to do with those resources. This creates challenges and opportunities for children and those who care for them. Negotiating these challenges and opportunities will rarely be a matter of absolutes. Helping our children to make sense of their world seems to me to be far more a matter of discipleship than evangelism. We can't evangelise children out of consumerism, because consumerism is not essentially sinful but morally neutral – even if the uses to which we put it are often selfish and sinful. But we can disciple children through the moral and spiritual challenges of growing up in an overwhelmingly consumerist society. Because discipleship is for the whole of life, it will touch on such issues.

Secondly, evangelism sounds like something done to someone by someone else, whereas discipleship implies a more shared existence. There is a perhaps still a nervousness about the language of evangelism that reflects a feeling that the notion of evangelism has become somewhat self-serving. We evangelise to make others believe what we believe; to prove ourselves right or them wrong; to grow our churches or groups. Evangelism certainly occurs within what we do, because we try to simply communicate what we believe the Christian faith to be about. But discipleship assumes a partnership and relationship that evangelism does not. I can do evangelism to you and never see you again, even if it is successful. But the invitation to discipleship is an invitation into a relationship. As such we commit ourselves to the children and families more profoundly and perhaps for longer because we want more than hands raised or prayers prayed, but we seek the evidence of, at least, the beginnings of disciplined lives.

⁷⁸ 'Fundamentally, *learning* is a more or less permanent change in a person brought about by experience.' Astley, 'Aims and Approaches', p3.

Finally, discipleship implies the language of invitation more than that of condemnation. Within evangelism, non-believers are often told that they are sinners in need of forgiveness. The reality of the sinner's separation from God is one of the defining concepts of the traditional understanding of evangelism. But Jesus called people to follow him in the light of the Kingdom's nearness, not their separation. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of confronting sin issues, but we can ask ourselves a simple question: what would we rather tell children? That God is near them and reaching out to them, or that he is far away and they are separated from him because of the bad things they have done? Children know about doing bad things, and some will need to say sorry for what they have done, but I would rather deal with sin in the light of God's nearness and the call to closer followership than in any language that leads to condemnation. In our experience, we have found a much greater openness to the message of Christ among children from unchurched communities than among the adults. The appropriate thing would seem to be to affirm this openness by inviting a closer followership rather than tell children too often how far away (we believe) they really are from God.

But the discipleship of children does not mean forcing them into adult expressions of faith. It is still the beginning of a process that takes many years (as it does for adults too) and its beginnings may be very simple.

Models of discipleship

Of the models and approaches we have examined, the Kidz Klub model seems to have the most obstacles to leading children into discipleship. There is an intimate quality to discipleship that surely cannot be present when hundreds of children are packed into a room for a high-energy, hour-long programme. The home visitations can compensate for this but, very often, those visiting will have dozens of children and families to visit, so the time necessary to build relationships of trust and discuss such issues will not be present. Kidz Klub is, at its heart, an evangelistic programme. Its material covers a wide range of issues but at its core are the four truths: God loves me; I have sinned; Jesus died for me; I need to decide to live for God. It would be hard to find a more compact version of the Gospel, and it certainly conforms to what a traditional approach to proclamation evangelism would wish to communicate. Nor does Kidz Klub engage in any kind of dialogue over the issues it teaches; the numbers of children envisaged in the model make it impossible. But Jesus frequently asked

questions, knowing that the answers would help reveal what was in the hearts of his listeners. Such questioning often set off the repentance/faith process. But Kidz Klub is proclamation, not dialogue. These observations may not necessarily be criticisms: Kidz Klub recognises the failure of past models to engage today's unchurched children and seeks to remedy that situation. Part of its vision is to reach as many children as possible, but a deeper life of discipleship may not be possible within this model. Indeed, even gauging the life-responses of the children to the teaching can be difficult, let alone exploring whether they are being to embrace any kind of discipleship.⁷⁹ But STOMP has never reached the large numbers of even the Liverpool Kidz Klub, let alone the 20,000 or more who attend in New York. The smaller numbers have sometimes allowed the team to adapt the programme and introduce elements like small group time, which immediately offers opportunities for discipleship and deeper application than a proclamation, broadcast model can allow. Often these changes have been a response to a perceived need that while children are enjoying themselves and learning about Christianity, the opportunities to develop any depth of followership are limited within the Kidz Klub. It is questionable that such programme adaptations would be possible were numbers to rise significantly, but the youth groups that STOMP members join when they outgrow the club are small group-based.

Is there, then, a choice to be made between quantity and quality? Jesus taught the crowds, but led the Twelve through systematic life changes over three years. And in the end it was those he disciplined that extended his ministry and allowed the Kingdom to touch new areas. And this is what apprentices should do. As Christians, we have received the Holy Spirit, so we are not limited geographically to the physical presence of the master, but perhaps discipleship still requires a level of intimate relationship that is impossible in a crowd.

What kinds of people might make good 'disciplers'? (Ultimately, we are all disciples and only Jesus is the master, so we can only disciple each other in a strictly limited sense.) Rowan Williams suggests that the 'safest' people for children to be around are those who have a sense of having grown (and therefore changed) themselves but who can remember the journey and what it felt like to have not

⁷⁹ At a Kidz Klub training day, I once heard a trainer say that she was not always aware of how much the children she visited took in of the basic Christian practices they had been taught. Upon investigation, however, she was pleased and surprised to find that many of the children regularly prayed and read the Bibles they had been given.

grown.⁸⁰ The one leading or encouraging needs to have a sense of the journey, and perhaps be a few steps ahead, but also needs to be able to relate to where those following are and have some sense of the challenges and obstacles they face. Of all the models and approaches we have seen, this picture seems to approximate to the interpretation model, where the group leader acts as guide for the journey as much as dispenser of truth. Finding those who can come down to a child's level is not always easy, but perhaps given time more people can remember what it was like not to have grown and can offer their own journeys of repentance and faith to the children in our midst.

Within a local church context, I believe the use of the language of discipleship about ministry to children is both helpful and challenging. Discipleship offers a 'big picture' of how children can grow in their relationship with God even from an early age, and even if they do not start out as members of the church community. The simple process of repentance and faith, understood in its widest context, helps us to see how the incremental changes of discipleship might occur. Discipleship gives us a relational priority not a programmatical agenda, which can affect even our contact with unchurched children. Discipleship does not eschew instruction, but values application that leads to repentance and faith as much as, if not more than, merely filling children's heads with Bible doctrine and stories. Discipleship challenges us to raise our expectations of how children can take on their relationship with Christ for themselves. It challenges us to provide leadership that meets children where they are, rather than offer them what we think they need to know. It challenges us to involve them in the whole life of faith, rather than offering a child-friendly version of Christianity and church life. It challenges us to engage with the whole of the child's life and world, not merely the parts that seem religious or spiritual. Finally, it challenges us to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is near our children by inviting them into the life we share with Christ and not keeping them on the outside.

⁸⁰ *Lost Icons*, p29.

Conclusion

The past always looks better than it was.

It's only pleasant because it isn't here.

– Finley Peter Dunne

Children enjoy the present because they have neither a past nor a future.

– Jean de La Bruyère

The breadth of this study has perhaps limited its depth in certain areas. But perhaps the breadth has given a sense of the whole within children's ministry: the evolving world of the child, the past and present of the church's ministry and the overarching themes and approaches within Christian education. These have all been placed within the context of a local church seeking to confront the world of today's children and find ways to make the message of Christ accessible to them.

In drawing to a conclusion, I would like to offer some brief thoughts on what we might draw from the study.

First, I believe the changes within the experience of childhood we have examined need to be taken seriously by those seeking to communicate the Christian tradition to children. Lamenting the changes or demonising what we perceive to be the agents of change, such as television or computer games, do little good. Though we remember earlier times that we may think were better, our children have no such memories; they like and enjoy their present. Ignoring these changes does not help either. Whether we like it or not, our children are growing up in a world where consumerism and technology are hugely important themes. Constructively engaging with these issues means allowing them to 'play' at the consumer/technological lifestyle within safe limits, while beginning to talk with them and educate them into responsible, adult actions and attitudes.

Second, we need to recognise the opportunities currently available to us. The appropriate care of children is a powerfully emotive subject within many communities. Many parents feel afraid of their children falling under negative influences and being led astray. So churches have the opportunity to prove themselves to be places of welcome and safety for children and families. Offering safe places for children just to play can in itself be a witness to them and their families. The growing unfamiliarity with the church in the majority of the population means that parents may

be more willing for their children to be involved in a church group. In recent years, instant reactions of atheism or 'but isn't church boring?' would have placed barriers between many people and their local church, but, ironically, the growing secularism may make it easier to involve unchurched children and families in the church's life.

Third, we continue to need new models and approaches to Christian education, especially for the majority of children who never come near a church. Billy Abraham suggests that most Christian educators 'shy away from evangelism, trusting that the familial or social environment will supply all that is needed to get Christian nurture on the road to success.'¹ If the attention of Christian educators is mainly placed on renewing our efforts to nurture the existing church members who are children, we miss out the overwhelming majority of children who need to be educated about Christ: those outside the church. This problem can be exacerbated by the influence of educators and thinkers from the US, where church attendance is still much higher than the UK and Europe. Rearranging the educational furniture of children's ministry is a necessary task, but it may not result in new children joining the family.

But the story of St Thomas' reminds us that new initiatives take time to produce fruit. STOMP has undoubtedly been an effective model for working with Sheffield's children but the constant changes of venue and the significant changes within the wider church all played a part in limiting that effectiveness. Making children's work a priority is often a challenge, but keeping it that way is often just as difficult. Children's work prospers most within a settled environment, so changes of direction, leadership and venue will all take their toll on the ministry.

Finally, there is the challenge to live out our heritage. For a time in the UK's history, the church was not just a significant contributor in the marketplace of children's experience, but one of the defining influences. Generations of children were raised with a basic knowledge of the Christian faith, which could develop into personal faith in later life. This is not a matter of reversing the decline because we will have to accept that similar levels of childhood Christian education may not occur again. But our heritage offers us a promise that decline is not inevitable. In God's grace, if we are prepared to embrace our changing world and seek innovative ways to communicate our message, perhaps there are ways the church can speak to the children again about the message and love of Christ.

¹ *The Logic of Evangelism*, p108.

Appendix A: The Kidz Klub Model

STOMP, the midweek club run in various forms at St Thomas', was based on the Kidz Klub model of children's ministry developed in New York by Bill Wilson and Metro Ministries. It is a model of children's work developed for use among children from difficult backgrounds. There is a detailed description of the Kidz Klub model in *Kidz Klubs: The Alpha of Children's Evangelism?*¹. Below is an account of a typical evening at STOMP, which follows the Kidz Klub model quite closely.

The room is laid out with two sets of seating (either chairs or benches, not on the floor) for the boys on one side and the girls on the other. At the front is the stage from where the programme runs. Ideally the room should be decorated to reflect the club's theme for the term. Leaders sit with children and around the edges of the team.

At some of our clubs, some of the children were brought in on hired minibuses. Both Liverpool and New York make extensive use of such transportation as it is often the only way a child from a deprived background will be able to attend.

Once the children arrive they are registered (which may happen on the bus) and taken to their seats by their team leader or another helper. Before the programme starts, they will be leaders and helpers available to talk to the children and loud music playing.

The club usually starts with some kind of dramatic introduction, perhaps a voiceover and loud music. The club leader enters to cheering and applause and the club begins. The children are welcomed, then The Rules are taught. The Rules are:

- 1) Stay in your seat.
- 2) Obey your team leader.
- 3) The whistle means silence.

After rule two, the team leaders for the boys' and girls' teams are introduced. After rule three, there is always a practice when the children are encouraged to make as much noise as they can (usually cheering for their team) and the whistle is blown. Silence should greet the whistle and the club leader can say a prayer.

Next there is a time of praise, with four or five loud, action songs. The teams are encouraged in some gentle competition and may have sing-offs against each other for points. The songs are usually fast and loud and the lyrics are quite simple. Some of

¹ pp6-9.

the songs will be quite silly and sung purely for enjoyment, not because they teach anything. During the song time the week's Memory Verse (a Bible verse related to the week's teaching) may be learned.

After the praise time is the games time. We usually play three or four games, interspersed with sketches, competitions or other special items. The games are played by the girls' team and the boys' team against one another. Some games involve the whole team; others are played by individuals or small numbers of children at the front. They are then cheered on by the rest of their team. Common games include types of relay, messy games and eating games. The winners earn points for their team and a running total of weeks won by each team is kept each term. Children receive small prizes for participating in a game whether they win or lose. Children are usually chosen to play a game if they can answer a question from the previous week's lesson.

The games time may be broken up with special items. There will usually be a series of special items over a term. These have included versions of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, *Pop Idol* and a spoof horror series set in a creepy science laboratory. If there is a 'bring a friend' promotion running at the club, it will usually happen at this point too.

The games come to a climax when the winning team is announced. Then the club begins to settle down in preparation for Silent Seats and the Bible lesson. There may be a prayer slot after the games where children can ask for prayer or a quiet worship song might be sung. (In New York they take an offering at this point, but we have never done that.)

Silent Seats is the final part of the club, usually the last fifteen to twenty minutes, when there is the Bible lesson. Silent Seats is always introduced carefully as it sets the atmosphere for the teaching time. During Silent Seats the rules change. The new rules are 'no talking', 'sit in your seat with your hands in your lap' and 'if you think you know the answer to a question, then put your hand up and don't shout out'. These rules we expect the children to adhere to. The leaders settle down quietly and try to model an attentive attitude. During Silent Seats, each team has three balloons placed in front of them. Any violation of the Silent Seats rules will result in a balloon being burst. If either team loses all three of their balloons, all of the team members lose out on the treat they receive on leaving the club. The other team receive the treat instead. There are also small prizes for the best-behaved children on each team.

The Bible lesson usually begins with a Bible story, followed by application. Each term or half term follows a particular theme or Bible character. The stories are told using a variety of media including videos, slides and drama. Then a single point is drawn out of the story, with an attached Memory Verse. The teaching point will be explained and applied using a number of Object Lessons (lessons taught using objects as visual illustrations) and a Life Story. A Life Story is a fictional story or, preferably, a personal testimony told to illustrate the lesson and its application. Sometimes questions and answers will be encouraged during the Bible lesson. The teaching time ends with prayer and the opportunity to respond to the teaching if appropriate.

The club finishes straight after the teaching time and the children are led out to go home. They each receive a small treat (if their team's balloons have not all been burst), which is usually a sweet of some kind. Then they leave and begin their journey home.

Appendix B: Numbers of Children at St Thomas' from 1998 to 2003

These figures are approximate and based on personal recollection and limited records. They are meant to serve as an indication of periods of growth or decline.

1998

STOMP started at Easter. By the end of the year we had thirty to forty children regularly attending from Crookes, Crosspool and Broomhall in Sheffield. There were four visiting rounds, visiting up to forty families altogether.

Kidz Church (for 7- to 11-year-olds) had fifty children at two services.

1999

STOMP grew to fifty to sixty children from Crookes, Crosspool and Broomhall, with six visiting rounds seeing up to sixty families.

The city centre church was planted, which met at Ponds Forge with twenty children in Kidz Church. Five children began to attend from Park Hill, with their own visiting round of ten families. Kidz Church at Crookes had twenty children.

2000

STOMP at Crookes lost children from Broomhall to the new club at the Roxy. Twenty to thirty children attended from Crookes and Crosspool. There were three visiting rounds meeting up to thirty families.

STOMP was started at the Roxy. Sixty to one hundred children attended from Broomhall, Park Hill, Pitsmoor and Shiregreen. Other parish churches also brought children from Netherthorpe and Norfolk Park. Eight visiting rounds were seeing over one hundred families.

Kidz Church at the Roxy grew to nearly thirty children. Kidz Church at Crookes remained constant at twenty.

2001

STOMP at Crookes continued to gather twenty to thirty children from Crookes and Crosspool. It closed in summer 2001.

STOMP at the Roxy had thirty to seventy children. The parish churches in Netherthorpe and Norfolk Park started their own clubs. Children from Pitsmoor and

Shiregreen stopped attending in preparation for the start of their own club. There were four visiting rounds, seeing up to sixty families.

STOMP at Shiregreen started in October 2001, with thirty to forty children. There were three visiting rounds seeing up to forty-five families.

Kidz Church and DynaMites (for 5- to 7-year-olds) at Crookes had thirty children in the groups. Kidz Church and DynaMites at the Roxy had up to seventy children in the groups.

2002

The city centre church left the Roxy to plant clusters in January 2001. Clusters took responsibility for their own children's work, but central children's cell groups were started. There were five groups, with forty children in them altogether.

STOMP at Shiregreen continued to gather thirty to forty children. The three visiting rounds saw up to fifty families.

STOMP started in Park Hill with ten to twenty children. There was one visiting round, seeing just ten families. It closed in summer 2002.

Kidz Church and DynaMites at Crookes gathered thirty to forty children.

2003

The city centre church moved into Philadelphia in spring 2003. The central children's cell groups carried on until the summer then closed, though many children were still meeting in clusters. Kidz Church and DynaMites were started fortnightly at Philadelphia in summer 2003 with twenty to fifty children attending.

STOMP at Shiregreen gathered fifty to sixty children with four visiting rounds seeing up to seventy families.

STOMP at Philadelphia had a three-week trial in the summer term of 2003 and started in October the same year. Ten to thirty children attended from church families, Firth Park and Grenoside. One visiting round in Firth Park saw five families.

Kidz Church and Dynamites at Crookes continued to gather thirty to forty children.

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