

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF FAMILIES IN CHURCH POST-COVID?

Perspectives of children, parents and church leaders in the UK



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WHAT IS THE PLACE OF FAMILIES IN CHURCH POST-COVID?

A research-based report, incorporating
perspectives of children, parents
and church leaders in the UK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How have families' experiences of church changed?

Both parents and church leaders reported significantly decreased engagement with the local church by families during pandemic times. Some church leaders reported an opportunity for greater focus on families, and improvement in relationships with them. There was minimal change for others, but a quarter of leaders expressed a negative impact; explaining a lack of energy and vision, smaller teams, and engagement with fewer families. Whilst three-quarters of church leaders felt that relationships amongst the church had been good support for church families, less than half of families agreed, with over a third of parents stating that the local church had not supported their faith at home. These disconnections and contrasting perspectives are explored within the report.

How has faith in the family context changed?

Christian parents and church leaders alike reported that the pandemic had generally improved family's faith lives but reduced their local church connection and engagement. Yet nearly half of church leaders did not know what impact the pandemic had had on families' faith. Whilst faith in the home was a focus during lockdowns, there are differing perceptions of how well this was supported. A quarter of church leaders acknowledged that they did not know if the families in their church felt supported with nurturing faith at home and 51% of the families said that they did not feel supported or resourced with this by their local church. Enhancement of this support is considered within the report.

Looking ahead

There was much agreement about how best to nurture a child's faith, with a clear consensus that church and families should work in partnership on this. However, despite both parties desiring partnership, this was often not reported in reality. A fifth of church leaders wanted to listen to and dialogue with families to change the church culture regarding the role of parents in their child's faith nurture. However, half of the leaders identified a need for parents to change how they engaged with faith, often conveying deficiencies in the personal faith of parents or their commitment to nurturing their child's faith. Many church leader's responses indicated a view that the church knows better than parents. On one hand, church leaders perceived a need for more resources, social gatherings, and intergenerational activities, with a clear caveat of needing more volunteers. However, these views contrasted significantly with those of Christian parents who wanted more personal, targeted and relational support from their local church for faith at home. This indicates a need for church leaders to listen and learn from families, and use these insights to mould the ethos of their church to enhance support and partnership with parents in discipling their children.

INTRODUCTION

This research project was launched as a joint venture to investigate how churches were connecting with Christian families in the post-lockdown era. This report draws upon the findings from an online survey (February 2022) completed by 175 church leaders and 209 parents of children aged 0-16, and in-depth interviews (between April and June 2022) with 36 children (aged 7 to 11 years old) and 18 Christian parents. The participants represented twelve different denominations from various locations across the UK.

There was a mixed reaction to how family ministry has changed. For some church leaders, there had been a positive change in improved relationships with families and an opportunity for a greater focus on families. There was a minimal change for others, but a quarter of leaders felt there had been a negative impact. There was a lack of energy and vision, a smaller team, and engagement with fewer families in many cases.

When asked about their family's engagement with the local church, 44% reported that it had remained the same, with 40% saying that it had reduced, and 16% stating that their engagement had increased. Considering that the willingness of these families to respond to the survey indicates that they are likely to be more engaged than average, it is concerning to see that a significant proportion of the participants have decreased church engagement over pandemic times.

Nevertheless, only 3% said that their attendance had been less than once per month during the past year (online or in person), despite many feeling that they were less engaged with church even though still attending regularly. The responses from church leaders confirmed this situation, with 48% expressing that church families now engage less with their local church than they did pre-pandemic. Twenty-six per cent felt that it had remained similar and 24% indicated that it had increased. When asked whether they felt the pandemic had improved how families engaged with the local church, 40% disagreed and 30% agreed, whilst 30% stated that they did not know. These statistics all show reduced engagement of a significant portion of families with church. This report will examine this more fully.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Common Ground

Children's responses to questions about the effect of Covid on faith understandably focused on the practical changes; such as: '[Covid] doesn't make me think differently about God I just learned new parts about God on zoom'. Children had varied experiences of engaging with church at home during the pandemic. Some children's responses were:

'With the Church on zoom, I was worried at first, then liked it, now it's normal.'

'I didn't like Zoom but had to do it. I prefer face to face.'

'I prefer face to face 'cos there is a better sense of family.'

The children in the focus group interviews generally had a positive view of church. A common response when asked how they would improve church was to suggest it should stay the same: 'it's perfectly fine as it is.' However, discussions with the children about developing faith revealed mixed views on their perceived importance of church, such as:

'If you go to church and [you] find out He's real.

Read the Bible and you'll see God's real.'

'They [Their parents] don't need to have a meeting about God every

Wednesday they can just talk about God.'

'Doesn't matter if [other children] don't go to church 'cos my school is a Christian school so they get to learn what I learn.'

Church leaders and parents held strong views on the vital contribution of the local church and family in developing a child's faith. There was consensus that the best way of nurturing faith was the local church working in partnership with families.

Three main ways to nurture a child's faith were highlighted in the survey responses:

- The importance of discussing faith with children was mentioned by 96% of parents and 92% of church leaders.
- Instilling Christian beliefs in children was seen as essential by 91% of parents and 88% of church leaders.
- Taking children to church was seen by 86% of parents and 87% of church leaders as making a vital contribution to the nurture of faith.

Key insight

Church and parents want to work in partnership to nurture a child's faith. But there is a need for both sides to fully understand the nature of that partnership.

The vital role of parents in nurturing faith was acknowledged by parents (66%) and even more strongly by church leaders (79%). However, an interesting area to explore further is the response of 20% of parents and 13% of church leaders who agreed that parents should have a hands-off approach and children should be allowed to decide for themselves about faith.

There was strong agreement from church leaders and parents that parents should not be the sole supporters of a child's faith. There was a consensus that the local church should partner with families to nurture children's faith. 94% of church leaders and 88% of parents saw the church's role as necessary to provide activities and resources to equip families for their spiritual growth.

The Contrasting Views

There were some striking differences in the views of parents and church leaders. When we investigated the extent to which the local church had supported families with faith at home, the majority of church leaders (66%) perceived that they had supported parents in this way, but a significant portion (49%) of parents stated that this had not occurred and they were not supported by their church in this regard. Alongside this, 24% of church leaders said that they did not know whether families in their church felt supported in discipling their child's faith in the family context.

The survey asked about the resourcing of families to aid their child's faith. Parents responded positively, with 77% stating that they knew where to find resources, although only 49% said that the local church had been part of this provision and 40% disagreed that the local church provides resources to support their child's faith. Church leaders' perspectives on the provision of resources was that 55% believed that parents know where to find resources and 60% stated that their church provided resources for parents to support faith in the home. This highlights a disconnection in perception as church leaders indicate that the church is doing this more successfully than parents report. Further to this, 28% of church leaders did not know whether parents in their church knew where to find resources to support their child's faith.

Key insight

24% of church leaders did not know if families in their church felt supported in faith nurturing at home

Key insight 40% of parents said that the local church does not provide resources to support their child's faith.



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There were some clashes of opinion about what was helpful to families. The churches reported that worksheets, crafts and activity suggestions provided by them for families during the pandemic had been successful. However, these were rarely mentioned by parents, with only 2% stating them as something which had been beneficial.

Several church leaders called for 'training for parents', parenting courses, discipleship for parents and coaching parents in prayer, implying a problem with Christian parenting. Indeed, 49% spoke about the parent's ethos/way of relating to family faith needing to change. However, very few parents expressed this sentiment, although many stated the need for churches to adapt and improve their welcome of families. This is a very striking difference: with church leaders perceiving that parents are the problem and need to make changes, but parents perceiving that churches need to change.

Another clear difference of perspective was regarding what is required moving forward. The church leaders' responses revealed a very strong focus on Sunday morning attendance, with many seeking to boost attendance of families in their church. However, this was less evident in the responses from parents, with many survey responses focussing on the value of faith nurture in the home, and the parents' interviews revealing that some families valued this more highly than returning to regular church attendance. Indeed, in the parents' interviews it was clear that for many Christian families the pandemic has brought a change in family priorities, with many explaining that whilst they were keen to continually strengthen faith at home, church attendance itself was not as high a priority for them as it has been pre-pandemic.

There was a sense that families had emerged from the pandemic with a clearer vision of what they wanted or needed regarding faith nurture of their children, but conversely churches had emerged as very unclear and uncertain about how ministry amongst families should be operating.

Key insight

Only 2% of parents said that worksheets and activities provided by their local church during the pandemic had been beneficial.

A Family Focus - in the church

Overall, children's perceptions of the local church were positive, they liked their church and the people in it. Quite telling when asked to describe what their ideal church would be like, the majority responded by saying that they liked their church as it is. A couple of children did say that they would like greater involvement in the services. When this point was followed up with other children in the focus groups, they reported that there were very few opportunities for children to be involved, apart from tidying up after their sessions.

Engagement with the local church had reduced during the pandemic and, for some, had not returned. 40% of parents reported reduced engagement with the local church. The impact of the pandemic on church engagement was seen by 46% of parents to have a negative effect, although 22% felt that it had improved their engagement with the local church. Interestingly, parents reported that connections with the church fell away more quickly than with other community groups during the pandemic. Several parents acknowledged that they had lost the habit of going to church during the pandemic and spoke of a struggle to re-integrate into church as a family. All of the parents interviewed explained that it had been difficult returning to church after the lockdowns. Many felt that their congregation had become less tolerant of children. One described this as her first experience of returning to church after lockdown:

I wasn't particularly looking forward to going back but felt it was important for my children to go to church regularly so I forced myself to. It was really hard because the kids area in church had been removed, apart from some simple drawing resources, so it was exhausting trying to entertain them during the service. Then at the end of the service, someone came up to me and suggested next time please could my children wear slippers during the service because they had been very noisy walking around. This did not make me want to return to church.'

Having engaged with faith at home resources during the pandemic parents became more aware and critical of provision for children at church. One parent reflected on their family's return to church after lockdown:

'My children went out to one of the kids sessions and spent the whole time drawing Minions. When I collected them at the end, the leader handed me the pictures and said 'I couldn't think of a way to connect this with Jesus so I didn't.' So I thought: why am I bothering to bring my children to church because they could draw Minions at home and it would be much easier for me than dragging them to church. They didn't get any spiritual input at all.'

Key insight

The parental responses highlight a need to reflect on how churches can listen to the needs of young families and thus provide and evaluate a welcoming and meaningful experience of church for all.

Church leaders were less sure of the effect of the pandemic on parents' engagement with the Christian faith, 43% stating that they did not know, 28% thinking it had a positive impact, but 29% reporting negative impact. However, church leaders did feel that the pandemic had changed their family ministry; identifying a variety of changes. For 26%, these were positive, including closer relationships, improved communication, established new groups, and a general feeling that their family ministry was in a stronger place.

In contrast, 25% reflected adverse outcomes, such as fewer children or families attending, reduced teams, lack of energy or vision and a feeling that ministry amongst families had diminished since pre-pandemic. 13% stated that the pandemic had been an excellent opportunity to evaluate and reflect on their ministry approaches. However, 10% of church leaders reported minimal change to their ministry. Interestingly, 18% of the responses described a greater awareness and focus on families rather than segregated age groups. The reasons stated for this were varied, with some reporting that they had seen the need to focus on this way to support discipleship in the home, others understanding the value of intentionality of this, and some feel that they had no other option due to diminished team.

The church leaders reported a wide range of activities being provided for families during the pandemic, with the most common being online all age services (68%), printable worksheets and craft (62%), activity suggestions for parents (62%), pre-recorded videos (62%) and online children's groups (51%). Aspects which were rarely mentioned were parenting courses (8%), discipleship groups for parents (8%) and in person toddler groups (24%). There was varied response to the question of the provision of church-based family activities compared with pre-pandemic, with 37% stating that this had increased, and 30% saying that it had reduced, and 33% saying that it had remained similar.

During the period of lockdown with churches closed, the majority made provision for online worship. Some parents reported enjoying this as it was less intimidating than in person, and some were still accessing online services when they couldn't attend church. For other parents the online experience had been quite negative. Parents of the youngest children reported that it was hard for them to engage with church online. Some parents argued it did not work their children were less engaged and they dreaded going to church online.

A Family Focus - at home

For many parents, faith at home was seen to be more valued than pre-pandemic; 54% of parents perceived that their family had engaged more in faith practices at home, with 36% remaining similar and only 11% stating that this had reduced. Indeed, 47% of the parents agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic had improved how their family engages with the Christian faith. It was interesting to see what faith activities families had engaged with at home. The families who took part in the survey reported that their family had been involved in a variety of faith activities during the pandemic: praying (78%), Bible reading (64%), spending time with other Christians (60%), using Christian books and resources (60%), faith discussions (58%), craft and worksheets from church (57%), watching online Christian content (55%), singing (49%), serving others (39%), outdoor activities with a faith element (31%) and reflective/quiet time (21%).

When children were asked about faith at home, they often mentioned reading the Bible. As an icebreaker to the online focus groups children were asked to share something that was special to them and their faith, many shared a copy of their Bible. Most didn't have a special place (other than church) or object that helped them think about God but some spoke of their bedroom.

An analysis of parents' responses as to how faith activity changed at home according to the age of the child revealed that there were some activities that were consistent across the ages. Prayer at set times of the day, meal and bedtimes was frequently mentioned by parents of children of all ages, although less so by parents of 11-16 years. The other consistent responses across the ages were engagement in conversations about faith and regular Bible reading, or with younger children Bible storytelling. As to the differences, parents of 8-11-year-old children reported the most variety of activities citing use of Bible apps, and other online resources. While parents of the under 7s highlighted how hard it was to engage children in faith activity, it was noticeable that the parents of older children (11-16 years) were more likely to report none or minimal faith activity at home.

Notably, 11% of all parents reported negative feelings or barriers to faith at home experiences such as 'hard to engage the children or 'hard work, with a number mentioning specific difficulties associated with online models of church. In contrast, only 6% of the responses were positive feelings, though many mentioned 'growing' results of faith experiences at home, including drawing closer to God and one another. Many of the responses made specific references to faith activity at certain times of day, particularly at mealtimes, before school/nursery and at bedtimes. These responses highlight the role of habits, rhythms and integration of spiritual practices with regular daytime routines for families' experiences of faith at home.

Key insight

One-fifth of church leaders did not know how the pandemic had impacted the engagement of church families with the local church. Just under a half of church leaders did not know how the pandemic had affected the faith of families within their church.

The value of relationships

Throughout the survey responses and interviews it was clear that parents and children valued relationships over content or activity provision. Church leaders and parents alike indicated that informal support structures had been more beneficial during the pandemic than provision of activities, services and events.

The majority of church leaders (75%) stated that relationships with people at church had been a support for the faith of church families. However, they also reported that resource provision had been the most prominent part of their church's activities for families during the pandemic, indicating somewhat of a mismatch between what they perceived was beneficial with the focus of their actual work. In contrast, the responses from parents were less convincing about the support from relationships at church, with 46% agreeing that relationships in the church were supportive but 40% disagreeing and 14% unsure. This indicates that families did not find relational connections as beneficial as churches perceived them to be, and therefore prompts churches to explore this further in their local context. If families are not experiencing supportive relationships through their church, it is not surprising that they have not rushed back to regular attendance in the post lockdown phase.

Key insight

Church leaders thought that relationships amongst church had been a good support for church families during the pandemic. However, they had focused the majority of their time on entertainment and activity resource production with minimal relational component.

It was interesting to note that the value which parents placed on relational aspects of church reduced with the age of their child. 48% of parents with children under eight years old expressed relational aspects of church as being what they wanted from church, although this reduced to 40% for parents of 8-11 year olds, and fell to 24% for parents of 11-14 year olds. This finding highlights the need for churches to be tuned into the continually changing needs of families as their children grow and develop, and to tailor their ministry approaches accordingly.

The children's interviews all revealed that it was the relational aspects of church which most influenced their overall experience of attending church. For example, many talked warmly about their friends at church or congregation members of different ages and generations. The times which they enjoyed most were the relational times, more than the programmed times (particularly if food was involved!). Almost half of church leader respondents (44%) detailed their provision of services and activities as age-segregated (ie aimed at adults or children), whilst 35% explained their wish to have more intergenerational approaches. However, both children and parents frequently conveyed their appreciation of informal relational contact with those of different generations, and many stated that they had appreciated whole family ministry which had occurred during the lockdowns, rather than age segregated. This is perhaps a key learning from the pandemic and something which could be explored further as churches navigate new ways of ministry amongst families for the season ahead.

Regarding the nature of support of families, 27% of churches wanted to provide support by spending time listening to families, with many of these mentioning visiting families as a successful strategy. There were also strong themes of cultivating relationships and peer support amongst parents and families of the church community (32%), offering emotional and practical support (23%) and prayer support (12%). Of the responses, 15% of churches conveyed a sense of uncertainty about how they could support family faith in the season ahead, with some stating they would 'help in any way possible', 'support however needed,' 'explore ideas,' intimating a lack of purpose in this regard. In contrast with this, 10% of respondents wished to dialogue with and listen to families about their needs and 11% expressed a desire to see a change in ethos of their church to be more inclusive and affirming of family faith and convey that parents are the primary nurturers of their child's faith.

Looking ahead, many of the church leaders (56%) reported that in the post-lockdown season, they felt it was most important to develop social activities, to bring people together, as they expressed that this aspect of church life had been sorely missed during the pandemic. Suggested activities included holiday clubs, free play activities to build back lost relationships, social events to encourage the families to get to know each other more and provide peer support.

9% of the church leaders conveyed a sense of more informally impacting the ethos of relationship building within the church community, such as coaching, times to chat and nurture family/church relationship, build bridges, opportunities to support one another. One explained: 'I think time together as families is most important - we need strong relationships to then grow together. Resources start to feel overwhelming. We need space to think, pray, share Bible and life,' and another similarly said that their goal was to foster 'a strong sense of loving accepting church family.'

These responses all indicate that churches perhaps find it easier to make tangible and concrete steps, such as implementing new activities or events, rather than influencing an intentional change of ethos amongst their congregation. However, this contrasts with what families are saying they need and want at this time: they value informal relational support much more highly than programmed events and activities. Indeed, 16% of the responses from church leaders conveyed that they wanted the parents to engage more with church activities, including a few comments such as "I'd like to see them making church a priority. If they don't, their children won't." "Encouraging their children to choose between activities, based on their Christian faith. Should football or orchestra always trump?"

These comments, alongside other responses about family faith indicate a mindset of some church leaders feeling that they need to instruct parents (often from a pre-set point of view), rather than listening to parents for their insights and using those as the starting point for the church's ministry amongst families. There is an assumption in these statements that the church knows better than the parents. Interestingly, only 5% of the church leader responses called for parents to support one another more mutually, further supporting the observation that churches see themselves as service providers; in this case providing support to families, rather than as facilitators of mutual support and relationships within their congregation.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that families' faith at home has tended to improve during the pandemic, whilst their engagement with church has reduced. However, there is a significant disconnect between the perceptions of church leaders and parents about what is needed going forward. It is clear that churches must now consider how to respond to this change in family's ethos and practices. It is key to meet families where they are and support those spiritual connections which occur at home rather than simply seeking to coax them back into church attendance.

Whilst a small proportion of church leaders want to listen and learn from families, and then change the ethos of their church to better accommodate and partner with parents to support them in discipling their children's faith, the majority of church leaders in this survey indicate that the parents are deficient and need to change what they are doing. In contrast, families strongly argued that they do not want to be 'resourced' by church, rather they desire a connection and partnership with church rooted in relationships.

Much of this connects with the issue of Sunday morning church attendance - most church leaders in this survey expressed this as their main focus but the pandemic has shown the value of faith nurture in the home, and some families have sought to continue this. Many families now see regular church attendance as less of a priority, with some opting instead to focus on nurturing their child's faith more at home, and others simply feeling that less regular attendance at church is sufficient and indeed necessary given the time constraints of their family life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Church leaders could consider how they can listen to and learn from families, and then adapt the ethos of the church to better accommodate and partner with parents to support them in discipling their children's faith. It seems that there is a need to be more affirming and supportive of parents in their primary role of discipling their children, intentionally and overtly conveying a sense of partnership and collaboration.
- Evaluate the aims of various church activities, for example is the ultimate aim to boost Sunday attendance or to ensure children's faith is nurtured and encouraged? It seems that families desire support with the latter but are less committed to regular church attendance - so it will be good to explore together new ways of focussing this support. Spending considerable portions of a church's time and energy on Sunday services no longer seems to match the needs of families, with an emerging requirement for greater creativity about how to support family's faith journeyings in a way which does not demand or revolve around regular Sunday attendance.
- Consider the balance of time spent generating resources, activities and services versus more informal and relational support structures, which seem to be more beneficial. Within this, explore opportunities for intergenerational ministry because this seems to be greatly valued by many families.

We'd love to know how this research has informed your ministry [please take two minutes to fill in this brief anonymous survey here.](#)

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Please contact these organisations for further information and support as you navigate how to enhance and develop you church's ministry amongst families:

[Share Jesus International](#) shares new ideas to help your congregation become more confident in talking about Jesus

[Parenting for Faith](#) provides support and resources for churches to enable them to equip and encourage parents and carers to help their children and teens meet and know God

[Kitchen Table Project](#) encourages parents and carers to find ways of exploring faith with their children in everyday life, providing resources and ideas to help.

[Hope Together](#) unites local churches and Christians to make Jesus known, working together to share our faith providing relevant resources and research including the [Talking Jesus course](#) and the [Talking Toddler research and network](#).

[Faith in the Nexus](#) investigates how to facilitate collaboration of home, school and church to enable children to explore faith and their spiritual life.

[The Evangelical Alliance](#) is united in mission and voice, and exists to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society.

