**Will The Children Have Faith in the Post-Pandemic Era? Investigating models of children’s faith formation in a world changed by pandemic experiences**

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**Abstract**

In a world significantly marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, we examine the modes of contemporary children’s faith formation and ask why these have not altered in light of so much societal change. What is the role and function of faith communities in nurturing a child’s faith in contemporary times? Almost fifty years ago, John Westerhoff first asked the question: “Will our children have faith?” (Westerhoff, 1976); critiquing processes of children’s faith formation. This paper seeks to examine this same question, now in the context of widespread pandemic prompted self-evaluation of religious perspectives and practices. This study examines parental and church perspectives on modern-day children’s Christian faith formation, investigating the effectiveness of established paradigms. The tentative findings reveal significant disconnections regarding perceptions, expectations and roles of key players and an urgent need for revising of the established and dominant methods of the global church in their efforts to effectively nurture the faith of younger generations.

**Key words:**

Child, faith formation, Christian community, Church, contemporary approaches

**Introduction**

John Westerhoff asked: “*Will our children have faith?*” (Westerhoff, 1976) almost fifty years ago, critiquing processes of children’s faith formation. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, we interrogate present-day modes of children’s religious nurture, developing Westerhoff’s question to be more fitting for the contemporary climate: *Will the children have faith in post pandemic times*?

Society had seen considerable societal change, and many highlighted opportunities arising from post pandemic reflections to bring positive change for children and families (Ford, 2021; Spiteri et al., 2023).  The British Academy (2021) saw this as a catalyst for new thinking and interconnectivity between policymakers at local, regional and national levels, whilst Pillay (2020) perceived a new landscape requiring resilience, adaptation and changes to the church. We therefore ask why the Christian community has not grasped the opportunity for change; exploring the approaches of faith nurture operating at the micro-system level in the contemporary era. This project examined the lived experiences of Christian parents and church representatives in the UK, USA and Canada, using thematic analysis to illuminate their perceived effectiveness and suitability of existing models of faith formation. These perspectives indicate a significant need for reflection and evaluation of existing models and methods.

**The context of faith formation**

Faith formation does not occur in a vacuum, since families and communities have a formative role in nurturing faith (Dykstra, 1999). Religion encompasses organisational participation as well as more fluid inclinations and religious dimensions (Ammerman, 2014), aligning with the notion of a plausibility structures as contexts for exploring meaning-making (Berger, 1969). Shier-Jones (2009) and Csinos (2011) argued that a child’s religious environment profoundly impacts their spiritual experience, as children comprehend and respond to God through the lens of their life experience and interaction with others. Such meaningful connectedness is greatly valued and desired by children (Heller 1986). Children appreciate relationships within their church community; both with peers and adults (Holmes, 2021). These relationships are highly impactful (Berne, 1960) and can serve as a source of support and adaptation or contribute to risk and dysfunction (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) due to the impressionable nature of children (Hart, 2003). Examination of a child’s immediate influences aids understanding of the construction of faith (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Christian parents have a significant influence on their child’s faith formation (Powell, 2014; Turner, 2014; Mark, 2016; Barna, 2019), but a child’s broader connections with their religious community provide valuable social support (Krause, 2008). The impact of these relationships may relate to their family’s degree of involvement with the church, reflecting encirclement of attachments present (Gurian, 2002). Pandemic lockdowns and social distancing measures heightened awareness of this due to impeded functionality of relationships (Schwaiger, Zehra and Suneel, 2021).

Relationships in the child’s religious microsystem are key since Hart (2003) and Csinos (2018) observed that children prefer to raise spiritual questions when they feel safe and secure. Hence, role models in a faith community are of significant benefit (Okholm 2018). The nexus of religion and relationships is highly complex, as religion can be both beneficial or detrimental to relationships (Kelley, Marks & Dollahite, 2020). Such influences may shape faith processes in the same way that they contribute to a child’s character and emotional processes (Harding 2008). This highlights the distinction between learning *about* religion versus being initiated *into* a religious perspective, which is key in evaluating faith formation models (Tillson, 2020). This requires tangible ways to enable healthy relationships as part of faith community contexts (Conway, 2018), aligning with the notion of religion in everyday life which is created and connects with the social processes (Ammerman, 2014).

**Nurturing a child’s faith**

Yust (2004) did not view children merely as observers or passive recipients, but rather as active agents, since interaction with their faith community is a key part of a child’s spiritual journey. Many concur with this active rather than passive mentality (Catterton Allen, 2004; Yust, 2004; Beckwith, 2010; Csinos, 2018). Hood (2004) stated that children are shaped not only by attending church programmes, but also through their comprehensive experience in the congregation. Csinos and Beckwith (2013) argued that school-like models and programs are not congruent since serving and being served within the church is vital. Ingersoll (2014) similarly emphasised the spiritual benefits to a child of participation in church life and Willmer and White (2013) implored adults not to set pre-conditions on a child’s faith. Hence, children should not be overlooked or expected to have minimal contribution but engaged in theological discussions (Csinos, 2018). Cavalleti (1983) argued that children can respond deeply to their religious experiences and adults must listen and hear their questions. This relates to the notion of a child being raised within a caring village-like community (Habtemariam, 2021). However, there is also a need for great sensitivity so that the child feels that they will remain valued and accepted even if they opt-out of a particular activity (Holmes, 2021).

It is therefore important to scrutinise the faith formation approaches adopted by churches and families (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013; Pinedo, 202; Weber, 2022) in the light of this context, to consider whether these modes are appropriate and effective in the post pandemic world.

**Approaches to children’s Christian faith formation**

In his seminal work, Westerhoff (1976) critiqued existing Christian educational efforts and envisioned a different approach to ministry with children. In the revised edition, Westerhoff (2000), he used three metaphors to describe the church’s approach to children’s faith formation. Figure 1 shows the categories of Westerhoff’s theory (2012), which will be used in this paper as a framework for evaluating approaches to faith formation of children reported by participants.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Faith formation model** | **Production Line** | **Greenhouse** | **Pilgrimage** |
| **Key terms** | Chronological age or stage, lifecycle, aging process | Developmental stage, cognitive stage, maturation process from lower to higher stages of development | Persons in relationships, the life process |
| **View of the child** | A piece of raw material to be moulded by the parent/teacher (skilled technician) | A seed for the teacher/parent (gardener) to care for until they grow up naturally | A pilgrim, with the teacher/parent as co-pilgrim. |
| **Aim** | To work *to* mould each child into the adult’s design. To aid the child’s growth into adulthood | To care *for* the child’s faith so that it matures. | Process of shared journey together over time, *with* the child |

**Figure 1: Categories of the learning process connected with children’s faith formation (Westerhoff, 2012, p.102-103)**

Westerhoff’s first metaphor depicts a child's faith formation as a factory production or assembly line, with the child as a valuable piece of raw material that a skilled technician (the adult or teacher) moulds or shapes into the desired product. The product is often the same for each child as there is no space for variance or difference in an assembly line. Westerhoff’s second metaphor is a greenhouse, where the seedling (child) is nurtured by the gardener (adult or parent). As a gardener waters, weeds, and cares for their plants, an adult should care for children until they are grown and can bear fruit on their own. This metaphor allows for some individuality, although children still do not have a voice in the formational process. Again, the child is the recipient of the adult’s formation or educational efforts.

As Boyatzis (2004) points out, a dominant approach to Christian nurture is unidirectional parent-to-child transmission of beliefs and practices. This unidirectional approach aligns with the assembly line or the greenhouse metaphors where the child is merely the recipient of an adult’s educational efforts. In contrast, Westerhoff’s third metaphor of a pilgrimage expresses the child as a co-pilgrim of the adult, sharing a journey together over time. This is a communal or relational approach to faith formation where the child and the adult learn with and from one another, sharing their unique insights and understandings as they travel through life together. It is also a dynamic process, with milestones along the way but no two journeys are quite the same. This approach is a more relational, reciprocal style of communication, where the active participation of the child is preferable, aligning with a collaborative approach to theological meaning-making (Csinos, 2020).

This pilgrimage or journey approach also conveys that ministry should not be reduced to programmes but rather a practice of lived experience alongside one another (Okholm, 2018). A child’s faith is not reduced to religious instruction but fostered through informal interactions with significant others in the faith community. This correlates with the notion of enculturation, whereby children interact with other “faithing selves” (Westerhoff, 2000) and become ‘apprentices’ through full access to participation in the community (Mercer, Matthews & Walz, 2004). Berryman (2013) encouraged valuing of a child’s young faith, resonating with Westerhoff’s notion of faith developing similar to a tree. A young tree with only one tree ring is still a whole and complete tree. A tree with ten rings is not a better tree, it is just a more developed tree. According to Westerhoff, the same is true with a child’s faith development. An adult viewpoint of faith can result in childhood faith being overlooked or seen as a deficient model of faith where a child is unable to reach the required standards (Berryman, 2017; Csinos, 2020).

**Methodology**

*Procedure*

In exploring the notion of a ‘plausibility structure,’ wherein relationships and social institutions are integral to spiritual dimensions of children’s faith formation (Ammerman, 2014), mindfulness of the ever-changing world and the adjustment of individuals to their environment is necessary (Baucal and Zittoun, 2013). Ammerman (2014) therefore suggested to look for scenes of spiritual conversations and listen for emergent stories; in the private domain and in congregations (Ammerman, 2014). This aligns with the aims of this research project, to examine the scenes where faith nurture and formation is occurring amongst a child’s microsystem. Baucal and Zittoun (2013) asserted that the emphasis of exploration should be on processes and dynamics, not on outcomes or stable entities. This resonates with the processes of faith nurture described by Westerhoff above. Hence, this exploratory, primarily qualitative study examined faith formation practices from the perspectives of those involved in children’s faith nurture (in both families and faith communities), investigating the underlying ethos and practice of respondents, along the lines of research undertaken by Addai (2013), Griebel et al. (2014) and Balboni et al. (2015). Analysis of the data illuminated the participant’s experience, ethos and understanding of children’s faith formation approaches. Adoption of the contextualist framework was key (Mjoset, 2009; Moreno and Cardemil, 2013), so that all respondents had a similar context (being a Christian involved in children’s faith formation during pandemic restrictions), so that their context could be part of the analysis. Some demographic questions facilitated this contextualisation, although otherwise the surveys were anonymous.

Data was collected from three countries (Canada, the UK and USA) primarily due to convenience sampling and the positioning of the research team. Nevertheless the three contexts were similar in being developed nations. Since all were English-speaking, they would have access to similar published resources, training opportunities and dialogues. Analysis enabled a comparison of experiences and models in these three contexts, similar to Kaliisa, Palmer and Miller (2019). However, it was key that the responses were contextualised to some extent, therefore the data has been analysed separately for the three nations so to aid comparative analysis, illuminating differences across the regions. There were respondents from the following denominations: Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational, Pentecostal and United Reformed Church.

An online survey was utilised in June-July 2021 (mid pandemic era) to ask self-selecting participants who denoted themselves as Christian parents to describe their pandemic experiences, using mainly open-ended questions to prompt topics such as the family’s spiritual activity both pre- and post- covid-19, perceptions of church approaches, and views about children’s spiritual needs. Responses were obtained from 159 parents, although this paper will focus on the responses from participants from UK (n=63), the USA (n=21) and Canada (n=9).

Data was collected from church representatives in two phases: Firstly, an online survey alongside the above parent survey (in June-July 2021) asking those who categorised themselves as a church representative or a children’s leader to describe their perceptions and approaches to children’s faith formation before and during the pandemic, and their strategies for the season ahead. This paper will focus on the responses to this survey from participants in the UK (n=34), US (n=14) and Canada (n=6). Secondly, an online survey of church leaders between March to May 2022, when the pandemic lockdowns were abating, incorporated closed and open-ended questions to ask participants to describe the approaches adopted by their church for children’s faith formation. This paper has extracted the responses only from the UK (n=79), US (n=33) and Canadian (n=27) to enable a continuing thread of analysis across the three nations.

Throughout the data collection ethical aspects were considered. Ethical approval was given by the ethics committee at \*\*\*University, and the research team ensured that all participants gave their informed consent, were aware of the project information and their right to withdraw. All information collected remained confidential and was reported in a suitable manner to ensure the anonymity of participants.

*Analysis*

The data from each survey response was extracted and classified using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) according to the project theoretical framework (see figure 1). This involved coding, cluster coding and subsequently the use of numerical values to reveal the overall frequencies of individual responses. This enabled comparisons of faith formation models across the datasets (Wuthnow, 2003). The contextualist approach enabled the context of responses to be integral in the analysis of the statements and beliefs of participants, so that their individual actions, statements, or expressions were understood relative to their surrounding context (Moreno and Cardemil, 2013). Westerhoff’s depictions of faith formation were adopted as a framework to investigate the outworking and impact of contemporary children’s faith formation models.

**Themes identified in the qualitative survey data**

*Perspectives of Church representatives in both surveys*

In the first research phase, when church representatives were asked what they thought were the spiritual needs of families in the season ahead, the textual responses were coded to reveal that the most common responses conveyed a sense of reconnection with church (47% of the UK dataset, 47% of the US participants and 30% of the Canadian responses). Other popular responses were pastoral support (12% of UK sample, 12% in US, 10% of Canadian participants), parental rest (9% of UK, 0% in US, 0% in Canadian), support for child's mental health (6% in UK, 0% in US, 0% in Canadian), to be encouraged, valued, listened to (7% in UK, 18% in US, 20% in Canadian). It is notable that all of these aspects are relational and emotional, rather than explicitly religious. However, the remainder (20% in UK, 24% in US, 40% in Canadian) stated that they believed families needed support for nurturing their child’s faith at home. This reveals an underlying discourse of a significant portion of churches perceiving that they have a greater role in pastorally supporting families than they do in supporting them in nurturing their child’s faith, although the Canadian data indicated a slightly different balance of this. This perhaps relates to Westerhoff’s notion of a greenhouse model. It was difficult to ascertain the reasons behind these statements, particularly because when asked about their vision or strategy, the majority (99%) stated that they do not have a formal one in place, with comments such as:

‘no but I am trying to develop one’ [9910]

‘still trying to figure it out’ [4911].

This indicates an underlying discourse of uncertainty and lack of intentional focus, contrasting with the clear answers given above. When church leaders were asked in the second phase to indicate through closed questions what extent they were personally aware of the spiritual needs of the families in their church, a significant proportion were very aware (43% of UK responses, 63% of US responses and 59% of Canadian responses) although some said that they were only slightly aware (52% of UK responses, 30% of US responses and 41% of Canadian responses). And some stated that they were not aware at all (5% of UK responses, 7% of US responses and 0% of Canadian responses). Since 57% of UK church leaders and 37% of US church leaders who responded were not aware or only slightly aware, this varied level of awareness could be a contributory factor in lack of clarity about the formal strategy of the church concerning ministry in this sector. Hence, the responses suggest that whilst some church leaders felt they knew what the spiritual needs of families were, they had not implemented formal or intentional strategies, which raises significant issues if church leaders are endeavouring to operate within any of Westerhoff’s models of faith nurture.

Overall, church responses conveyed that the church has a greater role in pastorally supporting families than they do in supporting them in nurturing their child’s faith, perhaps relating to Weserhoff’s greenhouse model. Only about half of the respondents were personally aware or slightly aware of the spiritual needs of the families in their church. The next section will examine data and responses collected from parent participants.

*Perspectives of Christian parents*

* *The place of church in family*

When asked how the pandemic lockdowns had impacted their family, there were minimal references to church or faith across all of the contexts indicating that at the time of the lockdowns other aspects were of a higher priority or more pressing need, such as their child’s education (mentioned by 14% across the whole dataset), their work (16%), social isolation or mental health challenges (35%). In the UK, only 23% mentioned church or faith, with 7% being positive, such as that they had more time for faith as a family at home. Whereas 14% reported negative experiences, mainly regarding church being closed, or not able to engage effectively with online church or whatever pandemic provision was being offered by their church. Markedly more of the American respondents (43%) mentioned faith or church with, although 38% were negative, mainly stating that children’s faith activities had closed down or ceased due to the pandemic measures. Only one participant (5%) reported positive experiences, stating that they had continued to meet with their church as usual. A similar number of Canadian participants (44%) mentioned church or faith in their responses. Of these, the majority (33%) portrayed a negative light, reporting that they had not engaged with their church’s children’s activity or it had been ‘non-existent.’ However, one respondent (11%) reported that their child had engaged well with the online children’s activities provided by their church.

Many participants reported challenges, such as:

‘Covid has disrupted our routines and as a result reading the Bible and praying together has been disrupted’ [8638],

* *The place of routine*

The above quote reveals that this family’s faith practices had previously been tied into their routines and hence become difficult when there was disruption to family routines. The context at the time was of widespread dramatic and sudden upheaval, change and confusion, hence this indicates disrupted spiritual routines alongside this. The underlying discourses intimate that families were attempting to find ways to shoehorn their existing corporate religious practice into the newly created family timetables which constituted the new patterns of their daily lives and activities, but were finding this challenging.

Others reported challenges of not being able to physically meet as detrimental to their family’s faith practices, with comments such as:

‘we lost connection with our church family who are extended family for us’ [1722]

‘it’s really difficult to worship together online church because it’s not the same in your lounge’ [9090]

‘part of us is left behind’ [2279].

* *A sense of loss*

These responses convey an underlying sense of grieving and loss, but also exhibit a discourse of the value of physically meeting together in relational, emotional and spiritual terms. The sudden removal of physical meeting almost entirely eliminated the possibility of churches to carry out faith formation following a ‘greenhouse’ model, as described by Westerhoff; whereby an environment is provided which is conducive to the child’s faith being cared for until it can grow up naturally. The sudden events of the pandemic will have brought about dramatic changes in children’s faith nurture as a result and it is perhaps this which parents are grieving, particularly if church attendance was perceived to be a physical place of nurturing, and hence removing the ability to access that physically challenges this mindset and approach. This may explain the strong lament and sense of loss communicated by the parents and reveals a strong reliance of parents on the church’s physical presence in a child’s faith formation. The strength of feeling about the dramatic loss of this physical meeting and contact is shown through the strong language used of being ‘totally cut off,’ lost connection,’ and ‘can’t sing and pray together.’ Whilst the respondents reported various online provisions and resourcing from their church, participant responses reveal that they were of far less benefit to participants than when combined physical presence. This indicates that transporting the same faith activities which were carried out in the church context into the home context was not deemed to be very effective or beneficial by the parents in this study. The lament in these responses was expressed more strongly by some, although some did also exhibit empathy and understanding of the challenges through comments such as:

‘it’s understandable’ [7852].

Whilst these empathetic laments demonstrate a degree of flexibility and resilience, it could be said that they exhibit a sense of complacency and unhealthy acceptance regarding diminished children’s faith nurture at the time. This comment from a UK participant reveals a prevailing context of children’s faith nurture being considerably reduced compared with pre-pandemic. This notion was further reinforced by comments such as:

‘I don’t believe the church cares very much about ministry to families’ [4576].

The discourses conveyed here utilise very powerful language to state that these respondents consider the place of children’s faith nurture was not deemed as high a priority as that of adult ministry and that the response of the church was deficient in terms of provision for children’s faith during the pandemic time.

* *The place of relationships*

There were some families who reported positive experiences of children’s faith nurture, such as:

‘we had more time to do faith at home together as a family and were more intentional about talking about God with our daughters’ [4910].

There were some comments about the value of intergenerational faith activity, such as:

‘the families found a place where they could meet and interact and keep their faith going’ [5611].

Such comments reveal the value of faith nurture occurring within the close relationships of the child’s microsystem. They could align with the ‘greenhouse’ approach to faith nurture, since it could be said that they attempted to create an environment conducive to supporting faith at home in the absence of physical church. However, there are some indications of journeying together and exploring faith alongside one another, rather than being adult-led, which would connect with the ‘pilgrimage’ approach to faith nurture.

Some participants communicated the value of relational connections continuing to occur through the church-based facets of the child’s microsystem, where that was possible within the social distancing restrictions. The warm language used in these comments conveys the sense of appreciation of these parents for provision of these activities. There are also hints of desperation evident in some responses, for example participant [5075]:

‘ we valued everything which engaged them to do things.’

Again, this shows the impact of the stark removal of physical church presence at the time of the pandemic lockdowns. Alongside this, some stated their dislike for the lack of intergenerational activity, such as:

‘I was not pleased with how separate things became, with families separate to older adults’ [8945],

‘it is detrimental to children to separate the generations in ministry’ [8225].

In communicating this sense of loss regarding intergenerational activity reveals the value to these parents of the church in the child’s microsystem and hence their child’s faith formation. It is not clear from these responses the purpose which these parents feel intergenerational aspects have, and hence whether they are part of creating a conductive spiritual ‘greenhouse’ environment for the children, or whether they are viewed as fellow pilgrims. Placing value on these relational aspects of a child’s faith formation could fall into either category but it is clear that overall they are valued by many since so many participants bemoaned the loss of relational connection with their church during the pandemic lockdowns.

* *Use of resources*

When considering the parent responses through the lens of Westerhoff’s theory, there was minimal evidence of specific approaches to children’s faith formation. Rather, the spiritual activity of the participating families appeared to be simply utilising any resources provided by their church, such as reporting online youth and children's activities and packs delivered to home as beneficial. This very much depicts a service-user mentality, demonstrated by comments such as:

‘what was provided did not meet our family needs’ [0233]

‘it worked for us but I know it didn’t work for other families’ [4008].

Whilst it must be noted that the context of the time was highly pressured and stressful for families, the underlying discourses of these narratives convey a passive role of these parents in the task of children’s faith formation. This sense of interacting with the church as a service provider of activities to nurture a child’s faith is consistent with the ‘production line’ mentality of Westerhoff’s theory. In this sense, these parent respondents seem to be viewing the child as raw material, requiring input from an adult. These responses indicate that these parents previously had tasked the church with this role, and during the pandemic situation they viewed themselves as being alternative conduits of this ‘faith input’ to aid the child’s growth towards an adult faith. When the textual responses were coded, it revealed that over half of the participants (53% in the UK dataset, 50% of US participants and 67% of Canadian respondents) reported that the aspect of their church which had been most beneficial during the pandemic was some form of online church, sometimes live or sometimes in the form of a resource to use at home. Others reported the most beneficial aspects as being pastoral care and contact (20% of UK respondents, 13% of American respondents and 17% of Canadian respondents), doorstep deliveries of resources (11% in the UK sample, 13% in USA and 17% in Canada), and all ages being together (11% of the UK respondents, 13% of US respondents but none of the Canadian respondents).

Conversely, there were a small number of respondents who expressed active participation in their child’s faith formation during this time, such as:

‘as parents we took more spiritual responsibility for our kids faith and growth’ [1121],

‘we did a lot more praying with the children and would prepare a liturgy for them every week. We also did more faith activities as a family during the week’ [0574]

and ‘we were more intentional with talking about God with our daughter’ [4910].

* *Responsibility for faith nurture*

It is notable that whilst the majority of the qualitative responses conveyed a passive attitude and service-user mentality, when asked what the church’s main role is in a child’s faith nurture, only minimal numbers (2% in the UK dataset, 5% in US set and no-one in the Canadian data) selected ‘to take complete responsibility to nurture children's faith.’ Indeed, the majority of participants (84% in UK and US participants, 86% in Canada) thought that the role of the church was to support parents in nurturing their child’s faith, with 14% of UK and Canadian respondents, and 11% of US respondents viewing the role as to reinforce parental nurture of children's faith. This striking difference in what parents reported in this closed question, compared with the narrative answers perhaps indicates that parent’s desire is for a partnership with the church, but the present reality is what is described in their qualitative answers. This resonates with Westerhoff’s assertion (1983, p.264): ‘we cannot be Christian by ourselves.’

In another question, when the parents were asked who they wanted to meet the spiritual needs of their children, only a small proportion of responses (17% in the UK sample, 16% in US, 14% in Canada) conveyed a sense of partnership or working together (between family, local church activity and informally through relationships amongst the Christian community). The remainder tended to state their responses in isolation, such as ‘youth team,’ or ‘minister.’ This reflects a pre-existing arrangement of the Church being a service provider rather than a partner, perhaps again indicating a notion that the church performs the function of a production line or greenhouse for the child’s faith formation. Those who did reveal evidence of a more collaborative approach to faith nurture, reported that family Bible study notes provided by the church had been very beneficial in instigating regular Bible reading amongst the family [1991]. Another stated that:

‘church came alongside us and mentored us through the next steps [4857]

‘adults from church have a positive influence on my children’ [0200].

These responses convey more of a collaborative approach, concurring with the ‘pilgrimage’ approach. Westerhoff (1983, p.272-273) admonished the church by saying that the church must stop doing things *to* or *for* families, but rather engage in practices *with* the family in order to nurture not only the child's faith but those of the adults as well. Other responses which conveyed this philosophy of a shared journey together over time, *with* the child were:

‘we led Messy Church together as a family’ [7327]

‘we got all ages involved in making video content and delivering bags’ [7327]

‘we had more time to do faith at home together’ [4910].

These responses all demonstrate a desire to include children as co-pilgrims and their contribution was valued by these participants.

The findings from both the church leader and parent responses will now be discussed collectively in order to explore connections and contrasts.

**Discussion**

*The gift of the pandemic*

Although the global pandemic caused significant challenges for local churches (Schwaiger, Zehra and Suneel, 2021), this research indicates that reflective thinking did occur, with subsequent new opportunities; when opting to view the pandemic as a gift to expose weaknesses in existing models of children’s faith formation. The findings identify a weakness in the partnership between church and home, revealing previous reliance of parents on the church to be the primary nurturers of children’s faith, even though this is not necessarily their desire or intentional choice. This created a sense of crisis when physical church attendance was not possible due to this unquestioned over-reliance. This disempowered many Christian parents to play a role in nurturing their own child’s faith.

Programmatic models, aligning with an assembly line or greenhouse approach to ministry portray the church as the primary faith nurturer, with adult volunteers playing the role of nurturers or gardeners. But a dilemma was created by the pandemic closure of churches since existing programmatic approaches did not translate into the home or online environment. Programmatic approaches seemed to work within an assembly line or greenhouse ministry paradigm but were ineffective in the family environment which was more relational and reciprocal in nature. Equally, post-pandemic contexts of irregular attendance and reduced volunteer numbers have intensified the need for a new way of engaging with children, to embrace a journey or pilgrimage way of discipleship and connect more with the home environment. Hence, the post pandemic context serves as a catalyst to push the global church to adjust their faith formation models to more authentically incorporate partnerships with parents.

*Envisioning a collaborative approach in children’s ministry*

To truly build a ministry that holds both the home and church as equal agents in children’s faith formation requires a healthy partnership whereby both agents (parents and church) utilise their unique gifts and environments in the formational efforts, since children’s spiritual experience is significantly impacted by their life experiences and interactions (Shier-Jones, 2009; Csinos, 2011). Embracing a collaborative ministry model requires several changes: 1) adjustment in understanding of expertise; 2) realignment towards a more cooperative model of ministry; and 3) recognition of the different ways children learn.

* *An adjustment in our understanding of expertise*

Many respondents operated a model of ministry *to* children with church programs as primary agent, despite many emphasising the need to minister *with* rather than *to* children (Tillson, 2020). This reliance on the church establishes church leaders (rather than parents) as the experts in the child’s faith formation. Yet faith formation does not occur in a vacuum (Dykstra, 1999), so parents have much more influence in their child’s faith formation than they realise (Smith et al., 2005; Powell, 2014; Turner, 2014; Barna, 2019). Most church leaders believed families didn’t need support for nurturing a child’s faith, nor did they have any formal strategy of engaging families. Parents viewed the church as a service provider of religious activities for their child’s faith. Neither party embraced a sense of partnership among the Christian community. However, the solution is not to shift the burden from the church to the home as this would foster the sense of parent’s isolation, and also deny the opportunities of children to have meaningful relationships within their church community (Holmes, 2021). Rather, church and parents must collaborate and partner so that both become active in faith formation.

* *A realignment towards a more cooperative model of ministry*

A more cooperative model of faith formation requires equal partnership between church and home with each unique environment actively contributing towards faith nurture, concurring with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) notion of nesting structures within a child’s environment. This requires a shift in reliance patterns to acknowledge encirclement of the child’s attachments (Gurian, 2002). The church must learn to accompany families better in formative activities (Krause, 2008) and enable healthy relationships as part of the faith community (Conway, 2018), so that more relational and reflective models of ministry may occur. A dialogue posture is key, with church leaders listening to parental needs and concerns without assumptions or a pre-existing agenda. Leaders must intentionally reflect on existing models and whether they help or hinder. A new way of operating must be discerned, although this is challenging as many children’s leaders are not trained to reflect in this way. Support through education and leadership training is therefore required. Parents also need to reflect, which may bring challenges to their own faith.

Society has changed due to the pandemic; particularly in the three nations studied here. So too must the approaches of the global church to children’s faith formation. New methods must be employed. How can we embrace a relational approach to faith formation? This kind of ministry requires less money, administration, or need for committees. Therefore, having the courage to embrace a communal approach to ministry will result in something more: A communal approach to faith formation which is empowering and life-giving to all involved. It is more flexible and inclusive of the child’s voice, enabling curiosity rather than always having the right answer.

* *A recognition of the different ways children learn*

Children’s faith formation needs to be viewed more holistically than simply teaching biblical truths, with awareness of children’s meaning making through a mosaic of curiosity, observation, copying, exploration and experimentation (Cavalleti 1983; Csinos, 2018). A more integrated approach is needed to engage children both at church and home rather than compartmentalization with only spiritual things discussed on a Sunday (Hart, 2003). Westerhoff’s analogies for formation exhibit a shift of responsibility being not only a few expert gardeners who know when to prune or plant. Rather, faith formation should be seen as a community pilgrimage, with *all* travelling together; wondering together; being formed together. In this way, children are viewed as active agents (Catterton Allen, 2004; Yust, 2004). And faith formation is seen more broadly than learning from designated activity programmes, since children learn so much from simply being part of faith communities (Hood, 2004). Indeed, being active participants in church life is so key (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013; Willmer and White, 2013; Ingersoll, 2014). If parents are uncertain, the church and home should engage in questions together. Relational connections will enhance understanding and maintain a deep reliance on one another and between church and home.

**Limitations**

The findings of this paper are tentative and not representative since the sample in each of the three nations is so small. Future work could develop this research to collect more responses in each context, and ideally a similar number of responses across the three contexts to aid cross comparison. Furthermore, the findings could be enhanced by including other similar nations in the project. Another enhancement of this resource project could be to interview participants rather than merely surveys, as this would provide opportunities for probing into reasons and underlying feelings behind some of the survey responses.

**Conclusion**

We asked: *Will the children have faith in the aftermath of the pandemic?* The answer depends on how approaches to children’s faith formation develop. We argue that there is urgent need to revise, re-imagine and recreate faith formation methods going forward as pre-pandemic approaches seem ineffective and irrelevant in the post pandemic world.

What has emerged so strongly is the need for faith formation to be collaborative and intergenerational; encompassing relationships between children, parents, faith communities and church leaders. Children need to be seen as active participants with a voice, as their deep innate appreciation of the transcendent cannot be ignored as part of a faith pilgrimage. The global church must support, nurture and take seriously a child’s faith pilgrimage, rather than merely transfer knowledge. Westerhoff’s metaphor of pilgrimage is dynamic, recognising that all children and families are active participants with a part to play. Relational models of ministry encompass equal sharing in the journey. This is demanding work, requiring reflection, reflexivity and appropriate support. Above all, it requires a deep listening, to God, self and all others involved. But this type of pilgrimage model emerges as a gift from the pandemic. It is a new, but yet old way forward.

The home and family must be seen as a strategic place for faith formation, equipped and empowered by the church. Parents must embrace the church as a partner, as they take their responsibility for their child’s spiritual formation. The church and family must bridge the gap, collaborating so that the children *will* have faith in the seasons ahead.

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