

# The Changing Nature of Ministry amongst Children and Families in the UK during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Empirical data was gathered from parents, grandparents, and practitioners, which revealed the impact of Covid-19 on UK children and family ministry. Prevailing restrictions and associated needs caused significant change in the nature of this ministry, and may not be temporary. Key observations were reduction in engagement of families with the church, shift in the volunteer structure for church-based children's activities, increased focus on family faith formation activities, and diversified individual faith journeys of children.

## Keywords

children's ministry, family ministry, Covid-19, parents, child's faith, church

## Introduction

Local churches and para-church organizations responded swiftly to the Covid-19 restrictions when they were initiated in March 2020. The continually evolving restrictions have significantly impacted the nature and practice of ministry amongst children and families. The unstinting efforts, creativity, and resilience of children's leaders (salaried and volunteer) across the UK during this unexpected and turbulent time have ensured that children's ministry has remained active in a variety of contexts and settings. Due to the prolonged nature of the pandemic and the immense

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impacts and changes, it is important to reflect upon what has occurred, what has been learned and how best practice may be identified and harnessed to improve the effectiveness of ongoing ministry. This article explores the issues, challenges, and progress that have occurred in ministry amongst children and families within the UK setting during this time. The aim is to foster reflection on children's faith nurture, uncover effective approaches, and disseminate beneficial strategies and tools.

### **Societal Impacts on Children during the Pandemic**

Pandemic-related school closures are thought to have affected the education of 80% of children worldwide (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). A suspected consequence of this was that children had gone backwards in terms of education, personal development, and physical fitness.<sup>1</sup> More broadly than education, these closures and associated restrictions also impacted children in terms of social isolation, well-being, and child protection (Crawley et al., 2020). Children reported having mixed emotions in lockdown; whilst many were happy and relaxed with their families, children also reported feeling fear, nervousness, worry, loneliness, sadness, boredom, and anger (Mondragon, 2020). There were significant inequalities evident with regard to home learning and provision of distance teaching by schools (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). The largest disparities seem to have been caused by poverty (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020) and special educational needs and disabilities (Toquero, 2020). Within this context, the reality was that whilst the risks to children (particularly vulnerable children) were increasing, the support mechanisms for both health and social services were withdrawn (Crawley et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is reported that 97% of parents were feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic circumstances,<sup>2</sup> which would compound the impact upon their children. Ultimately, Crawley et al. (2020) argued that the UK pandemic restrictions were not in the "best interest of the child" and hence contravened article 3 in the UN Convention on the rights of the child. To this end, Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) called for resources to support remote and in-person outreach strategies to reach at-risk children.

### **Changing Nature of Church**

The pandemic resulted in immediate and significant change in the nature of church.<sup>3</sup> UK churches were observed to have had a "huge" impact in delivering support and responding to the needs of their communities during lockdown.<sup>4</sup> However, the need to provide spiritual care remained despite the physical closure of churches (Ribeiro

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/ofsted-children-lockdown-impact-school-19302442>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/creatively-engaging-gen-z/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/changing-church>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/over-200-000-stories-of-hope-during-lockdown>

et al., 2020). Many churches adopted hybrid approaches,<sup>5</sup> also described as “click and brick”,<sup>6</sup> as the pandemic restrictions protracted. The essence of this was that churches strived to meet the needs of their faith community through both approaches, according to the individual needs within their congregation and the restrictions of the time and place. Such interaction was valuable in order to counteract the long-term adverse consequences of social isolation, hence connection within the church community was of great benefit. Indeed, Roberto et al. (2020) documented the positive correlation between spirituality and resilience. To this end, many faith-based settings identified innovative ways of providing virtual support during times of social distancing (Merry et al., 2020). Within children’s ministry also there was great creativity and adaptiveness in order to facilitate online delivery of Sunday school-type activities (Holmes, 2020). Conversely, Barna (<https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>) revealed that 32% of practicing Christians ceased contact with their church during the pandemic, and were not accessing online outputs. Whilst statistics for children’s engagement with church are not available, it is likely that it may have been a similar statistic. Indeed, many church leaders reported that children and youth ministry was the largest challenge that they faced.<sup>7</sup> In the UK context, this was exacerbated by the fact that in the UK many salaried children’s workers were furloughed. This article therefore seeks to investigate the implications of this on children’s ministry.

### Ministry in Times of Crisis

The pandemic resulted in the visibility of trauma symptoms amongst congregations, in part due to the loss of safe assumptions about the stability of the world alongside reduced relational connections within church communities (Kaze Yemtsa, 2021). Ross (2021) documented the manifestations of this such as awkwardness of social distancing, disruption to everyday life, pain and sorrow, emotional trauma, anxiety and stress. Within this context, Roberts (2021) highlighted the need for theological listening—not only to individual narratives but also to the “sounds” of the pandemic. Such practice leads to greater awareness and attentiveness to arising ministry needs. This in turn will result in the Church being proactive rather than passive in their response to trauma and loss (Harrington, 2021).

One particular aspect of need which Harrington (2021) observed was the intrinsic need of humans to find meaning and order amidst traumatic events such as the pandemic, and hence emphasized the requirement for the church to provide the necessary language and tools to facilitate reflection and spiritual searching in order to find meaning. Indeed, Beamish (2021) analyzed the content of preaching discourses in the early part of the pandemic, demonstrating the need for ministry to be

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-tim-keller/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/digital-church-five-lessons-from-lockdown>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/creatively-engaging-gen-z/>

continually reflective and responsive to the needs of those being served. The distinctive and continuous changes that have occurred throughout pandemic ministry have been incredibly overwhelming and draining for many (Ross, 2021), yet Brueggemann (2011) argued that disrupting the systems, continuities, predictable schemes and plans may be positive, and indeed evidence of God's capacity to break those schemes and formulae and bring good outcomes. Indeed, Kaze Yemtsa (2021) observed that the pandemic has led to increased self-assessment and reflection, and called for the Church to draw meaningful insights to enrich and improve ministry approaches. This sense of reflecting on ministry in order to improve its effectiveness and reach resonates strongly with reported experiences of UK children and family ministries during this season.

## **Methodology**

This research sought to grasp the underlying principles of practical theology by examining contextually the embodied experiences of children and families during the pandemic. By listening to participant narratives and reflecting theologically upon their lived experiences, we sought to capture the spiritual potential of listening (Roberts, 2021). The methodological orientation for this qualitative research is interpretive description, which was adopted due to its ability to explore the complex, experiential questions and issues that practitioners were reporting (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). The practical and versatile nature of this approach enabled the research to capture and inform real-world, applied practice (Michaelson, 2020).

Individual and small group interviews took place online, using the Zoom interface. They explored in-depth the experiences of participants with regard to children's faith nurture during the pandemic. Participants were recruited by distributing invitations in relevant online forums and networks, and represented a broad range of denominations and geographical settings across the UK. The sample of fifty-five interviewees included eight parents, thirteen grandparents, twenty-two voluntary and salaried children's workers, four Diocesan advisors, and eight representatives from children's ministry resource or training providers. They comprised nine male and forty-six female participants.

The interview protocols were subject to the ethical scrutiny of Liverpool Hope University, providing all respondents with assurance that their contributions would be handled in a secure and respectful manner, including the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The interviews followed a semi-structured style, asking about the participants experiences of children and family ministry between March and November 2020, their frustrations, ideas and approaches which they had found effective, what they perceived children had missed during the pandemic restrictions upon churches, their aims going forward, and the role of children's teams and the wider church. The interview data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and grouped into emerging themes and patterns.

## Results

### Experiences of Children's Ministry

All respondents reported that this period had been akin to a journey, with many trials and discoveries along the way. One stated that “there has been no clear aim throughout. We have rambled our way through this time, responding to the needs of our families as best we could . . . responding to where our children find themselves.” There was a sense of fluidity and evolution of ministry style as a result of the continual change. One stated that it had been “so hard to sustain children’s ministry throughout constant change.” Whilst many relished an opportunity to try new ideas, some observed that new activities tended to have a considerably shorter “shelf life” than they would have previously.

Some UK churches (unrepresented in interviews, but reported by para-church representatives) had not provided any children’s activities for the entirety of the pandemic. Some had not provided anything online during the first lockdown, but did during the second national lockdown. Many initially produced pre-recorded material, but then utilized interactive modes of delivery including “Zoom” sessions, “Facebook Live” and “YouTube Live.” In most cases, the online content was generic and provided no possibility of adaptation for children with additional needs. The majority of churches represented had provided distinct activities for children and adults, although a small number were providing all age components as part or whole of a service. Some had added midweek Zoom sessions for smaller numbers of children, since they saw the value of “quality over quantity” in their approach. A multi-faceted approach had been adopted over time by 85% of the interviewees; comprising, for example, a Zoom session and delivery of activity packs. Doorstep visits and delivering activity packs served as opportunities for pastoral contact and care, and the activities provided tangible links to the faith community. Most participants had not restarted formal face-to-face children’s sessions at all during the nine-month period. However, many had held sporadic and informal face-to-face meetings, such as Muddy Church, family picnics and treasure hunts. In the cases where face-to-face church meetings had restarted, many children with additional needs struggled since one-to-one support during services had not been available.

Participants reported that traditional Sunday school resources did not translate well to the new online arena, therefore 75% of participants were devising their own activities for use in the online sessions. They found online networking groups and webinars had boosted their creativity and enthusiasm. However, district advisory workers and resource providers reported that many churches struggled with creativity and flexibility, so turned to resource providers or regional advisors to coach them individually in establishing appropriate approaches for their context. Overall, the resource providers who participated reported that initially many churches purchased activity leaflets to distribute to church families. However, this soon evolved to requests for online material as churches attempted more interactive sessions from

May and June 2020. Consequently, adaptations to pre-existing material were made available. Churches later requested hybrid activities, so materials were re-produced accordingly. Resource providers reported a surge of new clients before the second national lockdown, when many began online children's provision for the first time.

Despite some initial enthusiasm from many, online engagement of families reduced over time in all settings represented, particularly in regions where restrictions had been prolonged. Many were unsure how many families were engaging with their online activities, although a few gave approximate figures of between a third and a half of their pre-Covid families maintaining engagement with church. One participant stated that it had always been a struggle to fully engage families in church, but this had now become intensified and more obvious, which was "depressing." Many interviewees were concerned of the long-term implications of this disengagement and the increasing disparity between the children who continued to engage regularly and those who did not. One children's worker emphasized that the children who had not connected online at all during the pandemic had become incredibly disconnected with the faith community, and would feel like "outsiders" once ministries re-opened. Another described having met a young child from church in the local park. Despite previously having a good relationship, the child had not recognized the children's worker due to not seeing them for nine months. She expressed sadness at being viewed as a "stranger" to the child, and asserted that the widespread loss of children's familiarity with both the church space and people will have significant implications when churches re-open. Alongside this, one respondent conveyed that children have lost the notion of corporate faith. Another worried that the provision of children's activities online has fostered a consumerism mentality and notion of faith as an individual and private activity. They believed that these two attitudes could have long-term implications for children's ministry.

## **Children's Ministry Teams**

Of the twenty-two churches represented, only two felt confident that their pre-Covid volunteer team was intact at the time of the interview. Participants reported that many of their regular volunteers had already expressed a desire to withdraw from involvement, or they had seen indications that this would occur. Reasons included older volunteers who felt vulnerable, and parents who felt too busy or overwhelmed. Equally, many long-serving volunteers decided that the pandemic church closures provided a natural end-point for their involvement. Another aspect was that the pandemic had altered the "role description" of children's volunteers, and many were not comfortable with the revised role. For example, the main focus in many settings had become video production rather than pastoral care. Furthermore, where there were salaried workers, they had in many cases initially taken on the majority of the work to release pressure on volunteers, which had become a pattern as the pandemic continued. A further nuance was that where salaried team members had been placed on furlough, it became difficult for the remainder of the team to function. This

- Lots of different needs and preferences within the faith community.
- Many children were struggling to engage with online activities, particularly those under five years old.
- Feedback from parents and families was very sparse.
- Uptake was often minimal, and had decreased over time.
- It was hard to know how engaged children were during the sessions (their attendance didn't necessarily equal engagement).
- Families often didn't complete the "take home" activities.

**Figure 1.** Frustrations reported by participants.

overall trend of disengagement of children's volunteer teams was very concerning to those interviewed.

This all led to a prevailing low mood and sense of weariness, frustration, and disappointment amongst the majority of children's workers and volunteers. Figure 1 shows some of the frustrations communicated during the interviews. One children's worker described feeling a process of grief over what had been lost. Another stated that "it's so easy to feel that we are failing at helping children get closer to God because we are so limited in these times. I know that I am not responsible. God is. But it's very hard because my job is to disciple children but there is so much of that I can't do at the moment." In cases where children's workers had been furloughed, there was deep sadness that they had been unable to minister amongst children and families during that time of great need. There were some positive responses, whereby a third of interviewees welcomed the opportunity to pause and re-evaluate programs. One children's worker expressed that she had opted to access online training webinars where previously she had not had time. Nevertheless, overall there was a strong sense of fatigue, exhaustion, and disappointment.

## Relationships

One of the over-riding themes was relational connection with the children. All interviewees described this as a significant loss. A number of participants reported that where relationships between children and families were strong prior to the pandemic, this has been strengthened. However, where such relationships were weak or non-existent this has been exacerbated. To combat this, churches increasingly turned to modes of delivery such as Zoom as the pandemic restrictions continued. In fact, one participant observed that through the social opportunities during Zoom sessions, the children who had attended regularly online had developed and deepened their relational connection within the church family. However, many others reported that it was incredibly challenging to maintain a relational connection between the children through this medium. Furthermore, one participant reported difficulty with this mode of delivery since their church comprised children who were fostered and adopted, so safeguards had to be rigorous in order to protect the

children. Where congregations lived in the locality of the church building, it was easier to maintain contact with and between families, than those with geographically disparate congregations. One participant reflected that their “church congregation was scattered geographically, meaning that church was not the center of their lives. Families accessed support networks elsewhere. This has caused our church to become a very fractured community.” In response to this, one children’s worker reported the immense value in visiting families at their front door, something that was not usually possible due to time restrictions.

## **The Family Context**

There was a strong sense from all participants that parents felt overwhelmed by the demands of the pandemic, including working from home, home-schooling and reduced availability of support networks. Whilst there were some positives expressed, including quality family time, the majority had struggled significantly. There was distinct awareness that parents had lost their support networks, and churches found it hard to support them effectively. Nevertheless, many provided pastoral support through phone calls, doorstep visits, and kindness acts.

Whilst some families relished the opportunity to focus more on faith in the home, many did not. Without exception, the interview participants all expressed that significant proportions of the parents in their church were very limited in their faith activities in the home, if at all. The perceptions of respondents were that this was sometimes due to a lack of awareness or availability of time and energy to be proactive in this role, whilst others felt ill-equipped and lacked confidence. Pressures and expectations upon parents to increase their commitment to nurturing their child’s faith during this time were felt insensitive and unrealistic by many parents. A notion frequently mentioned in the interviews was that children’s faith nurture has become professionalized in contemporary times, so that parents frequently entrusted the responsibility of this to salaried church workers. Many interviewees expressed that when churches were physically closed, displacing the responsibility back into the home context, many felt ill-equipped and disempowered as a result of the pre-existing understanding and arrangement. Conversely, parents felt they had been bombarded with too much information about family faith without any contextualization, exploration, or support in the early stages of the pandemic.

All of the children’s workers explained that they saw a great divide: between those parents for whom faith was practiced, modelled, and encouraged regularly in the home throughout the pandemic, and those for whom it happened rarely, possibly not at all. They expressed significant concerns about the long-term consequences of this disparity. All the interview participants stated that they could see children’s faith thriving where faith was evident in the home context, but for those parents who did not engage in faith practices with their children, it was clear that the child’s faith was not growing. With this in mind, many interviewees sought to support and encourage parents in this role largely through provision of activity packs, prompts, and ideas for



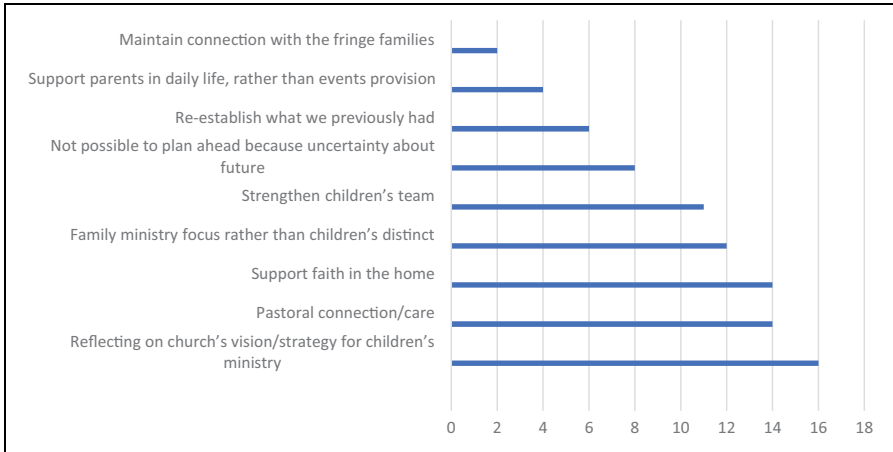
use by families in their own time. Some sought to provide hybrid sessions to encourage children and their parents to participate together, hoping to promote the idea of faith sharing in the home context.

## **Families Comprising Children with Additional Needs**

Not many participants raised this topic or demonstrated awareness of how families with additional needs had coped during the pandemic. When asked, the most frequent response was that churches did not know how they could help these families within the restrictions but had sought to support through telephone calls and doorstep visits. Regional advisers and resource providers relayed their first-hand observations and direct reports from families of children with additional needs; that the pandemic had been an overwhelmingly negative experience for them. Some reported that the strict structure and consistency had been helpful for those with additional needs. For those who found social engagement challenging prior to Covid, online connection with church seemed more beneficial. However, the long-term implications of this social withdrawal are yet unknown. This aside, the vast majority of parents of special needs children (according to the regional and national ministry organizations interviewed) felt isolated and abandoned by churches during the restrictions. Most support services and structures ceased at the commencement of the first lockdown and only partially re-opened, meaning that parents and carers were the sole support for their children, placing immense burdens upon them. One church worker observed that the faith of many additional needs families was “hanging by a thread” as a result of their experiences with church during the pandemic. These families were keen to be noticed and included, and wanted their struggles to be known, and not forgotten by the church family. Some expressed appreciation for help with shopping, collecting prescriptions, and deliveries of ready-cooked food. Some reported that churches had made contact to ask what type of support they needed. However, many of the families explained that they had not heard from anybody in church during the pandemic. A clear correlation was reported: that the extent to which churches engaged effectively with additional needs families significantly impacted the spiritual state of both the parents/carers and children.

## **Looking Ahead**

When thinking about the future, all participants expressed concern in some way about the nature of children’s ministry after the pandemic. The majority stated that they worried about the long-term consequences because of the uncertainty of when it would be possible to re-start children’s ministry unrestricted. Responses regarding their intentions for the medium-term are shown in Figure 2. On one hand, some reported that they wished to evaluate their ministry strategy going forward, for example: “I got lazy before, so it’s been an opportunity to be creative and think



**Figure 2.** Participants' medium-term plans.

outside the box.” Conversely, some stated in essence that: “I don’t feel I have the capacity to bring in new ideas . . . I’m just too tired.” There was an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about the future, with many expressing concern that they didn’t know “who would come back to church when restrictions are relaxed,” and alongside this many conveyed that they felt the need to work hard to rebuild the church community. Another expressed that there may be a need to “scale back” the children’s ministry for a season in order to re-ignite interest in it and consequently build willingness to recruit new volunteers. (This was in connection with the reduction in numbers observed in volunteers on children’s teams.) Another suggestion was that a “recovery curriculum” for children was needed due to time missed at church. This aligns with the notion that youth ministry needs to incorporate awareness of PTSD in the post-Covid era.<sup>8</sup>

Families with additional needs asked to be included in the next steps, rather than forgotten as restrictions eased. This call arose because many churches did not continue online provision during previous phased reopening, preventing those for whom physical attendance was not possible or practical to maintain engagement. This was very hurtful for families who felt that churches prioritized and focused on physical attendance, resulting in exclusion if it was not possible to attend. Many families called for a hybrid approach to be sustained long-term in order to facilitate engagement of children who have additional needs. They warned against tokenism, and argued that there should be an all-inclusive approach, for example the content could be broadcast from home as well as the church building, to demonstrate true inclusivity.

<sup>8</sup> <https://youthministry.com/a-post-covid-priority/>

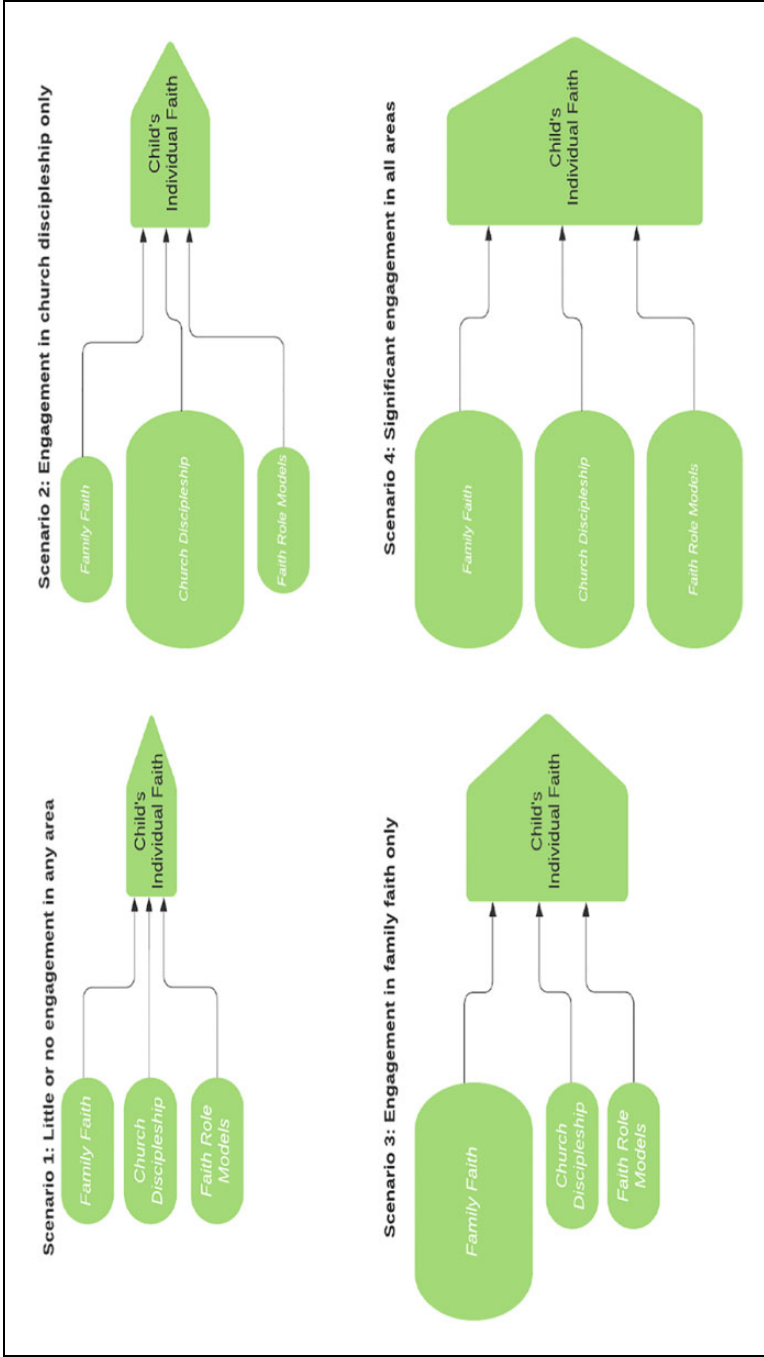
## Discussion

### Experiences of Children

There was significant awareness in the focus groups regarding the greatly varied nature in which each child had experienced the pandemic. Besides the educational, physical health and mental health impacts, the way that children's faith had been fostered was also significantly altered. Figure 3 provides some examples of scenarios explained by participants. The diagrams are not to scale, but seek to depict participants' descriptions. In the first scenario, the child has experienced minimal contact with faith activity either in the home or church context (online or face to face). Many children's workers reported that this was a prevalent scenario in their locality and they consequently worried about the child's faith nurture and development. The second scenario was the most commonly reported, whereby children had little or no faith activity in the home context but were engaging with church in some way—whether that be online or face to face. As the diagram shows, many reported that the contact which children had was largely through discipleship activities specifically targeted for children, rather than relational contact providing them with role models of faith (other than the children's leaders who did fill this role to some extent). The children's teams hoped that this would enable children's faith to thrive but they were concerned that the limited input from only one angle would impede this, having future consequences upon the nature of the child's faith.

The third scenario depicts a child whose family is very active with regard to faith activity in the home setting, but was not connecting with church during the pandemic. This was the least reported scenario by participants, due largely to the nature of the sample who had responded to the research invitation through their church link, so had maintained connection with church at the time. Participants explained that they thought the child's faith would be successfully fostered by this approach, but acknowledged that they did not accurately know the impact on the child's faith due to the fact that they had little or no contact with the family at the present time. Inevitably, the nature of family faith activities will vary greatly, according to family ethos, beliefs, and style. However, the general feeling amongst the participants was that regardless of the form and shape of family faith, it would enable a child's faith to thrive, probably more so than in the first two scenarios. The fourth scenario was the most ideal one according to all focus group participants; whereby children would gain discipleship and relational modeling of faith from both the home and church context. Participants unanimously agreed that this scenario would result in a child's faith thriving, despite the pandemic situation.

Further to the above scenarios, many children with additional needs had different experiences. Some had felt valued and included through pandemic children's ministry. But many had felt isolated and excluded. Hence, whilst the example scenarios depicted in Figure 3 may look similar for children with additional needs, the effectiveness of contact or engagement which they have had with the church community



**Figure 3.** Some examples of children's different faith experiences during the pandemic (NB not to scale).

during the pandemic may be significantly different. Indeed, many reported that the pandemic experiences had exacerbated pre-existing barriers of their child's access to discipleship opportunities in the church setting. Equally, in families with additional needs, faith activities in the home context may be of a different nature and value than is evident in other settings.

The nature of the discussion above represents a significant awareness amongst participants that once children's groups restart in the post-pandemic era, each child present would have had a different experience of faith activity during the pandemic season. Interviewees were acutely aware of the disparities. In the same way that school closures are expected to have detrimental social and health consequences for children living in poverty, and are likely to exacerbate existing inequalities (Lancker and Parolin, 2020), the impact of church closures is greater on families with a "spiritual poverty," namely those children with limited access to faith resources and activities. Indeed, Byrant, Oo, and Damian (2020) highlighted that children from poorer backgrounds and different skin colors often face greater challenges. A similar disparity has been revealed by this empirical data: children whose parents do not actively participate in faith activities in the home have been significantly hindered in their faith journey during the physical closure of church-based children's activities. Many children's workers worried about how they could provide a "one size fits all" type of session when children had experienced faith in such diverse ways for a significant length of time. Indeed, many reported that traditional modes of Sunday school-type delivery simply would not meet this need, and hence they would need to develop models of working much more individually or in smaller groups of children in order to meet their needs most effectively. This issue requires attention as part of the development of post-pandemic children's ministry, in order to ensure that children's spiritual needs are most effectively met. The role of adults who seek to nurture children's faith in this situation may be to listen to and advocate for the needs of each individual child in their group (Fuller, 2001; Hart, 2003; Turner, 2014) and ensure that each child feels valued and included (Shier-Jones, 2009; Beckwith, 2010; Berryman, 2013; Willmer and White, 2013). This is particularly true of children with additional needs, who may well struggle to re-integrate back into church post-pandemic.

## **The Role of Family**

Many churches reported significantly reduced engagement from many of their families as the pandemic continued, which could be due to the provision of activities not matching the needs of parents and families. There was also a realization that churches had frequently made unrealistic demands upon Christian families, such as expectations regarding attendance or engagement with church activities (either online or face to face), volunteering requests to busy parents, and provision of "homework" type activities. At times, where these pressures had felt too much, the families had withdrawn contact with the church, whilst children's teams were

unaware of the reason and possibly continued to make these requests in an attempt to engage with the families. However, many families expressed the need to simply be valued, accepted, and relationally supported by the church during the pandemic. This is echoed by David Kinnaman's encouragement for churches to make systematic contact with children and their families.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, where churches had focused on maintaining relational connection with families, this had been successful in fostering engagement of the families. Children's workers reported realization during the pandemic that relational connections were more important and effective than provision of events and activities. This contrasts with an expectation often upheld by churches for big, high-profile events or predetermined programs for children (Gurian, 2002; Hart, 2003; Beckwith, 2010). These may be highly valued by churches, but this empirical data indicates that it is not what children and families actually need, particularly during pandemic or post-pandemic ministry. There is a clear call from all interview participants for churches to attentively and genuinely listen to children and parents during this phase, in order that their needs may be most effectively met. This is particularly important for those who feel disconnected and undervalued, including families with additional needs.

The focus groups revealed a significant disconnect between churches who believed that parents should be more proactive in faith activities in the home during church closures, versus the reality of parents who were feeling overwhelmed and pressured by the prevailing situation. In order to resolve this disconnect, a notion of collaboration and a partnership between church and parents was emerging as a desire of both parties. This would support each family in developing their own unique identity as a household of faith (Barna, 2019), incorporating their own ethos and heritage of faith in order to meet the specific needs of their family unit. Rather than a bombardment of ideas sheets and resources, many parents desired more relational approaches, akin to personal mentors or guides, providing support and insight according to the specific needs that arose within their family, particularly at times when issues arose. This approach was particularly desired by families with additional needs.

## **The Changed Nature of Children and Family Ministry**

It is clear that the sudden shift of children's ministry to online delivery was incredibly taxing on children's leaders, causing them to unexpectedly shift their focus from face-to-face pastoral work to video recording and editing. The limitations and frustrations of this process has left many feeling demoralized. This concurs with the uncertainty and stress experienced by schoolteachers when schools closed physically and teaching began remotely (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The effects of this were cognitively and emotionally taxing and impacted upon the teacher's professional identity (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Indeed, UNESCO (2020) emphasized a plethora of

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/future-kids-ministry/>

adverse consequences of school closures. It is therefore critical that the local and national church pay attention to the adverse consequences for children of churches being physically closed for the protracted period.

Whilst many churches engaged in social action,<sup>10</sup> empirical data indicated that support for children and families significantly shrank during the pandemic. This follows the mainstream trend observed by Crawley et al. (2020) that whilst the risk to children had increased, the support mechanisms in both the NHS and social services were being withdrawn. The majority of families with additional needs expressed that similar was true of support from churches. Despite calls for increased investment in the mainstream children's sector to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on children in the short and long term (Byrant, Oo, & Damian, 2020), this study revealed that investment by churches in child-serving ministry has frequently been minimal during the pandemic and in the majority of cases has been a lower priority than adult-serving ministries. This was demonstrated by significant numbers of children and family workers being furloughed, and the withdrawal of many volunteers from children's teams, conveying the message that discipleship and pastoral support of children and families is not of primary concern or priority. However, Kinnaman remarked that this is simply a consequence of limited time and resources.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, this could have immense implications upon future generations of the Church, so must be addressed during the forthcoming seasons.

## Looking to the Future

Traditional modes of discipleship were considered inadequate for use during the pandemic situation. However, it is proposed that they may also be inadequate for the post-pandemic phase, due to the changed landscape of society. Gough (2019) stated that ministry must adapt contextually and relationally to meet the spiritual needs of children in their own setting. Congregations must therefore examine whether their existing ministry structures and principles serve children appropriately and effectively (Strommen & Hardel, 2000; Beckwith, 2010), in order that they help rather than hinder them on their faith journey.

During the post-pandemic era, a clear strategy needs to be developed on a local scale in order to capture and respond to the trends and patterns emerging above and most effectively meet the needs of children and families in their locality. This includes attentiveness to individual faith journeys, working closely with individuals or small groups to facilitate good quality and meaningful interactions, relational connections to model faith practically, intentional relational connection rather than taking it for granted, collaboration between parents and church, and listening to children and their parents. These strands all contrast with the structured church

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/news/latest-news/all-news/churches-challenge-food-poverty-with-latest-resource-on-foodbanks/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/future-kids-ministry/>

programs which have been somewhat prioritized in contemporary times.<sup>12</sup> Yet the pandemic has highlighted the value in slowing down and having less packed timetables, and also the value of working on a small scale. This indicates the need for greater emphasis on one-to-one and small group working in order that it is more bespoke to the needs of individual children and families. This may also facilitate greater engagement and effectiveness to support children with additional needs.


On a national scale, it is imperative that the deficit of investment and attention to child-serving ministry is rectified. A significant challenge to this is the fact that both financial means and volunteer teams have significantly shrunk during the pandemic. Almost unanimously, participants reported depleted children's teams. Therefore, a call needs to be made both within the local and national church for adults to step forward and serve children in this way. This seems essential to maintain future generations of the church. It may mean a shift in strategy and approach of churches in order to facilitate this, so that if resources and energy are limited, a greater focus is placed on child-serving rather than adult-serving ministry. Alternatively, a change in approach could seek to serve family units rather than adults and children as distinct entities.

## Conclusion

The aim of this project was to aid reflection on children's faith nurture, and investigate approaches, strategies, and tools. The findings arising from the data indicate significant issues and concerns for ministry amongst children and families in the post-pandemic era. Hence, careful consideration must occur in order to formulate appropriate strategies going forward, both at the local and national level. This undoubtedly demands increased investment in child-focused ministry.

It is clear that the pandemic was unexpected, requiring churches and children's teams to respond reactively according to the ever-changing situation. However, it is also clear that the prolonged season of uncertainty and constant change has not served children well. It is imperative that UK churches are aware of the changing needs within families during the pandemic and beyond in order that ministry amongst them may be most effective. Pivotal strands of the strategy for ministry amongst families may include increased awareness of children's individual faith experiences and pathways, greater collaboration with parents in nurturing children's faith, and a focus on smaller-scale relational connections with children and their families.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://markgriffiths.net/2018/11/05/it-seems-to-me-that-the-christian-church-has-a-glorious-future/>



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