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A qualitative inquiry into Christian faith transmission in the family context

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ABSTRACT

These empirical findings contribute to knowledge regarding Christian faith transmission in the family context, where assumptions are largely un-tested and ideas frequently accepted with minimal critical engagement. The findings presented are part of a three-year empirical research programme comprising in-depth interviews with parents and children in the UK annually, enabling a longitudinal mapping of the child's faith and examination into how family faith activity and involvement may impact it. Play-based interview activities were devised to access authentic and accurate insights into the child's beliefs, perceptions and faith experiences. The data collected was correlated with information about family faith practices and activities to explore potential connections between the two. The 26 case study Christian families revealed fascinating inferences, including that faith discussion in the home is a more significant influence on a child's faith than church attendance, Bible reading or family prayer time. It was striking that the child participants tended to emulate the faith of the parent that they were relationally closest to, reflecting the notion of attachment theory. Some practical implications of these findings are proposed to contribute to the dialogue amidst churches, Christian families and academic contexts regarding how faith may be most effectively transmitted to future generations.

Introduction

> Jesus is a fake! Jesus is a fake!

This phrase was chanted by two sisters, aged five and six as they marched around the church hall during the craft time of 'JAM Club', a midweek evangelistic group at a Church in Northwest England, UK. The group organiser asked them about their statement. Their response was that their grandparents (who were raising them) had said that Jesus was a fake, and they thought that their grandparents were very clever because they had lots of books. So, the girls concluded that Jesus was indeed a fake.

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This encounter marked the beginning of an exploration of the role of family in a child's faith journey. A three-year qualitative inquiry took place in Northwest England, UK, whereby empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews and question-naires with parents and play-based interviews with children. This paper is part of a wider project which visited 26 children annually to track changes in their family faith ethos and activity and explore the extent to which this may impact the child's faith. This paper focusses on the data collected during the first year of the study to contribute to under-standing of this subject area. The aim is to inform those actively supporting parents in passing their faith onto their children and to facilitate critique of vague traditions and un-tested notions which Bengston (2013) argued was very much needed in order to improve effectiveness of faith nurture.

Faith in the early years

Gottlieb (2006) stated that the aim of Christian nurture is to impart knowledge, cultivate commitments, train ritual competence, sustain community and stimulate experiences, implying that faith is passed on by human means. This aligns with the traditionally held notion of Bushnell (1861) that Christian nurture was important as part of the child's early life experiences so that they would experience the 'regenerating power of God', insinuating that parental requirements are merely to enable an instinctive and God-given faith to blossom. In contrast, Wangerin (1986) described 'faithing' as being a universal experience in all children, regardless of how their culture and language explains reality for them. This concurs with the notion of children being spiritually mature (Berry-man 2017) and actively generating theological meaning themselves (Csinos 2020). Such universality distinguishes faith from being that which is passed on, but rather something inherent. The Apostle Paul spoke of faith being a gift from God to believers in Romans 12, and Berkouwer (1958) emphasised God's faithfulness as a divine work of grace rather than the result of an individual's actions. God's word is said to awaken an action that is innate, rather than invade an individual or impose upon their will (Von Balthasar 1971). This high-lights the need to support and equip a child in responding to God's gift. It is equally important to take seriously the voice of the child within this discussion (Strhan 2019), hence the methodology of this project incorporated the child's voice.

This sense of a combination of God's gift and human enabling is reflected by King (2013), who stated that spiritual literacy does not just evolve, but rather needs to be fos-tered and nurtured, and is connected to a primal trust in life, an openness to the future and the search for spiritual energy resources. In contrast, Willmer and White (2013) argued that young children are inherently open to God and faith because they are not hindered by any intellectual, moral, aesthetic or religious 'a priori'. Such 'infinite openness' (Hins-dale 2001), may result in a child being open and receptive to God's gift of grace. This again points towards an innate condition. Historically Bushnell (1861) believed that each child came into the world as the recipient of a unique spiritual legacy due to their parents bequeathing a range of prejudices to their child even before birth. This un-testa-ble suggestion runs alongside the assertion that parents programme their child in infancy by passing on what they have learned and transferring parental feelings (Berne 1972), which is supported by many widely accepted theories of learning in early childhood (for example Bruner 1960; Bowlby, 1969; Erikson 1963; Gesell 1954; Rousseau 1762;

Vygotsky 1978). Indeed, aspects of family life are associated with how a child experiences and relates to God (Dalton, Dollahite, and Marks 2018; Smith and Adamczyk 2020). Further to this, Rizzuto (1979) described a child's construction of God as being formed through constant reshaping and rethinking during a child's early experiences. Berryman (2017), Allen (2018) and Csinos (2020) have also documented the ability of a child to construct mature theological thinking. Indeed, Strhan (2019) observed that attending to childhood experiences of religion shifts perceptions and deepens understandings of day-to-day realities. This paper examines this more fully.

Christian faith transmission in the family context

The first three years of life are key in forming lifelong attitudes and dispositions (Berne 1972; Morgenthaler 2001) and attachment theory is widely viewed as significant in the development of young children (Bowlby 1969). Equally, early attachment has been shown to be spiritually significant (Surr 2011), whereby healthy attachment enables a child's faith to be fostered effectively. Indeed, an individual's beliefs of self and others which are formed in the early years impact upon their styles of relating to others, including God, for the duration of their life (Clinton and Straub 2010). Effective faith transmission hence operates within and alongside the attachment relationships of a child.

Many have documented the impact of early influences on a child's faith (for example Bushnell 1861; Westerhoff 1976; Nye 2009; King 2013; Allen 2018; Smith and Adamczyk 2020) and transmission of God's commandments throughout daily living was instructed to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. Thompson's (1996) notion of the family being a 'forming centre' echoes this concept of spiritual formation through everyday activities. Equally, Roberto (2020, 85) argued that 'developing the spiritual and religious life of children has never been more important for religious congregations'. The vocation of parenting has been described as fathers and mothers acting as apostles, bishops and priests to their children (Strohl 2001), with some viewing the role of parents as restoration and refining of the image of God in their children (Guroian 2001). Contemporary parents often lack confidence in their beliefs and faith affiliations (Bengston 2013), which could impact upon their approach to faith transmission. Indeed, Roberto (2020) emphasised that the parent's role in a child's faith formation also requires others to contribute so that the child's broader ecology of faith is more comprehensive, and hence more effective. Equally, Allen (2012) affirmed the value of intergenerational Christian experiences for children. Nevertheless, Powell (2014) highlighted the need for Christian parents to have a deliberate plan and intentionality about their child's faith, although Harris (1998) would disagree, believing that parents are less influential than society would suggest. Alongside this, Yust (2012) cites a problematic division between congregational children's ministries and household faith practices.

Healthy faith transmission would maintain the child's simplicity and openness (Hay and Nye 1998), hence nurturing a child's faith should not be an imposition or something foreign to the child (Cavalletti 1983), but rather a response to the child's deep craving (Ratcliff and May 2004). Allen (2012) observed that this can occur naturally in the midst of regular family interactions, whilst Yust (2012) espoused the value of quality intergenerational experiences within a child's worshipping community. Bengston (2013) found that allowing children religious choice encouraged continuity of involvement and

commitment to faith. Equally, Hay and Nye (1998) suggested that adults should not feel the need to 'go searching' for spiritual experiences or to engineer them happening, but rather to foster the child's ability to simply receive from God and be part of his Kingdom, regardless of spiritual or other activity. This concurs with the missio Dei, whereby the work of God is not limited to organised activities or institutions (Bosch, 2011).

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader empirical project which investigated the effectiveness of approaches to Christian nurture in a three-year longitudinal study, comprising annual interviews of parent and child in the home context. The 26 children included a cross-section of ages, genders, denomination affiliation of the family, and geographical spread across Northwest England, although a range of socio-economic groupings was not possible due to participant willingness and availability. Eighty-eight percent were white British with the remaining 12% of other ethnicities. All of these families labelled themselves as 'Christian', and there were participants from Church of England, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Free Church and Evangelical churches. Interviewing the families on an annual basis permitted the researcher to view snapshots of the child's faith and discuss family life with parents and children to gain insight into faith-related practices that took place and assess the impact that these practices may have had on the child's faith. This paper reports from the data collected in the first year. Naturalistic observation was deemed important for the purposes of this study, because if the interviews were completed at church or school, for example, the child may have responded as per the protocols and expectations of that setting (Greig and Taylor 2013). In addition, the children felt more open and relaxed in their home context, providing more accurate and natural responses.

Due to children's limited attention span (Heller 1986), and concerns about the children feeling intimidated by an unknown adult (Lowe, 2020), play-based interview activities were adopted (Holmes 2019) to enable the child to communicate more freely and naturally, and without restrictions of their verbal competencies. The children were encouraged to shape the agenda and be involved in practical and tangible ways, such as drawing, role playing, modelling, building, browsing through children's Bibles and listening to excerpts of Christian music, rather than merely verbal activities (Greig and Taylor 2013; O'Kane 2001; Prior 2016; Winter 2016). The children led the order, length and pace of these individual activities, although the interviewer did steer it in part so as to achieve the research objectives. These participatory methods enabled the children to describe their own reality and feelings, rather than being limited by answering pre-set questions within an agenda fixed by the researcher. The researcher observed and documented the child's faith in two broad categories: existing aspects of faith to be valued and nurtured (labelled 'being'), and aspects to be developed and cultivated (labelled 'becoming') (Holmes 2016).

The parents were interviewed after the children to prevent the parental responses influencing those of their children. A self-completion questionnaire gathered some of the information that was potentially sensitive for the parent to verbalise during the interview, particularly since the child was most likely present during parental interviews. This included parents explaining their child's additional needs, contrasting faith involvement of parents, and their child's frustrations or difficulties. The parental interview allowed the

researcher to probe more fully into influences on parental practices and beliefs and faith activities in the home.

Complying with ethical guidelines (Greig and Taylor 2013), the research was designed so that parents would continue their existing practices and behaviours, and these would be documented. The correlation of these family practices with the child's faith was investigated over the three years to establish the extent of impact of the family faith activity on the individual child's faith. There was a concern that panel conditioning could occur over the three-year period. It was indeed observed in some families that the very act of investigating faith transmission within the home raised the issue to the forefront within the family, thus increasing their faith activity as a family. Whilst ultimately this may be viewed as positive, it may have slightly distorted the results. However, it only occurred in a very small number of cases.

Empirical findings

This paper discusses data collected in the first year of the longitudinal study, which was part of a wider study in which data was collected for three years. The mode of data collection and analysis permitted the child's faith to be numerically correlated with various aspects of faith nurture (church attendance, family Bible use, prayer activity and discussion about faith). Figure 1 shows the Pearson correlations for the elements of Christian nurture investigated, against the 'being', 'becoming' and 'total childhood faith' aspects (according to the observations in the year 1 interview). The mean and range of values are also displayed.

Impact of church attendance

The mean score for church attendance achieved by participating families was 4.90, which is only slightly under the maximum possible of 5. This reflects the fact that participant

	Mean and Range	'Being' aspects	'Becoming' aspects	'Total aspects of childhood faith'
Church Attendance	4.90 (Minimum 1, Maximum 5)	.315 .117 sig	.210 .304 sig	.282 .163 sig
Family Bible Usage	3.19 (Minimum 1, Maximum 5)	.297 .140 sig	.072 .726 sig	.186 .363 sig
Family Prayer Activity	3.68 (Minimum 1, Maximum 5)	.367 .065 sig	.175 .393 sig	.284 .160 sig
Faith Discussion in the Home	3.73 (Minimum 1, Maximum 5)	.521** .006 sig	.266 .189 sig	.414* .035 sig
Total Family Faith Activities	15.37 (Minimum 4, Maximum 20)	.432* .027 sig	.247 .223 sig	.361 .070 sig

Figure 1. Pearson correlations and significance levels (based on the year 1 findings) (* = significant at the 0.05 level, ** = significant at the 0.01 level).

families were recruited through churches, since it was desired that all participants would label themselves as active in the Christian faith. The correlation between church attendance and 'total aspects of childhood faith' values is .282, with a significance of .163. It is no surprise that there appears to be little correlation between church attendance and a child's faith, since many of the children interviewed attend church regularly yet they displayed a broad spectrum of faith. This suggests that other factors are much more influential than church attendance.

To further test the impact of church attendance on a child's faith, Figure 2 displays the children grouped according to the church they attend, to gauge whether any particular church was more influential. It incorporates the observations from children in the pilot study also to provide more comprehensive data for comparison. The total number of children interviewed across this project and the pilot project was 61, and they attended 16 different churches. However, only 10 of these churches had multiple children who participated in this research. It is these 10 churches which have been included in Figure 2.

Figure 2 displays that there was a significant spread of values used to describe the faith of the children attending. This indicates that church involvement is not the most dominant factor influencing a child's faith, because if it were, the children attending would demonstrate more similarities in their faith. This is extremely revealing, given the fact that the majority of parent participants reported that they believed the focus of their child's nurture to derive from their church attendance, and it was church attendance that was consistently reported by parents and children as most important in the child's faith nurture. The correlation statistics regarding denomination revealed minimal significance. The total being and becoming characteristics of the child's faith revealed a .077 correlation with church denomination, with a .708 significance. The 'being' characteristics showed a −.197 correlation, with a .335 significance and the 'becoming' characteristics correlated .267 with a .187 significance.
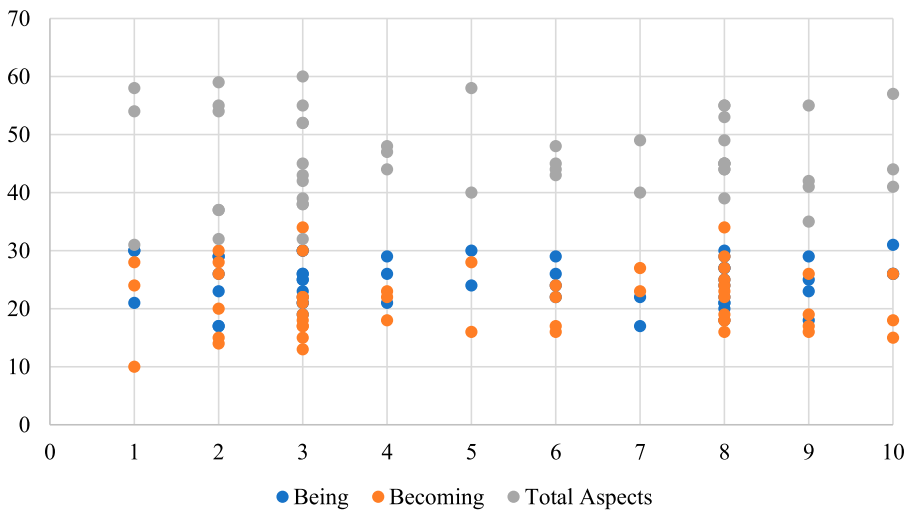
Figure 2. Children grouped according to the church they attend (1: Baptist church; 2: Pentecostal church; 3: Anglican church; 4: Anglican church; 5: Pentecostal church; 6: Baptist church; 7: Evangelical church; 8: Independent church; 9: Independent church; 10: Baptist church).

Parents in the study reported that their church provided events for parents, such as parenting courses, socials and parent support groups, and described these of mixed success. In fact, parents stated that such events do not accurately meet the needs of parents, but instead placed further demands and pressures on the family. Therefore, church leaders may benefit from asking parents and families what their needs and desires from the church are to ensure that provision of activity and support is appropriate. Participant churches that sought to welcome and involve families, providing an environment and activities that are conducive to family participation, seemed to attract families to attend. Provision of children's activities was important to families, but the aspect most frequently reported by parents is practical support, particularly provision of meals for families during challenging times. The other aspect that was important to families was friendship. Adults and children alike reported benefits from having relationships with others within the faith community, including practical support, a 'sounding board' in difficult times, and provision of role models for faith, both inter-generationally and with peers. This aspect of faith role models may have contributed to variance in the children's faith values exhibited.

Impact of family Bible use

Child participants frequently reported that the Bible was used most at bedtime, with family reading of Bible stories. This most frequently occurred between a parent–child duo, rather than the whole family. It tended to be a book of Bible stories that was read, rather than Biblical text, which only occurred in participant children over 11 years old. Interestingly, the children frequently reported more regular Bible reading than parents confirmed to be the case. This suggests that children feel that Bible reading is a regular occurrence and presence in their lives, without the need for regimented or habitual activity, which is what the parents seemed to infer was the requirement to label it 'regular'. Family Bible usage had a potential range of scores from one (signifying no use of the Bible in the home) to five (indicating daily use of the Bible within the family). (Figure 1) The mean score was 3.19, demonstrating that most of the families reported some level of Bible usage. The correlation co-efficient of family Bible activity with 'total aspects of childhood faith' values was .186, with a significance of .363. This suggests that family Bible activity does not impact upon a child's faith, in either a positive or negative manner. This was surprising when reflecting on many Christian traditions which would place high importance on Bible reading in the home.

Impact of family prayer

The mean value for family prayer activity in Figure 1 was 3.68, again demonstrating that most participant families exhibited some degree of prayer activity. However, children and parents alike reported that prayer activity occurring as a family was minimal. Most family prayer occurred at mealtimes and bedtimes. It was interesting to note that in most of the cases, the parent was the one saying the prayer aloud, rather than the child. In the cases where families recorded '5' for prayer activity, indicating spontaneous prayer throughout daily activities, there tended to be more occurrence of the children themselves saying prayers aloud or internally. The families whose prayer activity was categorised as '5'

reported saying prayers aloud in response to situations and events occurring in everyday family life. However, there appeared to be little correlation between family prayer activity and children's faith, demonstrated by a correlation coefficient of .284, significance .160. This is not to say that private parental prayer for the children is not an influence since this was un-tested, and hence is an area for future research.

Impact of family faith discussion

The mean score in Figure 1 for faith discussions amongst family was 3.73, again with a range of one to five. One parent indicated that no faith discussions occurred within the family home and five parents reported regular faith conversations amongst the family. The remaining families were between these two extremes. Statistical analysis indicated that faith discussions in the home are highly significant upon the 'being' elements of faith, due to a correlation co-efficient of .521, with a significance of .006. Figure 3 shows this in detail. It therefore follows that faith discussions have a significant correlation with 'total aspects of childhood faith' observations, demonstrated by a correlation co-efficient of .414, significance .035. It is intriguing that there is no significant correlation (.266, with .189 significance) between the 'becoming' aspects of a child's faith and family faith discussions, as it may be expected that discussing issues would aid development of those facets of faith. In contrast, it appears that discussions may preserve the 'being' elements of a child's faith, which one might consider to be natural and inherent in the child. Alternatively it may be that a child whose faith exhibits more 'being' aspects of faith may be more willing to discuss faith. The reason for family faith discussion having a higher correlation with the child's faith may be in part due to most children reporting Bible reading or prayer activity as occurring privately, and largely in a 1:1 situation. The nature of these activities is closed, in comparison with faith discussions which are open by nature. Faith discussions in the home are the activity that most correlated with increased 'being' levels. This is thought to be because faith being discussed with
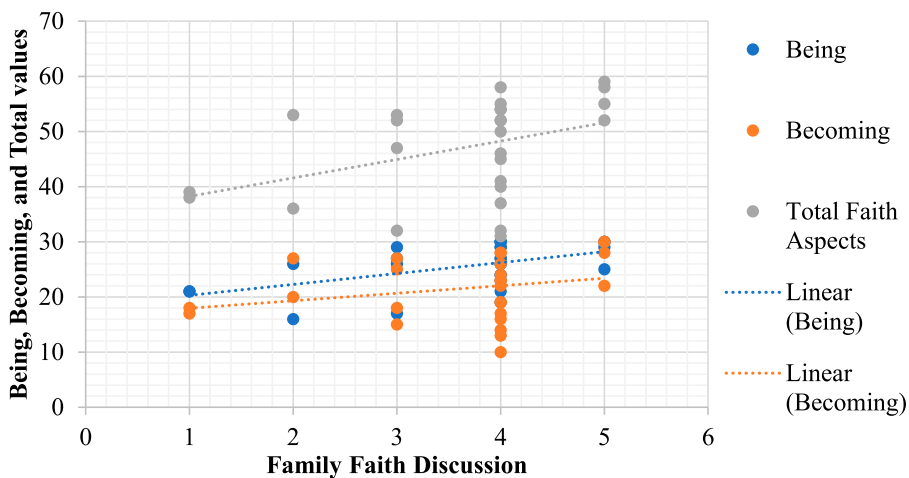
Figure 3. 'Being', 'becoming' and 'total aspects of childhood faith' values presented in order of ascending discussion about faith within the home (indicated by lines).

children as part of everyday life, as instructed in Deuteronomy 6:6-9, will prevent it from becoming a 'taboo' subject for children.

Combined impact of family faith activities

The range of possible scores for total faith activities was four to twenty and the average recorded was 15.37 (Figure 1). Statistical analysis indicated that there is a significant relationship between total family faith activities and the 'being' elements of a child's faith. The correlation co-efficient was .432, significance .027. Figure 4 also depicts the positive relationship between family faith activities and these factors, since increasing activity coincides with increase in both 'being' and 'becoming' aspects. These statistical findings therefore support the claim that faith activities in the family influence the child's faith in a positive way (Bengston 2013; Powell, 2014).

Discussion

Parental input

These findings reveal that faith transmission was most effective when the parents spent time discussing faith with the child. More broadly, within the interviews it was clear that when this occurred in a variety of settings and activities, it had a stronger influence, indicating a positive and mutually active relationship. Bible reading and bedtime prayers tended to be a 1:1 activity, and were valued by participant children in the research sample, although statistical analysis indicated that they did not have a significant impact upon the child's faith. Nevertheless, it was clear that those who were regularly involved in such activities were more interested in, and engaged with the Bible narrative. Equally, the conversations with participant children revealed that those who prayed regularly with their parents seemed to view God in a more close, intimate and caring manner. This was revealed by the language, expression and body language used to convey their
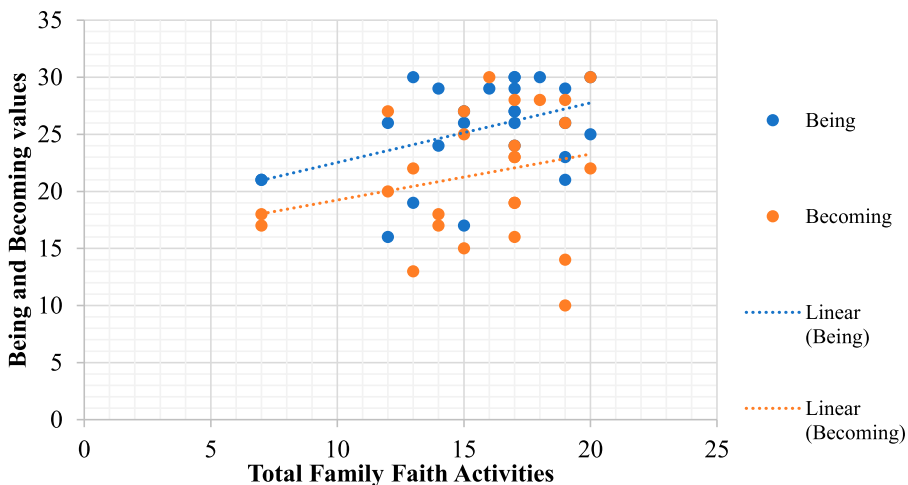

Figure 4. 'Being' and 'becoming' values plotted against total family faith activities.

expression and explanation of God. Discussion about faith is most likely of key importance due to the associated attitudes of openness and inclusivity that may accompany such discussions, causing the child to feel valued and positive about the experience. Conversely, if faith issues were a taboo subject, such discussion may not take place. Indeed, Morgenthaler (2001) observed that parental responses to discussion and faith exploration affect the way a child pictures God's love and providential care. Family faith discussions appeared to result in parents modelling to their child that faith is something to be valued and accepted and nourished, rather than something to be ignored and irrelevant to everyday living. This may or may not be connected to parenting style, although this was untested within this project.

The home environment is also held to be critical to effective faith nurture, so that mutual listening and environments of trust are valued by family members (Stonehouse 1998). Indeed Hart (2003) stated that if children feel safe and secure, they are more likely to raise questions of a spiritual nature. It is therefore important that throughout spiritual discussions with children, adult expectations are not apparent or that the child feels in any way forced to talk about spiritual experiences. This could lead to active rejection of faith by the child, including atheistic tendencies (Bengston 2013). It also echoes James (1977) who emphasised the wide range and variety in religious experience that is apparent amongst adults and children alike.

One interesting case was seven-year old twin boys who lived with their mother (an active Christian) and father (an atheist). Their interview observations were markedly different. One boy demonstrated considerably higher levels of both 'being' and 'becoming' aspects than the other. The first boy spoke reverently of God, but also perceived God as a stern judge, as he continually talked about deciding whether to go to heaven or hell, and explained that if you see God you will die, unless you're in heaven. His twin brother mocked God and giggled as he used a toy wearing only underpants to represent God. He was disinterested and replied 'don't know' to many of the researcher's questions. Whilst the first boy did seem thoughtful, his answers were rather regurgitated in nature. However, the second boy was thoughtful and seeking to evaluate and personalise his own beliefs. The mother explained during the parental interview that the first boy had a stronger relationship with his mother and the second had a stronger relationship with his father. It became clear that the boys were mimicking the faith and attitudes of the parent that they felt closest to, emphasising the importance of attachment (Clinton and Straub 2010). This also concurs with the 'life script' concept, emphasising the early years as a formational time in terms of the values and attitudes that are adopted via 'parental programming' (Berne 1972). This echoes the findings of Bengston (2013), that warm, affirming relationship patterns were most likely to result in the successful transmission of faith. Equally, Voas and Crockett (2005) found that if only one parent is religious, the probability of the child following suit is 22%, compared with 50% if both parents are. Their findings suggested that children are more likely to follow their mother's religious affiliation than their father's, in the case of the parents having different positions. There have been studies suggesting that the father is the dominant figure, and conversion of the father equates to conversion of the whole family. However, this empirical research indicates that the child's faith may tend to imitate the faith of the parent that they felt closest to, connecting more generally with attachment theory (Bowlby 1969). To confirm these results, it would have been beneficial to have carried out an 'attitude to

Christianity' scale (Francis 1979), or similar on both the parents and children to discover how closely the parent and child attitudes match.

Faith role models

The empirical research indicated that the beliefs and attitudes of the parent may be transferred to the child during the early years, so that substantial elements of the child's life script (Berne 1972) and childhood faith will be formed and shaped as a direct result of interactions with and observations of the parent. This strength of significance in the parent–child relationship concurs with attachment theory (Bowlby 1969). This highlights the value of parents as spiritual role models for their children and spending time as a family, particularly if this includes a spiritual component, to strengthen the passing on of faith within the family context. Discussion about faith issues can facilitate openness if carried out in a healthy and open manner. It must be noted that within this sample there was no evidence of negative effects on any child's faith as a result of faith activities in the family context. However, it would be beneficial to examine further whether the effects of differing Christian nurture are positive or negative (Moberg 1984; Ward 2011; Bone and Fenton 2015).

In addition to parents being role models for their children, the interviews with parents and children alike emphasised the value of role models of faith within the church community, so as to strengthen and reinforce faith transmission (Yust 2012; Bengston 2013). As the child grows, it is advantageous for them to connect with other adults who demonstrate a living and relevant faith. However, parents were very clear in the interviews about their difficulty in attending and being involved in church when they have young children, which is often preventing their child from accessing other faith role models. The parents would appreciate greater flexibility and acceptance of this fact from other church members. The main aspect that parents valued, but felt they missed out upon due to having young children, was the relational component of church. They generally found it difficult to make meaningful relationships in church due to constantly 'running around after the kids'. They proposed that if support could occur in this respect, it would be highly beneficial to their family. Similarly, many of the parent participants asserted that church services and activities should not take away from family time that was already limited due to school and other activities. Ultimately, they would appreciate the church communicating the value of family time, in which they could discuss aspects of faith. Relating to this, many of the families communicated that they would value some more intergenerational time in church, rather than the ages being split up for the majority of the service. This again would enhance the presence and activity of faith role models within the church community.

Conclusion

There is great value in examining ideas and assumptions that are often largely un-tested, such as within this paper. The wealth of data collected in this research project facilitated a rigorous investigation. The inquiry into these case study families ultimately suggested that parents do indeed have a significant impact upon their child's faith, echoing Bengston (2013) and Powell (2014). Flowing from this the dominant feature that appeared

to impact the child's faith was family discussions about faith. It was likely that this was connected in some way with the associated characteristics of openness, acceptance, healthy criticality, and dialogue that are apparent in homes where faith discussions were prevalent. The child's relationship with their parent is clearly of prime importance, since participant children demonstrated aligning themselves with a similar faith to the parent that they were closest to. It is therefore recommended that the Christian community seek to support and equip parents in enhancing these faith discussions within their family context, and also project the value and importance of them rather than often focussing attention on church attendance as the primary model of faith transmission.

Notes on contributor

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