**What’s the point of ministry amongst children, youth and families? Examination of aims and activities from different perspectives**

**Abstract**

Thisphenomenological exploration of the aims and activities of ministry amongst children, young people and families captured data from a range of stakeholders using an online survey. Responses from paid (n=325) and voluntary team members (n=312), parents (n=298), church leaders (n=216) and young people (n=33) were considered through a comparative analysis to establish the extent to which their perspectives aligned. Whilst there were some differences regarding the role and support of parents in their role of faith formation, there was marked unity and clarity of overall purpose across all stakeholders, revealing the significant opportunities which are apparent for greater communication and collaboration since all parties appear to desire this. Indeed, all saw the value and mutual benefit for including and collaborating with CYF. This will undoubtedly be challenging and require a revised vision and strategy, but intentional effort to evaluate and revise the agenda will enhance faith formation amongst children young people and families.

**Keywords**

Children’s ministry, youth ministry, family ministry, aims, UK

**Introduction**

“Often there is no system in place to monitor the health of the ministry, there is no accountability other than “are they present,” training is lacking, church vision is blurred, and many children’s ministry volunteers feel like they are nothing more than large-group babysitters who are not getting paid” (Warren, 2018, p.15).

This quote conveys the often unseen and unclear context and outworking of ministry amongst children, young people and families (CYF). It begs the question: What is the point or purpose of ministry amongst CYF? Subjective and anecdotal comments are often made regarding conflicting aims and purposes of these ministries, and these can result in differing perspectives of the impact and consequences of CYF activity. This confusion around the aims and purposes of CYF ministry is longstanding but is emphasised in importance more recently, given the falling numbers of children, young people and families engaging with church and Christian activity. Despite the falling numbers engaging with church, it is still argued that there is immense value in CYF engaging and connecting with church (Holmes, 2021), although Kingston and MacDougall (2011) called people to think through their beliefs and values for children and young people in the church; questioning their assumptions and reflect on their practice. Hence, this research is needed to further explore the aims and purpose and provide clarity to the CYF ministry sector. It is hoped that the findings will foster greater dialogue and understanding, whilst also illuminating gaps and opportunities.

In light of this hazy picture of CYF ministries in the UK, we set out to ‘take the pulse’ of these ministry areas. A comprehensive online survey was carried out in Spring 2024 to capture insights and perspectives from a range of stakeholders. The context of this project is those working in UK Christian churches, in any aspect or activity relating to 0-18 year olds or their families. This may include ‘Sunday School’ type activities, afterschool or holiday clubs activities. It could also include community-based work, or schools work. This paper focusses on a small number of the survey questions: those which asked about the aims and purposes of CYF ministry. Once the data was collected regarding what the different stakeholders viewed as the purpose of CYF ministry, a comparative analysis on their responses took place. We found that the primary aims are universal across the stakeholder groups, but there is considerable variance across the subsidiary aims. The findings enable all stakeholders to be more aware of the perspective and expectations of others, and hence facilitate greater collaboration. They also serve to enlighten the contexts and expectations of anyone involved in these ministry areas. We recommend that those who oversee ministries nationally, regionally or locally foster dialogue amongst stakeholders of CYF ministry to aid clarity of the purpose of different and distinct roles, in order to firstly affirm the different ‘players’ but also to enhance effectiveness since each party can focus on carrying out their specific role and not feel the need to also work within the remit of what may more appropriately be the role of other stakeholders.

**Children, Youth and Family Ministry**

Many have written on the topic of ministry amongst children and young people as distinct and requiring specific approaches (such as Csinos & Beckwith, 2013; Morgenthaler et al., 2014; Larsen, 2017; DeVries & Safstrom, 2018; Griffiths, 2018). To some extent, this reflects the notion that faith is developed in stages (Fowler, 1981), although Berryman (2013) argued that a child’s faith is often more mature than an adult’s. Similarly, Keeley (2010) argued that faith is more complex than stages which progress with age and highlighted the need to utilise Bible stories to allow God to introduce himself to children and young people. This reflects the spiritual awareness which Hay and Nye (1998) and King (2013) documented from an early age, which relates to the notion of spiritual intelligence posited by Zohar and Marshall (2000). Whilst many argue that children’s capacity for faith is innate (Willmer & White, 2013), King (2013), stated that spiritual literacy does not just evolve, but rather needs to be fostered and nurtured. Court (2013) viewed the goal of religious education as to bring students to an authentic ‘religious attitude in the soul,’ and Gottlieb (2006) asserted that it was to impart knowledge, cultivate commitments, train ritual competence, sustain community and stimulate experiences, implying that faith is passed on by human means. However, Hart (2003) observed that children’s spiritual experiences may frequently be dismissed or misunderstood, indicating that there are distinct differences between ministry amongst adults versus children and young people. Indeed, Csinos (2022) observed that whilst children and young people are often present in church, the messages which are spoken are not really for them, indicating the need for them to have specific content delivered to them.

In contrast, Csinos and Beckwith (2013) argued that ministry is not about provision of programmes and events, but rather relates to the action of serving and caring in order to help children and young people to develop and live healthy, flourishing lives. Children benefit greatly through participating in church life (Hood, 2004; Ingersoll, 2014). More broadly than family alone, Habtemariam (2022) argued for an approach of a child being raised within a caring village-like community. This reflects awareness that humans are relational; living in families which have an enormous effect on their spiritual faith formation (Beckwith, 2010). Allen (2012) emphasised the value of intergenerational Christian experiences for children. As a result, Okholm (2018) observed the importance and value of role models within a faith community for young people. Mercer et al. (2004) asserted that children become ‘apprentices’ through full access to participation in the community, reflecting Westerhoff’s (2012) notion of the child as a co-pilgrim of the adult, sharing a journey together over time. There is deep awareness that positive relationships with nonparent adults can have profound effects on the faith formation of children and young people (Csinos, 2022). Kingston and MacDougall (2011, p.73) presented the idea of ‘nesting dolls (figure 1), highlighting that children are not isolated but a nest of contexts, with each layer impacting the child at the centre, and simultaneously themselves impacting their context. This resonates with the notion that it is important for the Christian church to understand how context impacts how a child or young person acquires their views, values and lifestyle (Westerhoff, 2012). Allen and Ross (2012) pointed to the concept of apprentices, whom participate actively and relationally in communities of practice alongside more experienced members. In a similar way, they argue that church communities provide situative learning opportunities which leads to believers who are spiritually formed while participating authentically and relationally. It is important for leaders to be mindful that children are active agents and that they will both impact and be impacted by the church context they inhabit (Kingston and MacDougall, 2011). In this way, faith can be inspired within a community of faith, although it cannot be given to one person by another (Espinoza, 2014).

In contrast to these arguments for age segregated ministries, Smith and Adamczyk (2020, p.83) argued that religious transmission must be accomplished by parents if it is to be successful. Turner (2010) similarly emphasized the significant influence Christian parents have on their child’s faith formation, reflecting the notion of Thompson (1996) of the family as a ‘forming centre’ of spiritual formation through everyday activities. This concurs with the depiction of parents as apostles, bishops and priests to their children (Strohl, 2001). Powell (2014) highlighted the need for Christian parents to have a deliberate plan and intentionality about their child's faith. The relational connections are key since Surr (2011) documented that early attachment has been shown to be spiritually significant. Stonehouse argued that so that mutual listening and environments of trust are valued by family members and are key to effective faith nurture (Stonehouse, 1998). Whilst retelling Bible stories within the family context has been proposed as an effective method of sharing faith within the family context (Worsley, 2010), Cavalletti (1983) suggested that awareness of the mode of prayer is key, since prayer formulae tend to stifle the child’s personal expression. With all of this in mind, in the context of an increasingly secular society, contemporary parents often lack confidence in their beliefs and faith affiliations (Bengston, 2013).

Whilst Roberto (2020) highlighted that the task remains the same for religious congregations; namely developing the spiritual and religious life of children, Espinoza (2014) highlighted the need to critically reflect upon children’s ministry practices while imagining new possibilities and providing a faith community to nurture the faith of children. Indeed, Yust (2012) cites a problematic division between congregational children's ministries and household faith practices. Holmes et al. (2024) similarly argued that in light of considerable societal change, faith formation models need to be evaluated for effectiveness and suitability. Griffiths (2012) specifically called for outreach projects to shift their modes of communicating in the light of significant shifts in the way children learn, in order to prevent further decline. This paper therefore sought to explore this further.

**Methodology**

This paper is a phenomenological exploration of CYF ministry. The overarching aim was to illuminate the perspectives of different stakeholders about what they deem to be the aims of CYF ministry activity. Data was collected using an online survey in Spring 2024. The survey was circulated throughout existing UK ministry networks, Christian organisations and denominational groups. The online survey contained both qualitative and quantitative questions and received 2100 responses across all of the cohorts (paid workers, voluntary leaders, parents, grandparents, chaplains, church leaders, those no longer involved in ministry and those who attended children’s/youth ministry when they were growing up). This project was subject to the scrutiny and approval of the ethics committee at Liverpool Hope University. This ensured that informed consent was gained, including information about their right to withdraw, and all participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were invited to leave their name and email address if they wished to be entered into a prize draw as an incentive. However, once they had submitted their response, their name and email address were removed from their survey responses to ensure confidentiality.

This paper focusses on the responses from paid (n=325) and voluntary team members (n=312), parents (n=298) and church leaders (n=216) to a few specific questions relating to the aims and purposes of these ministries. Church leaders were asked two related multiple-choice questions: Why does your church provide activities for children, youth and families? and What do you think the role of church is for families? They were then also invited to respond to an open-ended question: What excites you most about ministry amongst children, youth or families? The paid and voluntary workers were asked a similar question: a multiple-choice question about their perception of the main aims of their ministry. Parents were asked what they perceived the role of the church to be for families. Responses to the quantitative questions are presented in funnel graphs within the findings section of this paper, whilst the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) on MAXQDA software. Information about the codes identified within the data and the themes arising are also presented in the findings section.

Once this data had been analysed, young people (n=33) were asked for their perspectives on these issues using interviews which took place on zoom to enable a good spread of participant location, denomination, and age. Interview participants were aged 8-18 years old. These participants were given a voucher as an incentive for their involvement. They were assured about the confidentiality, anonymity and safe storage and later deleting of their interview recording. Once transcribed, their responses were also coded, clustered and grouped by themes, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify themes within the data. After all of the data streams had been individually analysed, a crisp comparative analysis took place across the streams (Roig-Tierno et al., 2017). As a result, if the aspect was present within the original data stream, a ‘1’ was recorded in the table but if it was not present, a ‘0’ was recorded.

**Findings**

*Perspectives of church leaders*

Figure 1 shows the reasons church leaders said that their church provided activities for CYF. They are listed in descending order of frequency. This reveals that 86% (n=186) of the church leaders participants expressed that their church provides activities for CYF in order to help them to grow in faith. This is not a surprising result, given the nature of the participants, and shows that these church leaders are clear that the faith development of the CYF is a responsibility that ultimately sits with them, as it does for any member of their church. However, it is somewhat surprising that not all of the church leaders selected this option. Whilst 11 respondents (5%) did not answer this question at all, and 5% (n=11) indicated that they do not provide activities of this nature, 5% (n=10) selected other aspects as their reason. Of these, the main reason they selected was ‘Biblical mandate,’ although some selected ‘we always have done’ or ‘there is pressure from denomination.’

The second most frequently provided reason was to reach out to parents (51%). It is interesting to note that all of the participants who selected this reason also selected ‘to help the children to grow in faith,’ revealing that they were not simply viewing the activity provision for children and youth as a means of access to their parents, but that they were equally concerned to support adults and children in their faith journeys. This may indicate a sense of partnership being sought in raising children.

Other reasons selected by participants were that it was a Biblical mandate (50%), they’d always done it (32%), to boost their attendance figures (8%) or pressure from their denomination (3%). These four reasons imply slightly less willingness and active participation in this ministry area but indicate a sense of participating in this activity area to some degree not out of choice. Although these were smaller numbers, it is still important to note that some churches may be engaged in these ministry areas for these sorts of reasons. Alongside this, 35 respondents (16%) provided other reasons as textual comments. These mainly centred around evangelistic or discipleship reasons, with many comments about supporting the local community and some saying, ‘because we care about their spiritual wellbeing.’



**Figure 1: Responses from church leaders to: Why does your church provide activities for children, youth and families?** (Total responses = 216)

Figure 2 reveals the perspectives of the church leaders about what they deemed the role of the church to be for families, providing a slightly different focus than the previous question. Concurring with the essence of the previous question, 83% of these respondents viewed the role of the church to support the personal faith of CYF. Similar proportions also selected to provide faith role models (80%), to equip parents for faith at home (77%), and to be a proactive partner to support the child’s faith in collaboration (69%). A slightly smaller proportion (64%) viewed the churches role as being responsible to bring the CYF to faith, whilst 63% deemed that the role of the church was to provide activities at church in order to support the child’s faith. In contrast to these very intentional and active roles, 43% viewed the church’s role as being available as a background supporter. There were some textual responses (n=11), which comprised slight nuances on the notions of ‘bringing to faith’ outlined above and a couple intimated that they perceived their role as being ‘whatever is needed to bring (individual) people to Jesus.’



**Figure 2: Responses from church leaders to: What do you think the role of church is for families?** (Total responses = 216)

In the open-ended responses to the question about what excites the church leaders most about ministry amongst CYF, there were 298 different codes identified in the 216 responses. These were clustered to form five themes, which are shown in figure 3. Aside from these themes, it was interesting to note that five church leaders stated that they were not able to be excited because they did not have the funds or resources to work in this area. Further to this, 43 (20%) of the church leader respondents did not answer this question. It is not possible to know the reasons for omitting this question, since it may be due to time constraints when completing the survey, although, it could also indicate that they did not know how to respond or may not be excited about this ministry area. This is mere conjecture, although is interesting to note.

The theme most frequently (40%) included in the responses was about the traits of children. This included eagerness, energy and enthusiasm, the awe in the very young when they achieve something, their sense of wonder and exuberance, their excitement and passion. Fifteen responses spoke of the honesty, curiosity and openness of children, and ten others expressed the fun and joy which they bring. There were also 30 different codes within this theme, each identifying different ways which they observed faith or spirituality in the children, such as ‘grasping faith in a natural way,’ ‘ seeing children draw closer to Jesus,’ ‘the way they express their thoughts, ideas and feelings about Jesus,’ ‘their acceptance of the love of God’ and ‘seeing what God is doing in them.’ Similar to this cluster, there were 25 other codes which conveyed children as examples of faith, such as them ‘being open to God in a way that adults are not,’ ‘dependent in prayer,’ ‘freshness of their perception and insight’ and ‘adults learning from them.’ One also said: ‘often they spur us on when we see their example,’ and another: ‘without children, we cannot easily know what it is to look like them.’

The next most frequent theme related to faith (30%). Of these responses, 37% stated ‘seeing them grow in faith,’ and 30% said ‘bringing them to a faith in Jesus.’ The remaining responses in this category were aspects directly relating to faith of children and young people, such as ‘seeing them grow as disciples,’ ‘learning about the Bible,’ and ‘applying their faith to their lives eg. caring and sharing.’

The next themes which were identified equally in 12% of the responses each were about ministry opportunities and the church community. The ministry opportunities included ‘sharing Jesus with a new generation,’ ‘encouraging leaders to flourish,’ ‘learning about how people view the world,’ ‘trying to find ways of us all flourishing’ and ‘filling the gap education leaves.’ The church community responses were generally about mutual support and connection, with one stating: ‘the whole congregation is mutually transformed by their presence.’ Other codes referred to learning about God together, and welcoming everyone, with many also emphasising the benefits of intergenerational communities. A small number of the responses (5%) spoke of a future outlook, such as ‘investing in young people,’ ‘sowing seeds and hope,’ ‘eternal consequences’ and ‘they are our future.’

It is interesting to note that whilst the question was very broad and open, all of the five themes identified in the responses were spiritually significant reasons. None of the church leaders said that they were excited about the wealth families bring, or the bright pictures on the walls, or the community goodwill that is created or the improved reputation their church gains in their denomination. The fact that all of these reasons were spiritually significant indicates that the participant church leaders are excited about spiritual progress amongst the next generation.

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|  **Theme** | **Segments** | **Percentage** |
| Children's traits | 118 | 39.60 |
| Faith | 90 | 30.20 |
| Ministry opportunities | 37 | 12.42 |
| Church community | 37 | 12.42 |
| Future | 16 | 5.37 |
| **TOTAL** | **298** | **100.00** |

**Figure 3: Responses from church leaders to: What excites you most about ministry amongst children, youth or families?** (Total responses = 216)

*Perspectives of paid and voluntary team members*

Figure 4 displays the responses of paid workers (n=325) relating to their perceptions of the aims of their role. The highest number of responses were for role models (20%), telling CYF about the Christian faith (17%) and supporting CYF to have an independent faith (15%). Almost 15% of the responses also indicated that supporting the general wellbeing of CYF was also key. Some of the responses related to the provision of church activities, such as organising and liaising ministry logistics (10%) and encouraging them to attend church (6%), although these were deemed to be less important by the paid workers than the other aspects. Furthermore, 11% of these respondents viewed a key aim as being to equip and empower families for faith at home, with connects with some of the views of other stakeholder groups. This is disappointingly low but not surprising since there is frequently a vast relational expanse between those leading CYF ministry and parents. Not many respondents selected the more background parts of the role, namely being available to answer questions (3%), facilitating networking (1%), equipping others (1%) and ensuring quality control (less than 1%). This is interesting since some within congregations may perceive that these sorts of activities are key parts of the job description of paid workers, but these participants would not concur with that mindset.

Figure 5 displays the responses of the volunteer workers (n=312), again in decreasing order of frequency. Aligning with the views of paid workers, supporting CYF to develop their own independent faith (21%) and provision of faith role models (16%) were amongst the highest scoring aims of their role. However, in contrast the volunteers also selected ‘to equip and support others in the team’ as part of the aims of their role (16%). It is interesting to note that this option was not really included by the paid workers. Equally, the volunteer workers viewed provision of social opportunities as being key parts of their role, although paid workers didn’t particularly mention this aspect. Very similar to the paid workers, 10% of the volunteer workers viewed support for parents a part of their role, whilst 12% deemed ministry logistics and 9% viewed oversight of the ministry as key parts of their role. These are similar to the views of paid workers. Not many selected the final two aspects of provision of childcare (1%) or providing high energy programmes (less than 1%), which is interesting since these can sometimes be perceived by congregations as some of the aims of CYF ministry. Yet these stakeholder participants would not concur with that at all.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
| Be a role model within this ministry | 265 | 19.89 |
| Tell CYF about the Christian faith | 231 | 17.34 |
| Bring those I work with to have a Christian faith of their own | 202 | 15.17 |
| Support the general wellbeing | 190 | 14.26 |
| To equip and empower families for faith at home | 146 | 10.96 |
| Ministry logistics  | 139 | 10.44 |
| Encourage them to attend church | 75 | 5.63 |
| Be available to answer queries | 39 | 2.93 |
| Facilitate networking | 18 | 1.35 |
| Equip others | 17 | 1.28 |
| Ensure quality control | 10 | 0.75 |
|   | **1332** | **100** |

 **Figure 4: Responses of paid workers relating to the aims of their role**

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|  | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
| Help the young people to have a faith of their own | 251 | 21.49 |
| Equip & support others in the team | 189 | 16.18 |
| Be a role model for the young people | 188 | 16.10 |
| Provide social opportunities for youth within church context | 157 | 13.44 |
| Run the logistics to make sure it happens (eg rotas etc) | 144 | 12.33 |
| Empower parents | 121 | 10.36 |
| Oversee the ministry | 100 | 8.56 |
| Provide childcare to give the parents a break | 12 | 1.03 |
| To provide a high energy, dynamic presentation of Christian faith | 6 | 0.51 |
|  | **1168** | **100.00** |

 **Figure 5: Volunteer responses relating to the aims of their role**

*Perspectives of parents*

Figure 6 shows the options selected by parent participants in descending order of frequency. Concurring with the other stakeholder groups, parents selected provision of ‘faith role models’ (23%) and ‘supporting personal faith development’ (18%) as key aims of CYF ministry. This conveys an ethos which is focussed on prioritising support of the faith formation of CYF. The second most frequently (20%) chosen option was equipping parents to support their child’s faith at home, which is more frequent than was chosen by other stakeholder groups (except church leasers). Similarly, 17% of the responses indicated that they wanted the church to be a proactive partner with parents in this regard. Only 9% of the parents indicated that they viewed the key role of the church as providing activities for CYF to come to, which contrasts slightly with the church leadership, where 63% thought that the church’s key aims were to provide activities for CYF to attend. It is interesting to note the contrasts in opinions through the proportions of parent participants who selected the other two options, whereby on one hand 8% of them perceive that the church’s role is to ensure that their child has an independent faith, versus 6% who viewed the church as more of a background support to help as needed. The need for churches to be aware of different perspectives of parents is clearly key so that they can operate in a balanced way which meets the needs of the families attending in the most effective manner.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
| Provide a community of faith role models for children/families | 262 | 22.98 |
| Equip parents to support faith in the family home | 224 | 19.65 |
| Support personal faith development | 203 | 17.81 |
| Be a proactive partner, communicating and collaborating with families | 189 | 16.58 |
| Provide activities for families to come to | 104 | 9.12 |
| Make sure that my child has a faith of their own | 86 | 7.54 |
| Be a background supporter, available when needed | 72 | 6.32 |
| **Total** | **1140** | **100** |

**Figure 6: Responses from parents about how they perceive the role of the church** (Total response = 298)

*Perspectives of young people*

Figure 7 shows the codes identified in the responses from the young people about what they perceived to be the aims of CYF work in churches. Almost half (44%) spoke about faith formation, with many stating ‘help people to get closer to Jesus, ‘or ‘to understand the Bible more.’ Two participants spoke about the aim being for the child or young person to follow their parent's religion, and one explained further: ‘make sure they stay a Christian their whole life and then get their children to become Christian.’

Just over a quarter of the responses explained about the importance of the atmosphere or ethos of the church and how this is the key aim of this ministry work. The main words used were comfortable, safe, friendly, welcoming and one said that the aim should be for the children and young people to have fun. One respondent stated that: ‘if they don’t feel comfortable, they are not as focussed on it and not wanting to listen as much,’ expressing clearly the need for a comfortable atmosphere to underpin all activity which happens in the church. Another emphasised the need for children and young people to ‘feel you are open and can they can share anything.’

There were some interesting conversations about content, and the participants conveying that this was a balance with considerations on both sides. Whilst some expressed the need for ‘reading the Bible and discussing it together,’ others said, ‘not too much content.’ One explanation of this from one of the young participants was:

‘Some of my favourite sessions have been mainly talking about life. And then we talk a bit about the Bible but we understand it much more cos we talked about our lives first. It’s more interesting then.’

The final theme identified in the responses was about relational or community aspects being the aim. The young people generally conveyed the importance of modelling being part of a community, with one stating that the aim of this ministry should be to ‘be a role model.’

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Segments** | **Percentage** |
| Faith formation | 15 | 44.12 |
| Atmosphere/ethos | 9 | 26.47 |
| Content | 5 | 14.71 |
| Community/relational | 5 | 14.71 |
| **TOTAL** | **34** | **100.00** |

**Figure 7: Responses from young people about their perceptions of the aim of CYF work in churches** (Total responses = 33)

*Comparative analysis*

Figure 8 shows a comparative analysis across the data streams. It is interesting to note that there are only three aspects which appears in all of the stakeholder columns: faith formation, relational aspects of community and the atmosphere or ethos of the church. This shows that all of the participant groups see these factors as key aims and priorities of ministry amongst CYF. However, all of the other aspects vary in terms of appearance in the responses and hence their expectations as to whether they are aims of CYF ministry.

Only one stakeholder (paid workers) denoted support of the child/young person’s general wellbeing as a key aim of CYF ministry. Conversely, all stakeholders except paid workers viewed content and activity provision as a key aim of this ministry. This indicates that church leaders, parents, young people and even volunteers all expect activity provision to be a key aim of CYF ministry but this mismatch with paid workers instead viewing other relational, ethos and general wellbeing aspects as priorities could lead to disconnections and friction due to differences of expectations.

Regarding the logistics and practicalities of CYF ministry, these results indicate that paid and voluntary workers are much more aware of the necessity of these aspects as fundamental parts of the ministry than church leaders, parents and young people are. This could also lead to misunderstandings and lack of appreciation felt by paid and voluntary workers if this is a significant part of their role, but is not seen and valued by other stakeholders.

Similarly, facilitating networking, equipping others and ensuring quality control were all evident in the responses of the paid workers but none of the other participant groups. This indicates that these responsibilities may fall alone to this group. Conversely, the volunteers were the only stakeholder group who expressed the aim of supporting the team as being a key aim of their work and role. It is interesting that the church leaders and paid workers did not include this in their responses.

The final aspect to note is about encouraging the children and young people to attend church. Only the church leaders and paid workers included this within the aims of CYF ministry. It is unknown whether this is linked with the expectations of their paid roles within the church and the need to validate their work through boosted attendance figures. However, it must be noted that neither parents, volunteers or the young people themselves detailed church attendance as a key aim of CYF ministry. Here then is another mismatch in aims and expectations across the participant groups, which again could lead to conflict or confusion if not discussed and resolved.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Church leaders** | **Paid** **workers** | **Volunteers** | **Parents** | **Young** **people** |
| Faith formation | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Atmosphere/ethos | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Support general wellbeing | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Content/activity provision | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Community/relational/role models | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Supporting the team | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Oversight & logistics of ministry  | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Encourage them to attend church | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Empower parents/carers | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Facilitate networking | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Equip others | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ensure quality control | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **TOTAL** | **6** | **9** | **7** | **5** | **4** |

**Figure 8: Comparative analysis across the different data streams**

**Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to illuminate the perspectives of different stakeholders about what the expectations are of the aims and activities of ministry amongst children, young people and families (CYF). Our survey and interview data has enabled us to identify some common aims across all of the stakeholder groups: faith formation and role models of faith. It is reassuring in times when there is sometimes hesitancy of preaching the Christian gospel and promoting Christian faith formation in a multi-faith society that all of these participant groups viewed these as the main aims of ministry amongst CYF. Indeed, none of the stakeholder groups cited any form of childcare as a purpose of this work, but all cited the importance and immense value of CYF ministry, reflecting Berryman (2013), Csinos and Beckwith (2013), and Ingersoll (2014) amongst others who capture the spiritual value of faith formation during the childhood and youth stages. Since all of the stakeholders held the same desires, these primary collective aims may be achieved more effectively if collaborative efforts across stakeholder groups become a priority, rather than each of these stakeholder groups working in isolation. This concurs with Griffiths (2017) who outlined three dimensions of the context of CYF work, comprising the immediate family, wider church community and the world. Likewise, it reflects the current awareness and campaign of the Church of England’s Growing Faith Foundation[[1]](#footnote-1) to foster greater collaboration between church, home and school for the sake of the child’s faith formation.

The church leaders conveyed that they saw their role as a collaborative, supportive partner for families, indicating an intention and desire to collaborate in this way. It is proposed that enhancing this collaboration further to reflect the notion of sophisticated collaboration could be beneficial (Rogoff at al., 2017). This denotes intentional and proactive sharing of ideas in addition to implementing ideas collectively. Yet whilst our data has strongly revealed both the desire and the need for faith formation to be collaborative and intergenerational; encompassing relationships between children, parents, faith communities and church leaders (Holmes, 2024), the responses from paid and voluntary workers indicate a significant disconnection and lack of desire for partnership. This speaks of disconnected churches which seem to be the status quo. However, the biblical models of the body of Christ fully including and valuing members of all ages (1 Corinthians 12) and intergenerational respect (1 Timothy 5:1-2) do not seem to be widely evident within UK churches (Roberto, 2020). It does not seem that churches are proactively seeking to encourage and support one another across the generations, in this case to see faith in the next generation as Allen (2012) would champion for. It was notable that parents were the only group who do not see some form of faith development in the top two answers. This was because the participant parents wanted support as *they* teach faith to their children, and they want others to join them in modelling the life of faith. The implication of this is that parents understand their own critical role (Powell, 2014), but they also know that it is challenging, and they face many barriers. They are clear that they are primarily responsible for raising their children in faith (inspired by Ephesians 6:4) but feel ill equipped for the task, both in how to teach faith and in modelling the life of faith. They want support in both areas, and it is incumbent upon the church to support them in this. The parent participants appeared to have greater expectations of the church to equip and support them in faith formation at home, than did some of the other stakeholder groups, reflecting the assertion of Westerhoff (2012) that children will never have faith unless there is a community of faith for them to live in and be influenced by. Moving towards a more village-like and collaborative sharing of the responsibility for supporting children’s faith formation (Habtemariam, 2022) seems to align with the desires of all stakeholders but seems to have many hinderances (Crispin, 2017).

Despite the disconnection in terms of collaborative working, it is encouraging that all stakeholder groups displayed significant confidence and expectation in the church to provide role models of faith and atmospheres which are conducive to faith formation of children, youth people and families. For the young people, atmospheres which were comfortable, safe, friendly, welcoming and genuinely listened to and included CYF were of critical importance as a foundation for all other church activity. And it was wonderful to hear the participants report experiences of this so fondly. Indeed, the participant young people displayed significant confidence in the church in this regard and this is something worth celebrating in a world where the church often receives very negative press coverage. If young people can inspire the church to continue meeting together, as instructed in Hebrews 10:25, they can set an example for the wider Christian community of the impact of conducive atmospheres and cultures operating within the church community. Many of the church leader responses about what excites them about CYF ministry spoke of the mutual benefits amongst all parties of the congregation, specifically the example which children and young people can be to others and the joy, life and challenge they bring to church life. The distinct awareness of these church leaders that adults and children can journey together and learn from one another is evidence that those in leadership positions firstly do see the spiritual capacity of children and young people and are therefore in contact with them in some form. Secondly, it indicates that they *do* have a vision and desire to see ministry amongst younger generations thrive. It is encouraging to hear their openness and enthusiasm to spiritual things that is often lacking in adults. It is therefore encouraging to hear the excitement of church leaders abut children and young people.

As part of this atmosphere, there was a strong focus across the participant groups on relational aspects, specifically faith role models, concurring with Mercer et al. (2004), Keeley (2010) and Holmes, 2021) who all reflect the significant value of relationships within and across the church community. This is perhaps something churches could focus efforts on more since this is a low cost/no cost action, merely mobilising people who are already within their congregations (Okholm, 2018). It is imperative that those involved in outreach projects carefully consider their context, content and mode of communicating (Griffiths, 2012). For example, home visits have been a key method for communicating with the wider community (Griffiths, 2012). More widely than this, DeVries and Safstrom (2018) emphasise the need for resilience in ministry, drawing on ministry mentors, supervisors and coaches. Being intentional about building healthy communities of support for oneself can be life-giving and result in a profoundly positive impact. This shift in culture and ways of thinking perhaps relates to new possibilities within existing contexts which Espinoza (2014) was referring to. Careful consideration of a renewed focus upon relational activity rather than activity provision is key. There was evidence of some mismatch between views on provision of activities for CYF to attend and encouraging CYF to attend church above all else, and being the ultimate aim rather than other aspects of authentic faith formation. It is therefore critical to evaluate who sets the agenda and aims of church? Is this agenda intentionally set? Or does it default to providing events and activities, which consumes all of the time and resources, leaving minimal time and space to work relationally and focus on supporting faith formation as part of daily life? How can churches be supported in setting their aims and objectives according to the needs of their congregation and local community? And how can the voices of CYF be genuinely included in this agenda-setting? These are important questions for churches to consider.

The final observation within this data relates to the place of this sector of ministry, since alongside their aims, all of the stakeholders expressed it as being of key importance within the church. However, some church leaders did intimate that they were involved reluctantly, due to denominational pressures or to gain access to parents of boost attendance. We argue that this mindset could undermine the aims and purposes outlined above. However, on the whole, the church leaders described excitement at seeing the value which children can bring and how they can inspire and encourage adults. How can this be developed more comprehensively in order to help the wider congregation to catch the vision and see the value of ministry amongst CYF? As Csinos and Beckwith (2013) remind us, Jesus took children from the sidelines and made them the centre of his attention. Allocating time so that church leaders can be more actively involved and connected to these ministries would be an excellent enhancement (Holmes and Worsley, pending). Some of the ancillary parts of the roles were mentioned by paid staff and volunteers but not by church leaders, parents or the young people. This highlights that for many CYF activities there are significant additional requirements such as preparation of resources, setting up and packing away. It was not clear whether the other stakeholders realised all of the work involved and whether they value and appreciate paid staff and volunteers for all they do in this regard? It was interesting that some of the church leaders surveyed said that they couldn’t be excited as they had no resources or funds to work in this area, whilst others said that they did not have any children in their church therefore did not spend any more on this area. These two mindsets are rather limiting and lacking vision, and raise questions relating to the well-known adage about speculating to accumulate. If churches are not investing time or resources into younger generations, then it follows that they are likely to have minimal gains in that area. This resonates with Brierley’s (2023) call to observe shoots of encouragement in spiritually barren places. Our survey participants have all pointed to many shoots of encouragement in and around the faith journey of children and young people, which are reasons to be encouraged. The UK church needs to intentionally focus on these shoots of life and diligently nurture them so that they can thrive. This surely gives us hope about the future of the church.

**Conclusion**

This paper asked what is the point of ministry amongst CYF. Whilst our findings indicate that these stakeholders all tend to have common and collective purposes rather than wishing to work in isolation, there are some disconnects in the messaging and operational activity. Beyond this overarching purpose, our findings clarify that are different nuances of perspective and priority for the different stakeholders, which highlights the different role and function each party has. For example, the church leaders present a more strategic perspective while volunteers see the need to bring the team together, aligning with the notion of the body of Christ. Each stakeholder plays a different part. There is equality, unity and also difference in roles. This is helpful to illuminate so that greater communication and collaboration can occur. But it seems that the young people are less aware of the distinctively different roles of each stakeholder. It is recommended that there is enhanced conversation about the distinct roles each party has, in an effort to enhance collaboration. Further to this variance in outworking the overarching purpose, there seems to be a difference in how church leaders communicate and enthuse other stake holders of the vital importance of parents as part of this team. Collective discussion and decisions about onward vision and strategy would serve to enhance effectiveness.

Despite these aspects of disconnection which are opportunities for the church to develop into, unity was the thread which came through the most strongly. According to these stakeholders, the point of CYF ministry is raising the next generation in the Christian faith. They demonstrated unity and commitment to that quest. There is a core of shared priorities, which is an excellent platform for shaping onward strategy. Our findings therefore indicate that there is much to celebrate! It is encouraging to hear the excitement of church leaders abut children and young people, and recognition that there are mutual benefits amongst all parties of the congregation when younger generations are included. The results show an upbeat underlying narrative of unity, encouragement, community and joy. This is a positive position given the reputation of stuffiness, tradition and decline which is often presented of the UK church. Yet our findings reveal a vibrant picture of church families moving forward together, serving the least among us, following in the way of Jesus. This is greatly encouraging for the CYF sector as a whole. The fact that the participant young people displayed significant confidence in the church to provide them with role models and support for their faith journey indicates that the church has a wonderful secret that needs to be shared with those who are outside of the church community.

The main gap that our analysis has identified relates to the difference in perspective in supporting parents. There seems to be awareness that it takes place, but there does not seem to be strength of commitment to this amongst all stakeholders. Previous research and literature express that the foundation of faith formation is the home, and the church leaders concurred with that. The parents mainly recognise that also but often felt ill equipped and desired more support. But the youth/children’s leaders and volunteers did not necessarily share this view as strongly. This area therefore needs increased work to navigate this core challenge facing the church. Moving towards a more village-like and collaborative sharing of the responsibility for supporting faith formation of children and young people seems to align with the desires of all stakeholders and should form part of the ongoing strategy, despite the inevitable challenges and hindrances involved. Intentional mobilisation of congregations to develop more relational connections with children and young people is a key aspect of this approach.

We therefore call for the church to intentionally evaluate the agenda and aims of church in relation to CYF. A refreshed vision is required of what it looks like to pass the Christian faith onto the next generation, through authentic faith formation rather merely asking children and young people to attend activities and events connected with church as the sole aim, since our data indicates that this model is not meeting the needs of contemporary CYF. They want and need more. They desire role models and encouragers. People of faith who will deliberately inspire and actively coach them and support them as they explore the Christian faith for themselves. Change is always a challenge but it seems that it is necessary to instigate more conversation amongst stakeholders so that together we can strive to carry out the great commission amongst children, young people and families in the years ahead.

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1. https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)