

# GROWING FAITH: CONNECTIONS

**EMERGING BEST PRACTICE FOR  
GROWING FAITH IN HOUSEHOLDS,  
SCHOOLS AND CHURCHES**



growing  
**faith** 

**JANUARY 2023**

**A REPORT SUPPORTING THE WORK OF THE GROWING FAITH FOUNDATION**

# FOREWORD

**W**atching Growing Faith develop over recent years has been filled with joy, and some sadness. The joy has been to see people catching the vision of Home, School and Church working collaboratively together to enable faith to grow in people of all ages. There have already been plenty of creative ideas many of which are noted and picked up in this excellent report. The sadness has been in pondering where the interconnections were lost along the way, and the times when people have questioned why the whole project is being pursued.

What this brief report highlights is that there are some simple principles to be followed that can be worked out in a myriad different ways locally. Listening to the voices of children and young people in a way that leads to active engagement; building strong relationships between home, school and church; developing helpful rhythms mirrored across all three settings; and being clear in the purpose of growing faith together will take people of all generations forward in our walk with Jesus Christ.

I am grateful to the team who undertook the research and commend it warmly.



Paul Butler

**Bishop of Durham**

**Chair of the National Society**

# ABOUT GROWING FAITH

**G**rowing Faith is arguably the most exciting movement within the Church at the moment! (I suppose we would say that, but it is pretty amazing.) It's the movement to change the culture of the Church of England so that everyone instinctively puts children, young people and families at the heart of all the mission and ministry of the Church.

It comes from the vision set by the House of Bishops and endorsed by General Synod in 2019. It involves churches, schools and households working together to help children, young people and families have life in all its fullness.

Research indicates that when school, home and church work together, children and young people's spirituality has the best chance of flourishing. Since 2019, six Trailblazer Dioceses have pioneered work in the intersections of these three spheres and every diocese has appointed Growing Faith Champions to promote the culture change at a local level. The Growing Faith Foundation itself started in February 2022 as a small cog to move things forward and ongoing research is an important part of its work.



***The wheels are turning. We need more and more leaders in the Church who 'get it'***

In early 2023, we're still a long way from a church culture where under-16s are close to our heart, but the culture change is starting to happen; the wheels are turning. We need more and more leaders in the Church who 'get it' and who can support families, churches and schools in their respective collaborative ministries.

So I was delighted to be invited to sponsor this small project group of present and future leaders from the Strategic Leadership Development Programme, who had caught the vision for this culture change before I had. They are, as I soon found, absolutely passionate about ensuring their research would be both theologically grounded and as useful as possible to households, parishes, dioceses and the national church to help change the culture into one which

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confidently, generously, creatively and collaboratively nurtures children and young people in their Christian faith.

It has been a privilege to accompany the group and I am looking forward, as are they, to the transformative impact their findings will have.



Lucy Moore

**Head of the Growing Faith Foundation**



# INTRODUCTION

## OUR CONTEXT: CAN WE GROW YOUNGER?

The vision of the Church of England is to become ‘a church which is younger and more diverse’ and to ‘double the number of children and young active disciples’. Progress towards this has included the launch of the Growing Faith Foundation in 2022. This takes place in the context of evidence of declining engagement with church life among children and young people, exacerbated by the challenges of Covid.

## OUR AIM: EMERGING BEST PRACTICE

This report is based on a process of research and listening led by a small project team over 14 months, particularly looking at the intersection between households, schools and churches. The present report sets out some marks of emerging best practice in the current landscape.

Our aim is to help realign the spheres of home, school and church through a change of mindset so that we can see a renewal of Christian faith in the coming generation. We see the Growing Faith agenda as crucial aspect of this realignment.

In particular we hope this report and the accompanying resources will:

- Stimulate future research for the Growing Faith Foundation
- Influence policy and procedure at diocesan level, including priorities, youth engagement and the structure of new roles
- Resource and inspire informed practitioners in local churches and schools

## OUR FINDING: FAITH THAT CONNECTS

In the context of challenging circumstances we have seen some genuinely hopeful and creative practices. All ministry with children, young people and families is valuable. But in the current context, some kinds of ministry seem to have connected

with households particularly well, bridging divides between households, school and church, and helping build a faith which is holistic – heart, mind, soul and strength.

A significant observation from several quarters is that much current provision has tended toward centrally-provided programmes, run independently by churches or schools (at times, working in ‘silos’). This approach often remains at the relatively superficial level of one-off events and resources, though recent reports suggest this limits its effectiveness for growing faith (for instance, the [Multi-National Children’s Ministry Report 2021](#)). In contrast, our research highlights the importance of a markedly collaborative approach, characterised by shared listening, shared relationships, shared rhythms and shared purpose.

In our listening we have discerned a call to reconnect what is disconnected. The vision of church we see emerging is one where young people are truly heard so that “every supporting ligament” can play its part in the body (Ephesians 4:16); where relational sinews are renewed so that the Spirit can revitalise our communities, and where the three strands of household, church and school are rewound together around Christian practices. This is the connected faith we long and pray for.

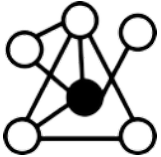


## FOUR KEY CONNECTIONS

Our research highlights the following connections as vital:



Young **VOICES** at the centre of delivery and decision-making rather than children, young people and families as relatively passive recipients of centrally-provided programme



Building **RELATIONSHIPS** as a priority, including developing the links between households, churches and schools, rather than working independently in silos



Investing in **RHYTHMS** which bring regularity and a deeper participation in the church seasons, as a way of going deeper than one-off events and resources



A shared **PURPOSE** which contributes visibly to God's kingdom so that children and young people can see faith making an impact

The following sections of this report unpack each of these connections in more detail, providing a basis for the findings in theology and recent research, and offering some recent illustrative examples of emerging best practice. For short video testimonies in each of the four areas, visit [growingfaithconnections.org](http://growingfaithconnections.org).

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR EVERY CONTEXT

- Be intentional about *connecting* the contexts in which children and young people find belonging, especially home, school and church.
- Build these links through the following connections:
  - Make space for the voices of children and young people and make sure they can shape the culture of their homes, schools and churches.
  - Expect each person to be able to bless others and to be blessed by them, regardless of age. Foster mutuality between households, churches and schools; and place a high value on intergenerational relationships.
  - Be creative in joining the rhythms of life and faith in order to create a sense of belonging not just to the local but also to the cosmic story of salvation.
  - Be bold in opening up new ways for children and young people to explore and live out their faith, to discern their particular calling and to exercise their gifts.

### FOR HOUSEHOLDS

- Start where you are and be encouraged that even small steps have great value.
- Discuss the four 'connections' at home or with other parents (easy-to-share resources for this are [online](#)), especially the rhythms and routines that support faith development (see Rhythms, p. 14-16).
- Start a conversation at your local school or with church leaders. Could you arrange a time for parents to share the realities of faith in the home and to discuss what would be helpful?

### FOR CHURCHES, SCHOOLS AND DIOCESES

- Reflect on this report with your leadership team (a short 2-page summary is available [here](#) to facilitate this).



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- Establish a principle that no significant decision will be taken without input from children and young people, and develop mechanisms to support this (see *Voices*, p. 10).
- Ensure relationship-building between homes, schools and church communities is prioritised in job descriptions, ministry reviews and strategic planning (see *Relationships*, p. 13).
- Support household rhythms of faith through publicising resources, sharing stories and enabling peer mentoring (see *Rhythms*, p. 16).
- Schedule a school-church planning conversation to establish connection points through the year (see *Rhythms*, p. 16).
- Establish a principle that faith development work, whether in a school or church context, should feed directly and meaningfully into practical mission and regularly review this connection with children, young people and their households (see *Purpose*, p. 18).

## VOICES

We build connections when children and young people have the opportunity to:

- share their stories and ask their questions, cultivating shared curiosity about faith, rather than receiving content or a fixed prescription of what faith looks like;



- own the vision and programme, being given time to co-create faith experiences and learning alongside their carers.

Our voice is a manifestation of our identity, just as Jesus, the Word of God, expresses who God is. To make space for a person's voice affirms their dignity. The Scriptures carry the testimony of people who have been given a voice: freed slaves give the Lord praise (Exodus 15:1-18); Hannah acknowledges that her prayer has been heard (1 Sam 2:1-10); young Samuel and David test out their intuitions (1 Samuel 3; David asks, 'Can't I even speak?' 1 Samuel 17:26-29); and children raise their voices in the Temple courts (Matthew 21:15-16). Jesus, who also spoke up in the Temple when he was young, develops this challenge to listen when he brings a child right into the centre of the group of disciples (Matthew 18:1-5). How can we practice this commitment to listen with children and young people in our communities today?

In her book, *Children's Spirituality*, Rebecca Nye offers six criteria or threads for enabling children's spirituality to grow in church, and she uses the acronym SPIRIT as a helpful way to remember these (Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy and Trust).<sup>1</sup> All of these threads provide the way for young voices to be encouraged and nurtured. Children and young people should be valued by the kind of **space** they are given within all aspects of church to use and listen to their voices in different contexts and for different purposes (e.g., in exploring Scripture, in leading worship, in praying, in asking questions, in offering ideas, in teaching others). Their voices should be valued in and of themselves, as part of a **process** of growing faith for the whole community, rather than simply to create programmes or to give feedback (although

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this is important too). They should be encouraged to articulate how their *imagination* enables links to be made between knowing and living their faith, and for all of this to happen, we need genuine *relationships* of *trust* that will respond to these voices in appropriate, sensitive and grateful ways.

Harvey Kwiyani also reminds us of the importance of authenticity in these relationships.<sup>2</sup> We may seek to create an environment in which young voices are intentionally sought and listened to, but if our children and young people do not see honesty and authenticity in the older voices in their community, then this will dissuade them from using their own.

## **LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES**

- Durham Diocese established a Children and Youth Council in 2019, which includes representation on the Bishop's Council and is about providing avenues for the voices of young people in the church. They train and recruit members via a Growing Young Leaders course (aimed at 10-13 year olds). They also run Mini Missionaries 'Homegrown', which is about children and young people developing mission events in their own churches, schools and communities.
- Youth Speak in Chester Diocese, is another young leaders' forum, which has been meeting since 2021 and inputs into key issues that impact young people and the church. So far they have spoken into the diocesan youth strategy and the Church response to the climate crisis. The group also feeds into the Bishop's Leadership team and recently addressed synod.
- Coventry Diocese has explored the idea of Table Church, where everybody brings some food to share and then also has encouragement to share about their faith story/journey. For a resource that can help you plan a similar event, with a structure to help all generations engage in telling their faith stories, see The Big Scrumptious Faith-Filled Feast.
- The website Learning to Listen has resources and practical ideas to help churches take steps towards better listening to the children and young people in their community and beyond (a digest of some of these is available here).

## RELATIONSHIPS

We build connections when children and young people have the opportunity to:

- form the long-term, diverse, and cross-generational relationships that build genuine community;
- develop strong and multiple connections between church, school and home; these develop through the complex interconnection of resources and people – not just through a vicar or youth worker.

Growing in faith is nurtured by growing in relationships with other people of faith: seeing what faith looks like in others, hearing other people witness to God's love, soaking up the habits of prayer. Many of the different models or images offered to understand and explore how faith grows in children and young people specifically name the importance of relationships.

John Westerhoff offered a theory of faith development where the community of faith is central to how a child experiences faith (shaped by their interactions with other people of faith) and the strength of their perception of how they belong to that faith



community. Important to Westerhoff is the concept of sharing within this community. Shared relationships (where diversity is valued) should be centred around the sharing of the good news story and shared rituals, and emanating from this should be the sharing of a common life that puts faith into action which extends beyond the church walls.<sup>3</sup>

However, a recent report on the impact of the pandemic has found that, during this time, many relationships (especially those between churches and households) were transactional rather than relational, 'so that the church provided resources; creating products for the parents to use rather than living faith out together in partnership'.<sup>4</sup>

***Many relationships between churches and households were transactional rather than relational***

Olwyn Mark highlights through her research the finding that children learn about faith through 'spiritual modelling' and 'observational learning', something in which 'the influence of grandparents, and indeed the wider family, plays a positive role'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Rachel Turner writes: 'Grandparents are a vital part of the spiritual development of children and teens, so it is important that we invest in equipping them as well'.<sup>6</sup>

Modelling faith may not just happen from adult to child but may in fact happen from child to adult. This recognition marks a significant change in attitude, a cultural shift marked by humility and generosity. As Ronni Lamont writes, 'We all know that children bless us through their immediate spirituality – enabling us to share the moment of ordinary grace – but do we recognize how profound that mutual sharing can be?'.<sup>7</sup>

## LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES

- Activities which have built interconnections between church and school include national programmes such as Open the Book (an easy resource for telling Bible Stories in school assemblies and collective worship), or local initiatives such as providing volunteer listeners for children's reading practice. Churches may well have the retired demographic schools need to fill the role and children get to know a good number of church members through weekly contact. Chaplaincy in Primary Schools also opens up excellent opportunities for engagement across the three spheres of school, church and household.

- Churches praying for and considering simple, practical ways to look after their local schools can bear fruit. The Diocese of Peterborough has published Top Tips for Blessing Schools, while Pray For Schools is a national initiative of local prayer groups.
- For an example of a church prioritising intergenerational approaches to ministry, in this case on Sunday mornings, take a look at Church on the Heath, Fleet's All Together Worship. They have been building an intergenerational culture since 2018, and have taken the whole church on that journey and have integrated many children and young people into their services.
- Sharing meals together as a community is a great way to connect across generations. Truro Diocese trialled an intergenerational Afternoon Tea (in schools on a Sunday afternoon), while St John's Peterborough has a Wednesday café run by students from the local school.



*Photo: Chris Lawton (Unsplash)*

## **RHYTHMS**

We build connections when children and young people engage with rhythms of faith through time, season, tradition and memory. They do this through activities which are:

- Practice-based – although engagement with children can naturally be programme-based (at church or school) or ad hoc (at home), the most powerful activities build over time and with repetition; these regular practices can engage memory and connect with the deeper tradition of the church.
- Seasonal – our church and secular seasons provide very natural points of connection between home, church and school, providing opportunities to work together, share resources and deepen practice.

Our key commitments and our deepest learning are rooted in rhythms and routines. We know that these are important in child development and identity formation. For instance, children connect instinctively with seasons, through which they form a sense of themselves as growing through time, of what is important in their family, and of how they fit in a wider community. Weekly rhythms are also crucial, as Nick Shepherd

***Our key commitments and our deepest learning are rooted in rhythms and routines***

comments, when it comes to regular attendance in youth work, ‘rhythm [is]...important as well as the benefit felt from being there’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Olwyn Mark’s research indicates that parental attendance at church services can be the strongest factor influencing adolescent affiliation.<sup>9</sup> Children and young people can, and need to, connect with the rhythms of daily prayer, weekly gathered worship and seasonal celebration which make up the church’s life.

Some recent research suggests a significant gap between the regular routines of a church school and the life of many households.<sup>10</sup> And yet there are huge opportunities here. Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter are rich ‘nexus’ occasions where home, school and church can interconnect. For example, ‘families engage more with faith-related activities at certain times of the year linked to the key Christian festivals; evidence of increased school activity at these times rippled into the home environment’.<sup>11</sup> The church year offers opportunities which are truly participative, not simply cognitive. Remembering baptism or thanksgiving, regular community service commitments and other special repeated church events can also form part of children’s faith ‘calendar’.

## LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES

- The [Kitchen Table Project](#) was set up to support parents and carers in nurturing a living faith at home. Their article [Ten Things We Can Do at Home](#) to help build rhythms of faith is a good place to start.
- Oxford Diocese has developed a [Contemplative Toolkit](#) (for households) and [Space Makers](#) (for schools and churches) which provide resources for sharing and teaching Christian practices. [Prayer Spaces in Schools](#) is an organisation that can support schools in exploring practices of prayer.
- The seasons of Christmas and Easter particularly lend themselves to shared rhythms and practices. The Diocese of Gloucester has developed [Experiencing Easter](#), [Experiencing Christmas](#) and [Experiencing Harvest](#) as ways for churches and schools to link together to engage with the rhythm of the church seasons each year in an interactive way.



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- Connecting with God outdoors is a great way to connect with the seasonal rhythms of creation. For examples from across the Church of England and resources [click here](#).

## PURPOSE

We build connections when children and young people 'do' faith rather than 'learn' or 'receive' it. This happens by:

- contributing to a purpose or project that makes a difference to the wider community and world in which we live;



- moving outside the walls of home, church or school buildings and into a 'Fourth Space' (i.e., another gathering place in the wider community)

A good deal of recent research exploring faith in children and young people specifically refers not just to faith being encountered or tasted, but to faith growing and being fruitful in children and young people. The report Faith in the Nexus argued that faith should 'flourish',<sup>12</sup> Sarah Holmes refers to faith being nurtured,<sup>13</sup> and the Growing Faith vision expresses the hope that children and young people should grow into an 'active faith'.<sup>14</sup> This term, 'active faith', clearly suggests a faith that is 'alive' in all aspects of discipleship outlined in the Old Testament and New Testament, picturing children and young people not just as passive consumers of belief but as full human beings who can experience God powerfully and who can play a full part in building up the Kingdom of God in all of its dimensions.

***Children and young people can play a full part in building up the Kingdom of God in all of its dimensions***

As Lynn Swaner and Andy Wolfe remind us, 'The question of purpose is a question of story'.<sup>15</sup> Children and young people must be offered the opportunities to explore and discover their gifts and their calling to live as lights in the world, to live as God's creation, 'created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Ephesians 2:10). Their purpose is deeply connected to the story of God's way in the world, which is in relationship with his people, calling them to a life of worship, marked by holiness, mercy and compassion. Churches, schools and households should be enabled to have a greater confidence in how they participate in

the grand narrative of God, but also in how they articulate their own particular stories of encountering God in the stories of their communities. Becoming bolder in our understanding of our God-shaped story should automatically deepen a sense of purpose in all people, including our children and young people, for we are all called to participate in the story of God's salvation.

## **LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES**

- The Community Hubs Project in Salisbury Diocese are partnerships between schools, churches and communities, which aim to provide opportunities for children and young people to work for the transformation of their local communities, around needs identified by the young people themselves. They enable conversation and practical expressions of faith. These are locally led projects but with support provided centrally for those looking to start a project.
- Churchyard and community rewilding projects have provided opportunities for church, school and community connections across many parts of the country. For example, in Gloucester Diocese one parish is developing a churchyard project connecting through the local Community Wardens, to the local wildlife Trust and the nearby schools in a project to remove grass and replant local wildflowers in the old section of the churchyard.
- St Bartholomew's in Hazelmere is doing some specific work around purpose, striving to give children and young people significant roles within their services, training and equipping them to take an active part in the worshipping life of the church. They have given the group (The Den) a sense of purpose through community projects that look to educate around environmental and social issues at the same time as giving young people opportunities to serve and use their gifts and talents.
- Bristol Diocese offer resources for a four-week Emerge course, which gathers young people with their peers to explore volunteer roles, nurture their leadership potential, and enable them to serve in their churches, schools, clubs and in their daily lives.

## OUR RESEARCH TEAM



**Gareth Irvine** is Vicar of St Laurence’s Church. He is the Foundation Governor at St Laurence’s CE Primary School. Since 2018, Gareth has developed a unique Family Link Worker role in partnership between the church, Together for Change Coventry & Warwickshire and the multi-academy trust. He has been a youth worker, a school chaplain, and has led a church plant in an urban neighbourhood.



**Esther Prior** is Vicar, St John’s Egham. She been a secondary school chaplain where she made innovative connections between the school, local churches and home. Now Esther leads a church with a vibrant youth and children’s ministry.



**Michelle Dalliston** is Vicar of Peterborough, St John the Baptist and St Luke. She has worked extensively with children and young people both before and after ordination across a variety of parish and Cathedral settings, including establishing support and training for Godly Play in churches and schools across the northeast.



**Rowena King** is Rector of Bourton-on-the-Water, with Clapton and the Rissingtons. She has worked in the fields of education and school chaplaincy for over 20 years, and now combines these roles with ordained ministry. She has a currently leads a vibrant lunch-time youth group in the local high school.



**Emma Parker** Deputy Warden, Cranmer Hall, Durham. In 2019 Emma created the first ‘Growing Faith’ module and leads on this at Cranmer Hall. In 2023 she and another colleague are partnering with the Growing Faith Foundation to organise and plan two ‘Growing Faith’ conferences.



**Mark Powley** is Principal, St Hild College. He has been a youth worker and secondary school teacher; he currently oversees additional ordinand training on ministry with children, young people and families at St Hild.

## ENDNOTES

Further resources and a guide to recent publications can be found at [growingfaithconnections.org](http://growingfaithconnections.org).

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009). See especially p.54.

<sup>2</sup> Kwiyani, Harvey C Kwiyani, *Our Children Need Roots and Wings: Equipping and Empowering Young Diaspora Africans for Life and Mission* (Liverpool: Missio Africanus, 2019), pp.83-84.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Westerhoff, J.H, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012. 3rd revised ed), pp.75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Holmes et al., '[Multi-National Children's Ministry Report 2021: Do We Need a New Plan for Children's Ministry?](#)', p.12.

<sup>5</sup> 2016, p.35 and 59.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Turner, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Parent: Creating a Culture Where Parenting for Faith Can Flourish* (Abingdon: BRF, 2018), p.164.

<sup>7</sup> Ronni Lamont, *Faith in Children* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2020), p.166.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Shepherd, *Faith Generation: Retaining Young People and Growing the Church* (London: SPCK, 2016), pp.167-168.

<sup>9</sup> Olwyn Mark, '[Passing on Faith](#)' (London: Theos, 2016), p.53.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Casson, Sabina Hulbert, Mary Woolley and Robert Bowie, '[Faith in the Nexus: Church schools and children's exploration of faith in the home: A NICER research study of twenty church primary schools in England](#)' (National Institute for Christian Education Research, 2020), p.12.

<sup>11</sup> '[Faith in the Nexus](#)', p.70.

<sup>12</sup> '[Faith in the Nexus](#)', p.88.

<sup>13</sup> '[Multi-National Children's Ministry Report 2021](#)', p.17.

<sup>14</sup> The [Growing Faith vision](#) talks about the need for churches to make more of an effort to take what children have experienced regarding the Christian faith in their school, and provide opportunities for it to develop into an active faith: 'The connection between what a pupil experiences in school and how that translates into an active faith, nurtured through a local church often needs to be developed further' (para 19, p.5).

<sup>15</sup> Lynn E. Swaner and Andy Wolfe, *Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators and Schools* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), p.15.