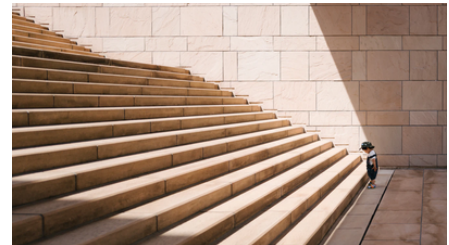


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# DO CHURCH STRUCTURES ENABLE CHILDREN'S & FAMILY MINISTRY TO GROW?



## A MULTI-NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

by

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# INTRODUCTION

The multi-national survey (carried out during summer 2021) revealed the need to investigate further some of the issues surrounding children's/family ministry. So, we distributed an in-depth reflective questionnaire in the spring of 2022, which explored training opportunities and investment, the role and input of clergy (ministers, pastors, priests, and bishops) and parents, the role of children themselves and the dynamics of collaborations between all parties. There were 207 responses from the UK (38%), USA (17%), Brazil (15%), Canada (13%), South Africa (4%), Australia (3%) and twelve other nations (9%).

During the planning for this survey, we suspected that the research could help spark conversation, so we encouraged clergy and children's leaders/teams to complete it together, in dialogue - this has been very beneficial for those who did this. We've heard some great stories of the benefit of these conversations. So now we share some of our findings and encourage you to use them in your setting to enable your church's children's and family ministry to thrive. We also encourage you to use the survey questions as prompts for discussion in your church leadership meetings to assess which areas your church could develop to enhance children's and family ministry.

## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN

For English-speaking countries, the survey revealed that 21% of clergy always actively involved the children, and 59% of clergy sometimes involved children in the church's mission. This is positive in that it acknowledges that children are understood to be part of the church and the mission of the church by about 80% of clergy who participated. Further clarification is needed to know how the children were involved, the extent to which their voices were heard and how they influenced decision-making.

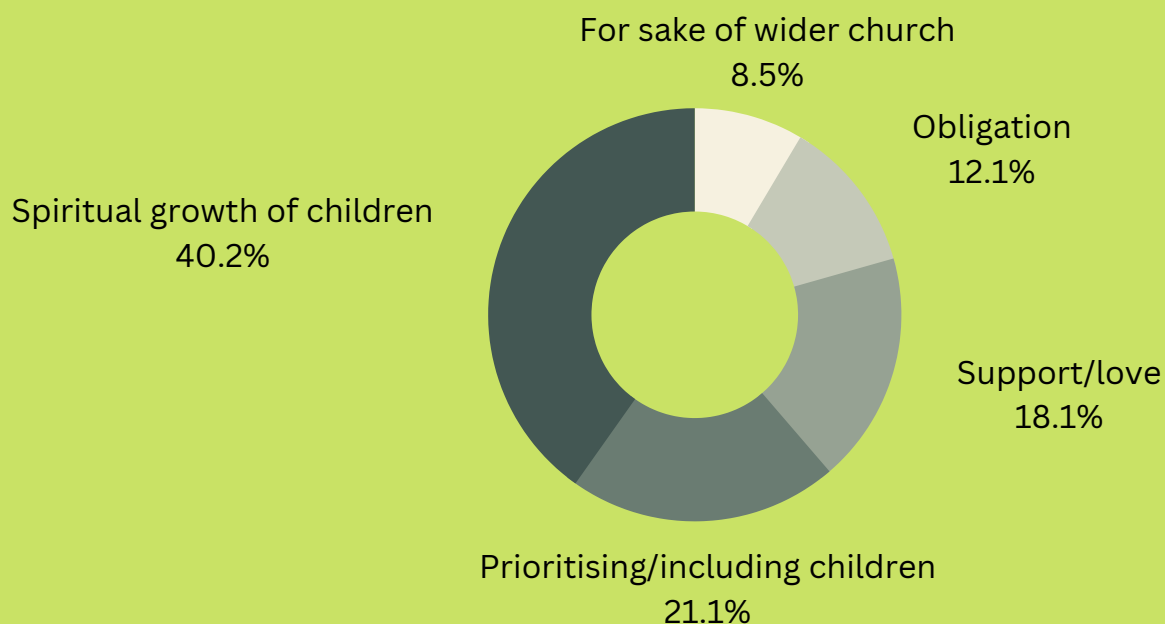
For the Portuguese clergy, the results indicate that a significant number (52%) do not see children playing an active part in the church's mission. This suggests there are cultural differences that need to be further explored as well as an understanding of what "active involvement" is considered to be.



*Photo: Larm Rmah*

# WHY CHILDREN'S MINISTRY?

We asked the clergy why their church does children's/family ministry. The largest number of responses were child-focused, citing spiritual growth in children or the desire to include and prioritise them. Some responses (18%) were family focussed; expressing a heart to support and care for families, while 12% gave reasons which indicated a sense of obligation, such as "because we have to," "it's part of the Great Commission," "it's a good thing to do," and "because an enthusiastic person wants us to." Nine percent of respondents gave reasons such as "to increase church numbers," "to keep children out of the service," "to strengthen the wider church," and "to secure the future church."



**Responses to question: Why does your church do children's/family ministry?**

## HOW DOES YOUR CHURCH ENGAGE CHILDREN?

We asked the clergy how their churches engage children in church life. Unfortunately, 22% stated that their church did not, although 30% said they engaged children during the Sunday service through involvement in leading prayers, Bible readings, PA/visuals, worship and serving together. Twenty-six percent described other activities, such as schools ministry, uniformed groups, Messy Church, social justice, family nights and catechism classes.

Others reported that this took place through the church's ethos (16%), such as modelling discipleship, viewing children as agents of change, mentoring, fellowship, child-centred ministry and intergenerational ministry. Seven respondents (2%) stated that this occurred through paid staff, the kid's team or other relationships in the church.

# PREPARATION OF CLERGY

The clergy's knowledge of children's and family faith formation was not extensive (see diagrams below). Regarding formal training in children's/family ministry, 57% said they had undertaken some, 38% had done none, and 6% said their training had been more informal. This minimal training may be due to its being perceived as an add-on for many clergy's education rather than a focus, or a lack of available training. It appears that while most of the training and knowledge has given the clergy some understanding of children's and family ministry, it is limited, and an emphasis on children's faith formation was more of a side issue than a focus.

## Clergy's knowledge children's & family faith formation



It was encouraging to hear reports of training provided for parents. Almost 43% of the clergy said they provide training for parents directed toward the faith formation of their children; however, just over 40% said they do not.

Comments from 16% of the clergy indicated ambivalence toward training, with one saying that training for parents “would be very presumptuous,” presumably on behalf of the church leadership. It also appears that most churches lack a coherent strategy taking a relatively laissez-faire approach toward the faith formation of children by both parents and the clergy.

## WORKING TOGETHER

When we asked the clergy about meeting with their children's or family ministry teams (staff and/or volunteers), 19% of English-speaking clergy reported that they met with them rarely or never, and 10% said they met once per year. A third stated that they meet once per quarter, and a third met monthly. Seven percent said weekly, and 1% said as and when necessary. Two commented that it was challenging and often not possible. Of the Portuguese clergy, this seemed to be less frequent, with a quarter saying they met together rarely or never, 39% saying they met once per quarter, and 23% meeting monthly.

These figures do not indicate an ongoing collaborative partnership or dialogue between the clergy and those involved in children's/family ministry. This suggests that input into children's/family ministry may not be considered within the clergy's role or remit.

# FAMILY FAITH FORMATION

The first multi-national research project (2021) indicated that Christian parents felt ill-equipped to nurture their child's faith and that churches provided minimal support for family faith formation. This current research project supports this claim but also shows that some congregations engage in more relational and collaborative ways to equip parents in family faith formation.

Portuguese-speaking clergy are overwhelmingly more intentional in teaching parents how to nurture faith formation at home. However, almost half (41%) of English-speaking clergy stated they are not. Some comments from pastors:

"To teach parents how to nurture faith formation at home would be very presumptive."

"Few churches, if any, have a coherent strategy for this."

While the clergy say that family faith formation is important, they are not actively supporting families to do this. One person said,

"While the pastor might preach on this topic, churches don't intentionally teach into it."

Congregations relied heavily on passive engagement to strengthen family faith formation, such as providing helpful resources that support family faith formation. But families must know how to engage with them.

The research also shows that relational efforts through home visits, family Bible studies, and parenting courses are often utilised to strengthen family faith formation within the home. Portuguese-speaking congregations are more often willing to connect relationally, with 55% of Portuguese-speaking congregations engaging in home visits compared to 29% of English-speaking congregations. Fifty-two percent of Portuguese-speaking congregations offer family Bible studies compared to 11% of English-speaking congregations. A significant number of English-speaking congregations (74%) and one-third of Portuguese-speaking congregations (36%) utilise the entire congregation and intergenerational activities to help strengthen family faith formation.

## What churches did to strengthen family faith formation:



Intergenerational services & activities (74%)



Provision of printed or online resources (60%)



Sermons on family faith formation (38%)



Home visits (29%)



Spiritual parenting courses (21%)

# INVESTING IN FAMILIES

More than 52% of the clergy said that less than 20% of their congregation serves in adult ministry, and 82% said that less than 20% of their congregation serves in children's or family ministry. This implies that in many congregations, most attendees are uninvolved in their church's mission. The majority are, therefore, consumers who come for programs, activities or services.

The survey revealed that more people are available to serve in adult ministry than in children's or family ministry since the majority of children's and family ministry is done by less than 10% of a local church congregation. However, a large proportion of adults connect with children. Eighty percent of the clergy said that the members of their congregation speak to children and involve them in congregational worship (in Brazil, this was only 55%). About 60% said their congregation provides opportunities for children to use their gifts, about 50% reported that their congregation prays with children, and 22% stated that their congregation asks children for input on church decisions (10% of Brazilian clergy).

Training in children's and family ministry seems to be a low priority in the churches which responded to the survey. Thirty percent of the clergy said their church annually provides children's or family ministry volunteer training, and 30% said their church rarely does. Eleven percent said their church offers quarterly training, while 16% say their church never provides training. One pastor said that training is "not applicable," and another considered it the responsibility of the denomination, diocese or synod.

Parental involvement with children's church programs and activities seems to be sporadic. Twenty-three percent of the clergy said that parents are involved with children's ministry "all of the time," and 14% say parents are "never involved." When asked about parental involvement, one pastor said there was "little evidence," another said "no parents are involved on a regular basis," and another said, "some do, and some don't." The erratic nature of parental involvement raises questions about the roles and responsibilities of parents. It also indicates that congregations and families are not collaborating adequately in children's faith formation.

## What clergy said about contact with children



Congregation speak to children and involve them in worship (80%)



Children have opportunities to use their gifts (60%)



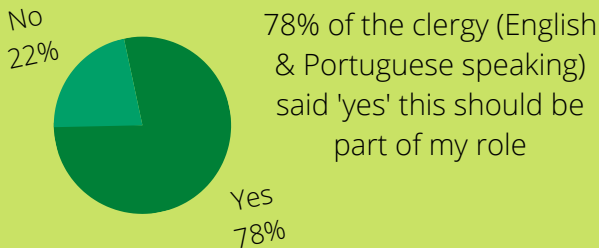
Congregation prays with children (50%)



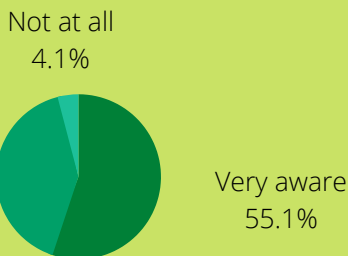
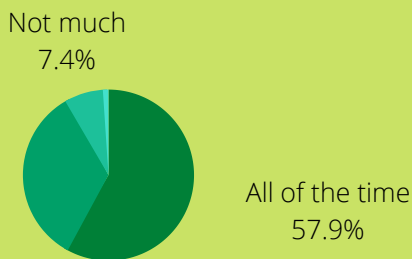
Congregation asks children for input on church decisions (22%)

# ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

## Should children/family ministry be part of the role of clergy?



55% of the clergy (English & Portuguese speaking) said they interact personally with all of the children at church "all of the time"



54% of the English-speaking and 84% of the Portuguese-speaking clergy said that they were very aware of the spiritual needs of families in their church.

The clergy who participated in the research overwhelmingly thought that children and family ministry should be part of their role. However, we did not ask about the extent to which this occurs in practice.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see that the majority of the clergy interact with children at church sometimes or regularly.

Again, it is encouraging that most of the clergy reported being very aware of the spiritual needs of families in their church. This demonstrates a desire to minister amongst this sector of the congregation, even though the other portions of this research indicate that collaboration is minimal in practice.

The survey asked whether children's/family ministry had been discussed in a governance meeting during the past five years, and 55% of English-speaking clergy said frequently or often (50% Portuguese). Thirty-three percent said it was occasional, and six percent of English-speaking clergy said never (0% in the Portuguese-speaking sample).

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Cultural differences significantly affect the process and results of multi-national research projects. People differ considerably in how they view their contexts. Their attitudes and evaluations, emotional experiences, social categorizations, perceptions and decision-making must be considered. In gathering information, applying observation techniques, and compiling this report, we've thus paid attention to cultural variables. In particular, we've recognized that the clergy who participated in this study structure their organizations differently, face diverse issues in their settings, hold a range of theological perspectives, and minister alongside people with varied motivations. So, as you look ahead, keep in mind the effects of cultural differences on the observations and judgements in this report.

# LOOKING AHEAD

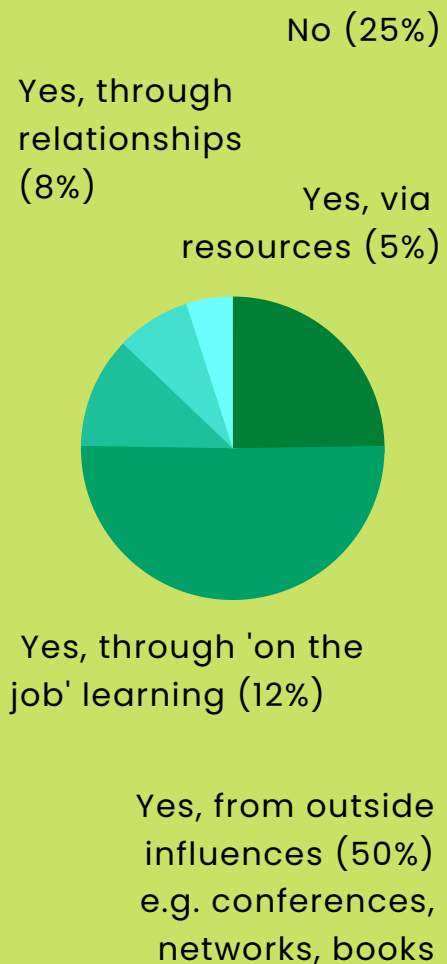
Many members of the clergy want the children and families in their churches to become disciples and grow in faith. Along with the spiritual growth of children and families, the clergy wish to see their congregations grow numerically. Their hopes for the future include improving their capacity to equip parents as disciplers, encouraging evangelism, and becoming more purposeful in cultivating intergenerational ministry.

The clergy are unclear on how to fulfill their children's and family ministry dreams. Some wonder if better teaching, more involvement of children in services, making the church a more welcoming space, or changing their Sunday services would facilitate spiritual and numerical growth. Others propose more engagement with local families, better resources for staff and volunteers, and fostering an increased sense of belonging. A few members of the clergy are considering better facilities, appointing staff, increased support/social engagement, or cultivating programs like Messy Church.

To look ahead, the clergy must intentionally value children as equal value to adults in their congregation, and develop their expertise and skills regarding ministry amongst children and families. Yet, twenty-five percent said they are not acquiring knowledge or proficiency in children's and family ministry, sometimes (in 7% of cases) because other staff do this. About 50% read books, attend training events (workshops and conferences) or utilize online learning forums. And about 10% learn through trial and error, listening to parents, networking with volunteers, or receiving mentoring or input from children or adults in their congregation.

These findings indicate that most of the clergy want children and parents to grow spiritually. Yet, many don't have the expertise, skills, or in some cases, the inclination to champion the health and growth of children's and family ministry. Thus, for churches and denominations to adequately envision future ministry to children and parents, most of the clergy must become more informed and involved.

## Are clergy intentionally developing their expertise/skills for ministry amongst children & families?





# CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Some encouraging aspects:

The survey seems helpful to spark conversations, so we encourage the clergy and children's leaders/teams to complete it together in dialogue.

This will help you work together to establish how your ministry amongst children and families can be further enhanced.

**Twenty-two percent of the clergy said they ask children for input on church decisions.** This strongly sends the message of inclusion and valuing the children. It would be great to see this happening regularly in churches.

**It's so encouraging that over 70% of the churches seek to engage children in some way in the life and mission of the church.** Developing this ethos throughout the global church will foster the involvement of younger generations in the church.

**It's exciting to hear that some congregations are engaging in more relational and collaborative ways to equip parents in family faith formation.** Sharing these stories widely will help to inspire and equip others to do this more.

## Some areas for development:

**In 79% of the churches represented, children are not always involved in the church's mission.** Focusing on including children more fully and actively in the life and mission of the church will encourage families to engage more with the church and also provide increased opportunities for children's faith to be nurtured.

**Only 16% of the churches described an ethos of viewing children as disciples, active agents within the church and a sense of modelling and mentoring to support them in interacting more.**

Striving to change the ethos of churches to exhibit this will further enable children's spiritual lives to flourish.

**Only 16% of the clergy described an ethos of viewing children as disciples, active agents within the church and a sense of modelling and mentoring to support them in interacting more.** Striving to change the ethos of churches to exhibit this will further enable children's faith formation to flourish.

**Sixty percent of the clergy meet less than monthly with their children's leaders/team.** Increasing this interaction could lead to an improved sense of partnership and valuing of children's and family ministry.

Please get in touch if you have any queries or comments:  
[youngfaith@hope.ac.uk](mailto:youngfaith@hope.ac.uk)



# APPENDIX:

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

You may find these question prompts helpful in discussions amongst church leadership, children's teams and church families:

### About the church leadership

1. How much do you know about children's and family faith formation and ministry?
2. How often do you meet with volunteers/staff to plan children's or family ministry?
3. Should children's or family ministry be part of the church leader's role and responsibilities?
4. Do you interact personally with all the children in your church? If so, in what ways?
5. To what extent are you personally aware of the spiritual needs of the families in your church?

### About the church

6. Approximately what percentage of your church budget is spent on Physical facilities, Administration, Staff salaries, Adult ministry, Children's or family ministry, Other
7. Approximately what percentage of people in your church serve in adult ministries?
8. Approximately what percentage of people in your church serve in children's or family ministries?
9. In the past five years, has there been discussion about your church's children's or family ministry in a governance meeting?
10. How do the adult members of your congregation affirm and value children? Speak to them, Provide opportunities for their involvement, Pray with them, Include their input on church decisions, Visit them, Other
11. What is your church's primary approach to children's and or family ministry? Traditional Sunday School, Children's version of adult worship, Multi-generational family services, Learning centres or theme based workshops, Intergenerational (mixed age serving, sharing, learning together), Other

### Children and families

12. Do the parents in your church help plan and run children's ministry programs and activities?
13. Does your church children's and or family ministry team discuss the spiritual needs of the children with their parents?
14. Are the children actively involved in the mission of your church?
15. What do you do to strengthen family faith formation in your church?

### Training

16. Does your church actively support parents to nurture faith formation in the home?
17. Does your church provide children's or family ministry volunteers training?

### Strategy

18. What are your church's plans for children's and or family ministry?  
Doing what worked well in the past, Trying new approaches, Not sure, Other
20. Does your church have a written strategy for children's or family ministry?

### Other reflections

21. Why does your church do children's and or family ministry?
22. What are your hopes/dreams/vision for the children and parents in your church?
23. How do you engage children in authentic worship, responsible service, and intentional evangelism?
24. Are you purposefully developing your expertise and skills regarding ministry to children and families?
25. What does your church need to do to strengthen the health and growth of children's and or family ministry?

