Do we need a new plan

for children's ministry?

A report based on research in

Brazil, Canada, UK and US in later-pandemic stages

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Executive Summary

This research project revealed areas of concern in ministry amongst children and families in the four case study nations. There are indications that for the majority of children, the pandemic adversely affected their faith formation. Hence, there is an urgent need for church leaders and para-church organisations to lay out clear and effective strategies for the seasons ahead, in the light of our observations of pandemic children and family ministry:

- Decreased engagement of children and families with church during the pandemic. Feelings of exclusion, isolation and marginalisation of children from churches are widespread, alongside perceptions that ministry amongst children is not prioritised as highly as ministry with adults.
- Relational connections were highly valued by families but appeared to be one of the most challenging aspects for churches.
- Children's role in churches seems to have become more passive than active. Equally, Christian parents are often viewed as mere conduits to pass on church provision and resources to the child, rather than viewing parents themselves as resources. Hence there is a transactional relationship between Christian parents and the church rather than relational and collaborative.
- Christian parents have felt ill equipped for nurturing their child's faith. Effective church support of them in this has been limited, and tended to equate to mere resource sharing rather than meaningful and collaborative support, compounded by resources often not being fit for purpose.
- Collaboration between families, schools and churches has been minimal. The Church is often viewed as a service provider rather than a partner. A disconnect was observed between how churches support schools and families: whether content or connection is most effective.

We conclude that there is an urgent need for church leaders and para-church organisations to prioritise ministry amongst children, and to formulate clear strategies for the way ahead. This must incorporate a new way of working across all of the nations involved in this research - to a mode where parents are authentically in partnership with the church to more effectively support faith formation intergenerationally. Rather than provision of resources, there is a need for a deeper level of dialogue to transform the existing mindset of parents feeling ill-equipped and therefore being hesitant to engage with their child's faith, and reverting to the church having the primary role. This revised approach must embody greater relational connection, rather than being primarily content or program-driven. Ultimately, there needs to be clearer communication, greater clarity and a stronger sense of purpose amongst all who are involved in children's faith formation in order to best serve children in the seasons ahead.

1   Setting the Scene

It is clear that many have experienced pandemic ministry as tumultuous and exhausting.[1] However, Brueggemann[2] argued that change and disruption can have positive impacts and outcomes. In fact, in some cases, enhanced self-assessment, reflection and evaluation has occurred in response to the pandemic conditions, which has been beneficial.[3] This research project therefore sought to capture insights into children and family ministry, to spark evaluation and reflection, with a view to enhancing effectiveness of this ministry in the forthcoming seasons.

This report is based on online survey data collected in Brazil, Canada, UK, and US in June 2021; gathering the views and experiences of 139 church leaders, 16 schools and 113 Christian parents in pandemic times. Supplementary data was collected through an earlier more extensive survey in Brazil comprising 167 church leader survey responses representing 24 denominations, a separate Canadian survey capturing responses from 175 churches from 25 denominations in all ten provinces and one territory,[4] and 55 interviews in the UK (parents, grandparents, children's workers, regional advisors, and resource providers). We have also incorporated data from the Barna Group[5] to provide further detail of the situation in the United States. We acknowledge that the survey and interview respondents are likely to have participated as a result of being more interested and involved in children's faith formation than others in the Church, potentially skewing the data collected. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see that the same issues, challenges and opportunities were reported by all of the countries represented.

Clarifying our terminology:

Schools: There are different types of schools and the terminology to describe them varies from country to country. Schools informed by a Christian world-view are usually identified by their denomination (e.g. Catholic, Baptist or Anglican), association (e.g. Association of Christian Schools International), or more loosely by a variety of terms (e.g. Church Schools, Christian Schools, Faith Schools, Religious Schools). The schools that participated in this study fall into one of these three categories.

Intergenerational ministry is a way of life together more than a ministry approach. It occurs when a congregation "intentionally brings the generations together in mutual serving, sharing or learning within the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each

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[1] Boaheng (2021); Johnston, Eagle & Headley (2021); Ross (2021)
[2] Brueggemann (2011)
[3] Yemtsa (2021)
[4] Scripture Union, (2021)
[5] The Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/

other and the greater community."[6] This concept incorporates the community of believers who engage in reciprocal relationships between the generations as the foundation for a person's spiritual formation and learning.

Faith in the home: There has been a growing awareness of the importance of the family, alongside church, in a child's faith nurture.[7] Those involved in children's ministry must consider who is responsible for a child's faith formation. Is it the parents, local church, Christian school, or two or three of these combined? Recognizing that all three are invested in faith formation, this study investigated what was happening in the home, church and school during this season.

2   Gifts of the Covid-19 Pandemic: What did it Reveal?

It may seem strange to talk of the pandemic as providing gifts. Pre-pandemic it would seem that institutions such as schools and churches felt confident in their orientation towards ministry with children. There were plans in place, with some awareness of the need for review, but all appeared to be working to a plan. However, the pandemic has caused complete disorientation and for many it has highlighted pre-existing situations as dysfunctional or ineffective. The results of this research show that the old orientation needs to be completely reviewed and that is one of the gifts that has been given. No longer is there certainty about what will or will not work within church and school settings. There is now a strong call towards creating a new orientation. This will be outlined in the subsequent sections, including our observations of ministry during the pandemic, to serve as gifts for the church in evaluating how children's faith nurture may be most effective in the season ahead.

2.1 The pandemic impact on church-based children's ministry

In the UK context, many children's leaders reported deep sadness and frustration about the changed landscape and context of ministry with children. Many had simply found it impossible to meet the diverse needs of the children and families in their church community due to the various restrictions and limitations in place. They worried about the impact on the faith of children who had received minimal spiritual input during the pandemic. Indeed, 71% of the Brazilian respondents reported that the difficulty of maintaining the resource structure they were offering was unmanageable due to increased responsibilities. The scale of the situation was captured by the Canadian research,[8] revealing that 63% of churches cancelled or suspended Sunday School, 43% of churches cancelled or suspended midweek clubs and Vacation Bible Schools, and 35%

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[6] Allen & Ross (2012)
[7] Barna (2019a), Mark (2016)
[8] Scripture Union (2021)

cancelled or suspended camps. In Brazil, 20% of churches ceased ministry support for children during the initial stages of the pandemic, 32% transferred their children's ministry online, and at the time of the survey 24% stated that they were evaluating and making changes to support children. In the United States, 34% of churches offered digital resources for children to use at home, 26% increased their social media presence or offered online Bible classes or Sunday school for this age group, and a decrease in engagement with children was observed across the board.[9] Only 9% of churches said that their engagement with children under 10 years old had increased, with 21% reporting that it had remained the same and 62% reporting a decrease.[10] In Brazil, less that 10% of the participant churches offered a form of personal interaction with the children.   In interview conversations the only Brazilian churches that reported growth were those that offered personal gatherings online beyond the Sunday School material moment. In a similar vein, the UK interviews revealed that many children's leaders and para-church organisations expressed concern that in families where minimal faith activity had taken place in the home, the impact would be compounded by a lack of engagement or attendance with church activity.[11] Hence, reduced engagement with church activities during the pandemic was thought to be highly impactful and have longer-term consequences on children's faith. As the pandemic restrictions ease, these impacts seem to continue, as many anecdotal reports in each of these nations indicate that children and families are not returning to pre-pandemic levels of attendance in church activities or programs.

Regarding the content and style of provision, it seems that pre-existing resources and concepts were simply transferred onto the online interface, with minimal change or adjustment to account for the change of delivery style.   In Brazil, most participants reported using the same material but online during the pandemic, and then in hybrid format in the post pandemic era. There were slight adjustments in the form of provision of take home material for parents and adding themes related to emotional trauma and loss. Indeed, it seems that Zoom works well for information transfer, but not for the relational or experiential interactions that happen naturally in a ministry setting. Many children's ministry leaders in the study indicated that they did not know how to be creative during the pandemic.   They saw only two options - face to face or Zoom. It seems that churches struggled to shift their mindsets into a new way of ministering, so instead simply attempted to continue their pre-pandemic ministry patterns but through online platforms.

In our research, when parents were asked about their feelings regarding pandemic children's ministry, 34% said that the provision was good, adequate or ok, although 66% felt negatively about it, expressing emotions such as "upset," "disappointed" or "frustrated."   Twenty-seven percent stated that in their setting children were excluded, isolated, or not accommodated by their church's

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[9] Barna (2020a)
[10] Barna (2020a)
[11] Holmes (2021)

pandemic provision. Comments illuminating this included: 'I had to remind them to remember the children,' 'it was easier to connect with parents than children,' 'they did not take children seriously,' 'the kids were left behind,' and 'the children disengaged.' These comments revealed an overriding sense that often pandemic ministry was more adult-focused, resulting in the exclusion of children. In Canada, half of the churches involuntarily neglected or ignored young children.[12] In the international survey, many explained that this sense of excluding children had led the children to disengage, suggesting a negative impact on their faith formation. This sense of prioritising adult ministry was further demonstrated by the widespread practice of furloughing youth and children's ministers in the UK at the onset of the pandemic.[13] Conversely, in Canada, many volunteers who had been involved in children's ministry pre-pandemic ceased involvement during Covid-19, although salaried children's ministry staff were usually kept on the payroll because they were the only people who continued children's provision. In the UK, there was also widespread concern at the marked reduction in volunteers involved in ministry with children during and after the pandemic.

Further evidence that children's ministry was a low priority during the pandemic was that a large-scale piece of research exploring UK church activity during the pandemic did not include a single question about church involvement with children or youth.[14] Observations in Norway, The Netherlands, and South Africa resonated with this, indicating that children's ministry was not prioritised as highly as adult focused ministry, and was often overlooked during this time of crisis.[15] The same was shown in the context of South Korea.[16] Furthermore, it seemed that often children were not included as active participants, but rather as passive recipients, with little or no input from children themselves.[17] Anecdotal observations show that as pandemic restrictions are reduced, church practice continued to prioritise adult ministry rather than children. Alongside this, in all of the case study nations, churches are struggling to re-engage volunteers.

UK interviews revealed that one of the most significant challenges for children's leaders in the pandemic was relational connection, as they frequently emphasised that it was significantly harder to connect with children than with adults within the circumstances.[18] This seems a dichotomy, given the digital age that we are living in, whereby children access technology with immense ease. Yet in the church context it has been challenging. The UK interviews also revealed concerns of children's leaders that there were minimal intergenerational opportunities during the pandemic. They believed that this had limited the child's availability and access to role models of faith and hindered their sense of belonging. Of our survey participants, 43% of the parent responses reported segregated ministry for children and their parents and 40% reported ministry to the whole

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[12] Scripture Union (2021)
[13] Holmes (2021)
[14] Evangelical Alliance (2020)
[15] Holmes, Sandsmark, Sonnenberg and Weber (2021)
[16] Oh and Hong (2021)
[17] Holmes, Sandsmark, Sonnenberg and Weber (2021)
[18] Holmes (2020)

family. Twelve percent of the respondents expressed that the segregated provision had felt detrimental and would have been preferred whole-family ministry during this season, because 'we were all in the same room at home so it would have made more sense.'

It must be noted that our research did capture many positive experiences also. Some respondents reported practical support such as doorstep visits, shopping for families, phone calls as well as by online all age services, and resource provision were all reported as support and nourishment for children's faith formation. In these positive cases, the emphasis reflected the community working together to provide support and resources, which in turn impacted faith formation. An underlying discourse in the responses was that the impact (positive or negative) of a resource or activity depended on the extent to which families felt supported within their faith and wider communities in the first place. Indeed, in the Brazil study there were only two churches whose work with children increased during the pandemic, and they were churches who deliberately sought to do more than simply offering a Sunday School program. Instead, they created personal relational contacts, through which faith nurture was carried out. This seemed highly impactful, further supporting the notion that relational connection is a key factor.

2.2 The pandemic impact on family-based faith nurture

Survey responses from parents showed clear evidence of families feeling withdrawn and disconnected from church or faith (66%), including sentiments such as being overwhelmed, struggling to engage with online provision, exhaustion, balancing various demands, feeling isolated and unsupported. During the intensely busy phases, other day to day issues took precedence over faith formation. In Brazil, 52% of the church leaders emphasised the difficulty of engaging children via online formats, which many believed to be due to the difficulty of parents being partners in setting up the technology for their child's needs. Further to this, in the multi-national survey, whilst 32% of the parents stated that their family's spiritual activity had decreased due to diminished interest and disconnection from church, 25% remarked that it had increased. Further to this, 17% reported that their family faith had grown or been enriched over the 18-month period and 10% reported increased discipleship in the home. These positive changes included comments, such as "more intentional children's worship at home," "used resources together," "faith more in depth with increased time at home," "faith has become a part of everyday life," "more spiritual conversations," and "more intentional about spiritual nourishment." Indeed, for some families (26%), the pandemic provided an opportunity for them to grow as a family in faith. Some relished opportunities to come together as a family for fun and for worship. This resonates with the observations in South Korea of parents becoming more interested in their children's faith and growth.[19] Hence, our survey

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[19] Oh & Hong (2021)

responses revealed a mixed blessing brought about by the pandemic - it gave extra family time which for some was of great benefit (12%) but for others brought stress and challenges (88%). There were comments regarding social isolation and lack of access to groups (16% of responses), suggesting that there is a real desire, value and need for community gatherings, perhaps not fully realised and appreciated until these groups disappeared.
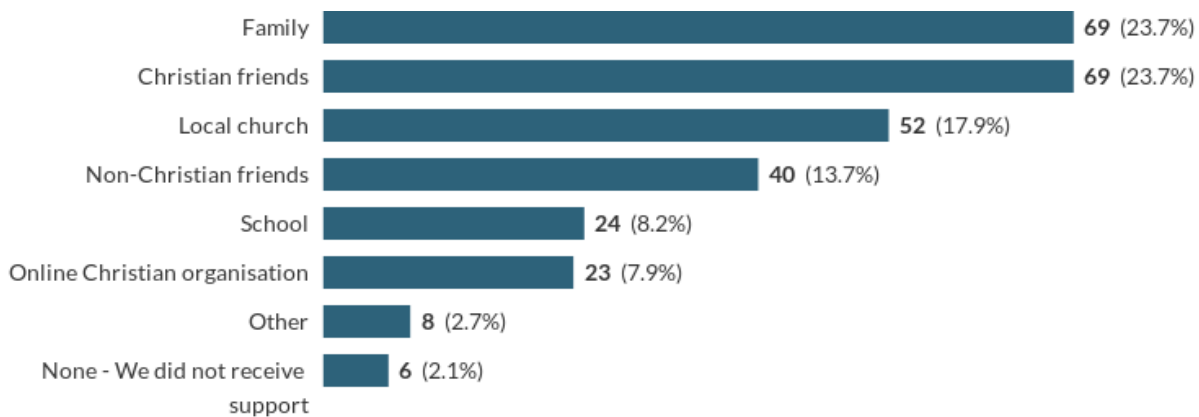

Figure 1: Sources of support reported by Christian parents during the pandemic

The pandemic restrictions not only resulted in the cessation of traditional church programs and activities, but also resulted in many Christian parents becoming de facto Sunday School teachers and pastors. The various research strands all revealed that most parents were unprepared for these roles and responsibilities. The South Korean research stated that "the teacher's work fell to parents," and "they were stressed in their new role,"[20] concurring with reports in our surveys and interviews alike that the sudden shift of focus from church-based nurture to parent-focused was incredibly challenging and stressful for the majority of Christian parents. Many felt ill-equipped to disciple their children. One children's ministry worker said, "we were aware of parents' hesitation to own the discipleship of their children." Indeed, the pandemic exposed a tragic reality; "even good Christian homes struggled to build spiritual formation into the daily rhythms of life."[21] The approaches adopted must be considered here: whether ministry was done 'to' or 'with' parents. In the UK interviews, it was frequently reported that a plethora of resources and ideas had been 'thrown at families' as the lockdown began, and this had been overwhelming for many. Indeed, many families struggled to 'fit church in' according to some of the church representatives. This indicates that the expectations were not consistent with or integral to family life. Ultimately, Barna reported that 72% of church-engaged parents stated that they were more likely to rely on their church for the faith development of their children. Less church-engaged parents, by comparison,

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[20] Oh & Hong (2021)
[21] Scripture Union (2021)

are more likely to look to extended family as key to their child's faith development (39%). This highlights the limited responsibility which Christian parents take with regard to their child's faith formation. It also calls into question whether the approaches were appropriate and effective.

Regarding support for these families during the pandemic, figure 1 shows that almost half of the participant families (48%) reported that their main source of support was family and Christian friends, demonstrating that personal and informal support structures were more prevalent and effective than formal structures such as the local church (18%), school (8%). It is interesting to note that in our survey some church representatives reported that one of their key goals during the pandemic was to support parents, yet the parents indicate here that they did not find church to be a primary source of their support structures. This disconnect in perception and experience is worth noting as churches form and shape their strategies and activities in the season ahead.

2.3 The pandemic impact on school-based faith nurture

Survey responses from schools were very limited, which is deemed to reflect the stressful situation that schools experienced during pandemic times. However, responses from churches and parents provided interesting insights on this theme. When parents were asked about the extent to which their child's faith had been supported within the school context, the majority (83%) revealed that their child had received no support for their child's faith during lockdown. Whilst it is not clear how this compared to pre-lockdown, it does indicate that parents viewed the school context to be of minimal input to their child's faith. Those who reported that their child's faith had been supported by school described this as occurring through collective worship and lessons, with 7% describing a general ethos of respecting discussion about faith, 1% reporting prayer, and 1% reporting parents being supported in their faith nurturing role. One commented 'My son has his faith nurtured at home and at church so he would not necessarily need it at school', and another: 'We do not expect or ask for faith stuff in school'.

Only 10% of the parent respondents reported that their church had supported local schools during the pandemic. This resonates with the sentiment reported in many of the UK interviews with UK Christian schools workers, commenting that the local churches often did not understand and participate in the vision of outreach through schools. The situation is a little more complex in the United States and Canada, hence the data did not reveal any trends of this nature in those nations. In Brazil, schools and churches tend to work independently from one another, and this continued throughout the pandemic. Regarding the nature of this support, survey responses from churches showed that where possible, and dependent on pre-existing relationships between churches and schools, input from church organisations continued in the form of online services, creating online resources and recordings, sending in gifts and offering pastoral support to staff. However, many

church/school connections were not able to continue during the pandemic or did not appear to exist pre-pandemic. The effect on children's faith formation is not clear from the survey data, although many churches stated that pre-pandemic relationships with schools were fundamental to their continued involvement during the pandemic. Without exception, all of the UK schools-workers interviewed stated that the biggest impact of covid within their sector was the greatly reduced relational contact with children. Similarly in the US and Canada, there is a feeling from workers that the biggest challenge is the inability to be face to face with the children. The interview and survey data reveals that the pandemic opportunities for school involvement were largely non-relational in essence; ensuring that the Christian curriculum content continued, but lacking personal and relational contact alongside. Christian schools workers felt that this greatly impeded the impact of their ministry. Many expressed frustration that although they had been able to provide some support for the school staff, this had largely not been possible with children. This raises the question of whether it was possible to maintain relationships with the children and staff through online services or gifts being sent in. However, this awareness did not seem to be at the forefront of the thinking of many church participants as they reported their pandemic activity in the interviews and online survey. Many had their time consumed by the generation of various resources to be delivered remotely, with minimal opportunities to connect relationally. This prompts thought about the difference that physical presence as opposed to virtual presence makes to faith formation.

2.4 Evidence of collaboration

The survey responses showed very clearly that collaboration between home and church was lacking in the approaches taken during the pandemic. Phrases such as 'the church did not meet our needs,' 'we engaged with the services as much as we could,' 'they should have catered more for children' all portray the church as a service provider for families to utilise. None of the answers spoke of collaboration and general or holistic support of children's faith. The focus was very much on what the church provided and how useful it was. In fact, when parents were asked who they wanted to meet the spiritual needs of their children, only 30% of the responses conveyed a sense of partnership or working together (between family, local church activity and informally through relationships amongst the Christian community). The remainder tended to state their responses in isolation, such as "youth team," "youth and children's leaders at church," "main youth/children's worker," "minister." This reflects a pre-existing arrangement of the Church being a service provider rather than a partner, and connects with a significant disconnect that was observed in all of the case study nations during the pandemic: On one hand many churches believed that parents should be more proactive in faith activities in the home during church closures. However, many parents felt overwhelmed and pressured by the prevailing situation so did not feel the capacity to do so.

Hence, each group felt that the other should be doing more. For example, the concerns of some Canadian workers were captured in this comment: "Despite offering numerous resources via our Kids Ministry Facebook page and YouTube channel, it seems that not many parents have been taking advantage of them."

Further to this, there seemed to be a lack of clarity with regard to the shared venture of faith nurture amongst children, emphasised by many reports in UK interviews disclosing that the extent to which family faith was addressed was that children's leaders hoped parents might overhear what the children were doing during online sessions. A small number opted to use the online sessions as opportunities to 'coerce' adults to get involved, for example with 'action songs' or craft, indicating a sense that the goal was to make the adult feel uncomfortable or do something that they would prefer not to. In a more positive manner, some provided extension activities for families to carry out together outside of the sessions. This lack of clarity regarding working together is further supported by investigation of the churches in Norway, South Africa and The Netherlands, where support of families regarding children's faith nurture was limited and variable.[22] Indeed, they observed that para-church organisations tended to produce extensive resources but this was often not replicated or accessed within the local church. And the resources produced often did not seem to meet the specific needs of individual families. Furthermore, it was noted that churches focussed more on producing discipleship content for the children, whereby the parents were enlisted as agents of providing the content to the child. There was much less evidence of churches equipping and empowering parents to actively take responsibility for this aspect themselves. This was further compounded by the underlying discourse which was observed in many cases, that the child's faith development was "on hold" until churches could return to physical meeting; further undermining the role of family in faith development. Ultimately it seems from our research that many churches simply sought to equip families with Sunday School lessons. They merely attempted to transfer what they did ordinarily in the classroom into the home, with no awareness of whether those teaching methods would be effective, whether parents would like them or have the capacity to carry them out. There was minimal evidence of the creation of something to fit the unique environment of the family.

The connections between churches and schools followed a similar trend, in that they were minimal and tended to focus more on resource provision, rather than relational connection. Only 6% of churches conveyed a sense of their church supporting schools relationally and pastorally, although 33% did report that their church had provided assemblies or RE lessons (prerecorded or live online). This project did not investigate the extent to which schools collaborated in the formation of these resources, so that is unknown. Nevertheless, there is indication of a strong emphasis on resource provision being the primary purpose and strategy within the church-school relationship.

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[22] Holmes, Sandsmark, Sonnenberg and Weber (2021)

It therefore seems that a sense of collaboration and partnership between churches and parents, and churches and schools would be greatly desirable and beneficial, since the aspect which Christian parents reported as most beneficial during the pandemic were informal relational connections. It is suspected that the same may be true for schools. Figure 1 shows that 54% of participant parents identified support from the local church during the pandemic as supportive, although 71% did state that Christian friends had been a support to them. This indicates that informal support was more functional than formal structures of support during the pandemic season. However, it is notable that 71% reported that they had gained support from their family, highlighting family and Christian friends as the primary support structures for Christian families during that stressful season, rather than local churches. It is therefore critical that the Christian community is attentive to the fact that these relational connections (particularly informal) were the most beneficial aspect of pandemic support, rather than provision of Sunday School style resources. Hence, the formation of revised ministry strategies should be shaped by this.

2.5 Summary observations

- Families and churches alike reported decreased engagement of children with church during the pandemic. In many contexts, there was a feeling of exclusion and isolation of children from churches during the pandemic. Many felt that ministry to children was not prioritised as highly as ministry to adults. This may be associated with the reduction in children's team volunteers during the pandemic and beyond.

- Relational connections were highly valued by families but appeared to be one of the most challenging aspects for churches. Positive pandemic experiences seemed to correlate closely with situations where there was good relational connection, particularly intergenerational connections.

- Families reported varied pandemic experiences: some finding it a time of growth for family faith, and some finding it exhausting and overwhelming.

- The role of children within churches during the pandemic seemed to be passive rather than active participants. Alongside this, it seemed that churches often viewed parents as passive and mere conduits to pass on church provision and resources to the child, rather than viewing parents themselves as the resource. Hence the relationship between Christian parents and the church was more transactional than relational, so that the church provided resources; creating products for the parents to use rather than living faith out together in partnership.

- Many Christian parents felt ill equipped for their role of nurturing their child's faith. There appeared to be a deficit in effective support of Christian parents with this revised role. Resources provided by churches during the pandemic tended not to be designed for the

purpose of use in the home, but were a replica of what would be used in a church setting, and hence were often ineffective. Furthermore, families required more than mere resource provision; they needed continual support in their role. Unfortunately, the pre-existing culture and ethos of the church as the primary provider of faith nurture did not empower parents. Hence, Christian parents were often hesitant to take the primary role in the faith formation of their children, consequently expecting the church or school to do it.

- There is minimal evidence of collaboration between families, schools and churches. Indeed, the Church seems to be viewed as a service provider rather than a partner in the quest of nurturing children's faith. There seems to be a disconnect between how churches support schools and families: regarding whether content or connection is most effective, and also the extent to which any resources are devised collaboratively with the users.

In summarising the observations of this research study, it would appear that for the majority of children, the pandemic has had an adverse effect on their faith formation. The observation of a distinct lack of collaboration between church, home and school is striking. It seems that there is a need for a new way of working across all of the nations involved in this research - to a mode where parents feel supported in nurturing their children's faith through church and school, and where the connections between schools, families and church are strengthened to more effectively support faith development intergenerationally. This is an opportunity for reflection and a precious gift that has arisen out of the pandemic that must not be ignored or lost.

3   Responding to these Observations for the Seasons Ahead

This research study sought to capture insights into how the global pandemic impacted ministry with children. We believe these insights are significant and can be harnessed for future ministry endeavors. In some ways, we see what happened in the pandemic as a gift to the global church in terms of showing us where our efforts have helped a child's faith formation and where our efforts might be hindering it.

3.1 Exploring roles and responsibilities

In the survey, parents were asked what their family's spiritual needs were for the season ahead. The overwhelming desire of parents in the survey was to re-integrate into Christian Community, with this being mentioned by 39% of respondents. Examples included rebuilding relationships, intergenerational opportunities, more in-person activity such as meeting with other families, and allowing children to experience church and feel to be part of the church family and connect with Christian peers. Alongside this, 25% expressed desires for church activities which include children

and families together, reflected in comments such as "a place to worship together," "serving again," "making services welcoming to families and prioritising children," "prayer and encouragement" and "singing together". Of the responses, 21% explained a desire for more personal/family discipleship. Five percent wished for greater mental health awareness and teaching on processing trauma within the church. Only 1% of the respondents stated that they wished for the same as pre-pandemic ministry. These responses demonstrate a desire of Christian families for something new and different to pre-pandemic ministry, yet also the strong desire for a sense of gathering as a church community.

When asked about the role that Christian parents perceived churches should have in their child's faith nurture (figure 2), only 1% stated that they thought the church had sole responsibility. Conversely, 97% of respondents indicated that the Church should not be the primary lead in faith nurture of children, but rather their role was to support parents, reinforce parental nurture and be available for advice if needed. This response is staggering since it does not seem to portray the contemporary ethos of many churches in the countries being researched. Indeed, in our research, churches communicated that they saw it as their job to disciple children, not parents. Therefore, here again we see that Christian families are desiring a new mode of operating in terms of the roles involved in children's faith formation.
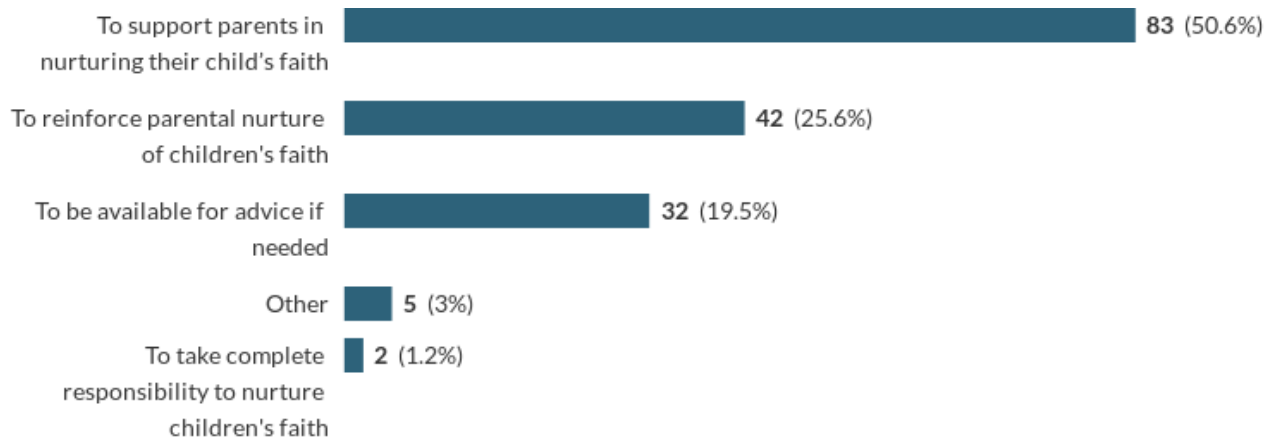

Figure 2: What role do Christian parents perceive churches should have in their child's faith nurture

In another part of the survey, churches were asked what they thought the needs were of Christian parents and families. Responses correlated with the predominant desire of parents described above, with 29% of the participants indicating reconnection with the church. Further to this, 15% of respondents mentioned the desire for support from the church community and another 15%

believed that families wanted encouragement, and a sense of being valued and listened to. It is fascinating that 26% believed that parents wanted support to grow the Christian faith in the home, and yet there was no evidence in the survey that this matched with the strategies which they had employed. Similarly, a previous study found that American church leaders of all denominations universally agreed that children's spiritual formation should start with parents, and yet churches place little emphasis on training and equipping parents.[23] On a different note, 5% felt that parents wanted to rest and recharge, resonating with the reports from parents of being exhausted and overwhelmed. Hence, the church representatives in this survey seemed to be appropriately aware of the needs and desires of Christian families, yet this did not seem to translate to a subsequent practical outworking in many cases. Whilst many state that it is important that pastors, teachers, and parents all work together for the sake of the children,[24] in our survey only one of the children's leaders specifically stated that they sought support and advice in their ministry from parents in the church, indicating that consultation with parents in many churches may be minimal. Hence this all suggests a general confusion about roles and responsibilities with regard to children's faith formation. This needs to be clarified as part of re-shaping approaches to children's faith formation.

3.2 Developing church strategies

In our survey, 68% of the church leader respondents stated that they had no strategy or vision for children's ministry in their setting, whilst less than two percent said that they did. The remainder explained that they were exploring or considering the way forward. Further comments revealed that 13% of the respondents were returning to pre-pandemic activities, 8% said that their strategy was to recruit or train their children's teams and nine detailed hindrances to developing a strategy, such as "no volunteers," "financial pressures," "burnt out parents," "our church is not great at planning ahead," and "church disagreement over how important it is." Thirty-four percent of the respondents answered that they were making adjustments to their ministry programmes, such as "more interactive services," "quiet room in church to show livestream," "run parenting for faith courses," "run a youth Alpha course" and "create more ministry opportunities". It is interesting that the respondents listed these things in answer to the question about their strategy, vision or plan, intimating that they perceived activity provision itself to be their strategy. The responses to this question revealed a degree of confusion and ambiguity of the concept of strategy, and a wider perspective.

In the Canadian research, not a single church was found to have a strategy for their children's ministry.[25] Surely this highlights an urgent need for the Church to consider more deeply their

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[23] Barna (2019b)
[24] Oh and Hong (2021)
[25] Scripture Union (2021)

onward vision and strategy in order to enhance effectiveness of their ministry and change the way in which ministry amongst children is accomplished. Many are continuing what they were doing before Covid-19 hoping that a strategy will develop as they begin to reopen their ministry. In a similar vein, the Brazilian interviews revealed little or no strategy planning yet for the way forward regarding children's ministry. Most explained that they are trying to tread above water in recruiting volunteers and to provide a space for children and families to be able to return to in person gatherings. Three church leaders in Brazil stated that they did not have the time or energy to focus on children's ministry at this stage but would be open to outside organisations investing in their children's work. Similarly, the UK interviews revealed that pandemic ministry was very reactionary and responsive to meet immediate needs as they arose, with one interviewee stating: "there has been no clear aim throughout. We have rambled our way through this time, responding to the needs of our families as best we could ... responding to where our children find themselves." In many cases, children's ministry was observed to have become very task-focussed rather than spirituality-focused due to the unfolding pandemic situation. Now that we are moving into post-pandemic times, there must be a distinct change of direction, particularly since it appears that the resources and tools used prior to Covid-19 did not transfer well. A continued reliance on Sunday School or VBS curriculums has left most churches inadequately equipped for ministry outside the box.[26] Future resources and tools should therefore not be so rigid and must be adapted to each local setting.

It must be noted that often it is not children's leaders who lay out their church strategies and trajectories of ministry. Rather it is church leaders. It therefore seems essential that church leaders address strategy for children's faith formation as part of the broader church strategy. Unless strategic plans are made, children's ministry workers will not be appreciated and parents will not be encouraged to take the lead in their children's spiritual formation. There is a deep need for greater consideration and inclusion of this ministry at senior levels of church leadership.

3.3 Prioritising family ministry

In the majority of UK cases, adult and children's ministries operated separately during the pandemic, raising the concern that adults no longer see or value children as part of the faith community. Anecdotal observations indicate that this situation is continuing to some degree. The Canadian survey asserted that 'moving forward, we must raise the profile of family ministry, shown by some of these comments expressed by Canadian churches: 'Engaging parents is not optional,' and 'Workers don't want to go back to parents relying on the church to do it all for them … parents need to step up to disciple their children and to engage them purposely.'[27] Indeed, this sort of

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[26] Scripture Union (2021)
[27] Scripture Union (2021)

approach seems to be the desire of parents in this study, yet this research indicates that this notion does not seem to have pervaded through to the operational level of church life.

4   The Ultimate Vision: Arriving in the Promised Land

Research allows us to identify and analyze the shifts and changes in life and ministry. However, we need to do more than simply observe or be aware of the situation. Rather, we need to know what to do to prepare for the battles ahead. Think about the story of the twelve spies sent into the promised land, and ponder what it might have been like for Caleb to know that the leaders and current generation would not be entering the promised land with him; only "the little ones who do not yet know good from bad".[28]   What plans and strategies may Joshua and Caleb have set into place from that day forward, knowing about the battle they would fight in the future? How may that have changed how they went about preparing these children for fighting the giants in the land? The reality is that society continues to change right before our eyes and more of those around us are doubting how to get into the promised land. We have the opportunity to help prepare our children for the battle they face ahead with the giants!

It is our recommendation that a significant paradigm shift is needed across the global Christian Church, with regard to the prevailing ethos and framework of children's faith formation.

➢ There is an urgent need for churches to **prioritise children's faith formation**, since it has been so negatively impacted and marginalised due to the pandemic. It is necessary for this to occur at leadership level of local churches and para-church organisations, rather than by children's leaders or families themselves. Formation of clear strategies for ministry in the seasons ahead is of paramount importance.

➢ Rather than being confined to distinct children's activities, faith nurture would be more effective if it is carried out **collaboratively across different sectors of the child's life**, including home, church and school. This requires churches to be viewed as partners in faith nurture of children, rather than as service-providers. In addition, churches need to redress their efforts to support, equip and empower Christian parents in their partnership role of children's faith nurture. Rather than provision of resources, there is a need for a deeper level of dialogue to transform the existing mindset of parents feeling ill-equipped.

➢ Instead of being content-driven, there is a need for greater relational connection, so that there is **more attention and facilitation of relational contacts** for children amongst church communities, particularly across different generations.

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[28] Deuteronomy 1:39

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