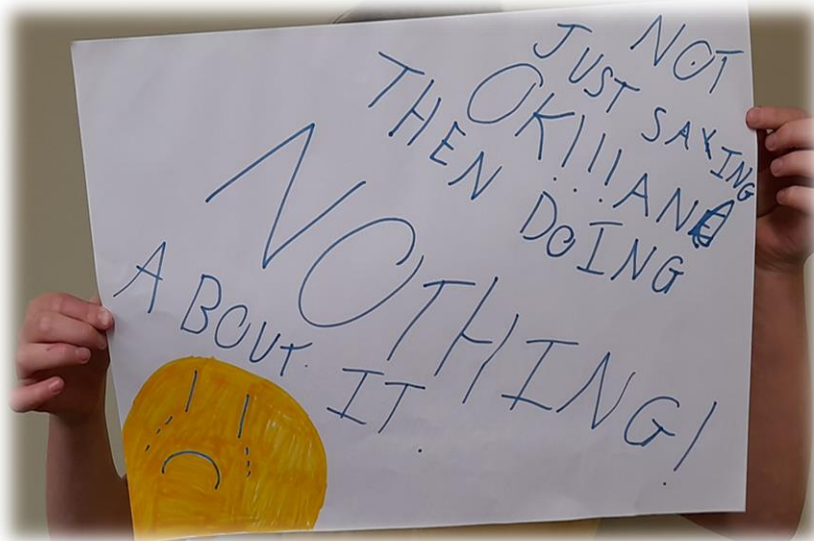


Are we listening?

Full Report

Karen Beal January 2024



Context and Background Information

Churches need to be willing to adapt and change to be more accommodating to young people, children and families. Often the best way to achieve this is in discussion with the young people, children and families within the church

Youth and Children Growth research amongst churches which have grown in their under 16 Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) 2014-2019 Sample: 217 churches Jan-April 2022 p6

The original research proposal, was to investigate the opportunity children (primary age) have in contributing to various aspects of church and school life, the impact of this on those worshipping communities and the wider Diocese. This would involve engaging through mixed method research, with identified groups for example a children's deanery synod and children's chaplains alongside children in a selected number of churches. As it is often recognised that children have a voice within school settings through school councils and in CE school collective worship, ethos or similar groups, but less so in church, it was hoped that this piece of research would contribute to highlighting areas of good practice, suggestions of possible ways forward and provide learning for Manchester Diocese and the wider CE within the *Growing Younger and More Diverse* agenda.



Research Methodology

Ultimately, two schools and three churches, different in tradition, were able to participate in this piece of qualitative research. Arranging meetings particularly with the church communities proved more problematic than imagined as did the logistics of bringing all participants together for a day which did not take place. However, in its place, follow up meetings were arranged.

The sample size therefore may be seen as relatively small and restrictive but this reflected the capacity of the researcher in undertaking the research and not making it too broad in scope. This resulted in a small scale piece of mixed method research consisting of for example, semi-structured interviews, model building and written/drawn responses to questions. Recordings of sessions were made, which were transcribed, and notes and photographs taken. A first research session was held in June/July 2023 with further follow up sessions held with three participant groups in November/December 2023.

Before undertaking this research, I met with three representatives from the Ethos Explorers at Bishop Bridgeman Church of England Primary School to see if they had any input to offer on the questions I was preparing. The Ethos Explorers have been

involved in co-researching with a PhD candidate, a participatory project into child-centred ethos development in a church school. Therefore, I thought it important to seek their views as researchers the same age as the participants in this study.

Recordings and transcripts are held securely and in line with the information form given to participants and their parents/carers (Appendix 1). Questions and statements are based on resources from <https://www.learn-to-listen.org.uk/> Please also see the accompanying video and attached appendices.

Findings

What follows is an exploration of some of the emerging themes during each research session.

Session 1

The overall sense of the participants in this first session was that whilst they felt part of and welcome at their church, they were not involved in any of the decision making or in planning and leading worship. A particularly noteworthy conversation was one in response to the statement;

I am able to take part in leading church services and using my gifts

One of the participants remarked that they didn't have any gifts that could be used in church as their gift was football;

R: So you don't think football or sport could be used in worship?

P1: Imagine me playing keepie up at the front

R: You can't imagine that? why not?

P1: 'Cos the ball might go everywhere

P2: Disrespectful!

When the group was question about why they this might be considered disrespectful , one answer was 'cos it's during worship' you don't mess around and you praise God'. However when asked whether a gift like football could be used to praise the Lord, the reply was 'yes, because you could become better'. Further discussion about using gifts followed and when asked how do we find out what our gifts are someone suggested;

P1: ..erm...by practise?

R: Like with football?

P1: Yes

When asked to think about this in a different way and how old people are who mostly stand up in church – '36' and 'mostly adults' were amongst the answers given - and how they might have been able to discover the gifts they might use in leading worship, it was suggested 'they say (what they think their gift is)' to the church leaders. When asked if they had ever had opportunity to do this as young people, it was obvious it had not occurred to them to do so, and in turn they had not been asked.

A discussion about the planning of services and other aspects of church life again led back to adults making the decisions with several of the participants wishing to have more input into this including wanting to consider things such as 'learning about the solar system' and 'everyone's equal'.

When asked who gets to make decisions in school one reply was the headteacher. However, some of the children attended the same school and shared that at the end of the lesson, they are sometimes asked what they want to improve and that letters can be written to the headteacher to be forwarded to the PTA. All participants had access to some form of school council.

Speaking with the leaders later, they were struck by the fact that pre pandemic, they felt that they often consulted with children and young people in the church about how the junior church was run and how they might be involved in leading services but that this was something they had not done recently.

Following the research, later in the summer, an intergenerational Sunday morning service was given over to exploring some of the questions raised in the first research session with plans being taken forward in how to respond. Included in this is a midweek group for young people co created and led by them.

Session 2

One of the big issues for the participants in this church centred around the music which was chosen 'for the children' during worship especially 'cheesy American videos' with actions. Whilst they liked those involved in planning and leading the services, there was feeling that assumptions were made about what people their age would relate to. Being invited up to the front of church to share what they had been doing in Junior Church helped them to feel included in worship however, they did not like then being asked to stay there and join in with an action song, 'we really don't want to do that'. They

expressed the desire to be more involved in planning and leading various aspects of church life but were unsure how to go about this. However there was a lot of discussion about the processes for making decisions at school which included speaking directly to the headteacher in one school, resulting in a tuck shop being established by pupils. Asked if they would like to make suggestions at church there was definitive 'yes';

- Just to be part of it more.
- We don't normally get to make decisions about what we do...about what we are going to do.
- They normally plan it for us.
- We would like to make suggestions because I think that sometimes like...something like at Christmas...like we could plan something.

On one occasion a parent had suggested a different version of a song that was used in school and was familiar to many of the children attending church, that was then used in church which was evidently seen as a positive outcome.

Again, during a discussion about using their gifts within their church community and about who gets to plan things, interesting points arose. For example, one young person shared that;

P1: I don't know if it's true, but I feel like my teacher tells me I use empathy a lot, but I don't believe her.

R: So you use empathy a lot, but you don't believe her. Do you think that empathy could be something that you could use in church?

P1: Yeah...

R: In what way?

P1: (if someone was) not really understanding something and getting upset about it, I feel like I could talk it through with them maybe

R: Do you get to use that?

P1: Mostly at school, but sometimes I get to use it at church.

When asked what other gifts participants got to use at school and not at church, sport came up again with the suggestion that maybe having a sports day at church would be a good way to use that person's gifts. Maths also came up as a gift with the suggestion that it could be used for 'counting people' or 'finding out how many people came from which places to church'.

One of the participants drew a picture;

P2: ...a hand symbol where it's like a rainbow. It's like a symbol of pride.

R: Why is that connected to church for you? Is there a reason?

P2: Sometimes when I go to church, it makes me feel like proud of that I come to this church

Session 3

The participants here were much younger and quieter, initially reluctant to offer suggestions and express themselves.

The participants clearly felt welcomed at church but not at all part of any planning or decision making. When asked how they would like to be involved it was suggested;

P1: When we're in children's church, we could plan the different events that go on in church.

P2: Yeah.

R: So do you mean like services...? Have you ever planned a service, been part of a service?

P1: No.

P3: It would be good if the children got involved but then if they don't want to they don't have to.

When we explored what they might do various suggestions were offered such as;

- I would like to be the microphone person (setting it up).
- We would need help.
- Like some of us could rewrite the Bible if we didn't understand the words.
- We could do like (priests) do and read out prayers.
- We could read out there (in church)...we could write prayers.

The group were not forthcoming about any involvement collective worship at school although one person said;

'We help start assemblies...we like switch the lights off and stuff'.

All of the group felt that they would invite their friends to come to church, with one unsure person because 'I'm not really sure...some of my friends aren't really that interested'.

One participant explained that;

'Because most of our friends are atheists...just to see what they would think. Because they've never been to church...so maybe if they came to church once, they would really like it and keep going back'.

However, everyone felt that inviting friends to the church which was more of a café style service would be best, explained by one as 'because I feel like that service has more activities'.

Once again, the discussion around gifts some felt they did have some that could contribute to church activities but have never been asked;

P4: I'd like to play the piano

R: Do you ever get to do that in church?

P4: No

R: Would you like be able to use your music gift?

P4: Maybe

P5: I like being friendly and like welcoming people.

R: So is that something you do get to do?

P5: Sometimes.



Session 4

For the first research session, two schools met together then I was able to have a follow up meeting with School 2.

It was clear that the pupils in the main, valued church as a place in which they felt comfortable and welcomed whatever their religion. We explored some of the words and phrase they had written on post it notes which can be found in Appendix 3. Comments included;

- I feel...well I'm...I'm not from the Christian faith when I go church, it's very like quiet and calm as well.
- Church is like a place where everyone could feel happy and comforted.

- If you, like, from a different religion, you can still go to church and, like, pray.
- Place where people can trust to go about their problems.

When asked about the phrase 'a place where everyone is welcome', one of the pupils explained that;

- Even if you do really bad things, you can still go, God will still forgive you.
- If you, like, from a different religion, you can still go to church and, like, pray.

When we moved on to discussing who actually plans church services and collective worship, although the pupils appeared to be more involved than in a church context, they were still not able to take a lead in planning. For example, pupils suggested that they would like to have more input into choosing the songs that we used within services in church. Although they are able to lead different aspects of services in church, it is the 'headteacher and the vicar' who plan the services although 'sometimes we get to do readings' or 'reports on what we have done' although these last are often written by teachers. In one school, pupils sometimes have the opportunity to write poems to share in worship. There was a sense that it would be better if;

'What they could do is tell children what they need to talk about in the lines, but then let the children write the lines....Like cos a lot of time when you read it, it's like you're reading like a book out to them and not what you feel and thought and how you would talk'.

It is important to note that there is a part-time volunteer school chaplain who has developed a team of Peer Chaplains in the schools, who are beginning to plan and lead regular collective worship.

When we moved on to discuss decision making in other areas of school life, pupils shared that there are various ways they can do this. Each school has a school council and is very involved in environmental issues;

'Like when we do school council, time the school council get questions on then we get to say what we like about school council goes and says it to staff'.

One of the responses given in reference to the statement 'I feel an equal member of the school community' which was ticked by most people was;

- We all get...every person gets elected to different things like ethos council or eco council. Every single person gets elected to something.
- It's like if you want to say something, then you can say something...it's not like they can't say what you think...we all get a turn to say something.

Return visits

On the return visit with the two churches and one school, we discussed further some of the points that had arisen from the previous conversation. In particular we explored further about participants involvement in services in church and collective worship in school and how they might like to change this.

We spent some time putting in order of importance (to participants) and discussing the list of statements found in Appendix 3 which came from the previous round of research.

Session 5

There was some discussion of church as 'a place where no one should be excluded' and that if someone new arrived then;

P1: It might be really difficult because you didn't know people.

P2: Just be yourself...you be yourself to that person...just be kind.

Later, a participant felt that it was sometimes easier to express your feelings with friends at church than at school as they would understand more. When asked to put statements in order of importance as to which was most important in church, the same participant put prayer at the bottom of the list 'because you can pray anywhere'

One of the things that came from his conversation was that the young people expressed a desire to get to know more of the adults in church. They said they would like to have 'more conversations' in the coffee time after church. Ways this might happen were suggested such as sitting at tables or people wearing name tags as they had when a new vicar arrived. It was suggested that if children were able 'to speak out more' in this way, it would cause the adults to listen better. They felt that this would help them feel more confident about expressing their opinions and their involvement in leading services. 'Doing the reading' was put forward as a way of adults 'getting to know your voice' and 'seeing you'.

Once again, the participants were able to give examples of how at school, there was much more involvement in decision making through school councils or similar. They were

aware at church this was something that adults were able to do and that the teens were able to get together and 'talk about what they are going to do'.

Session 6

This group's sense of their place in the church was still much the same. One participant shared that they had been asked to join the choir but left after a short while as they were the only young person, 'it was really difficult because it was mostly adults'. They felt they might have stayed had other young people been present and another person in the group suggested they might to be interested in joining the choir if other young people were part of it.

Another participant shared they had done readings 'before' but they had felt comfortable doing so because they had known the adults for a long time. Others in the group felt the opposite because 'I don't know everyone...you don't know' and 'you might get a bit embarrassed'.

Discussing what they might do if asked to plan a worship service they became more animated and felt there would be 'lots of fun activities and ...some games. We would have, like, meaning behind it'.

- It's going to be very enjoyable.
- You get to choose the hymns and the songs everyone knows.
- Make a snowman nativity altogether!

When we discussed how could adults listen better to people their age the group became quite animated;

- A lot more.
- Taking (us) to church more often.
- Not thinking 'I'm the adult you're the child so you have to do it'.
- Not acting towards you like you're a child...like giving them ideas...making space where you can suggest things.
- Have a like a school council but at church so you could have your say on like services.
- Listen to what we are saying...by actually talking to us.

One thing that was valued about church was the opportunity of being in a 'calm and holy' place;



P1: Where It's not loud and it's not annoying.

R: Do you have many places like that in life?

P: No, 'cos like school's always so loud, never peace and quiet at school.

Session 7

As in the church groups, we discussed what a church service planned by this group of Peer Chaplains might look like that perhaps '...the normal visitors would be surprised... a good surprise. Alright, a shock'.

Various suggestions followed but most of these were around 'the little ones' being involved and 'singing songs from school' because they know them and changing words they didn't understand 'so that they're understandable if the little ones are planning it'.

We discussed why they thought people went to church and/or worship;

P1: Learn more about Jesus, closer to God.

P2: To be a better person.

R: In what way?

P2: Because sometimes you get a person who's still a Christian, a good person, but has done lots and lots of things. But when they go to church, they repent and they go to God and they're like, God, please forgive me and everything. And then they become a better person. Because we're all learning, aren't we? So sometimes I say that to people, that being a Christian, it doesn't make you any better than anybody else. Because we're people, aren't we? We make mistakes...

R: Thank you. Anybody else?

P3: I worship God because sometimes it just makes me feel happier that I could just talk to him and he can hear my worries.

R: Thank you. Anybody else want to share anything?

P4: Yeah, I worship God, and when I worship him, it just feels like there's someone there that I can express my personal feelings to, and it just calms me and makes me more, you know...

When we discussed whether collective worship was a place where 'everyone belonged', I was struck by this statement and will end this section with it;

'Because our school is literally the safest place ever and you can be yourself

and you can pray to God and like, I'm not Christian, and I come to the school and they make me feel so safe. They don't make me feel excluded. They include me in everything. They don't pick out the differences, they're so just and everything'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Small as the research sample was, it proved to raise many areas that would benefit from further investigation. For example, lots of interesting conversation arose relating to the discipleship journey's young people are on and 'what next' in many of our schools and churches. I was also not able to fully draw themes of the 'impact of this on those worshipping communities and the wider Diocese' although my response at this point would be negligible. There was also a definite contradiction about the children from the churches about feeling part of church but not being as involved as they would like to be which warrants further investigation. For those of us with a passion for intergenerational worship, many participants would prefer to leave for a Sunday School type group than stay in the main service even when it is All Age, an area which would benefit from further exploration.

Certainly initially, the research seems to demonstrate a lack of agency for children about the decisions made for them in terms of church activities and especially worship. The participants were unsure of how they might make their voices heard and their reticence at times seemed as if they almost thought they didn't have anything to offer. There seemed to be a compartmentalisation about what was expected in school in terms of them being able to contribute to school life and the expectations at church, again, particularly in worship – some participants were cautious about offering their views particularly early on in the process. Whilst we often like to use schools as an example of child leadership in worship, there remain questions about how much of this is actually planned by the and how much is just given to them to do by school staff. In schools and churches, it seemed as if on occasion, there was a sense of performance rather than worship about child involvement.

It appears that whether intentionally or not, a perception of what services and collective worship should involve/look like is fixed, whichever context participants were in, leading to a culture of being apprehensive about trying new things. In each case, when asked what would it be like if the participants were able to plan a service, at first, they found this a difficult concept. It would be interesting to carry out some of this research with the

whole worshipping community to see if all of this is in fact not just age related but does in fact relate to adults as well and the culture we have created within our churches.

Drawing on the research, as a way of moving forward, I recommend the following might be helpful;

- Create opportunities for intergenerational activity where people get to know each other and a culture of conversation is fostered.
- Develop processes that allow for all voices to be heard for example looking towards school council models.
- Create a culture where new things can be tried and gifts explored.
- Think more widely than just the 'service'. For example, a young person shared they have a gift for maths – might they be involved in helping to collate attendance figures etc.?

All of this takes intentionality, commitment and time but what amazing possibilities might arise from this? How might we be inspired as the church? Many of us will be able to give testimony to the fact that we had adults in our lives of faith who let us 'have a go' in order to discern our gifts.

In turn, as we seek as a church to *Grow Younger and More Diverse*, are we prepared to listen to and truly hear the voices of children and young people, to recognise and accept them as co worshippers and, to use their gifts to build up the body of Christ? We are all part of that Body no matter our age and we each have something to offer.

Finally....

A massive thank you to the children, young people and leaders who participated in, and gave their time to, this piece of research project and helped it to happen. We will try and make sure your voices are heard.

Karen Beal, ManDio Growing Faith Programme Manager, Diocese of Manchester
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Contact: karenbeal@manchester.anglican.org

Appendices

Appendix: 1 Information and Consent Form



St. John's House
155-163 The Rock
Bury, BL9 0ND

Date

Hello,

Thank you for giving consent for your child to take part in this research project.

Please find details below for you to keep and please complete the consent form and return it to me.

Research Information

I am in the process of undertaking a research project for the Growing Faith Foundation - <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation> - with the working title **Are we listening?**.

Researcher:

Karen Beal with assistance from the Man Dio Growing Faith (MDGF) Team. I will lead this group and am an experienced researcher and facilitator with a full enhanced DBS disclosure as do other members of the team.

Description of the research project:

The aim is to investigate the opportunity for children (primary age) to have a voice in various aspects of church and/or school life, the impact of this on those worshipping communities and the wider Diocese. It will be based within the new MDGF Programme in the Diocese. This piece of research will contribute to highlighting areas of good practice, suggestions of possible ways forward and will provide learning for this Diocese and the wider CE and the Growing Younger agenda. At some point it is hoped we can bring all those involved together in September/October for a final day of exploration of this theme and to contribute the preparation of the final report. Separate consent will be requested for this.

Planned date

April/May 2023 to November 2023

Data Storage and security

During a meeting, I will ask questions relating to the programme and take notes and offer other activities for example artwork or model building. Recordings and photographs may be taken on my work laptop/phone. All research data; consent forms, recordings of interviews, notes, other communications, will all be stored my, password protected work laptop. Any other details submitted by you will be held in accordance with GDPR regulations and Manchester Diocesan GDPR Policy <https://www.manchester.anglican.org/privacy>

It is anticipated the final report will consist of a written report with recommendations, a possible video but it is important that part of the response is led by the research participants.

The report be presented nationally to other colleagues and within the Growing Faith foundation and wider CE Church including via social media.

Your church/school may be identified within this paper along with information such as ages of participants however individual children will not be identified.

What if I have any concerns?

Thank you for reading this information sheet. If you have any questions or concerns at all about the research, please do contact me.

Yours sincerely

Karen

Karen Beal, MBA, MA Th&ThEd

ManDio Growing Faith Programme Manager

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Consent Form

Growing Faith Research Project

I agree to take part in the **Growing Faith Research Project**. I know that I can decide not to continue at any time.

Young Person (name):

Age:

Signature:

Date:

Parent/Care giver (name):

I have read and understood the information I have been given and give permission for the child (named above) to take part in the group. I understand that they are able to withdraw from the group at any time.

Signature:

Date:

Contact phone number or email:

(This is in case we need to contact you for any reason. The processing and retention of personal data in Manchester Diocese is governed by the General Data Protection Regulation).

Images Consent

During the course of the stakeholder meetings, permission is requested to take images the young people on my work camera phone and to make recordings on my work laptop. These images may be used within the final report and by Manchester Diocese on social media as a record of the activity and to promote the Man Dio Growing Faith Programme.

I **do/do not** (*please delete as appropriate*) give permission for images of my child to be taken as part of the group.

I **do/do not** (*please delete as appropriate*) give permission for images of my child to be used to promote the activity.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix: 2 Session plan example

Register
Upside down cups Place 20 or more cups in the middle of the room, put half of them upside down and the other half the right way up. Divide the group into 2 teams and give each team a name (i.e. ups or downs) - the 'up' team needs to turn as many cups up the right way as possible, and the 'down' team needs to flip them upside down. When the allocated time limit is over, count all the cups and whichever team has the most turned up their way wins. Explain Jesus came to turn things upside down – part of this is the importance of children
Graffiti table <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I like it at church when...• My favourite part of church is...• At church I would change things by• At church I feel
Play doh What does church mean to you? Make the play doh into a shape and then explain it.
Statements skittles Place a Skittle in the container if you agree with the statement <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I feel part of my church• I feel I am seen as an equal member of the church community• I am able to take part in leading church services and using my gifts• I feel included when I go to communion• I like the space we use• I feel welcome in my church• I feel involved in the planning of church• I would invite my friends to come to my church• Church helps me to learn more about God, Jesus and faith• I get to make suggestions about what happens at church
Church in Order (picture cards of what's important and why) Choose one of the cards and say what you think about it. Why would you/wouldn't you do that thing?

Appendix 3: Graffiti table responses

<p>I like it at church when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + We have longer (Sunday school) + It is fun when we have church parade + We do fun activities (funny PP, custard/jam doughnuts) + I learn about God + We sing hymns + They put out the Bibles + We have fun + We have biscuits and you get to play at the end of church + It has Sunday school + It is fun + When we get biscuits 	<p>My favourite part of church is...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Sunday school + Hymns/songs (without actions) + When we learn about God + It is in the morning + How the light shines on the stained glass to make a rainbow + The special days and important parts + Staying in church with mummy + Biscuits + When we can talk to each other after the service it gives us an opportunity to know what people have been up to
<p>At church I would change things by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Less action songs + Having options for older children + Making (Sunday school) every week + More sports + We would play outside more + Making the back of church brighter + Going out in the garden + I'm not sure + Make (where we meet) brighter + More activities + Bringing pets + Maybe a bit more (later) in the day (service starts at 9.30am) + More cooking – Christian edition + Make it later like 1.00pm + Snacks + Activities + More sports 	<p>At church I feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Happy + Loved + Comfortable + Safe + Curious + Calm <p>Other things...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Church is brilliant + I want drawing in church and more Christian activities + It is fun + I love connecting with God + Church is sometimes boring + I connect with God + Having to stand up a bit makes me frustrated sometimes + I like that church is family + I love church and I love everyone
<p>What kind of place do you think church should be?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + A Place of God + Calm and Holy + A place where people find safe, comfortable and trust + A place where you can pray to God + Joyful Ambient Respectful Fun + Where no-one should feel excluded + A place where people feel comforted + A place to express feelings + A place where everyone belongs 	

Appendix 4: Statement responses

- ✚ I feel part of my church 55%
- ✚ I feel I am seen as an equal member of the church community 41%
- ✚ I am able to take part in leading church services and use my gifts 32%
- ✚ I feel included when I go to communion 82%
- ✚ I like the space we use 50%
- ✚ I feel welcome in my church 82%
- ✚ I feel involved in the planning of church 18%
- ✚ I would invite my friends to come to my church 91%
- ✚ Church helps me to learn more about God, Jesus and faith 86%
- ✚ I get to make suggestions about what happens at church 18%

Appendix 5: Make up of research groups – churches/schools

Church 1	Eight participants, yr 4-6; two leaders
Church 2	Six participants, yr 5&6; one leader
Church 3	Ten participants, yr 3-6; two leaders
School 1	Eight participants, yr 5&6; one leader
School 2	Five participants, yr 4-6; two leaders

Appendix 7: Suggestions from Ethos Explorer leaders at Bishop Bridgeman CE School, Bolton

- Might need to do a getting to know you activity first; definitely will if you have a day away; also, build in time to ask (participants) what they might like to do on away day.
- The Graffiti table is a good idea but to make it even more interesting, you could use coloured paper to cut out in shapes or magazine pictures or paint sticks or oil pastels
- Time limit choice making time to encourage making own decisions
- In school take photos of collective worship things they like – do the same in church
- Make sure to push the conversation with supplementary questions
- Frame it as just a chat
- Set some ground rules – give turn to speak; listen to different opinions;
- Encourage them to give sincere and faithful
- Give them something think about/do until next meeting