

CHAPTER 4

'EMPOWERING PARENTS'

Introduction:

The 2014 'From Anecdote to Evidence' Church Growth Research Programme Report states that evidence from the European Values Study shows that among Anglicans who say that religion is very important in their lives, only 36% listed religious faith as an especially important quality that children can be encouraged to learn at home, compared to good manners (94%) or tolerance and respect (83%). They conclude that 'There is an urgent need to focus on children, young people and their parents and a challenge to identify how the church can best invest in people, programmes and strategies which will encourage young people actively to continue exploring faith.'

This chapter explores how parents can be empowered to nurture faith in their own children and play their part in joining up spheres of church, school and household.

In this chapter:

Empowering Parents (Emma Olorenshaw, Shelley Logan and Sarah Holmes)

- The research aimed
- to explore tangible and realistic approaches for empowering parents from the school and church vantage point.
- to investigate the outcomes of empowering parents to be more involved in their child's faith journeyings.
- to examine which context is most effective at empowering parents to be more involved in their child's faith journeyings (school or church or school and church in partnership).
- Four CofE schools, Five CofE churches, four church/school partnerships and fourteen Christian home educators took part in the project.
- For stage one of the project, they conducted semi-structured interviews over Zoom with representatives from these settings to hear about their current experiences and approaches. These interviews also provided some insight into the challenges and barriers individuals face in this work and helped to identify some potential areas where support or resources may be a benefit.
- The project then provided resources and training to the settings to encourage and equip them in empowering parents to be more involved in nurturing their child's faith and the impacts of those changes were shared.

IN CHURCHES

The initial stage of this research found that churches currently seek to empower parents through supportive relationships, All Age services and providing resources to use at home. The success of this is varied.

The Role of Relationships

Almost all of the churches mentioned the role of relationships in empowering parents suggesting that cultivating and encouraging these relationships is an important tool when seeking to empower parents. These church leaders all mentioned the benefit of church staff members regularly connecting with parents either via phone calls, meetups, or conversations after church services. Peer support also seems to be a common approach to empowering parents.

While relationships are clearly key in supporting family faith, it can be difficult to help parents feel empowered to nurture their child's faith themselves rather than relying on their church connections. This was exemplified in a story told by one church leader when a family who lived nearby knocked on the vicar's door when their pet died, and they wanted prayer and support. The vicar expressed delight that they had turned to the church for support, but also shared a desire for the parent to feel more confident coaching their child through this and praying together without needing the vicar's presence.

Case study from the research

The findings suggest that strong relationships within a church community are important for nurturing family faith but suggest there is still work that could be done to assess how these relationships can be used particularly to empower parents to feel confident doing this in their everyday lives. The importance of relationships between leaders and parents and within the church family were included by many parents.

All-Age Services

When asked about their patterns of services and approaches to discipling children, all the churches mentioned 'All Age' or 'Intergenerational' services. From all the parent responses only one parent hinted at All Age services as being important and a small number referenced

IN CHURCHES

services in general. Age specific groups were however listed more frequently as being important.

Resources to Use at Home

In contrast to schools, the churches interviewed suggested significant effort in empowering families to explore faith at home with many highlighting the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic for initiating or accelerating this work. All of the churches in the study referenced sending home discussion questions or formal resources for families to use at home. It seems that seasonal festivals such as Christmas, Lent and Easter are times that churches offer increased resources to do at home with multiple churches mentioning this. Many conveyed a sense of frustration as they felt that the resources sent home were under-used, despite them requiring significant time to prepare. However, there was little knowledge or awareness of the extent of their use.

When asked what parents would find helpful in empowering faith the most common answers were not too dissimilar to the parents in the school settings wanting resources to enable faith inclusion in the home. Help to pray at home was also listed by several parents. In the parent/carer surveys, whilst some participants cited parenting courses and provision of materials to inform parents about what has been covered on Sundays and how this could be developed in the home context, many described Sunday School sessions, family services or how children's workers developed good relationships with the children. These latter comments are not really about churches empowering parents to support their child's faith at home, but more about the church providing the spiritual support for the child. This is an important distinction to note. It intimates a lack of clarity about what it means for the church to empower parents in this way, and perhaps a preference for the church fulfilling this role rather than parents.

Implementing changes

The team found that implementing changes was difficult. In the one case where change had been implemented, there had been a strong intentional move to adjust the language and culture surrounding responsibility for children's faith. This was evidenced by changes in the service structure, the way activities were explained during the service and sheets sent home with the children - all communicating an ethos of the church partnering with families. Interestingly, this change had not been explicitly communicated to the congregation as a new strategy but was being carried out through a 'drip feed' approach.

IN SCHOOLS

The initial stage of this research found that the main outworkings of the Christian faith in school are currently seen through the school's vision and values, acts of worship, and opportunities for prayer.

Vision and values

School values, mission and vision statements appear to be a key way that schools reflect their Christian faith. All of the school staff interviewed made reference to these in their interviews, with three schools highlighting their Christian values. All the schools highlighted the importance of weaving their Christian values throughout the school via lessons, curriculum, and policies and also discussed the importance of these being clearly explained to parents.

Worship

All the school representatives highlighted regular worship as part of their Christian distinctiveness, suggesting this is another key way schools seek to nurture faith in children. It seems that worship is a significant way that schools interact with their local churches, with all schools mentioning that clergy or volunteers from the local church run weekly collective worship, and three schools noting attending a local church for services or events around festivals in the church calendar.

Prayer

Prayer was mentioned by most of the schools as another important way the Christian Faith was part of their school life. The schools display creativity in the way they encourage prayer in school discussing a wide range of examples within their setting. These included school prayers written by teachers or children and said at various times throughout the day and having a specific place in the school that children could go to pray and reflect or write their prayers.

The schools in the study predominantly connected with parents about faith by inviting them to attend faith events at school such as collective worship, services and events happening in school or at their local church. The success of this seems to vary with some schools claiming

IN SCHOOLS

good attendance while others lamenting that uptake is slow.

The researchers found some desire from schools to encourage more faith sharing and exploration at home. However, when asked to reflect on what they have currently tried to empower parents to discuss or explore the Christian faith with their children at home, schools generally commented they had done very little.

When asked what school is doing to empower parents for faith, parents mainly responded by mentioning invitations to school and church events such as school worship or services held in church. Some parents, when asked, indicated that they would like resources from school which would help them to talk about faith or share prayer at home. Equally parents responded that they would simply appreciate knowing what was being taught in RE or through school worship whether this was directly from the school or through time with the vicar.

Implementing Changes

Whilst there was a desire by our participants, they acknowledged that a significant paradigm shift was required to develop more collaboration between parents/carers and schools regarding children's faith development.

“School helps teach and model the Christian faith.”
- Parent from the research

The main approaches adopted by our participant schools during the research timeframe were those which could be picked up and used, such as sharing links to Parenting for Faith websites. Many of the participants were asking for more of this sort of resource, which could be integrated into their existing activities and communications without adding additional workload for the school staff. Many stated that quality videos made specifically for parents/carers about Christian festivals or similar would be very helpful for signposting from their school website or newsletter.

There was a noticeable shift during the research project from schools mainly inviting parents/carers to join in with the activity of the school, to them sending home information to equip and empower parents to foster faith conversations in the home context also. The team saw this as being positive. It is key to note that of the range of resources signposted as part of the project, neither the paper-based resources, information leaflets or suggestions of activities to run were selected or operationalised by these sample schools, since they simply did not have the time or space to utilise these resources in the sample school contexts in our study.

BETWEEN PARTNERSHIPS

In the cases where the church only was participating in the study, the role of school in children's faith formation was barely mentioned and there was minimal desire to work together to empower parents. However, it was very marked at the beginning of the project that in the partnership contexts, church and school were working together very actively and enthusiastically. They often had shared staff or individuals who spent significant amounts of time in both contexts.

The presence of church staff in school

All the interviews with partnerships were characterised by significant presence of church staff in school. It seems that partnerships between school and churches seem to work best when staff and congregation are able to give a significant amount of time to being in and around the school. A small number of parent responses referenced a link between church and school as being important, with some mentioning visits from clergy or visits to the church.

Communication and celebration

When the researchers asked the partnerships to describe how their relationship worked and the impact it had, the results suggested that communication and celebration are key features of strong partnerships. This seems to work both ways.

A beautiful example of collaborative working was described in one interview where church staff and congregation worked together with school staff, children and parents to create and maintain a spirituality garden based on Psalm 23 in their school.

Example from the research

Partnerships Working to Empower Parents

As could be expected, the ways the partnerships appear to be seeking to empower parents are a mix of the ways described by schools and churches in our study. Their responses

BETWEEN PARTNERSHIPS

highlighted three key themes: inviting parents to events (similar to schools), running All Age services and sending resources home (similar to churches).

A popular resource raised was the Bible Society's 'Open the Book'. Interestingly one of these partnerships explained that they invite parents to watch or get involved with Open the Book and another suggested that inviting parents to be a part of Open the Book is something they wanted to try.

Example from the research

All except one of the partnerships mentioned school sending things home to try and empower parents to share faith at home. These ideas are shared with families in various ways including via apps, newsletters and on school websites. Similar to the reflections of churches also sending home resources, there were some questions raised as to the effectiveness of the approach.

The researchers concluded that it does seem that there are many more opportunities created for supporting the home context of faith formation when the church and school work together.

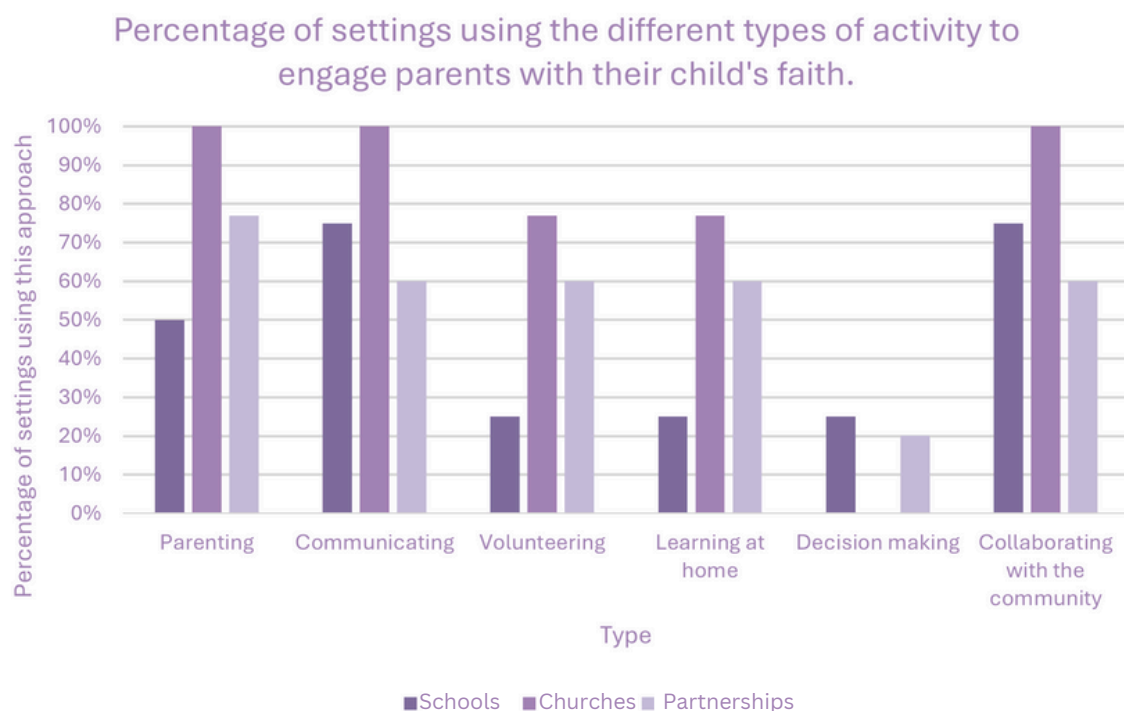
One partnership spoke in detail about a monthly All Age service run for families in the school hall. This is a long-term project run by the church team closely supported by the school and sees many families engage with faith through it during their children's time at primary school. Interestingly the vicar noted that this did not lead to increased families in church activities and that as a result they had recently begun another service aimed at reaching children and families.

Example from the research

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The researchers concluded that empowering parents is hard to do!

It was clear in data collected from a range of participants in schools, churches and partnerships that they were all finding it incredibly challenging to bring about a change of ethos of empowering parents to support their child's faith.



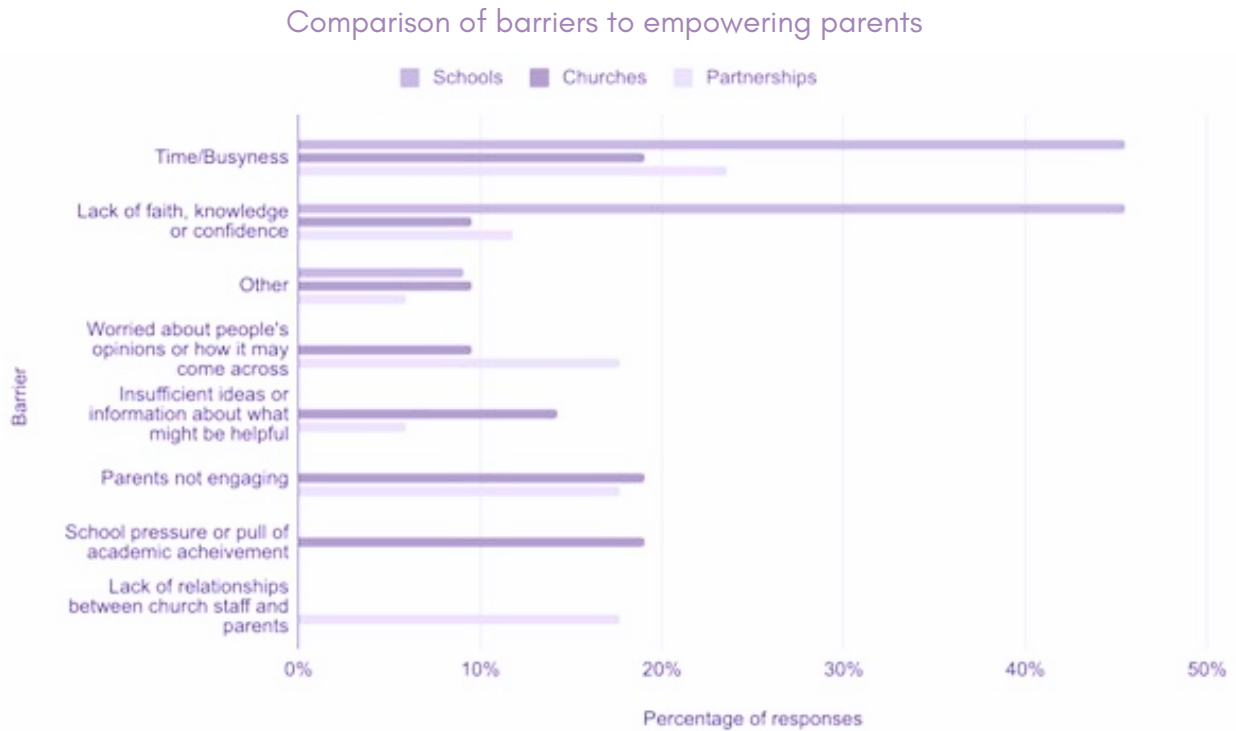
There is clearly a need for more support to be given to schools in the area of engaging with parents to support their children's faith and to boost their confidence. If these tools and resources can be simple and with minimal time needed to implement, this will help to negate the time pressures reported in the schools.

There is a need for churches to consider how parents can be more fully involved in decision making regarding support of faith in the home context.

The other barriers reported tended to be relational - whether with parents or church/school. It is striking that it was the partnership settings who were saying that a barrier was the connections with the other sectors or stakeholders (church vs school). Once again, this highlights a resourcing need to equip and foster relationship building for this purpose. This is reinforced by the many church respondents and some partnership settings, who said that there was insufficient information or ideas about how to carry this out.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

When asked about the issues and challenges around empowering parents three clear themes were observed across the contexts. These were time, parents' faith, and staff faith/knowledge.



Time

The interviews suggested that busyness of children, parents, school staff, church workers and clergy all impact the effectiveness of anyone empowering parents.

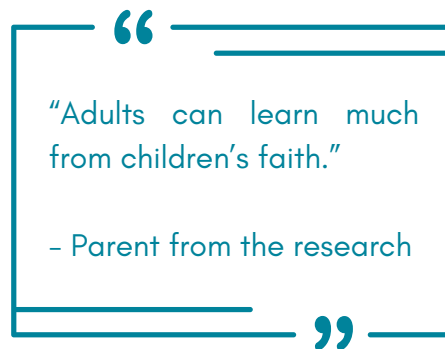
The researchers note that addressing these issues is complex, it is surely more difficult than simply 'making more time' for empowering parents. While it seems some vision casting for parents may be required around the importance of prioritizing time exploring faith with their children, church leaders also insightfully expressed concern that they did not want to burden or guilt families into doing things and were keen to ensure they didn't unintentionally judge other people's parenting in the process. In this area, however, there seems to be the greatest disconnects as many parents are asking for resources to use at home.

There are also huge difficulties in reducing time pressures on clergy and school staff who are typically already overworking. There is some suggestion from our discussions that specifically employed staff members such as children and family workers or school chaplains can go some way to helping carry the load of empowering parents.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Parents' Faith

Parents not having a Christian faith or lacking confidence in it was identified as a barrier to empowering parents across the spheres. Parent responses reflect this as many asked for resources to help them in this area. However, when asked their views on the importance of Christian faith in children, most parents stated it was either very important or important however some indicated it was beneficial in helping them 'choose their own path' and others expressed the importance in teaching morals and values. It was suggested that something as simple as information on what the school services or RE contained would be helpful so this can be discussed and built upon in the home would be beneficial.



School staff faith and knowledge

The final theme which came out across multiple interviews was that the knowledge, confidence or faith of school staff can be a barrier to empowering parents.

When asked if the school or church ever talked to parents about their child's faith development, the responses were mixed. Churches tended to do this more than schools or partnerships with more parents noting this was a frequent occurrence in church rather than an occasional one. In the schools and partnerships communication via printed forms happens more frequently than verbally and in church it is both. This could be a result of lack of time and confidence in many school staff when tackling this issue.

Communication

In all three sectors responses regarding communications between school/church and parents were the same, with parents asking for more information on what is being taught, and feedback on how the teaching was received. Parents suggested a variety of ways. In all settings it seems that communication and feedback could be improved.

FINDINGS FROM THE HOME EDUCATOR PARTICIPANTS

Many of the Christian home educator participants expressed that home educating provides an opportunity for depth of relationship and depth of faith exploration that may not be possible in mainstream education. Many of these parents/carers conveyed a strong sense of parental responsibility for supporting their child's faith and therefore viewed the role of the church differently to other parents in the study. To them, the greatest value of the church was the intergenerational relationships, as a basis for socialisation of their children. To these parents, the church was akin to a family, providing role models for their children and a support base for the parents as they sought to nurture their child's faith. As a consequence, the actual discipleship activities targeted towards children were less important to these families since discipleship occurred so strongly in the home environment. There was a strong feeling amongst these participants that they had many ideas and approaches for discipleship which they would like to share with the church but at the present time this knowledge and experience was undervalued and not appreciated or utilised.

CONCLUSIONS

TOWARDS CULTURE CHANGE: EMPOWERING PARENTS

This research highlights again the seismic shift that needs to happen to our thinking and our practice around the place of households in the faith development of children.

In scripture we see the passing on of faith deeply rooted in the household set within the whole faith community. We see parents taking on their God-given responsibility to 'tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.' *Psalm 78v4*.

However, over the past 50 years we have professionalised the passing on the faith to such an extent that parents have been disempowered and often feel that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to do a good job at exploring and explaining faith with their children. The commonly held belief seems to be that you need to be a trained and experienced expert who is 'good with children' in order to be qualified to teach children about faith. This takes parents, and to a large extent school staff, out of the picture and leaves the job of raising the next generation in faith to a handful of faithful people, doing their best, often with a small number of children in less than an hour a week. A lack of confidence abounds amongst parents and educators.

Encouraging and enabling parents to take up that responsibility again, without piling guilt on top of disempowerment, involves us all changing the way we do things. Whether we are church leaders, children's workers, teachers or volunteers in schools we need to be asking ourselves if what we are doing is helping to empower parents or taking responsibility away from them.

As this research shows this is not easy, often even parents themselves can be resistant to the changes we might be trying to make, and it will always be easier to continue to do things the way we have always done them. However, this is an area where there is huge potential and opportunity for ingenuity, creative thinking and sharing of best practice.

CONCLUSIONS:

QUESTIONS, MESSAGES AND FURTHER READING

Key Questions:

- How is what I am doing empowering the households of these children?
- Could I be doing more to involve households in this?
- Am I taking responsibility away from households by what I am doing?
- Is there anything I need to stop doing so that households have more opportunity to engage with their children?
- How might churches and schools partner together to empower and equip households in growing faith at home?

Key messages:

For church leaders:

- There is a need for churches to consider how parents can be more fully involved in decision making regarding support of faith in the home context.
- While it is clear that churches have a strong desire to see parents sharing faith at home and are trying to resource this by sending things home, it is apparent that some more work needs to be done to identify whether this is actually helpful for parents and if not, what might be better.

For schools:

- Parents from school, church and partnerships all mentioned they would like some sort of resources to help them know how to introduce faith conversations or answer their children's questions with one parent adding it would be helpful to have a "cheat sheet" of the main topics covered and answers to possible questions the children may have.
- A recurring theme amongst parents is that they are unsure what their children are being taught in school or church groups around faith. Developing communication in this way could therefore be advantageous in fostering greater empowerment of the parents.

For Households:

- Talk to your church and school about what you would find most helpful in helping develop you child's faith at home.

CONCLUSIONS:

QUESTIONS, MESSAGES AND FURTHER READING

For children:

- Children can be leaders of faith activities and conversations at home.
- What would help you start faith conversations at home?

For congregation members

- Findings suggest that strong relationships within a church community are important for nurturing family faith but suggest there is still work that could be done to assess how these relationships can be used to particularly empower parents to feel confident doing this in their everyday lives.

For strategic leaders:

- Finding ways to help church leaders, and congregation members to spend more time in school and working directly with parents appears to be something we should work towards in order to empower parents more effectively to share faith with their children.

RESOURCES:

For further information about this project:

Read Emma Olorenshaw, Shelley Logan and Sarah Holmes' [mid-project report](#), *Empowering Parents*

- See also a [summary of research findings and recommendations](#), produced by Sarah for the Kitchen Table Project

RELATED CASE STUDY

THE ARCHWAY LEARNING TRUST HUB IN THE DIOCESE OF SOUTHWELL AND NOTTINGHAM



During consultation with parents, it was clear that parents were struggling to engage in faith dialogue with their children and were seeking help. In response, we created a recipe book. This was created with the hope of promoting and aiding families to cook together, eat together and to meet Christ together.

Considerations were made with regards to the cost of living and dietary requirements, so each meal is simple, vegetarian and cost effective whilst also healthy and hearty.

Below each recipe there are discussion starters - simple questions for families to discuss and consider whilst breaking bread together.

The Growing in Faith Facebook page was also promoted through this recipe book and families were asked to message in their family's responses to the questions. This is designed to assess impact at home.

To learn more:

- Read the Hub's [first written report](#).
- Watch their [first video report](#).
- Read the [Hub cookbook](#)

If you would like any other information about any of the projects represented here, visit our website:

<https://cofe.io/gf>

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