

The Child in the midst of a Mission Shaped Church

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When I was asked to lead a session at your conference, he said that I could do what I liked provided it was based on the theme, *the child in the midst*. My first reaction was to wonder why the word 'midst' had been used, rather than centre. According to the Concise Oxford dictionary, it is not the same as the 'centre' because it may only be used in conjunction with the word 'of'. So, the child in the midst of what? What is in the midst of our children's lives? What sort of Church will have a child in the midst? What are the characteristics of Church for children?

We have just been on a pilgrimage of discovery that ended in Jerusalem. I am going on another journey that starts in Jerusalem, where the Church began. It will look at the sort of Church we have today and whether the child is in the midst of it, or on the edge, or has ever been there in the first place. Then I will look at the opportunities and issues surrounding the ways that children are being Church but are unrecognised as such.

Jesus put a child in the midst of his followers, so I am going to start with a child. His name is Lee. He is eight and he is a real person. I have only tweaked his story a little.

Lee lives with his Mother at 31 Whitehill Road. This is in St Mary's parish. Lee was baptised there and has been there a couple of times, to a Christingle service and a wedding.

Lee goes to the local Church school – St John's. Everyday, they have a Christian act of worship. Twice a term there is a Eucharist and he sees some of the teachers and older children receive Holy Communion. The children visit the church for special services and RE lessons.

Lee has just joined the Cub Scouts. That is based at the Methodist church hall. As it is a Church sponsored group, they end every meeting with a prayer. Once a quarter they go there for church parade.

Every other weekend, Lee goes to stay with his Dad and stepfamily. They live twenty miles away and sometimes go to the family service at their local church.

This asks a big question; where is Church for Lee? In which community do we grow church for him? The 'legal' church where he lives would see him as non-church, but actually, Lee is worshipping God within a Christian community regularly and frequently, at school, at a sponsored Cub pack and when he visits his father and stepfamily.

As one third of children come from split families, and over 20% of our children attend Church schools, many children have similar lives to Lee. A lot more will be having experience of worship through a club or uniformed organisation; through school; through occasional special services, or through going to church with a second parent, a grandparent or a friend. Some of this will happen in a church building but much more will happen in other places and situations. So asking '*where is Church*' or '*what is Church*' pertains to far more children than those who come to a church service on a Sunday morning.

The ways that children are part of the Church are very complex and varied.

1. The local church is not necessarily the parish church. Thanks to changes of life style and mobility, there is more choice. Families will attend the church that they like or that offers them the facilities that they need.
2. Churches of particularly strong traditions or in city centres will have people travelling some distance to be there. Children like Lee go to a church with their second parent, or a grandparent, possibly many miles from home. This means that they have a different church community from the one where they live.
3. Many Church schools are distinctive all-age worshipping communities. About half of our schools celebrate the Eucharist regularly. Children are prepared for first Holy Communion, baptism or confirmation there and so are staff and parents.
4. More and more children are worshipping midweek. This ranges from toddler clubs, after school Kids Klubs, cell groups, to Saturday morning sessions. These groups invariably have far more children than on Sunday.
5. Holy places are IN. Children are being Church at cathedrals, pilgrimages and camps. Some youngsters come to faith through a Christian camp, or a pilgrimage.

When we look at all of these ways that children are being Church, we clearly have what Archbishop Rowan calls a 'mixed economy' kind of Church of which Sunday morning is only one, albeit, a very important example.

The reasons for the success of these other forms of Church, are partly to do with the time and place where they meet, but also because there is a tendency to try to make the traditional Sunday morning model accessible to children without actually changing it. In the last fifteen years, since *Children in the Way*, we have done an enormous amount to bring the child out of the Sunday school in the hall to take part in the main service. We have had *all age worship*, lectionary based teaching, Godly Play; children present at the Eucharist and eventually, being allowed to receive Holy Communion. A great deal has been achieved and we need to go on affirming the children that are at church on Sunday morning and see that they are *in the midst* of the gathered community. I suggest, however, that most children are not even on the edge of that sort of Church in the first place and neither are their parents. It is a small factor at the edge of a crowded life.

If we are to engage with children, we must recognise that improving what we have already - a gathered community on Sunday in a special building (which is rarely in the midst of the community geographically, socially or culturally) is not enough. Neither is a bit of mission-flavoured tokenism, like a holiday club with the feeling that if the children don't turn up on the next Sunday and love what they find, it was a waste of time but that the Church can put a tick against 'outreach'.

A common way of drawing the church is a series of concentric circles, like a dart board. This is very comfortable because it puts US in the centre and shows that it is possible to reach the so-called fringe that are equidistant from this centre and drag them in or let them sit on the boundaries. In practice, this does not work because the basic premise of putting the Church in the centre is wrong and has been so for decades.

A couple of months ago I attended a lecture on Mission Shaped Church by George Lings of the Sheffield Centre. He took the text of Acts 1:8. [11]. This is when Jesus tells the apostles to be his witnesses, *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Sumaria and to the ends of the earth*.

George showed that this moving from Jerusalem, to Judea and then to Sumaria was travelling from the Familiar through the Uncomfortable to the Unthinkable. This can be likened to a linear journey from the congregation to the fringe and then to the Unchurched, the increasing numbers of children who know nothing.

This is less comfortable than the traditional view because it shows two things: First that we have to be prepared to be challenged and to change if the Church is to develop. It is far easier to stay 'in Jerusalem'.

Secondly, we find that the circle has turned into an ellipse or even a straight line. 'Jerusalem' or the parish church is no longer in the centre. Indeed, this is what happened as the early Church grew and developed.

If we relate this to the children we reach, we find that the centre of our ellipse is not Sunday morning worship/nurture, but the children that we call the fringe, who are actually being Church in other ways. We also see how remote Sunday worship is to the children who have no contact or knowledge of the Christian faith.

We say 'come to church' but many children are already being Church but we do not fully acknowledge it. For even more, it is a long journey, literally and culturally into unfamiliar territory – from Sumaria to Jerusalem - and Jerusalem does not necessarily want them or be prepared to accommodate them anyway!

Before you suggest that I am trying to destroy or marginalise the traditional Sunday worship in the church building, let me assure you that I am not. This is not an either or situation. Still less is it about tearing up the Church, as we know it. It is more about recognising the new ways of being Church that grow alongside the traditional model. It will allow children to be Church wherever they find themselves. Moreover, we will find that much of what has been called 'fringe' is actually Church. Worship is taking place in school, in clubs, and midweek worship and so on. Moreover, it is now more accessible to the increasing numbers of youngsters who know nothing about the Christian faith.

The implications of this are huge. It will require a major change of thinking for parishes and for those people who try to resource them.

1. We need to own and celebrate the wide diversity and variety in our children's ministry.
2. There is no second-class worship or 'proper' Church. A Eucharist in school is as 'good' as one in the church building; a group of mothers and toddlers sharing a short service on Tuesday in a house is as much 'Church' as a Family Service on Sunday and so on.
3. This means giving equal respect and support to the many different ways that children are being Church.

4. To do this we need to resource and train our clergy and leaders to recognise and support Church in all its forms.

What are the issues that hinder this happening?

First, negative reporting makes children's workers draw inwards to protect what they have. This destroys imagination and kills growth.

The second obstacle is bound up with being Anglican. We tend to assume that we are in the centre of the community. This is partly about a traditional picture postcard image of having the building literally in the middle of the village. It is also about our history of being the Establishment. We used to call non-Anglicans 'dissenters'. We still hear them being called 'non-conformists'. It was a big shock to me when I lived in Scotland to find that the parish church in the centre was Presbyterian and what I attended was an eclectic church on the edge.

This even spills into worship. Having had 'Common Prayer' for 400 years, which was designed for everyone in the land, we adapted the title to have 'Common Worship' but it is designed solely for articulate Anglican adults, and certainly not for children. Some of you will remember the email conversation that went on just before Easter about the need for a child-friendly Communion service and especially a suitable Eucharistic Prayer. Accessible to all? In your dreams!

The other obstacles are concerned with resources and training. The demand for good quality resources and training far outstrip supply.

The number of resources geared towards outreach is increasing, but is still very low. There are very few resources on worship with children who have little experience of God; hardly anything for small numbers of children; for midweek clubs; or for parent and toddler groups – yet these are where we find most of the children and where the Church is growing.

Turning to the whole subject of training, in the survey I made in 2003 you told me that only 27 dioceses offered training to children's workers in using the Bible and 25 in evangelism. About 1/3 of dioceses offer no training at all to clergy and authorised ministers. If children are an optional extra; if we fail to help children to meet God through Scripture; (and we cannot assume that our leaders know even the most popular Bible stories); if reaching out to children beyond our Sunday congregation is the lowest priority, the future for the Christian faith in this country is grim.

So, how will we recognise that a particular children's activity is indeed Church? I have created a list of five possible hallmarks. You may have different ones.

1. Trinitarian – loving relationship
2. Worshipping – presence of God
3. Incarnational – change in order to reach others
4. Nurturing – telling the story
5. Inclusive – every person valued

You notice that there is nothing about time, place, style or content!

Lastly, what will happen to a Church that is so varied and diverse?

The quick answer is that I do not know. I find this quite scary. I like to look ahead and see what will happen. It is tidier (as well as being Anglican!) to lead everything neatly back to 10 o'clock on Sunday morning. But, just as the first pioneers who started Sunday Schools wanted to keep children off the streets and teach them to read the Bible, never dreamt that this would evangelise the whole country and be the foundations of universal free education, we cannot know what will happen.

1. We must use what we have now.
2. We sow seeds and have faith that there will be a harvest.
3. Any of you who are parents will know that, whatever we can find out with various tests, we still do not know what our children will look like until they are born. Only then do we see the likeness to parents, characteristics, and so on, but there is always an element of surprise.
4. While we focus on a single model of Church, however we may work at it and vary it, this will be diminishing. This is not how life is.
5. A multi-faceted outlook brings hope, and it is only with hope that we will have a future.