CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

A RESEARCH REPORT TO

CHURCH OF IRELAND
BOARD OF EDUCATION (NORTHERN IRELAND)

JANUARY 2005

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1: STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The attitudes, needs, and experiences regarding Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland are perceived to have changed significantly in recent years. The Church's Board of Education (Northern Ireland)has established a sub-group[1] to examine this important issue in church life. The sub-group invited a research consultant, Dr Gareth Higgins, to draw up a proposal for an academically credible, but accessible piece of research that will help identify the 'shape' and needs of Children's Ministry at present, and the potential needs now and in the future.

2: METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out as follows:

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed to elicit richer data. The goal of the research is to provide a concise analysis of the attitudes, experiences, and needs regarding Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland. Issues raised in the research include the following:

- *Physical space used for Children's Ministry.*
- *Types of activity in Children's Ministry.*
- *Numbers and age bands of children participating in Children's Ministry.*
- *Numbers and age bands of people involved as Children's Ministry workers/helpers.*
- *What provision other than Sunday Schools exists?*
- *How parents are/are not being assisted with the nurture and development of the children in the home.*
- *Which text-based or other resources are used in Children's Ministry?*
- *What material and/or training needs exist?*
- *What factors influence the decision to send or not to send a child to a Church of Ireland ministry?*
- *What can other bodies do to assist the development of Children's Ministry?*
- *What 'dreams and visions' do those involved in Children's Ministry wish to articulate?*
- *Is there potential for the development of other roles in Children's Ministry in the church as a whole?*

- A short written questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of 20% of Northern Irish parishes (53 parishes); incumbents were invited to complete the questionnaire in consultation with the person in their parish with key responsibility for Children's Ministry.
- A letter appeared in the Church of Ireland Gazette that invited further contributions from any other interested parties.
- Focus Groups and supplementary interviews were held with relevant people (see below).
- The Methodology included reading/reviewing documents including 'BCP for kids', 'Safeguarding Trust', and a parish strategy document for Children's Ministry.

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[1] Members of the Sub-Group are Mr JE Bunting, Rev. IW Ellis (Convenor), Rev. Canon RT Gillian, Rt Rev. Alan Harper, Mr RF Palmer, and Mrs MP Wallace.

- The consultant met regularly with the Board of Education (Northern Ireland) Children's Ministry Sub-Group and the Education Officer, and met once with the Board of Education (Northern Ireland) itself during the course of the research.

3a) INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS

The findings presented in this report should be interpreted according to the usual methods of analysing social research, as well as in the light of the following caveats:

- The response rate was relatively high in terms of social research – at 45% of the sample. As well as possibly representing the consequences of 'consultation fatigue', the response rate may be seen by some as indicative of some people according the issue of Children's Ministry a lower priority than the Board of Education might have wished. It should however be borne in mind that while the sample was weighted according to the age and gender of rectors, statistics in the report represent the percentage of the *parishes sampled* for the research. The statistics do appear to accord with anecdotal evidence about the church as a whole.

- A Note on statistics – readers will note that the percentages in some figures do not add up to 100%; there is also some slight discrepancy on figures in the tables on numbers and age groups of people involved in Children's Ministry. This discrepancy results from the fact that not all respondents answered each question, and it became clear in the drawing up of the statistics that some respondents had estimated their response. The figures are however a useful guide, and an accurate representation of the responses.

- The value of social research is not simply to provide 'numbers and narrative', but to paint a picture of needs and experience that may prove helpful in shaping future direction. We have sought to err on the side of providing perhaps too much information in quoting from respondents. Sometimes comments are made simply to inform the reader of examples of good Children's Ministry activity; this is not to single anyone out for special praise, but simply because their activities or comments may be of interest to the Board of Education as it nurtures the future development of Children's Ministry.

- All comments are anonymous; most are from rectors in the sample, but some are from lay people, leaders and those fulfilling other roles[2].

- From the inception of the research it was made clear that Children's Ministry is not limited to Sunday School. All forms of Children's Ministry have been included in the research.

- In light of the remit given to the consultant, we have not sought to make explicit or firm proposals, in the knowledge that there is more than enough expertise on the Board of Education (Northern Ireland) and Children's Ministry Sub-Group to use the report as a means to informing discussion about future strategy as proposals arise naturally from the findings. However the conclusion to the report includes a number of 'suggested action points' – these are neither rigid, nor comprehensive, but they are merely suggestions to 'get the ball rolling' in a discussion of how the church might wish to respond to the research.

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[2] Comments from children are reflected in more detail in the Analysis and Conclusion section of the report.

- It seems appropriate also to stress the fact that the key resources for Children's Ministry are its leaders and helpers. While some parishes have a tradition of lay leadership, and others do not, the vital task of Children's Ministry would be impossible without the many people involved at different levels in nurturing the children of the Church of Ireland in discipleship, human development, and the things of the kingdom of God. Not least because this report aims to provide a platform for the needs of Children's Ministry leaders/helpers, it is dedicated to them.

Findings are based on the following received data:

- 24 completed questionnaires were received from sample of 53 = 45% response rate, which is very good for research of this nature. The 24 questionnaires represent 35 parishes as some of the parishes sampled have incumbents who are responsible for other parishes. Over 1200 children are involved in Children's Ministry across the 35 parishes.
- 12 responses were received from people not in the representative sample; 5 in the form of questionnaires, and 7 were interviewed by phone. Respondents included rectors, people involved in children's bereavement service, training clergy, parish administration, and leading children's ministries.
- 6 Focus Groups took place as follows: 1 with members of the Board of Education Children's Ministry Sub-group; 2 groups with Parents of Children who participate in Children's Ministry; 1 group with leaders of Children's Ministry; 2 groups with children who participate in Children's Ministry. A child development worker facilitated the Focus Groups with children, while the research consultant facilitated the other groups. In addition to the 5 members of the Children's Ministry Sub-Group, 9 children, 1 leader, 1 rector, and 7 parents participated in the groups, which took place in three dioceses. 30 children also responded by completing fun work sheets in their ministry activity in two dioceses.

3b: I) Types of activity

Figure 1
Please list the kind of Children's Ministry activities that take place in your parish
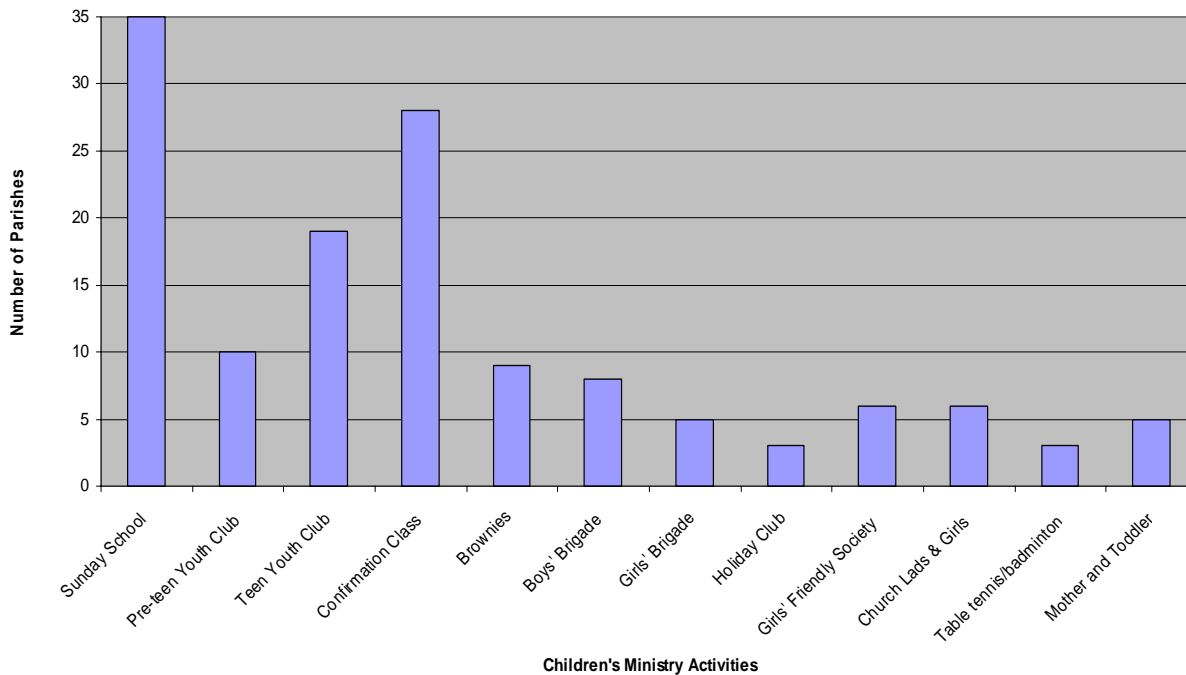
Unsurprisingly, as can be seen from **Fig.1[3]**, each of the 35 parishes that responded from the sample have a Sunday School, although some of them no longer use this outdated label, as they feel it is too strongly linked to an 'instructional' rather than 'child development' mode of ministry. Names such as 'Powerhouse', 'Lyfe', 'On-line', 'Pathfinders', and 'Going Live' are used in place of traditional Children's Ministry labels. The shift of perception that such a name change brings should not be underestimated[4].

In addition to Sunday Schools in every parish; 80% of parishes in the sample have a confirmation class; there is a teen youth club in 55% of parishes; a pre-teen youth club in 30%; Brownies in 25%, Boy's Brigade in 22%; and Girl's Brigade in approximately 16% of parishes in the sample.

Most parishes are engaged in a wide range of Children's Ministry activities – as the following list from one parish in the North West exemplifies:

> [We have a] confirmation class; 2 Sunday Schools; badminton; table tennis; Sunday supper club (12-17yrs); children's choir, a weekly children's sermon; monthly children's service; Scouts; Cubs; Guides and Brownies (shared with another parish); crèche; and the Young Farmers' Club also uses church property.

At least one parish has recently established a special Sunday service for parents with children aged 0-4; called 'Praise and Play', and the rector expressed delight that so many people were attending. Another parish indicated that they have special children's weekend activities approximately 3 or 4 times per year.

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[3] **Fig.2,** a chart with diocesan breakdown of Children's Ministry activities is in the appendix.
[4] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46.

Children in several parishes were invited to tell us some of their thoughts on Children's Ministry, and these focused mostly on the value of pastoral development and play-learning rather than 'instructional' models of ministry[5]:

- I like singing, I like quizzes

- I like watching videos, I like drawing and painting on walls

- I hate singing, I hate stories

- I hate [when Sunday School is like] work. (Many children echoed this comment.)

- I don't like sitting doing nothing in Sunday School

- I like watching TV, I would like to read in church

- I like making stuff

- I like drama

- I like playing games

- I like drama, singing, doing quizzes, watching videos, I would also like to do a reading or say a prayer or poem in church

- I like one song 'Be bold, Be strong' (a fun song with actions)

- If Sunday School was a Pizza the toppings would be:

Tomatoes – I don't think it lasts long enough
Chicken – the leaders and other people are FAB!
Ham – when the hall is knocked down there won't be any children's church
Cheese – children's church RULES
Sweetcorn – I really like the games and there should be more
Pepperoni – I don't like the boys (!)

- I don't like answering questions

- I like the leaders

- I don't like the leaders

- I like my friends

- I like to learn about God

- I do not like writing.

II) Type and Suitability of Premises

The Board of Education (Northern Ireland) may be encouraged at the response to questions about the suitability of premises used for Children's Ministry activities. As can be seen in

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[5] More reflections on Focus Groups with children are in the Analysis and Conclusion section of the report.

Figs.3 and **5**[6] below, 80% of respondents said their premises were 'suitable' or 'very suitable'. 14% said they were 'somewhat unsuitable', and 3% 'very unsuitable'. Questions of suitability centred on room size and comfort.

Figure 3
What physical space is used for Children's Ministry activities?
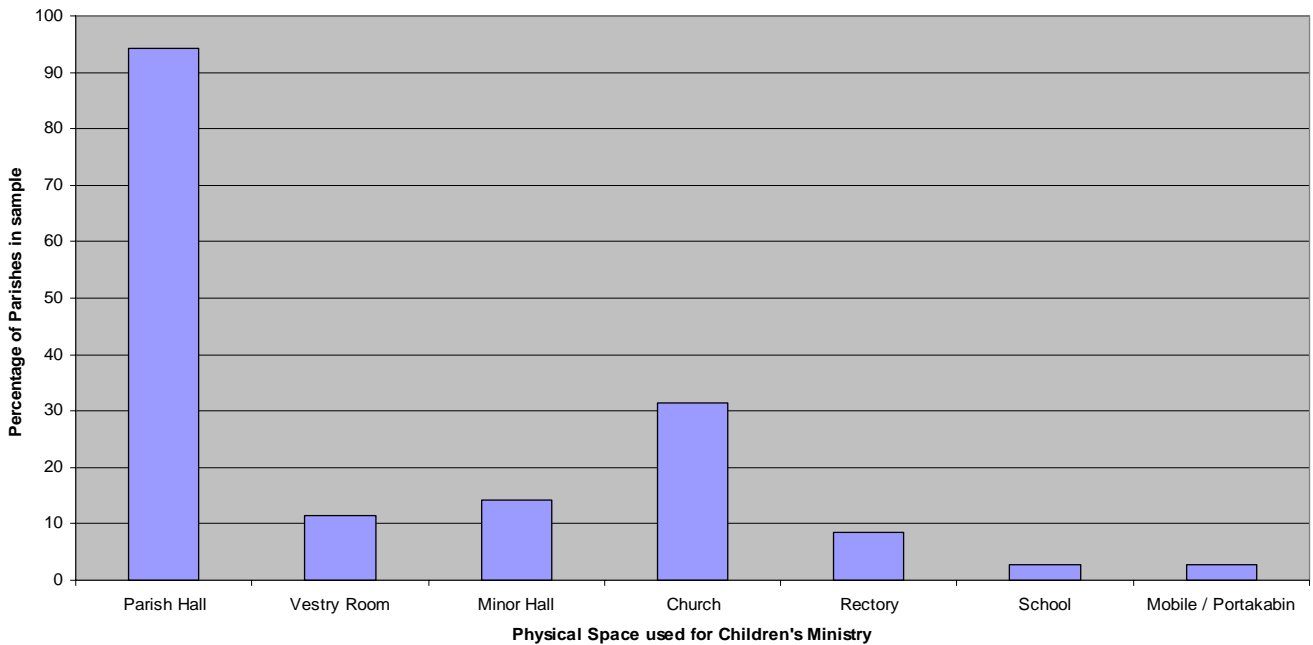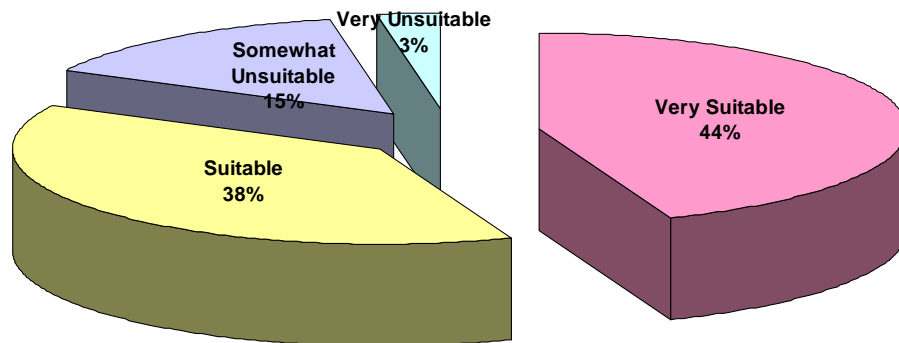

Figure 5
How suitable are the premises used for Children's Ministry?

Comments made in questionnaires often suggested that rooms used for Children's Ministry were functional rather than comfortable, for example:

> Some activities take place in the community hall, not parish linked. Some premises have the usual 'brown and cream' feel; functional but unfriendly.

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[6] **Fig.4**, the chart with diocesan breakdown is in the appendix.

One rector indicated that her parish had sought to address this problem:

> One room has been fitted with sofa and easy chairs (second hand) to provide a more comfortable environment; carpeted rooms mean kids don't have to use chairs.

Some recent legislation affected premises used for Children's Ministry in at least one parish:

> Disability access legislation – major works will be required. [We have a] very old and unwelcoming toilet block…[The distance children have to travel] from the main church involves crossing a road and a 200-yard walk.

In general, many – although not most - respondents resonated with the following sentiment:

> All venues are suitable but all could be improved with additional finance. Size too small, need for repairs, etc.

III) Link with other a) Church of Ireland parishes.

Figure 6
Do any of your parish's Children's Ministry activities take place in co-operation with other Church of Ireland parishes or other denominations?
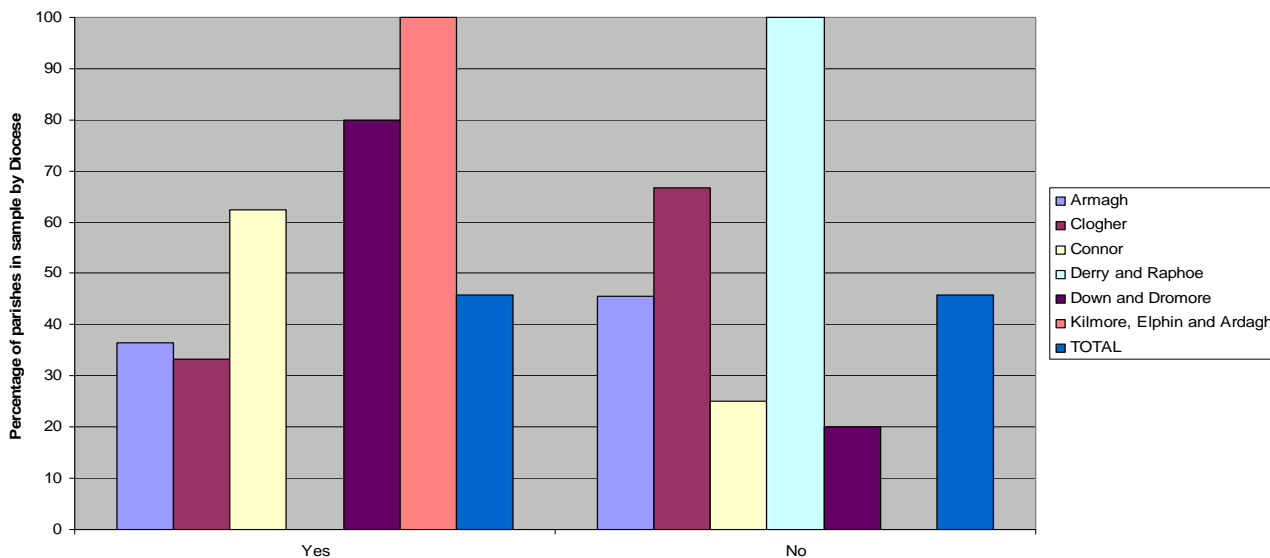

*As shown in **Fig.6**, 46% of responding parishes co-operate in some Children's Ministry activity with another Church of Ireland parish or denomination; while 46% said that they do not[7].*

31% of responding parishes share activity with one or more Church of Ireland parishes. Examples of shared activity with other Church of Ireland parishes include monthly youth activity on a deanery basis and youth fellowships meeting with another parish.

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[7] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46.

Figure 7
Please list the other denominations with which your parish shares Children's Ministry activities
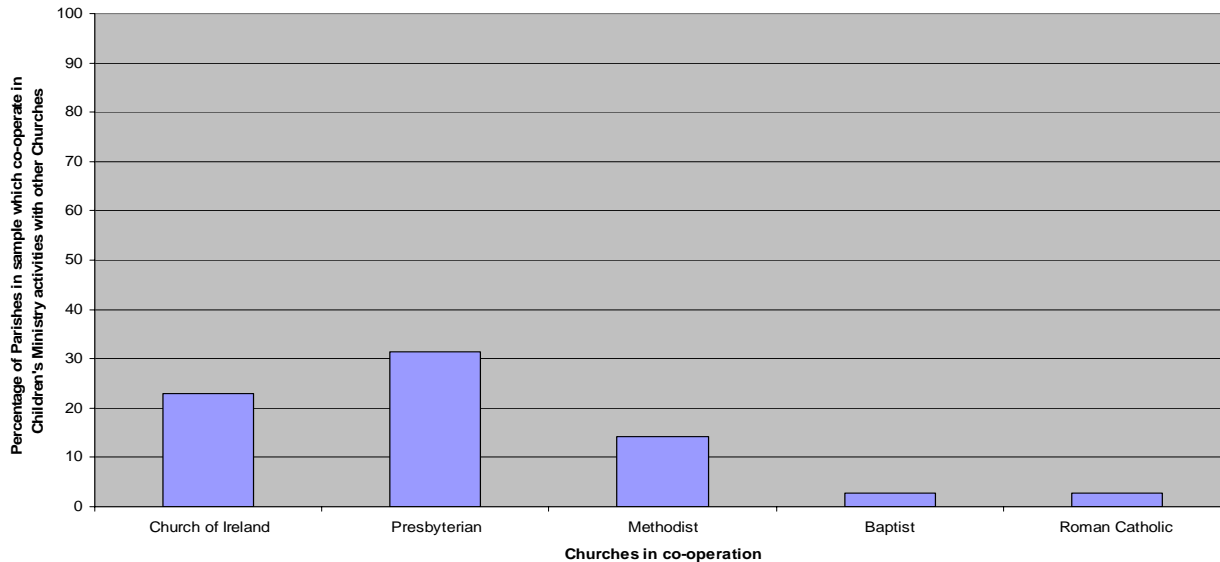
Interdenominational activity was reported as follows (see **Fig.7**):

- 42% of responding parishes share some Children's Ministry activity with a Presbyterian congregation
- 19% with a Methodist congregation
- 4% with the Baptist congregation
- 4% with a Roman Catholic parish

It was reported by several respondents that uniformed organisations often meet cross-denominationally.

Two comments illustrate the openness of respondents to further shared activity:

[We don't have shared activity] yet, but hope we will in the future.

All parish organisations have open memberships.

Some activity takes place in co-operation with others, with some church youth clubs serving the whole community making use of parish halls, and links with the Young Farmers' Club – not a church organisation but in a few parishes plenty of young people are involved, including as leaders.

IV) Numbers and age bands of children and leaders/helpers in the parishes sampled

Figs.8 and **9** below show the numbers and age bands of children and leaders/helpers participating in Children's Ministry activities in the parishes sampled for this research. It is worth noting that over 1200 children attend Sunday School in the sampled parishes; the data in this report is based therefore on the comments of people working with a substantial number of children indeed.

Figure 8
Numbers / Age bands of children participating in
Children's Ministry activities in the 35 sampled parishes

	Creche	Sunday School	Girls' Friendly Society	Church Lad's Brigade	Youth Club
Pre-school	124	34		2	11
P1 - P4		449	32	27	17
P5 - P7		442	29	21	178
Post-primary/Pre-confirmation		296	11	18	117
TOTAL	124	1221	72	68	323

	Confirmation Class	Youth Fellowship	Mother & Toddler	Boys' Brigade	Girls' Brigade	Other
Pre-school			48		10	15
P1 - P4				60	44	115
P5 - P7				68	68	250
Post-primary/Pre-confirmation	222	172		40	26	633
TOTAL	222	172	48	168	148	1013

Figure 9
Numbers of people participating as leaders / helpers in
Children's Ministry activities in the 35 sampled parishes

	Creche	Sunday School	Girls' Friendly Society	Church Lad's Brigade	Youth Club
Pre-school	14	10		1	1
P1 - P4		29	4	4	5
P5 - P7		29	4	4	9
Post-primary/Pre-confirmation		27	4	4	8
TOTAL	14	95	12	13	23

|	Confirmation Class	Youth Fellowship	Mother & Toddler	Boys' Brigade	Girls' Brigade	Other
Pre-school			3		1	1
P1 - P4				6	3	8
P5 - P7				6	3	12
Post-primary/Pre-confirmation	24	9		4	3	15
TOTAL	24	9	3	16	10	36

V) Programmes for parents

Respondents were asked:
Is there any specific activity or programme facilitated by, or available in your parish to assist parents in the nurture of their children?

*As **Fig.10** shows, in response, **29%** of respondents said 'Yes', while **57%** said 'No'.*

Figure 10
Is there any specific activity or programme facilitated by, or available in your parish to assist parents in the nurture of their children?

No reply 14%

Yes 29%

No 57%
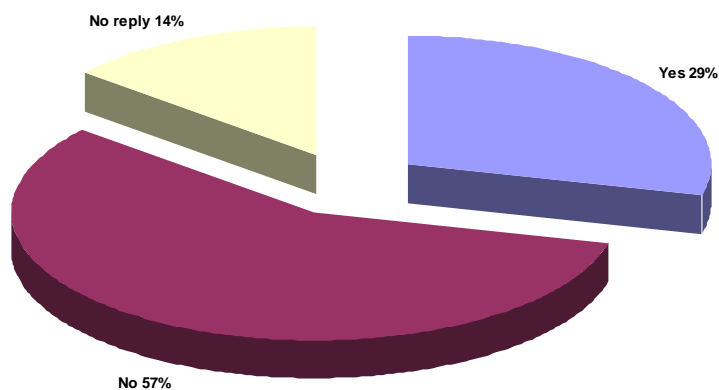
Parenting courses are run in a variety of ways. One respondent indicating that her parish runs a parenting course every three years, focusing on parenting young children and teenagers; another said that a course had recently been run in his parish, attended by 8 mothers. Fathers were then invited for a follow-up evening alongside those who completed the course. Another parish hosted a series of evenings with a focus on parenting issues; participants did not have to sign up for an entire course to attend. The Mothers' Union often facilitates parenting courses. At least one respondent said that he hoped to have a parenting course in the parish in the near future[8].
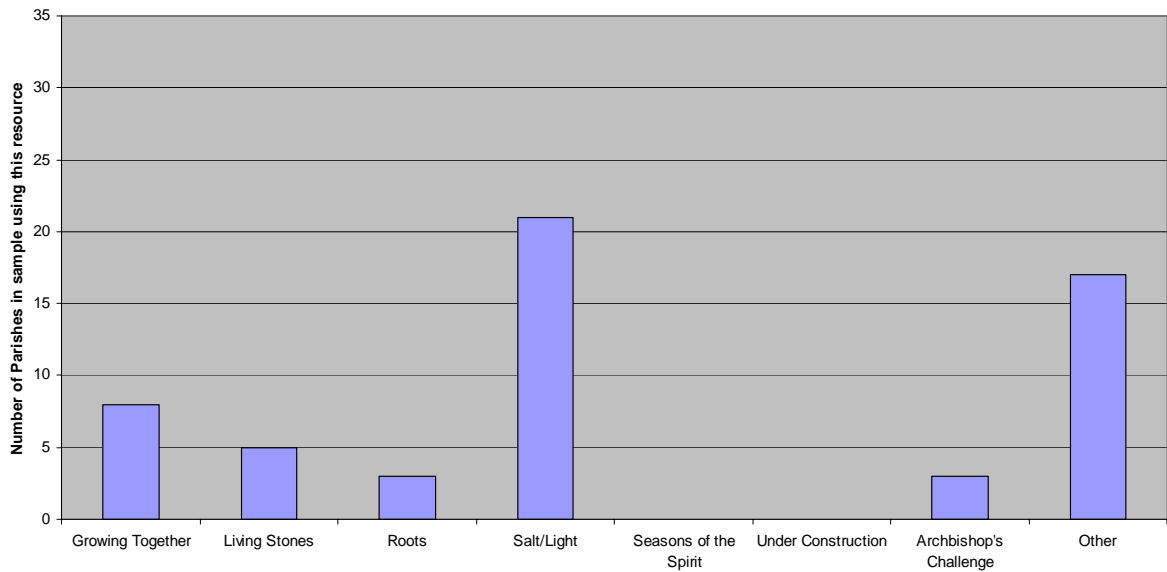
VI) a) Resources used

The most frequently used text-based resource[9] in Children's Ministry according to respondents is 'Salt and Light' with 21 of 24 respondents using it; 8 of 24 using 'Growing Together'; no respondent reported using Seasons of the Spirit or Under Construction (see **Fig.11** below). Other resources used include Youth Alpha, and some respondents indicated that they use Growing Together to develop Church of Ireland ethos in the Sunday School. Several respondents suggest that they would like to use Church of Ireland-based material, but imply that they would like to see more up to date material made available.

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[8] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46
[9] See Suggested Action Points on pp.41-46

Figure 11
Which text-based or other resources are used in Children's Ministry
Christian Education activity in your parish?

b) Usefulness of resources

When asked about the usefulness of the resources used and how well they meet the needs of Children's Ministry in their parish, 60% of respondents rated them 'very well'; 31% stated the resources were somewhat adequate, with a small number – 3% - remaining neutral. Respondents had the option of answering 'somewhat inadequately' or 'not at all', but no respondent indicated either of these (see **Fig.12**).

Figure 12
How would you assess the usefulness of the resources used?   In other words, how well do the resources meet the needs of Children's Ministry in your parish
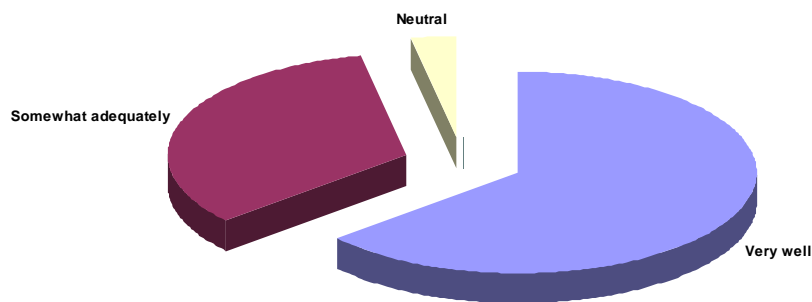
The following comments illustrate:

- Resources are useful, but people need the confidence to adapt them.

- Resources should be constantly re-evaluated and developed.

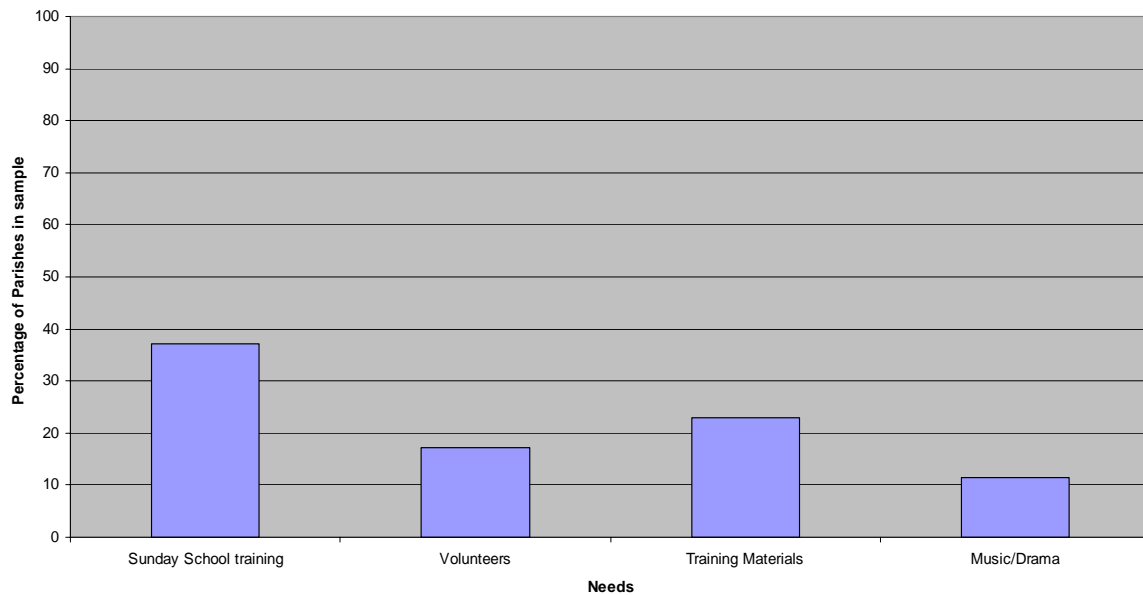Meanwhile, most respondents shared the following sentiments:

> While good materials clearly help, the key [challenge] is not resources-based, rather it is [the need for] people [to be equipped to be involved in Children's Ministry].

> [It doesn't matter what text-based resources you use; if you don't see the children as] people, in terms of relationship; if the kids aren't relating to whoever is delivering it, it's just like relating to a TV screen. You can use [text-based resources] to get things across, but we live in a lack of relationship world. Children are names and personalities.

VII) a) Resource and Training needs

When respondents were asked about the resource and training needs[10] in their parish, 37% indicated a need for adequate leadership training for those involved in Children's Ministry; 23% said they needed more training materials such as workbooks and other training resources for leaders/helpers; 17% said they needed more volunteers; 11% said they would like to enhance the use of music and drama in Children's Ministry (see **Fig.13***).*

Figure 13
What resource, material and/or training needs exist regarding Children's Ministry in your parish?

While a small number of respondents stated that their current arrangements for Children's Ministry were satisfactory, the following comments by rectors are representative of views shared by almost all of the respondents:

> I fear that with one or two noticeable exceptions that resources/training are not major needs. Fundamental is a real spiritual heart for our children and young people. Some present leaders are older and want to hand over. A new generation of Christians is needed from which there may be new leadership.

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[10] See Suggested Action Points on pp.41-46

Our Sunday School teachers are not trained in any way – they are simply well motivated volunteers.

The greatest need is committed volunteers; also training for new leaders recently appointed; although our BB and GFS leaders will receive training through these organisations.

[What we most need] is committed young Christian teachers.

The most important resource is the people who work with the kids. I think the church needs to pay a lot of attention to training the people so that this resource is a good one. The kids in school are looked after by people who are highly trained and have ongoing training. Materials are important as well. But the big gap is that the church does not look at children as a separate group with their own needs and gifts – e.g. children being lumped in with youth. It would be good if the church could provide compulsory training for leaders; to bring greater awareness of the developmental needs of children and give them some skills in responding to pastoral needs too. Quite often kids' pastoral needs are overlooked – 'kids are resilient – divorce or bereavement won't affect them'.

I have never found a confirmation course that meets the needs [of children]; I designed the [course we use] myself.

We lack a definitive Church of Ireland material – much of what we use is good but there is rarely a reference to the church that the kids are in. Even if it's only five minutes per week or fortnight – bit like the BCP for kids. Why do they belong to this church, etc?

It is clear that most respondents see the leaders/helpers as the most important resources in Children's Ministry.   It is evident that both recruitment and training/resourcing of leaders/helpers are key challenges. The fact that many respondents made comments such as 'we need regular meetings of our kids' club leaders', 'we need to share ideas',

Some respondents recognised that children and young people outside the church should also be a focus of Children's Ministry, yet resources were often seen as lacking in this regard:

Youth ministry is limited by the availability of leaders…We need a youth worker to work with those outside the church – we need financial resources for this.

Some examples of other needs include:

We need Sunday School material suitable for small groups of children (4-8) when there is limited space.

Young leaders with fresh approaches to reach the young teen set; ability to play some musical instrument

I perceive the greatest need in this parish for Children's Ministry as being a teacher's handbook for Sunday School which fits the lectionary; teaching children the basis of the faith and moving away from the image of Sunday School as a pious art class.

b) How to meet the needs[11]
Respondents were invited to make suggestions about how best to meet the resource/training needs for Children's Ministry in their parish. 34% suggested training days; 23% proposed resource evenings where leaders/helpers can be made aware of relevant resources; 9%

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[11] See Suggested Action Points on pp.41-46

*suggested appointing a parish youth worker; 6% asked for more training materials to be made available; while 3% said that greater links with other parishes might help (see **Fig.14**).*

Figure 14
Do you have any suggestions about how these needs could be met
on a parish, dicoesan, or wider basis?
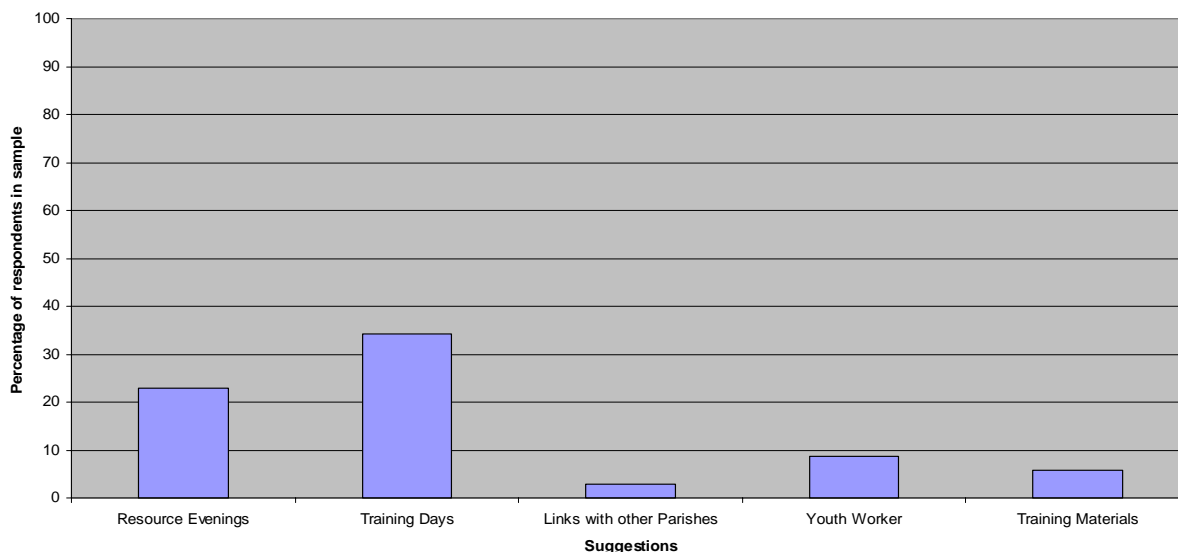
The training and resourcing of Children's Ministry leaders/helpers is self-evidently vital if they are to provide quality ministry. No respondent would disagree with this. However, a key question raised by respondents centres on the nature of how such training/resourcing is offered. In addition to regular (but not too frequent that they become a burden) strategic meetings for leaders/helpers, several broad types of training were suggested, as follows:

> Offer basic training on a diocesan basis; provide material for the different seasons of the church's year to supplement SU or other material would be very helpful.

> Regular short training sessions that can be accessed as and when required; large programmes can be missed due to other commitments.

> [We need] someone or a body that can offer training to parish workers; perhaps developing a recognised training or qualification that allows people to develop skills and have them recognised.

> Our parish had a training event with a Church Army worker; taught us good skills; helping us to think laterally about how we would bring across the gospel to them. It would be beneficial to visit other clubs to see the way they do things – perhaps build twin town relationship with other parish for sharing of ideas.

As for planning all-age worship activities[12]:

> I think the best way to do it is as a group of people – each parish needs to organise all age worship – we had a group of four within a parish who organised a monthly all age worship – one of those people needs to know something about liturgy; some people don't know the structure of a service…you need to adapt to the structure…You also need somebody who has contact with the children, who is working with the children – so that there is a link between the worship in the church and what the children are learning. You need a large amount of

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[12] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46.

participation from children and families in the service; very important to have all age worship not children's worship. It is all age worship – that has to be applied to the singing to the reading and to the sermon. You can do the sermon 3 minutes to the kids, 3 minutes to the adults. The rector doesn't have to do it.

Some respondents stated that the church's duty of care to nurture, support and encourage leaders/helpers is often lacking, and some made suggestions about how to address this:

1: Children's Ministry leaders/helpers often miss corporate worship because their ministry activity takes place at the same time:

> Why do we think children need taught but adults don't; the experience of worship is such a big part of growing in faith? Some have Sunday School separate from church service – probably the best way to do it; why take children out of church services – even the service should be a learning experience for children.

2: The parish does not always find it easy to access adequate training due to lack of skills (perceived or otherwise), or distance from urban centres:

> There is a great need for a qualified 'trainer' at local level, possibly throughout the diocese – available to parishes to train leaders on their home ground. One-off day conferences in Belfast are a help but not sufficient.

3: Lay people involved in Children's Ministry are often unable to make the commitment to travel elsewhere for training events, etc.

> All of the leaders have full time jobs; very unlikely that they would attend a training event elsewhere; but what would work would be if someone came to our parish, even if only for one evening.

> The leaders are an invaluable resource – the main resource that we have is our youth leaders and our – this is a terrible term – Sunday School teachers. We have attempted to have training to help people have confidence to be with young people. When we have held resource evenings they have come from far and wide in the diocese – they are hungry to help children but the training has fallen by the wayside because of time. We whittle down the training to one evening.

> Not a Saturday! Perhaps an evening on a rural deanery/diocesan basis.

4: Some parishes feel isolated and try to generate too much work on their own part:

> I believe that it is vital for Parishes to work within the Deanery structure as opposed to simply being Parish based. Quite possibly many of our Parishes are too small. Also data needs to be held centrally in each diocese rather than in each Parish. In my own case as my main interest is in terms of the teaching & nurturing of the people I am not particularly interested in paperwork. I would quite happily pass on all data to a central diocesan database. Of course Safeguarding Trust data could & SHOULD be passed on rather than simply left in each Parish.

5: Some parishes have offered innovative patterns of leadership, including term limits to Children's Ministry leaders/helpers.

> A relatively common pattern is a kind of time-share – month on, month off, week on, week off; But I have reservations about that – part of what we're trying to do is not simply giving

them information but building relationships and nurturing them – if they don't know who is going to be there from week to week this is very difficult. Perhaps a school term on and term off approach is [a better approach].

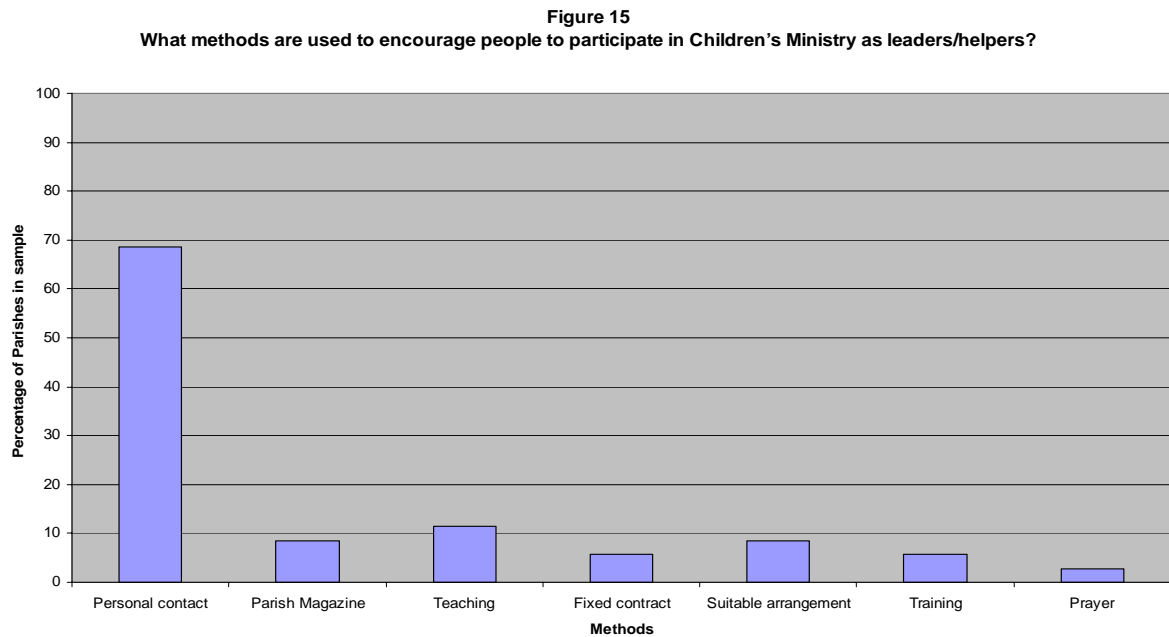We have meetings every term between teams and rector to review recent programme and plan ahead.

6: Some respondents suggest that the communication between Children's Ministry resource agencies and parish leaders is inadequate:

[There should be a] concerted (i.e. spread over time) 'bombardment' of letters, sample materials, etc. underlining the importance (and inexpensive) availability of using Church of Ireland-specific materials, could be (should be?) sent directly to the Sunday School staff (not the rector) and to the staff of <u>each</u> parish, where parishes are grouped. Almost by definition, grouped parishes do not have the financial capability for much photocopying.

7: Training needs to be done in a manageable way:

Most are experienced already; we're trying to encourage them. We need someone who can recognise the skills; training could be done on Sundays, or do it over 2 nights for an hour – there is a tendency to overdo training.

VIII) a) Recruitment methods[13]

Figure 15
What methods are used to encourage people to participate in Children's Ministry as leaders/helpers?

*Respondents were asked to indicate methods used to encourage people to participate in Children's Ministry as leaders/helpers (see **Fig.15**). While a variety of methods are used, 69% of respondents said they mostly used personal approaches with potential participants.*

Respondents stated that they often made personal approaches to potential participants:

- 'Begging and pleading!' as we have a regular turnover of leaders/helpers.

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[13] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46.

- Personal recruitment by Children's Ministry leader in consultation with rector.

- Persuasion by rector & Sunday School Superintendent; backed up by sermons and appeals in parish magazines.

- Highlighting certain individuals and asking them to help for a limited time, e.g. 1-3 years.

- Numerous personal approaches; raised in church notices, AGM, etc. Helpers have been recruited from among parents but these would not often call themselves Christians – this helps keep things going but has not helped the children's work share the vibrancy of relationship with God.

Some respondents indicated that they emphasise the vocational aspects of Children's Ministry and invite parishioners to reflect on their role in the church:

- We teach that every member has a ministry within the church. The church pays for training courses undertaken; church encourages people to serve others both in the church and the wider community.

- This comes primarily from preaching & teaching where people are encourage to offer their gifts to God. Of course this can only come into play as people are given the right vision as opposed to attempting to coerce them to fill the gaps.

- Rector meets with Sunday School teachers; we have prayer for leaders/helpers in church services.

b) Ease/difficulty of recruitment

*Respondents were asked to name the challenges to recruitment of Children's Ministry leaders/helpers: 29% said social context (including lifestyle changes that restrict the time availability for participation, and the perceived complications of child protection legislation and the fear of litigation regarding health and safety issues); 20% said lack of commitment; 14% said behaviour difficulties; 11% said time commitments (see **Fig.16**).*

*As for incentives to participation, 17% of respondents suggested showing enthusiasm; a range of other incentives is outlined in **Fig.17**.*

Figure 16
How easy or difficult is it to recruit helpers/leaders for Children's Ministry?
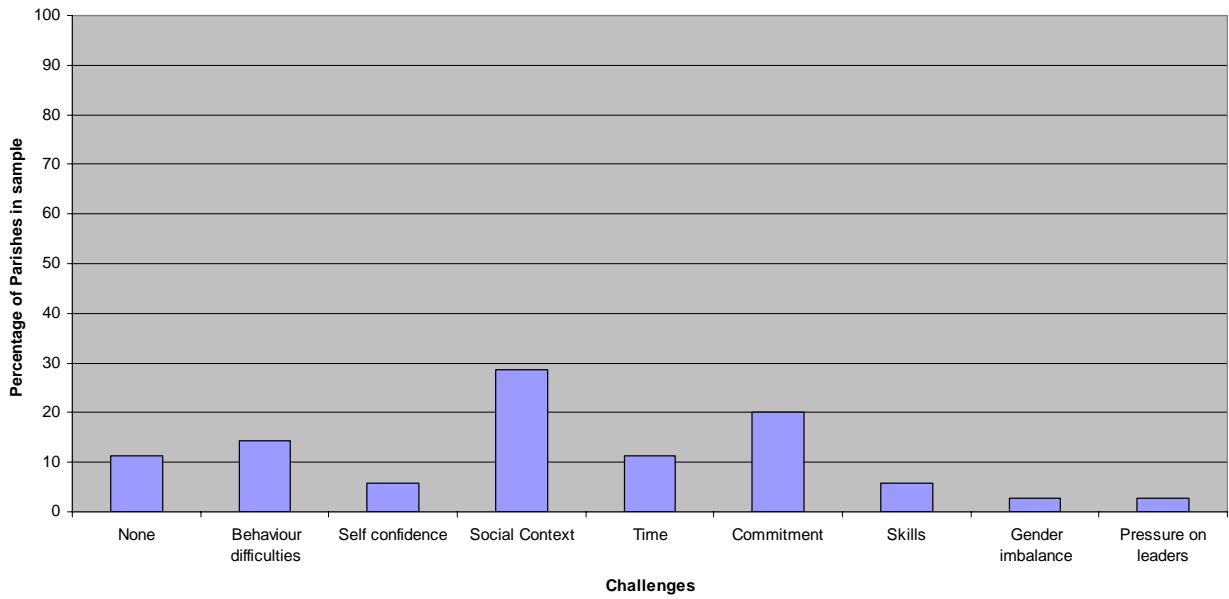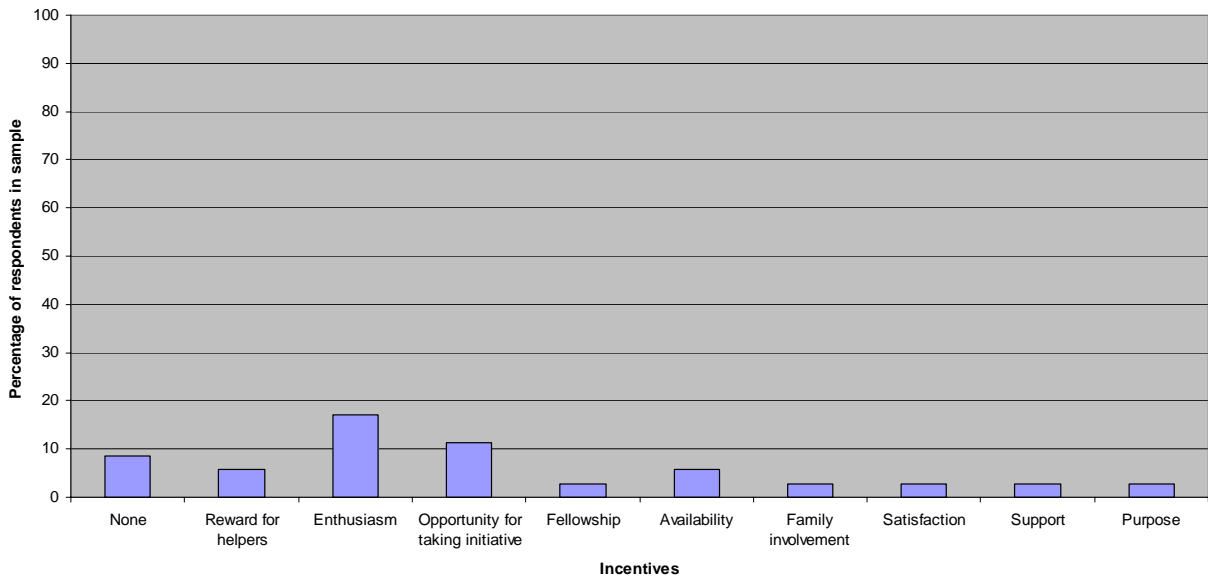**What are the challenges to participation?**

Figure 17
How easy or difficult is it to recruit helpers/leaders for Children's Ministry?
What are the incentives to participation?

The following quotations illustrate that recruitment appears to be easier in four of the parishes that responded to the sample, for instance:

It's reasonabl[y easy] – most people want to help.

There have been very few problems in encouraging people to come into different ministries.

Not too difficult. The biggest incentive is being able to work with other members and your family – benefiting their own children and working alongside their spouses.

Reasonably easy; good support is provided; the organizations have a clear identity and purpose; lots of input to Sunday services.

For the most part, however, recruitment poses significant challenges:

1: In terms of time pressure in lay people's lives, for example:

Terribly difficult. Lack of ownership with all but the uniformed organisations who have recruited from former members, though these are fewer in number. There is concern over commitment and responsibility.

People have other commitments; tend to offer inexperience, lack of ability as an excuse.

Extremely difficult. Becoming more so as the years pass; too busy lifestyle; children involved in numerous school, tutorial and other activities.

2: In terms of perceptions that the process of being child-protection trained is too complicated and time-consuming, so people choose not to volunteer, along with the challenges of behaviour difficulties:

[Some people] claim to find child protection issues too restrictive – although this is often an excuse rather than a genuine concern.

Discipline can sometimes be a problem; Safeguarding Trust, whilst being very necessary can be very off-putting to potential helpers.

[We] also [face] the challenges of working with children who may present behaviour difficulties.

3: In terms of parishioners not recognising either the value of Children's Ministry, or the vocation of all believers to serve in some way.

Very difficult – most volunteers are pressured into their roles. The challenge is to make the congregation aware of their Christian duties and responsibilities. We also need to give 'importance' to Sunday School teaching in terms of status so that it becomes more attractive. We need to reward people in some way rather than taking them for granted…Parental duties are never mentioned in the pulpit in our parish!

Difficult due to the 'climate' and restrictions in society today; enthusiasm from various leaders is very helpful as well as people seeing that something needs to be done to assist young people.

4: In terms of lack of incentive/encouragement to people to volunteer:

Very difficult – no incentives, people do not have time to spare.

Lack of incentives – what about a meal out once a year?

5: In terms of specific generational, gender, or parochial issues:
Impossible to recruit young men; most willing group is young women post-confirmation 15/16 years old and often they don't possess the necessary skills.

One great challenge is to provide men as leaders, firstly to comply with Safeguarding Trust, and secondly to act as role models for boys. Children's Ministry is seen as a female activity.

As we already have a healthy number of leaders/helpers it is difficult to find new/fresh leaders/helpers, as they perceive that they are not needed. Potential problem is the burnout of current leaders/helpers.

Can be difficult to get helpers for older children, or SS Superintendent that sticks at it long enough.

Not that difficult but I would love to have younger people as leaders but they do not exist in the parish.

c) How to raise the profile/increase the perceived value of Children's Ministry[14]

Respondents made the following suggestions for raising the profile/increasing the perceived value of Children's Ministry: 20% personal contact; 17% leader's initiative – i.e. recruitment exercise; 12% diocesan initiative, contracts, encouraging leaders, encouraging parents (see Fig.18).

Figure 18
Do you have any suggestions as to how to raise the profile and increase the perceived value of Children's Ministry?
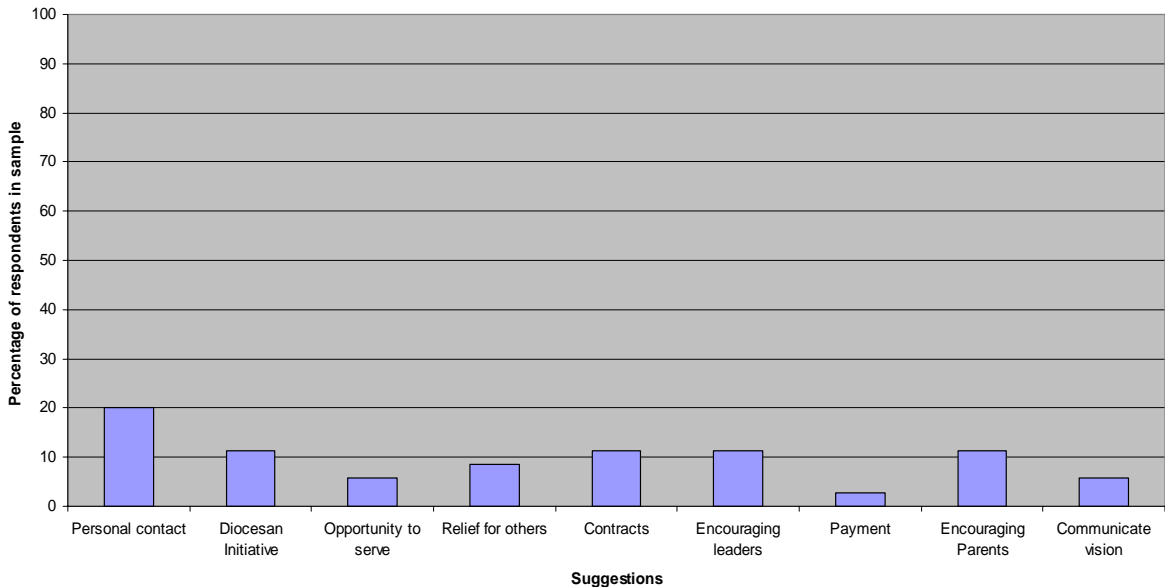
Suggestions for raising the profile and perceived value of Children's Ministry include:

1: Teaching the value of Children's Ministry regularly, and strategising for actively engaging and involving children in corporate worship as part of the whole church in ways that are neither child-exclusive nor patronising:

People need to be reminded how important Children's Ministry is, the traditional Sunday School model days are gone; youth ministry has had a high profile because people can see the need but now is the time to shout about Children's Ministry as the real foundation of faith.

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[14] See Suggested Action Points on pp.41-46.

Too long the message of the church has been in the earliest years that children are secondary in the life of the church. This may not be what we say but it is certainly what is experienced. The real business is what the adults do! I still occasionally hear the saying 'the children are the church of tomorrow'. We have to grasp that they are just as much part of the church today. Our new toddler friendly service in [the parish] hall, which is still too young to evaluate, turns the perception round.

All-age worship on a regular basis – on fifth Sunday combined service followed by parish lunch; parish strategy was written for whole parish, with parallel aims and objectives for kids. Key ideas include outreach to others through biannual open day; work with local schools, etc. Training leaders, etc. Develop ways for kids to participate in the fellowship and ministry of the church – linking aims to practical strategies; looking at additional after-schools provision.

Church needs to move beyond having a 'bit' for children; inclusive all-age worship would be a way of making Children's Ministry something other than a weekday activity.

We now have all age worship – 1 in 4 services the kids stay in. Do we really need Children's Church? I mean, it's important to have space with the kids, and without them…but we get more kids at church when there is no Children's Church on.

We need to tailor the worship to different needs – some kids don't like noisy Sunday Schools, for instance…This is a very welcoming church from [the rector] to the churchwardens.

Fun ways of teaching; we do memory verses in fun ways; if you hammer them too much with in your face Christianity they switch off; we do it in a more subtle way. The church of Ireland service – it would be good to have more freedom for the kids to move about in the service, more music and teaching the kids in an active way. Might be good to get speakers in and different groups to make it more active.

[We need to] encourage the whole church to value this ministry

2: Developing innovative models of time commitment and team work:

Appealing to more people to offer *some* time commitment rather than a few people offering a lot of time. Trying to avoid burnout – give frequent breaks.

My model in my last parish was to encourage leaders to come to one of the other services; we also timetabled the services in such a way that they were in two services a month for the sermon time; and one other Sunday, we did a family type service for the kids to stay in longer to get some teaching together, we encouraged leaders to meet once a term for a fellowship/nurture; encouraging leaders to pray for each other.

Ask for short-term commitments; provide plenty of support, encouragement and training services.

Promise of weekends off with relief leaders; use of Sunday School during the morning service so that they don't have to come to church twice on a Sunday.

Shared ministry/team ministry; more than one teacher/helper per group. Added to this: short term teaching, e.g. one term or half the year with short breaks from ministry. This is available but not always taken up by leaders/helpers.

Teamwork should be the model – a group of individuals who can support and help rather than a few dedicated helpers who soon get tired.

3: A personal approach from enthusiastic leaders and seeking to reduce gender imbalance:

Personal approach; renewed enthusiasm of current leaders/helpers; diocesan-level personal invitation through clergy to leaders to practical events with materials available to assist busy leaders e.g. ready-made handouts.

Shared responsibility – a collaborative effort; approach individuals rather than solely a general announcement; large-scale announcements on their own don't work'

Encouraging men into Children's Ministry could move it away from being viewed as something only women are gifted in. (Since most women's involvement in churches is viewed in terms of essential, but behind the scenes, work – it is important that Children's Ministry is not viewed in this light.)

4: Rewarding the commitment of leaders/helpers:

Find a way to show how offering Children's Ministry can be used to enhance CV for university or other employment.

Pay the youth leaders a regular wage/salary.

Incentives: teaching on discipleship; fixed term contracts; excellent leadership from co-ordinator – encourage, help, thank, value – the sense of being useful.

Award ceremonies for leaders?

The annual meal for leaders is happening; quite often what happens…is I would encourage the parish to take teachers out for a meal – one motive is to get them there [for a training session!]

5: Bring in outside inspiration/short term volunteer teams to rejuvenate Children's Ministry in a parish:

It would be great to have Streetreach from Summer Madness, and provide leaders weekends to help discover and train potential leaders.

6: Recognise that parents, the rector, and other parishioners have a role in nurturing Children's Ministry:

Give lots of time to it; meet leaders regularly; go to their events as much as possible. Have a clear list of 'who's who' available to parents and families; include their work at Sunday services; publicise and promote them in central blurb.

Support of parents – children learn from example and if mum and dad are keen then the kids will probably follow suit.

Parents need to tell kids to treat the leaders well…People should be admired.

Church of Ireland gets too much of a name of being a place where kids are seen and not heard. A child-friendly atmosphere depends on the older people or the rector.

7: Focus on special times of year as opportunities to champion Children's Ministry, and develop better communication.

I favour the continuous use of 'festival presentations' in church i.e. 10 minute spots in public worship at/on harvest/all saints/Christmas/lent/mothering Sunday, etc.; an easily available

selection of short programmes/presentations and ideas to the above end would be useful; teachers are always running ragged trying to find new ideas, and they nearly always think that any presentation worth its salt has to be a 'major production', disrupting regular classes for weeks. This is not necessarily so…Perhaps some kind of 'we tried this and it worked' shared regular communication around the leaders might help.

8: There is an appetite for 'joined-up' thinking re: Children's Ministry as part of the whole church, as the following comments, several from parents, illustrate:

We would be able to keep nurture of our kids going during the week if we knew in advance what the Sunday School was going to teach…it would be useful to be able to see the workbook. Don't teach them memory verses like the times table.

It's an awful pressure taking kids to church [because of the reactions of other people]…[And the kids sometimes say] 'Do I have to go?' [We'd like to have reasons to be able to say something other than] 'It's only an hour, for goodness' sake'

You need to be sure you've enough deodorant on a Sunday morning [because of the pressure from others for my kids to be quiet]! And let kids wear slippers in church!

9: Some respondents indicated that Children's Ministry presents many challenges, and that they are looking to the outcome of the process of which this report is part for inspiration and help:

I would be interested in hearing about some ideas (this is why the report needs to be published)

10: Finally, although, as with much research of this nature, respondents tend to focus on 'technical' or practical responses, the sense of obedience to the call of God was indicated on a number of occasions, for instance:

If the vision is properly explained & maintained…Of course ultimately it has to be the work of the Holy Spirit.

IX) Factors influencing sending children to Church of Ireland Children's Ministry

Respondents named the following factors as those influencing parents to send their children to Children's Ministry activities in the Church of Ireland: 89% family connections; 63% invitation from friend; 57% invited by rector; 49% parish is nearest church, quality of Children's Ministry; 29% parents.

Figure 19
What factors do you think influence the decision to send or not to send a child to a Church of Ireland ministry?
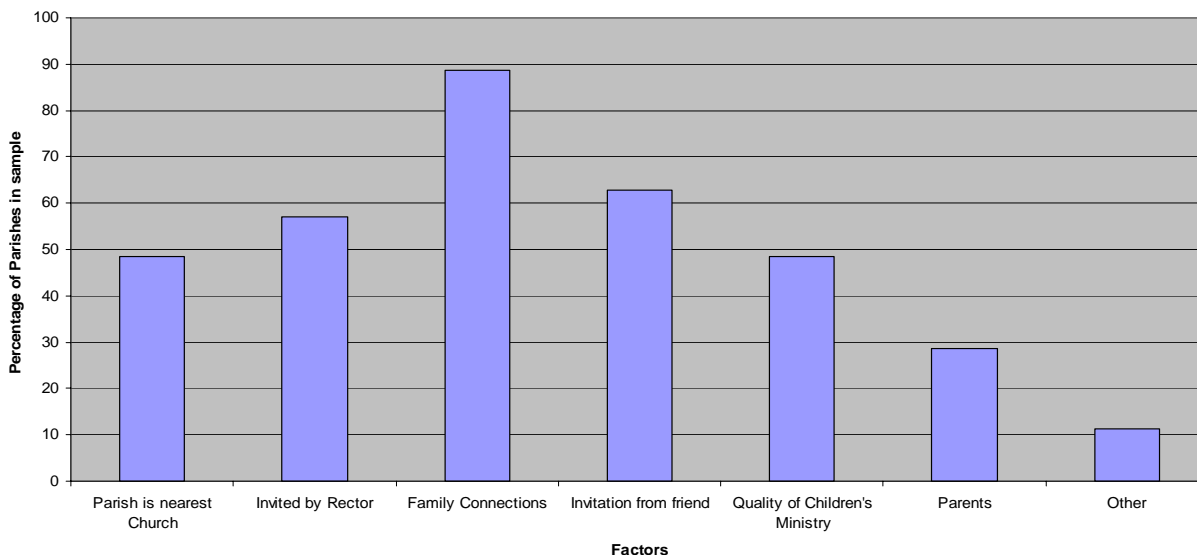
It is important to note that while some of these factors are immutable – such as location of the parish, historic family connections, several factors can indeed be nurtured and developed as part of encouraging people to send their children to Church of Ireland ministries. The following quotations are illustrative:

> Children inviting their friends have an influence that has brought their families along (another reason why kids' ministry is important). A lot will depend on the parish and how child-friendly it is perceived to be; this will include whether or not children are made to feel welcome and a part of the worship.

> Good child minding or a convenient time to drop off and pick up children. If we are seen to be a good baby sitting service we do well.

> Whether there is anything 'better' on, e.g. line dancing/football.

> Perceived quality of Children's Ministry carries at least as much weight as 'family connections'.

> In this part of rural Fermanagh the church is the provider of most children's social life.

> Youthfulness and attractiveness of the ministry's leaders; the liveliness/interests/sport connections of the ministry are important.

Disincentives to attend include the following:

> If the Church is NOT seemed to be relevant to society then children may NOT wish to attend. We MUST seek to feed their Spiritual hunger by giving them a Spiritual PASSION.

> Simple demographic decline in the numbers of children in church-going families and the number of young families attending church; to a lesser extent the often inappropriate formality of worship which fails to engage such families.

X) Role of other bodies

Respondents were asked to make suggestions about what other bodies could do to assist the development of Children's Ministry:

Board of Education
Suggestions for the Board of Education focused on two areas generally: providing a pool of resources for Children's Ministry, and providing funding for training at a local level.

- My previous diocese [in England] had a youth and children's library of resources. This was not just books – it included parachutes, earth balls, DVDs, projector. Youth leaders could pop in and book resources in advance for work or a weekend etc. We will shortly have a visit from the local primary school as part of their curriculum; what about a resource pack for churches receiving schools, with sample work sheets, etc? It would help churches build relationships with schools, and the needs would not vary much from parish to parish.

- Resource material not more conferences. Except for the very enthusiastic most are too busy.

- Well-produced multimedia presentations with associated resources; tie into SU themes to support syllabus.

- Training for leadership at parish level - the Children's Ministry conference is an excellent resource.

- Training for non-professional teachers, especially post-confirmation classes.

- Training events have been very beneficial; local area training might have a place; also information sheets on current issues and best practice.

- Teaching of new leaders; re-inspiring/re-training of one-time leaders who perhaps because of marriage gave up.

- Financial support for the creation of a team of 'Travelling Trainers'

Missionary Societies
Respondents suggested that missionary societies can help broaden the perspective of children and inspire them:

- Child-friendly resources to explain the work and to help kids connect with the lives of those overseas.

- Points of contact and encouragement of families.

- Missionary links that are captivating can only enhance the work of Children's Ministry. These links would often be best if they speak of children in other places of a similar age. Where possible video taped interview would be very helpful; anything visual and as personal as possible!

- Most now have youth workers and offer projects suitable for use with children. These are great resources well worth promoting.

- Young at heart missionaries on furlough can bring remarkable inspiration to children and young people.

Mothers' Union

The Mothers' Union is well thought of by respondents, many of whom are eager for it to play a fuller role in supporting Children's Ministry. Suggestions for such a role focused on nurturing parenting, and involvement as leaders/helpers:

- A more active approach to providing assistance with parenting

- Parenting courses stressing children's and youth participation in child-based activities and the value of these ministries will help.

- Provide crèche facilities for very young children to enable parents to accompany older siblings to church.

- Should help organise family services and provide more outreach to younger families.

It was suggested by some respondents that the MU perhaps needed to be encouraged to devote more strategic energy to Children's Ministry:

- In theory it should do a lot given its aims and objectives; however these seem to fail to be 'lived out' at parish level due to priorities of local branch.

- The link should be developed – MU needs to have a much higher profile among parents of primary school age children, but as an organisation it could have so much to offer.

Finally, some respondents expressed hope that the valuable work of the Mothers' Union would be recognised as relevant for this generation:

- Reduce the perception of members needing to be grandmothers; prepare material with reference to establishing young wives' groups.

- Members can of course encourage their children/grandchildren to attend and lead by example.

Others

Other bodies were also mentioned as having a potential role in Children's Ministry. Suggestions included the following:

- Sunday School Society providing training.

- Care for the Family – offers a number of useful pieces of work including heritage builders developing faith in the home, drugs awareness training; parenting course, and support for parent-toddler groups including day conferences and resources.

- Link with organisations like Alliance Youth Works that provide resources, training and interesting and dynamic activities for children and young people.

- Could the Church of Ireland produce some really high quality materials and resources that help Sunday School children grow in their understanding of membership of the Church of Ireland – perhaps to be used alongside other materials?

- Why not ask the bishop to make a short family video – bishop = unity = corporate church?

- Financial relief/grants from church bodies for capital projects and parochial ministry among the young which assists in creating better parochial facilities.

XI) Salaried Post[15]

*Respondents were asked if they thought it would be useful for the Board of Education to create a salaried post dedicated to resourcing Children's Ministry; the results are shown in **Fig.20** below:*

Figure 20
Do you think it would be useful for the Board of Education (NI) to have a salaried post dedicated to resourcing Children's Ministry?
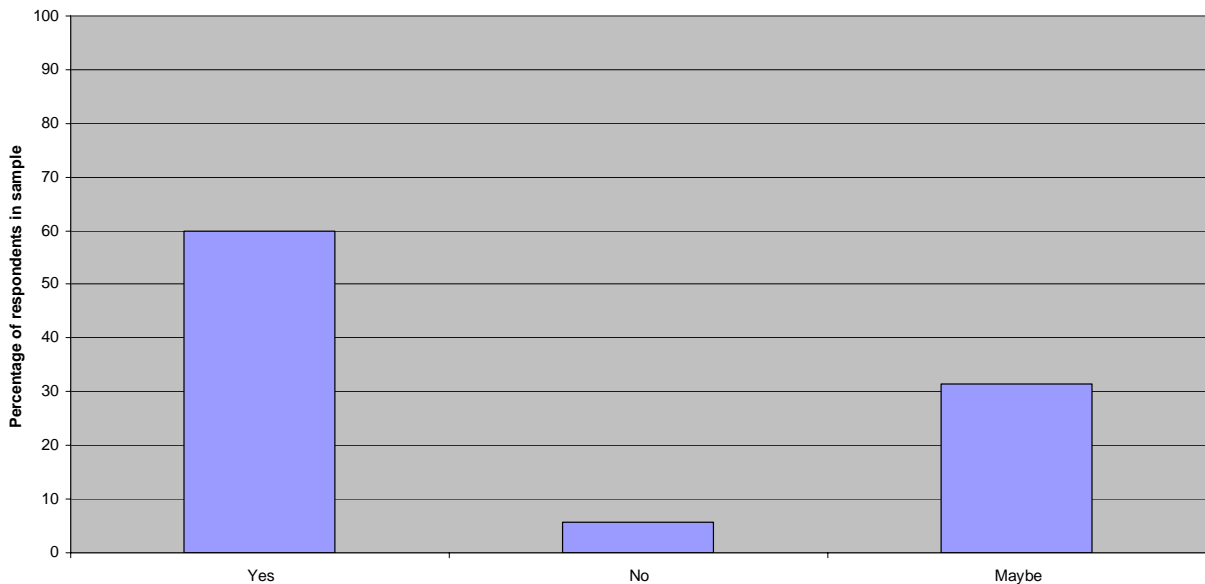
While 60% answered 'Yes', 31% 'Maybe', and 6% 'No', it is clear that the vast majority of respondents see a need for a salaried post to resource Children's Ministry, but many felt that any holder of such a post would be spread too thin if appointed at the national level, rather than on a diocesan basis. Quotations below are grouped according to whether the response was immediately positive, in favour with reservations, or immediately negative – although there is some overlap of opinion within the comments.

Those answering 'Yes':

- Most definitely – the more resources available the better.

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[15] See Suggested Action Point on pp.41-46.

- A very good idea – I would fully back that.

- Preferably with suitable qualification – e.g. clergy or teaching experience.

- Yes – someone to train leaders, not someone to produce resource material, plenty of which is already available.

- [We need] dozens!

- We should develop a team of travelling trainers.

- If a competent person with a passion for children and a passion to teach the bible to them could be appointed.

- With research/vocation and dedication something useful and lasting could be the outcome.

Those in favour, with reservations:

- If the person co-ordinated training/resources/handling problems [I would agree] – but no one person could do that across the whole of Northern Ireland.

- A number of organisations do this kind of work already – but there is inadequate awareness of these – there needs to be a public relations exercise. When we ask people why they want to create such posts it often seems that they haven't been thought-through strategically. I wouldn't be opposed to it, but it needs to be meeting a need.

- A post spread very thin is no good. I'm not sure there is a need for a post – although a post that would create resources that help local people relate to kids might be useful. A lot of people are nervous of resources that were developed elsewhere – but something that's based and developed in the Church of Ireland could be useful. Church of Ireland needs to produce its own resources, but too often it leaves the creativity to others.

- Not a resource person – there are too many resources. Find a *leader* who can visit, encourage and pastor existing workers. Children's work is very different to youth work.

- Only if the person would actually visit Sunday Schools every Sunday…If an advisor is appointed I feel that the primary responsibility should be to visit [and take] Sunday Schools and not to be a trainer of Sunday School teachers as a primary responsibility. The SS teachers will gain most in terms of encouragement and training by seeing a specialist in action with their own Sunday School children.

- I am not convinced that all-Ireland *(sic)* input is remotely effective at a very local parish level; diocesan efforts sometimes work. In western NI, Belfast-based events and initiatives are too urban and far away; there needs to be a localisation of support, even at a rural deanery level. I am strongly opposed to individuals having the impossible task of promoting at a national level. There should be more funding available for each diocese to do its own resourcing.

- In our small church we have often wanted to have a special youth day/event but feel we lack the expertise, resources, etc. A salaried post could perhaps help out in this case – organizing a day/event around a theme, bringing in music, speakers, etc.

- Yes, but the youth department has officers employed in a similar role; in over nine years of ordained ministry in three dioceses I have only seen *one*, who attended [a] diocesan synod but could not stay to answer questions. How you solve the problem of isolated parishes in the West obtaining what they help pay for must be a factor in any post.

Those answering 'No':

- [I would prefer to see someone appointed at] diocesan level, part time with closer links to situations and people.

- No one salaried [post-holder] could be in every parish where they need a pair of hands to help.

- The problem is lack of helpers [in the parish]; I don't see how a salaried person from outside would be more successful in persuading people in this age to volunteer.

XII) Challenges to Children's Ministry

*In response to a question about the challenges facing contemporary Children's Ministry, the following were suggested (see **Fig.21**):*

71% behaviour of children; 60% lack of awareness of the importance of Children's Ministry; 49% lack of children in church; 49% lack of human resources; 43% peer pressure on kids; 40% training needs; 34% motivation of leaders; 29% parents working; 26% financial costs; 23% lack of parental support.

Figure 21
What are the most significant challenges to Children's Ministry?
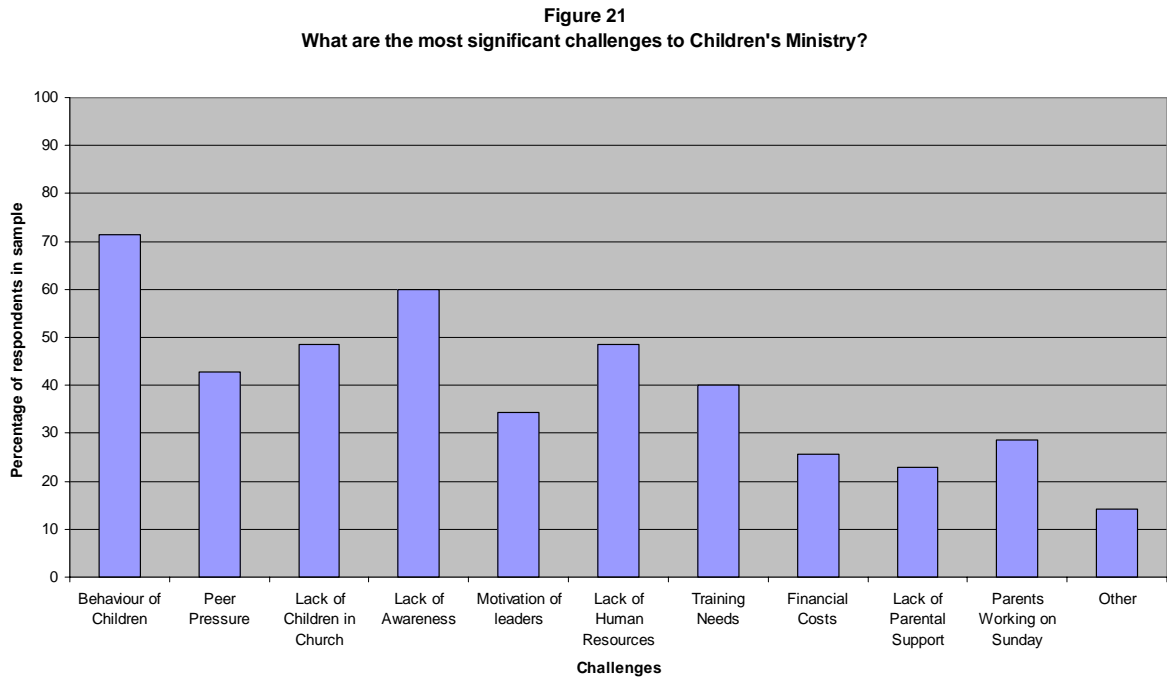
1: Training of leaders/helpers:

The importance of training (even basic) needs promoted.

It is ridiculous that there has often been no practical training for rectors to engage with young people and children…[Three years of academic training followed by a curacy is not practical].

2: Financial costs of Children's Ministry:

Some parishes still do not give a realistic budget to Children's Ministry; proper courses cost money.

3: Lack of parental support:

Numerous families locally are away many weekends from Easter to September with caravans. Children's work is finishing earlier and earlier – our Sunday School now stops at the end of May...Kids may want to come along but will not feel part of a group if they are consistently missing.

Plenty of parents in the community won't bring their children; if children live within walking distance they come on their own.

Ignorance of parents of how to raise children (nuclear family: no grandparental influence). How many parents ever read a book upon how to bring up their children? To my shame, how often does the church teach parents on this? (But how many are interested?)

I think for me personally Children's Ministry is basically the responsibility of parents in the church – the parents are responsible for the faith nurture of their children; they must be involved in the teaching in the church. There should always be rotas, with at least two adults with each group of children; month on, month off, etc. Preferably they need to be trained; perhaps mentored as a helper with an experienced person.

Parents don't really know the children's leaders. Leaders want the relationship with the parents…Could we draw up a 'Children's Charter' and perhaps provide a copy of programme or curriculum for parents? Perhaps do a Sunday School for parents? Do the senior leaders such as bishops visit the children's leaders when they come to the parish?

4: Cultural ir/relevance:

In [my parish's] inner city working class culture, we have to find new ways of operating. The inherited model of Sunday School is dying – for lack of leaders and lack of kids. Sunday School in the mornings is out of touch with our culture while other times raise other difficulties and questions. The Sunday School model was not initially designed for non-church children yet that is where we find ourselves. Virtually all non Church of Ireland churches have Sunday Schools in the afternoon while some may be well attended their value to the long term future of church can be questioned. Many act as a babysitting service. Few really touch parents in any real way – another generation of kids will grow up opting out of church when they feel too old for Sunday School, unable to relate to anything that the older church provides.

Is Sunday School lacking in something? What is wrong that kids are leaving the church? How can the gap be bridged? Kids have too much choice and Sunday School is too much like school. We need to use practical ways of helping kids encounter the bible rather than simply teaching 'bible facts' as if they were the times table…If they concentrated on fellowship and worship in their own way…

The training [for leaders and helpers] should involved not just the necessities, but child development and what is appropriate to different ages [and personality types]. Christianity is caught not taught, and we need to get away from the teacher-pupil model to the pilgrim church model where we are all on a journey together, and sometimes the children are way out in the front.

5: Behaviour challenges[16]:

Behaviour of children – traditional methods of ministry do nothing to assist the encouragement of good behaviour. They tend to leave children bored and restricted, creating space for challenging behaviour. Leaders need to be trained in positive behaviour management and what are acceptable ways of dealing with difficult behaviour.

Health and safety, children's demands, expectations, and lack of self-discipline are growing problems; many adults will not now help due to these growing problems. Compensation culture, etc.

6: Volunteer recruitment/availability:

Availability of leaders is the primary problem – late teens are working on Sundays; students may be away from home; 20s/30s are working or sleeping off the night before. Older people feel they no longer understand today's children!
Also, Sunday School programmes need to be high quality in order to compete with sport/TV.

Recruitment – the issue is to with commitment and lifestyle change – a regular attendee comes to church two Sundays, has a Sunday away at a granny's, and another Sunday off. People are tied down with deadlines and their own work and do not want that same tie down at the weekends. They'll be supportive of sending their kids and financing things, but when it comes to raising their hands and taking part this is more difficult.

7: Social pressure on children not to participate:

Materialism and values based problems. Peer pressure; it is very difficult to get over that – Christians still have the reputation of being spotty, nerdish, but we face the challenge of helping kids to see that being a Christian is cool. Keeping kids interested – so that things don't get mundane and boring. They get bored easily if they have to sit down for too long – use different angles to look at things. Good to get them to participate.

Church is not seen as cool.

8: Lack of strategy/skill among clergy, and the difficulties associated with change in the church:

For churches to develop a strategy for the kids' ministry – it's surprising how many parishes don't actually know what they want to do with the kids. The congregation don't feel that they have any part in the aims; they think of Children's Ministry narrowly as Sunday School – there's no sense of joined up ministry – we need the whole church to develop ministry that everybody feels they have a part in.

The intransigence of [some] rectors – I've been gob-smacked having organised a diocesan event for young people [at the low response] – only 11 out of 87 Sunday Schools responded.

We cannot sustain all 3 uniformed organisations on our current numbers yet there is an expectation from parents that they will continue (also an expectation from the diocese!) Our inability to appoint Sunday School teachers is a very worrying sign. Sorry if this seems negative – it probably reflects my own growing frustration at the gap between vision and reality.

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[16] We are not referring here exclusively to what are technically known as 'behavioural difficulties', although it is important that Children's Ministry leaders are aware of the needs of specific children in this regard.

One parish has a 10.30am Sunday School, followed by 11.45 service – kids are bored rigid – why bring kids into an adult service? And teachers say they [regret] miss[ing] the service.

There are no crèche facilities [in our parish] – even though we have lots of new families.

I do not think I am the best person to work with children; with the best resources in the world we still can't do the job without committed people; we are struggling to find the right people after some in Sunday School have recently left.

XIII) Dreams and Visions for the future

The 'dreams for the future' expressed by respondents can be summarised as a desire that:
- *The Church of Ireland parish would become an intergenerational community of faith, whose consistent activity includes to*
- *Develop and implement strategic vision for the full inclusion and engagement of children in the life of the church*
- *As participants in culturally relevant activities that make use of high quality leaders and helpers*
- *Who are trained, encouraged, and rewarded for their work*
- *And that children would also come to be seen as vessels through whom God works.*

Some quotations follow to illustrate and inspire:

1: The spiritual, social, and psychological development of children:

The church's primary aim for children is their spiritual development; that they should come to worship know and love God in word and sacrament and through personal prayer in pilgrimage with other Christians, in ways suitable to their age, culture and stage of faith. We must constantly ask and review:
How the church helps children to have an encounter with the living God
The information that children need for their basic Christian formation
How the church helps children face the implications of being a Christian in everyday life
How the church equips the children for the their faith journey
How Children's Ministry helps the church.

Effective Children's Ministry can offer children support, equipping and skills to cope with the challenges of life in the 21st century. It can also support the building of Christian values in children and young people that will shape the choices they make in later life. It can help children feel a valued and accepted part of the church and society. My vision for Children's Ministry is that it would become a valuable and effective tool in building an effective and relevant church in the future.

2: The development of each parish as an inter-generational community of faith:

[I want to see] children being regarded as fully part of the parish family which children themselves experience because of the attitude of the whole parish and proper resources and training becoming the norm.

Children and young parents need to articulate their relationship with God in a meaningful environment that is real for them.

A church with children as leaders not listeners. We need to move away from children being an 'add-on' to children being a 'part-of'. We should not simply see our role as 'trainers of children' but rather children as a contributing factor of church life.

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Continuity – leading kids into 'shadow' ministry immediately post-confirmation; encourage current teachers/helpers to take apprentices and disciple them in the job.

Children are drawn to the lives of those they admire; the substance and delivery of expressions of Christian faith that appeal to them. We also need to underline the fact that ministry happens everywhere – church, home, school. – need joined up thinking between Sunday School, church, home. See children as a resource too – ministry happens in several directions – between kids and adults

Linking ministry between baptism and Sunday School with a meaningful strategy – not just a babysitting service. What would Jesus do? Answer: Clear out of the way the obstacles in the way of children getting to him. The key is in the home – need to put far greater resources into supporting parents.

3: Connecting Children's Ministry with ministry to parents:

I believe that the battle to win children with parents has to be tackled from birth. Beyond the baptism day the local church presently is seen as either irrelevant or an impossible option for those with babies. It's a huge step for churchgoers and simply too big non-church attendees. My vision is that as the parents delight in their new children, looking upon them as the most important things in their lives, the church is able to say the same thing by the way we respond! Catching hold of the miracle of birth we seek to accompany one another on a journey of faith with emphasis both on:

Faith in the home and faith in the church…As new parents see their child as the most important thing in their lives: Our new service [for parents and children] seriously announces SO DO WE! In the future I hope that faith in parents will be ignited through our emphasis on young children. To include things like: Baptism Preparation that looks creatively at practical faith in the home e.g. praying with your child, bible reading, celebrating festivals as well as looking at how the church will help parents and children in the baptism promises beyond the day. Some of this to also be included baptism anniversary cards. One off events to look at faith in the home celebrating LENT & EASTER and CHRISTMAS. Emphasis on the whole person not just faith through parenting workshops / course, parent toddler groups. I am aware of many weaknesses in this vision. It simply seeks to start with where we are, however imperfect and undesirable. What lies beyond this is unclear. How do we continue to take parents with us as the children reach School ages? What model of ministry will then fit? As with any church-planting situation we will have to change and adapt to continue the journey.

4: Some less tangible hopes:

That church would be seen as the best hour of the week.

Focus more on spiritual needs than technique.

Raise a new generation with leadership skills not blinkered by old concepts

That Christianity would be portrayed in the mass media as a lifestyle of choice for many young people. Obviously we would all like vast budgets etc but our dreams and visions are that those we come in contact with will find a personal faith.

5: Some tangible hopes:

Equipment: that there would be no church without Power Point!

Put examples of good practice on a website; share successes.

XIV) 3 tangible hopes:

Respondents were invited at the end of the questionnaire to name three tangible hopes for the future of Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland. These are listed below without edits (except in the case of repetition) in order to show the unity in diversity of the responses to this research, and the fact that, in conclusion: it is universally agreed by the respondents to this research that children should be valued as full members of the church family, and are eager to see substantial resources invested in Children's Ministry as a matter of priority.

- Children's Ministry needs broadened; clergy need to provide child-friendly worship at least once a month

- Full participation of children and young people in all Sunday services
- Child-friendly but not childish worship.
- Church SEEN as important to all aspects of life.

- Deanery youth-work which, though small recognises the need for churches to work together if we are to survive.

- Mobilise more people to take an active role in Children's Ministry.
- To have children's contributions to our church viewed as being of equal value and importance as that of adults.
- That Children's Ministry reaches out beyond the church family and is effective with children who have no church connections.

- Church of Ireland-based courses for Children's Ministry linked to our worship.
- Use of post-confirmation young people in helping in ministry.
- Rotas to spread the work for helpers/leaders.

- A rector and select vestry with a passion for young people!
- We need people specially gifted and trained in the ministry to young people – perhaps externally qualified, perhaps properly paid. Developing the work among young people is where the church's future lies.

- Continuity of ministry – involvement from early years on.
- Integration of relationships: so that what children offer in worship is shared over the generations so that children learn that Christianity is not just for childhood.
- A sharing of gifts between children and adults.

- Outreach beyond the regular faithful parishioners to fringe members and the unchurched.

- That kids' ministry would not be seen as something separate from the life of the worshipping community, as our agenda is to build all-age church.
- That children and young people would be seen as having a ministry to the church as well as being recipients of it.

- A recognition that children deserve our best; that we'd be willing to put our money where our mouth is. Most churches spent less than 1% of their total budget on Children's Ministry (anecdotal but I reckon it's true). Some parishes use black and white photocopies of dated courses. People don't even know that there is a budget for these things.
- That we would have a proper discipleship programme in place for the church as a whole – that leaders would be discipled so they can then effectively disciple children.

- A more comprehensive and realistic programme for confirmation candidates.

- More use made of the children's opinions; i.e. a children's forum

- We need to find ways for liturgy to engage people rather than for liturgy to be simply 'done'. The congregation aren't the audience – God is. When we create this perception, this changes the perspective and attitude of the people.

- I would engage in creating parish homes rather than parish halls – not as functional buildings, but more comfortable, more relaxed atmosphere.

- We need to look at what is being done in primary schools in terms of key stages – how learning is done; seeing how kids learn and participate at high levels at schools – yet in church we neither expect it from them nor give them the opportunity. Maybe this is down to resources. The magic wand would be to acknowledge that children today are different to before – my child can go onto the internet, find the maths things he's looking for – we're no longer feeding them in ordinary life, but church is too often spoon feeding.

- We should move away from [the idea of Sunday] school – it's not how people learn anymore. It's a bad model because it assumes that adults have the answers.

- I would like to see the kids wanting to stay with the church, be part of it, get involved with it; I think it's more difficult post-confirmation when they're more vulnerable to outside influences, and being able to sustain their beliefs.
- I would also like better facilities – a more low-key, coffee bar facility would be great, but we make do with what we have.

- Finding some way to inspire the leaders. All the other problems would melt away if we could inspire the leaders that they could feel and see that they were making a difference.
- Parents don't always help with this. Confirmation is seen as a passing out parade. They are making a difference but they don't always see it. They need to see the parents take the kids to church (in parishes where Sunday School takes place at another time to the service).

- Most of us do better in any role when we're being affirmed.
- I would like to see a higher standard with the 'children's slot' in Sunday services.
- Change the way children are received into the church – every parish member should be made more aware of the kids; they are not the church of tomorrow, we are all the church of today. I admire the slogan 'Think Again' – we need a slogan like 'Think Children'.

- The leaders must have training. It would be great if we could produce a lovely package to help with this. To go out and encourage them, let them see that they *can* do it.
- Generate enthusiasm amongst parishioners – this is working very well at the moment, long may it continue
- Resources – we want to use the resources available – wisely!
- Building on what has been established in recent years.

- Children's desire to go on with church and Christ
- Sound knowledge base of Bible in children
- Joyful, safe, and relevant activities for children in their culture.
- I believe the most effective evangelistic opportunity for the church is the discipling of young people. This is best achieved after a foundation of 14 years of good Children's Ministry. Secular education is consistent from 3yrs – 18yrs; church discipleship should be nothing less than this: crèche – Sunday School – 'pathfinders' – youth fellowship – adult disciples.

- A youth and family worker to enthuse and encourage children and youth ministry.

- Youth/children's worship in Sunday School and church.

- The appointment of a few new BB & GFS leaders gives some cause for hope.

- To be seen as something worthwhile in the community.
- Children growing up in faith, seeing this as relevant to them.

- Children who truly believe and love and obey Jesus.
- Confirming children who are true believers.
- That these young people will become active working playing responsible Christians – enjoying prayer, the bible, people, life, God!

- More adult Sunday School teachers.
- Visitors from other bodies to provide inspiration.
- Someone to play musical instruments in Sunday School.

- To give children a clear sense of their place in the family of faith.
- To give children a sense of the value of adults and older members of the church.
- To help children enjoy the vibrancy of church and be able to grow in their own Christian life.

- Development of a sense of belonging.

- That Children's Ministry in this parish will be sustainable.
- That the necessary help will be available.
- That young parents will see the need to bring up their children within a Christian ethos.

- Children present in church services with at least part of the worship suitable for their age group.
- Children being taught the bible in an exciting relevant way.

- More modern resources.

- That older folk appreciate the need to serve and meet youth needs.

- Growth of young families coming to church.
- Vision being caught by the church leadership.
- Increasing enthusiasm in the church for children.

- Establishment of a 'faith friends' group for those coming to confirmation age in the parish – that other young adults can demonstrate faith alive.
- Youth vestry.
- Refurbished sports hall.

- I would make it more fun.

ANALYSIS, SUGGESTED ACTION POINTS AND CONCLUSION

The process of researching and writing this report has been fascinating and enriching. It is evident that the Church of Ireland carries out a huge amount of Children's Ministry activity; this work is vital, especially as the churches remain the largest voluntary sector agencies in the UK and Ireland. In the midst of this, there are difficult stories being told – including the problems of recruitment and training, and challenging local situations, for instance one parish that finds itself with no young leaders, and the apparently widespread challenges facing children of clergy who may often feel that they neither fit into children's and youth ministry nor find it easy to be 'on public display' or nurtured in their parent's work environment[17].

It seems entirely appropriate to acknowledge that it is obvious, to the consultants at least, that there are some genuinely amazing people in the Church of Ireland, who are seeking to grasp how important it is to engage with children on their own terms, in language and culture they can understand, in order to nurture their spiritual, emotional, psychological and social development. More than that, the fact that some respondents are beginning to advocate the renaissance of a truly inter-generational church is a sign of hope. It should of course also be borne in mind that many people have been involved as leaders for a very long time and deserve our respect, thanks, and we need to listen to them.

In the introduction to her compelling book, 'Post-modern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century', Ivy Beckwith states:

> The church's ministry to children is broken. A cursory look doesn't reveal its brokenness. From the outside Children's Ministry looks healthier than ever. But it is broken. It's broken when church leaders…see Children's Ministry primarily as a marketing tool. The church with the most outwardly attractive program wins the children and then the parents. It's broken when we teach children the Bible as if it were just another book of moral fables or stories of great heroes. Something's broken when we trivialise God to our children. It's broken when we exclude children from perhaps the most important of community activities: worship. It's broken because we've become dependent on an 18th-century schooling model, forgetting that much of a child's spiritual formation is affective, active, and intuitive. It's broken when we depend on our programs and our curriculum to introduce our children to God – not our families and communities. It's broken when we've come to believe that church has to be something other than church to be attractive to children. It's broken when we spend lots of money making our churches into play-lands and entice children to God through food fights and baptisms in the back of fire trucks. And perhaps most importantly, it's broken when the church tells parents that its programs can spiritually nurture their children better than they can. By doing this, we've lied to parents and allowed them to abdicate their responsibility to spiritually form their children. A church program can't spiritually form a child, but a family living in an intergenerational community of faith can. Our care for our children is broken and badly in need of repair. Let's imagine together a new way, a new future. (Zondervan, 2004: pp.13-14)

While perhaps not every comment here is applicable to churches in the Northern Irish context, where post-modern norms are still taking shape, much of what Beckwith says is a trenchant analysis of the heart of the challenge facing Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland. In

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[17] It is clear that some form of assistance should be offered to clergy to help address the particular challenges of parenting in a parish situation where clergy children will have high expectations placed on them and may feel 'under the spotlight'. Concurrently, it is clear that clergy children have as much need to be helped to deal with the peculiarities of having clergy for parents as vice versa! While this may sound facetious, the challenges of clergy families have been mentioned anecdotally on enough occasions to warrant some kind of sensitive pastoral response, without wishing to create a hierarchy of children in the church.

concluding this report, we are aware that while practical information on needs facing Children's Ministry is useful, it will take more than programmes and employees to meet the needs of a new age in human history, where so many of the practices and models most adults are used to now mean little or nothing to our children. There is a cultural shift under way that the church must respond to as a matter of urgency if it is to continue to nurture young generations of the church family. Yet what seems like a crisis is in fact much more of an exciting opportunity – and the church has the tools to address it. To elaborate, this report concludes by revisiting some comments made by children in the course of the research. These comments may seem pessimistic, but in reality they simply reflect the experience of the 'clients' of a form of ministry struggling to break free from an old paradigm[18] or worldview that no longer fits, whose leaders have admirable motives, but perhaps not yet the 'map' for the way ahead. A new paradigm for Children's Ministry will not seek to undermine what has gone before, but to find ways to translate the values of Christian nurture and discipleship into ways that are interpretable by today's children. The following points may themselves be seen as providing the template for the characteristics of Children's Ministry in a post-modern age. For instance:

1. When asked what they had learned in Sunday School the children could name Biblical stories or passages they had memorized but could say little of what life lessons or values they had been taught. None of them said they thought the things they learned in church helped them in their day-to-day lives.

A new paradigm for Children's Ministry might suggest that the teaching of Children's Ministry should be structured around the teaching of Christian values rather than biblical 'facts' i.e. the values form the basis for lessons and are reinforced and explained using Biblical stories rather than teaching stories while making little or no life application. NB: This does not imply any diminution in the use of Scripture in Children's Ministry; on the contrary, this approach actually asks leaders and helpers to consider carefully how Scripture is used, and to recognise the need to 'go deeper' beyond the surface of 'bible storytelling', which is of course a stereotype of Children's Ministry, but still apparently a default position in the approach of many sincere and committed people.

2. One group was positive about their leaders while another group was at best indifferent and at worst felt their leaders were unapproachable.

A new paradigm for Children's Ministry might claim that the relationships between leaders and children are of the utmost importance and therefore the process of choosing and training leaders should be treated with respect. The Children's Ministry needs to be seen by the whole church as primarily a pastoral ministry and secondly a teaching ministry. This may mean that some churches will need to adjust their perception of the kind of characteristics they require in a Children's Ministry leader and may even find it helpful to move away from using terms such as 'Sunday School Teacher' or 'Superintendent'. It is important to train leaders who will be able to be culturally relevant to children – this does not, of course, require leaders to be young, although a comprehensive Children's Ministry will include leaders from a variety of age groups, while recognising that older children often need and benefit from the care and attention of younger adults.

It is vital that churches recognize their responsibility to support the holistic development of each child in their care through an awareness of their emotional, psychological and spiritual

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[18] 'Paradigm' is a term often used in sociological research; it simply means 'worldview', or the 'lens' we use to interpret and act upon the world.

needs. While not every Children's Ministry volunteer can be a child-care professional it is important that they are provided with training and incentive for their pastoral role and that a structure of accountability exists to maintain a high level of care for each child.

3. One group felt the activities provided by leaders were fun and stimulating and helped them to learn and interact as a group. Another group was frustrated with the lack of games or creative activities offered as part of their Sunday School and felt the workbooks they used were irrelevant to their lives and quite boring. All children felt there should be more time for the group to relax together with one child even remarking "It would be nice to be able to chat for a while at the start before work begins".

A new paradigm for Children's Ministry might claim that there is a need for greater creativity in how the teaching material is presented to the children. This requires a confident leader who can take the chosen resources and lift the information from the page using a range of media to help children with different learning styles grasp the meaning of the lesson. Once again, if the characteristics of a leader restrict their ability to relate to the culture of the children then it may be appropriate to choose other people.

It is vital that churches do not rely on reading and writing as the main method of teaching within their Children's Ministry as they are in danger of alienating children experiencing literacy problems or other learning difficulties. It is also restrictive for the group as a whole as all children have different learning styles and methods of teaching need to reflect this.

4. Most children felt the friends they have in Sunday School are not necessarily the friends they would see the rest of the week. There was some variation in this but on the whole it appears that Children's Ministry may not be building cohesive communities of young people.

A new paradigm for Children's Ministry might suggest that giving time to social interaction between children both within the structured time for Children's Ministry and by providing additional activities such as trips or parties is not time wasted or taken away from the programme. In fact it may be the most valuable time in terms of keeping children engaged in their church community in the future. It also requires a leader who is skilled in supporting the children as they work through the joys and difficulties of growing together as a community.

Suggested Action Points

It has been said that in relating to and integrating children into the faith community, the church's role is not to 'fill buckets' but to seek to 'light fires' in a model of ministry that owes more to the Jedi apprenticeship of Yoda in 'Star Wars' than to the instructional models familiar from the caricatures of traditional public school masters. The greatest need the children have in their spiritual growth is the love and support of adults who will listen to them and offer a positive and reassuring voice in their lives. They also need to learn how to provide care and respect for each other through the teaching they receive and the time committed to building relationships. From the level of diocesan leadership to the helpers who make the juice and biscuits, everyone involved in Children's Ministry should be trained, nurtured, encouraged and rewarded to carry out their role with the awareness that our churches are full of children whose potential needs to be encouraged and nurtured and whose pain needs to be shared and tended to. With that in mind, the following are offered as suggested action points to nurture the discussion of the future of Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland.

NB: The suggested action points are simply that: suggestions. They are neither comprehensive nor dogmatic, but are offered as informal reflections on the data generated through this research.

1: **Terminology and Culture**

The Church of Ireland parish is often involved a wide range of vital Children's Ministry; those who lead and help in these ministries are seeking to provide the best quality care and should be applauded. Yet traditional, apparently successful, 'instructional' models of ministry are now subject to widespread questioning, and may be in terminal decline. A major cultural and philosophical shift is occurring in society at large; the shift from modernity to post-modernity (or whatever labels one wishes to use) has included a transition from 'facts-based' instruction to something more akin to 'apprenticeship' – in values, in skills, in the development of personality and maturity. 'Instructional' models of Children's Ministry are neither credible nor helpful in this context; yet an opportunity for substantial ministry among and with children still exists. The values have not changed, but the methods must.

While many parishes and Children's Ministry leaders are recognising these changes, it is clear that many could benefit from clearer, more strategic support and training. To that end:

- The Board of Education (Northern Ireland) should seriously reconsider the use of 'educational' or 'instructional' terms and methods in Children's Ministry; and provide sensitive advice and encouragement to leaders of activities to transition through appropriate training and recruitment to a pastoral/child development model of ministry. Although terminology in itself is not everything, a strong case can be easily made for removing terms and cultural norms in ministry that evoke unhelpfully instructional (e.g. 'Sunday School teacher') or even regimental (e.g. Superintendent) images. These terms emerged in a different historical and cultural context and were useful for a time, but are now inappropriate. The principle of leadership in ministry will not be harmed by a sensitive process of developing new concepts that are more appropriate today; and there are many excellent resources to that end.

- It should be recognised that there is a difference between children performing songs in front of a Sunday morning adult audience, and inter-generational or all-age worship. It is possible for worship to be child-friendly without being child*ish*. The Board of Education (Northern Ireland) should give serious consideration to how clergy are/are not trained to engage children, and to recommending that clergy be given strategic training, or be encouraged to share responsibility for inter-generational worship with a person skilled in that area.

2: **Links with others**

Almost half of the parishes that responded to this research stated that they have no link with another parish or denomination in Children's Ministry, although no respondent objected to the principle. It would appear that some links do not exist simply because they have never been considered. Given the value of sharing resources and mutual support, not to mention the common good of church links, the Board of Education (Northern Ireland) should encourage the development of strategic links between parishes for the purposes of supporting Children's Ministry.

3: **Supporting Parents**

Respondents are agreed that skills for parenting are both vital, and inculcated less than at any time in living memory. The role of the church in nurturing parents and the development of strong families is vital. The Mother's Union already plays an important role in this; but it could be extremely helpful if MU was to offer a regular culturally relevant parenting course in every rural deanery, bearing in mind that not every rural deanery would require such an endeavour on an annual basis. Meanwhile, parents should be better informed as a matter of course of what their children are doing in Children's Ministry activities so they can support this at home. Some parents may benefit from hearing skilled children's leaders talk about how to nurture children, and to exercise patience when children express the ups and downs of life, without reacting as if the child has lost his/her faith! While it may sound facetious, this is a serious point: significant damage could be avoided if more Christian parents were able to affirm the spirituality of their children, without expecting more 'sanctification' (!) from a child than is reasonable.

4: **Recruitment, Resources and Training**

In the focus groups with children it was apparent that one group was extremely satisfied with their provision while another on the whole had little to say that was positive. Some children indicated that Children's Ministry activities were difficult experiences because leaders were unable to deal effectively with disruptions, either through lack of confidence or taking things too seriously. There are a number of factors influencing this but the most obvious seems to be that one group of children were part of a group with a strong and highly skilled strategic leader, based in a parish with a recently adopted parish strategy that includes reference to implementing the strategy among children as well as adults.

Effective Children's Ministry is most likely to occur where there is the combination of a leader who takes responsibility for overseeing strategy and vision and a team of assistants who are skilled in relating to children. i.e. Without a clear strategic leader the team of 'helpers' will struggle to produce coherent effective provision, but without a good team the leader cannot achieve the goals set for the ministry.

Suggestions for making recruitment easier include:

- Offering 'term limits' and informal contracts including rotas which allow Children's Ministry leaders/helpers to have time off, and so they don't have to miss Sunday services every week. Having said this, it is vital for children to experience some continuity of leadership, so it is suggested that the team leader in Children's Ministry make a commitment to more consistent attendance than others, and that other leaders/helpers be offered 'term-on/term-off' rather than 'month-on/month-off' rotas.

Suggestions for developing further training are as follows:

- Make training opportunities more accessible to volunteer leaders, through hosting them at weekends, or shorter courses with sessions of perhaps one hour's duration over two weeknights per year. One way of offering training in an accessible fashion, while also offering encouragement and thanks to leaders/helpers would be for each diocese to host an annual one night residential training event, paid for by the diocese, at which leaders/helpers could be treated to a nice meal, followed by a short inspirational presentation on ministry to children on the Friday night; the Saturday

could be used for practical training sessions on a variety of issues pertaining to Children's Ministry. Investment in this diocesan event could well repay exponentially better than a more ad hoc approach.

- Ensure that each Children's Ministry has at least one leader trained in managing behavioural difficulties.

- Ensure that all children's leaders are trained in addressing acting out and other disruptive behaviour through techniques such as positive reinforcement, etc.

- Offer some form of accreditation for training, perhaps through Open College Network; both for the value of the training itself, and its value as an incentive for people to participate. Another form of 'accreditation' is implied in the proposals for 'commissioned lay ministry' that form part of the discussion about the future of lay ministry in some parts of the Anglican Communion.

Suggestions for offering resources are as follows:

- The Board of Education should develop as a matter of priority a resource library and website including substantial resources for Children's Ministry, which can be consulted or borrowed for use in parishes. The website should include articles on models of good practice, and discussion forums for Children's Ministry leaders to share their ideas and experience.

- The Board of Education (Northern Ireland) should consider the development of resource packs, to be sent regularly to each parish. The packs developed by US Christian Publisher Relevant Media Group are a good example – churches are invited to subscribe to the 'Relevant Network', and in return receive bi-monthly resource packs including books, CDs, visual aids, profiles of high quality Children's Ministry and churches, and a newsletter to help nurture their youth ministries. Something similar could be of immense value to Children's Ministry leaders in the Church of Ireland, perhaps on a smaller scale, and produced only twice a year, and could help address the need for more Church of Ireland-based materials. It may also be useful to produce and updated teacher's handbook that reflects the lectionary – that reflect the church's calendar, festivals, etc.; alongside the provision of training for providing activities that reflect the seasons of the church's year

- Parishes should be encouraged to register one of their Children's Ministry leaders with the Play Resource Warehouse in Belfast, and other regional equivalents.

5: **Diocesan Children's Ministry Working Groups/Children's Ministry Resource Officers**

It is worth remembering that the diocesan/parochial structure of the church allows resources and training to be developed strategically; although very few people ever mention their awareness of the rural deanery. Each diocese should be encouraged to appoint a Children's Ministry resource officer, whose role would include developing training opportunities, and consultancy/'trouble-shooting' with parochial leadership teams regarding Children's Ministry. Diocesan resource officers could be responsible to the diocesan Children's Ministry group and bishop, with guidance and assistance from the Board of Education (Northern Ireland), and

share models of best practice from within the Church of Ireland and elsewhere. This would include updating and developing resources with a distinctively Church of Ireland flavour.

With this in mind, it is suggested that Diocesan Children's Ministry Working Groups should be established where they do not already exist, and that each group be tasked with the following:

- To develop a diocesan strategy for Children's Ministry to transition from 'instructional' toward 'pastoral/developmental' models and from the Sunday morning 'children's address' or 'slot' to inter-generational worship, which it is suggested should include:

- Advising parishes on the development of parochial strategies for Children's Ministry.

- Appointing a salaried Children's Ministry resource officer (part- or full-time, depending on the diocese's needs). Responsibilities of the resource officer would include facilitation of training for Children's Ministry leaders/helpers and consultancy/troubleshooting with parishes to help them develop meaningful strategy for Children's Ministry, and address local parochial issues such as lack of volunteers, repetition across a range of ministry activities, etc. Resource officers (whose title may need to be less formal than 'resource officer') would also work as part of a team with their colleagues in other dioceses, sharing best practice, and building supportive relationships. It should be emphasised that any such post should be treated with the same respect as any other accredited ministry within the church – appointments should be made of candidates with appropriate skill sets and experience, who have worked with children and understand their needs, and not simply a person with a theology degree or time on their hands[19]!

- The process of responding to this research could benefit from a serious re-consideration of the meaning and usefulness of confirmation. Respondents frequently bemoaned the fact that confirmation is often seen as a 'passing-out parade'. Some parishes have made in-roads to addressing this, but this has required innovation on their part that may be a bridge too far for some (see p.47 for an interesting model of pre- and post-confirmation practice).

This is of course not much different from accepted standards within youth ministry; the respondents to this research agree that Children's Ministry is deserving of the same.

At the risk of making things more complicated, the model sketched below suggests the lines of accountability, relationship and strategy suggested for Children's Ministry Resource Officers[20].

Within Dioceses:

Bishop – Children's Ministry Working Group – Children's Ministry Resource Officer – Parishes

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[19] The issue of defining funding and resources for such a post is not within the remit of this research; but it may be possible to reduce costs by developing posts in such a manner as to facilitate resource officers working from home.

[20] Note to members of Children's Ministry Sub-Group: this diagram is meant to be helpful – please feel free to disregard if it is not!

Among Dioceses

Board of Education – Secretary to Board of Education - Children's Ministry Resource Officers

6: **Safeguarding Trust**

It may be useful to engage in a limited exercise of re-publicising and explaining 'Safeguarding Trust'; especially in light of the fact that some people seem to overestimate the complexity of being trained in child protection policy and this appears to be a barrier to some potential volunteers for Children's Ministry. The necessary processes of child protection policy are less time-consuming and complicated than many people seem to think; yet this needs to be regularly made clear. While child protection policy is of course a vitally important responsibility, it might also be useful to dispel some myths about how the processes work. It should be borne in mind that the office of the Board of Education is always willing to provide parishes with guidance in meeting the requirements of Safeguarding Trust.

7: **Publication of this report**

Many of the respondents expressed enthusiasm about the fact that the Board of Education (Northern Ireland) had undertaken this research and stated their desire to see the results as soon as possible. It is recommended that the full report be made available to any rector, vestry, or Children's Ministry leader/helper or group that requests a copy, and that a shorter/populist version of this report be made available as widely as possible.

CONCLUSION

This research has emanated from a concern to encourage the whole church to value Children's Ministry, and it must be noted that this implies the valuing of lay ministry in particular. Of course, Children's Ministry is not just what takes place in the hour or so still known by many as 'Sunday School', and several respondents indicated their commitment to outreach in this regard. High quality Children's Ministry that is responsive to particular cultural needs is vital, especially in a sociological context where rites of passage for the nurture and development of children have all but disappeared. Among the serious, heartfelt questions being asked by respondents are: How do we inculcate spiritual disciplines in the context of materialism? How do we engage children in ministry when so many forms of church culture are alien to them? How do we help children nurture their spirituality so that they see it as a normal part of life, not a chore, and certainly not an optional extra? How do we do this when sometimes we do not have the support of the parents?

It seems appropriate to draw this report to a close with brief comments from respondents to the research, which indicate some of the good models available in the church, and some of the hope for the nurture of children:

> Kids used to be seen and not heard; but now the congregation finds the kids entertaining.

> We've moved beyond Sunday School – all kids looking at the same topics and scripture as every one in the service – this is not one teacher with six kids round them every Sunday for the whole year – [we have] lots more interaction – one big presentation followed by age-specific activities. [We have] re-branded Sunday School as 'Kids Club'. Post-primary the children come to Youth Group, in first year, they come from 3-6pm on Sunday; for half an hour there is a confirmation class – which means that the group still exists after confirmation. When I first came here, we just did relational stuff; just to get to know them. 70% of the teenagers came back post-confirmation. We need to provide space for them to enjoy themselves – the youth group has become the main place for socialising. We have an identity here – the group affirms that. Lots of kids from other churches come to the Youth Group – this meant that other kids came to the confirmation class, which was as much about relationship as anything else. They are a 'work in progress' – confirmation was not then seen as an opportunity to leave the church – the bishop's sermon at confirmation was about 'sticking with [the youth group]' – lots are regular communicants, but for some of them, [the youth group] is church…Despite all of this, it is desperately difficult to get leaders to commit on a Sunday afternoon.

> When I was doing some of my training in the United States I observed that there were wonderful training days for leaders, after which people went out on a high – we need to get good trainers in to make it a fun, energetic day, to let their hair down and be children for a day. While some children's addresses are brilliant, most of them are poor – they didn't know what vocabulary to use. Or simply get up and read a story – need to liberate rectors from the assumption that the children's address needs to be a mini sermon; or do some post-ordination training.

> Kids are not voids to be filled - we're kindling a fire, not just imparting knowledge; stimulating love for God; the sense of spirituality is innate in kids; in other words what we're about is faith development, not instruction.

And finally, three comments indicative of the vision of the respondents based in Christian faith to see children develop truly Christ-centred lives, and to take their place as disciples of the living God:

I see the purpose of Children's Ministry as to help kids to develop good relationship with God, with the church, and with the other. Especially when relationships are not easy. Kids' ministry is important because the church only exists in relationship with each other and with God; we must include everyone.

If the decline of the Church is ultimately caused neither by the irrelevance of Jesus, nor by the indifference of the community, but by the Church's failure to respond fast enough to an evolving culture, to a changing spiritual climate, and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, then that decline can be addressed by the repentance of the Church. For true repentance involves turning around and living in a new way in the future. A diocese or parish, which, out of repentance, grows a new relevance to the contemporary world, may also grow in numbers and strength, because the Spirit of Jesus has been released to do his work.

Being involved with kids' ministry is the greatest privilege and joy: to help people know the Lord Jesus.

While children's culture will change, the call on the church to become communities of faith where people of all ages are welcomed, nurtured, and, as Dallas Willard writes in 'The Divine Conspiracy', find their place as co-creators for the work of God does not. This report, as with all research of its nature, does not answer every question, nor provide a template solution. But it is offered in the hope that its findings will assist the process of renewing the church's ministry to and with children, whose purpose could probably not be put better than the three comments above.

Gareth Higgins, Ph.D.
Michael Blythman, BSc.
Kellie Turtle, BSc.

Advent 2004

APPENDIX: DIOCESAN STATISTICS

Figure 2
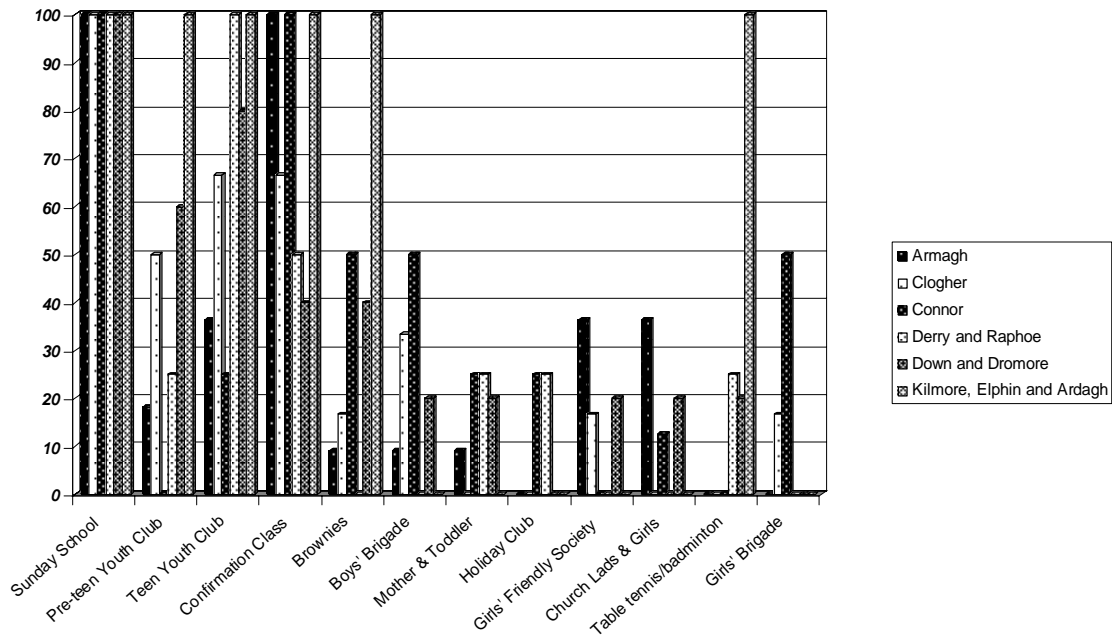**Please list the kind of Children's Ministry activities that take place in your parish**

Figure 4
How suitable are the premises used for Children's Ministry?