

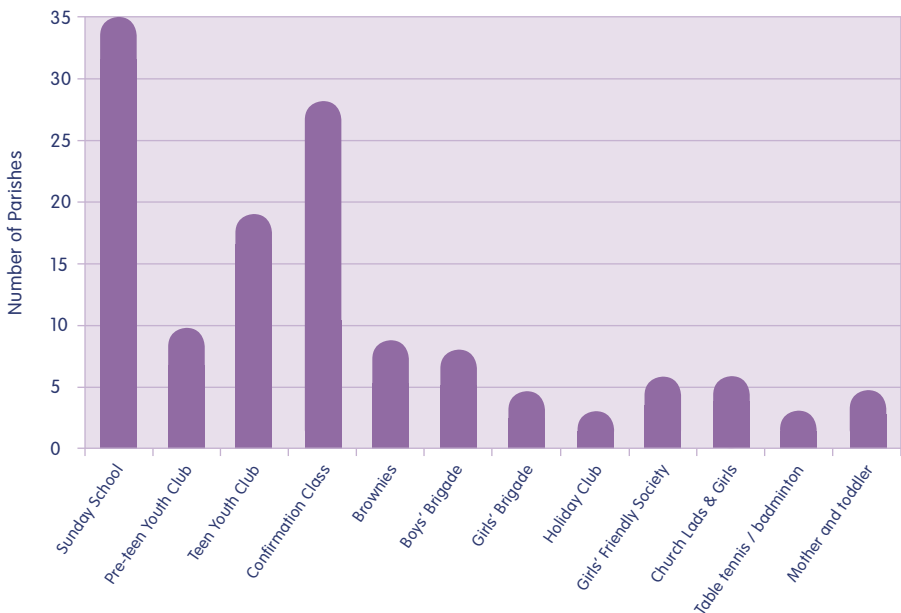
# Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland

## A New Vision

A REPORT TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION (NI)  
2005



The Church of Ireland Board of Education (NI) recently carried out research into the attitudes, needs, and experiences around Children's Ministry in Northern Ireland, among clergy, leaders/helpers, and children themselves. Clergy and Children's Ministry leaders representing over 1200 children were involved in the research. The full version of this report is available from the Board of Education (NI) and on-line at [www.ireland.anglican.org/committeenews](http://www.ireland.anglican.org/committeenews) while this shorter document summarises its findings. 35 parishes responded to the research, and the different kinds of Children's Ministry activities are shown below:



Children's Ministry activities in sampled parishes

In compiling the report, it was obvious 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. Many of the practices and models familiar to most adults 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. The following points, raised by children, but affirmed by the adult respondents, may themselves be seen as providing the template for the characteristics of Children's Ministry in a post-modern age. For instance:

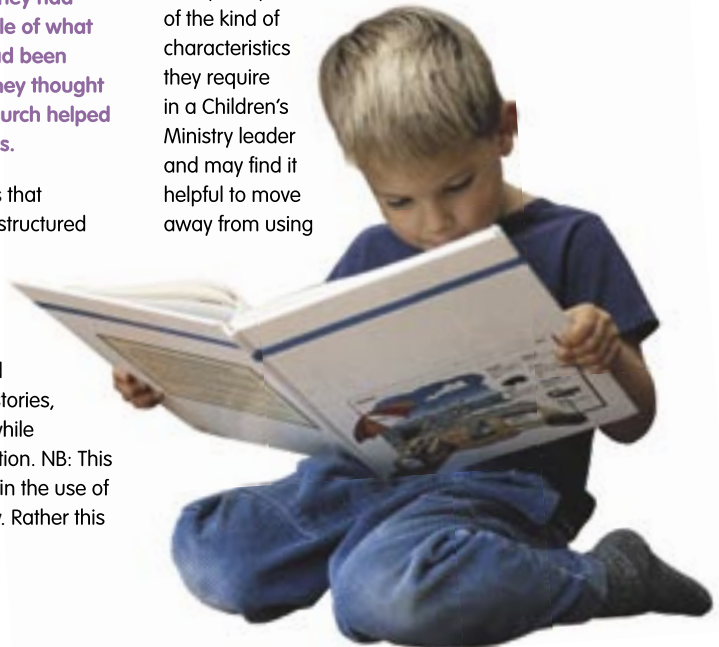
**When asked what they had learned in Sunday School, the children could name Biblical stories or passages they had memorized but could say little of what life lessons or values they had been taught. None of them said they thought the things they learned in church helped them in their day-to-day lives.**

So, a new approach suggests that 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 reduction in the use of Scripture in Children's Ministry. Rather 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'. The latter has been the stereotype of Children's Ministry, but still represents a default position in the approach of many sincere and committed people.

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

A new model for Children's Ministry insists that the relationships between leaders and children are of the utmost importance. This should be a priority in the process of recruiting and training leaders. Children's Ministry needs to be seen first and foremost as a pastoral ministry and as a result, a teaching ministry. This means that some churches will need to adjust their perception of the kind of characteristics they require in a Children's Ministry leader and may 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 relate to the culture of children. This does not, of course, require leaders to be young, however a comprehensive Children's Ministry will include leaders from a variety of age groups, recognising that older children may need and benefit from the care and attention of younger adults.

It is vital that parishes recognize their responsibility to support the holistic development of each child in their care through an awareness of their emotional, psychological and spiritual needs. While not all Children's Ministry volunteers can be child-care professionals it is important that they are provided with training and incentives for their pastoral role and that a structure of accountability exists to maintain a high level of care for each child.

**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.**

A new model 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 confident leaders who can take the chosen resources and lift the information from the page, using a range of media to enable children with different learning styles grasp

the meaning of the lesson. If the teaching style of a leader restricts his or her ability to relate to the contemporary culture of children then it may be appropriate to offer additional support. It is vital that parishes 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 this must be reflected in the teaching methods used.

**Most children felt that the friends they have in Sunday School are not necessarily the friends they see elsewhere. There was some variation in this, but it may be that Children's Ministry does not always result in cohesive communities of young people.**

An alternative approach is to provide time for social interaction between children through activities such as trips or parties in addition to dedicated programme time. Such 'recreational time' may turn out to be the most valuable component helping to keep children engaged in their church community in the future. It will require leaders 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 children have in their spiritual growth is the love and support of adults who will listen to them and offer a positive and reassuring presence in their lives. Children also need to learn how to give care and show 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. There is a need to reawaken an awareness that our churches are full of children whose potential should be nurtured and whose pain should be recognised and responded to. The following action points are commended for shaping the future of Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland.

## 1: Terminology and Culture

A major cultural shift is occurring in society. This shift has included a transition from 'facts-based' instruction to something more akin to 'apprenticeship' – in values, skills, development of personality and maturity. 'Instructional' models of Children's Ministry

make a very limited contribution in this context. 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 all could benefit from clearer, more strategic support and training. To that end:

- The use of 'educational' or 'instructional' terms, such as 'teacher' or 'superintendent' and traditional methods in Children's Ministry should be reconsidered. Sensitive advice and encouragement should be provided to equip leaders to make this transition to a pastoral/child development model of ministry.
- 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 childish. Serious consideration should be given to enabling clergy to engage more effectively with children. Clergy might also be encouraged to share responsibility for inter-generational worship with other persons 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, yet none objected to the principle. The development of links between parishes for the purposes of supporting Children's Ministry should be encouraged.

## 3: Supporting Parents

In the community of the baptised, the primary church is the home. Therefore the role of the parish in supporting parents and the development of strong families is vital. The Mother's Union (MU) plays an important role in this. The MU should offer regular, culturally relevant parenting courses in every rural deanery. Parishes should seek to communicate more effectively with parents to inform them of what their children are experiencing in Children's Ministry activities so they can support this at home.

## 4: Setting of goals

Good practice suggests that there should be an annual meeting to set goals for the

parish Children's Ministry team and to agree the training/resource/financial/personnel needs for the coming year.

## 5: Recruitment, Resources and Training

Some children have indicated that Children's Ministry activities were difficult experiences because of the inability of leaders to deal effectively with disruption. Children's Ministry will be most effective 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. 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 that they don't have to miss Sunday services every week.

Suggestions for developing further training are as follows:

#### AT PAROCHIAL LEVEL

- Make training opportunities more accessible to leaders/helpers, through hosting them at weekends, and/or shorter courses with sessions of perhaps one hour's duration over two weeknights per year.

#### AT DIOCESAN LEVEL

- It is always important to find tangible ways of showing gratitude to Children's Ministry teams. For example 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.
- Ensure that at least one member of each Children's Ministry team has received training in the management of children with disruptive behavioural characteristics.
- Offer some form of accreditation for training, perhaps through Open College Network.



Suggestions for offering resources are as follows:

#### AT CENTRAL CHURCH LEVEL

- A resource library and website including substantial resources for Children's Ministry should be developed. The website should include articles on models of good practice, and discussion forums for leaders to share their ideas and experience.
  - The development of Children's Ministry resource packs to be sent regularly to each parish should be considered. This could include books, CDs, visual aids, reviews of resources etc. Such packs, produced perhaps twice a year could be of immense value to Children's Ministry leaders.
  - There is also a need to develop additional Church of Ireland-based materials especially for use in NI.
  - Parishes should be encouraged to register one of their Children's Ministry leaders with the Play Resource Warehouse in Belfast, or other regional equivalents.
- To develop a diocesan strategy for Children's Ministry to enable the transition from 'instructional' toward 'pastoral/developmental' models and from the Sunday morning 'children's address' or 'slot' to inter-generational worship. This should include:
    - Advising parishes on the development of parochial strategies for Children's Ministry.
    - Appointing a salaried Children's Ministry officer (part- or full-time, depending on the diocese's needs). Responsibilities of the post would include facilitation of training for Children's Ministry leaders/helpers and consultancy/troubleshooting with parishes to help them develop a strategy for Children's Ministry, and address local parochial issues such as the shortfall in volunteers and overdependence on a limited core of volunteers.
    - Children's Ministry Officers should work as part of a team with their colleagues in other dioceses, sharing best practice, and building supportive relationships. They should enjoy complete parity of esteem with colleagues in other areas of ministry in the church.

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

Diocesan Children's Ministry Working Groups should be established where they do not already exist, and each working group be tasked with the following:



- The process of responding to this research could benefit from a serious re-consideration of the meaning and importance of the rite of confirmation. Respondents frequently bemoaned the fact that confirmation is often seen as a 'passing-out parade'. Some parishes have been successful in addressing this, and the full report provides examples.

### 7: Safeguarding Trust

In many parishes there is a perception that the demands of the Church of Ireland Code of Good Practice – Safeguarding Trust, place too heavy and complex a burden on those working with children and young people. While the importance of conforming to the Code of Good Practice cannot be overstated, it is clear that continuing training and encouragement needs to be provided in order to allay unnecessary fears and to prevent these becoming a barrier to volunteering.



## Conclusion

This research has emerged 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 more than merely the hour still known by many as 'Sunday School'. High quality Children's Ministry, responsive to contemporary cultural needs is vital. In a sociological context, where rites of passage for the nurture and development of children have all but disappeared, new forms of outreach are becoming an urgent necessity. Among the serious questions being asked by respondents are:

How do we develop spiritual disciplines in a 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 short 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 heartfelt hopes for the nurture of children:

**'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. What we're about is faith development, not instruction'**

And finally, three comments indicative of the desire of the respondents to see children develop a life of Christian discipleship:

**'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 change. This brief summary of a longer report does not provide all the answers. It is offered in the hope that it will stimulate discussion about how best to respond to cultural changes and challenges and to stimulate fresh action on the part of the Church, in continuing to provide Children's Ministry that reflects the values of the kingdom of God.

**Acknowledgements:**

The Board of Education (NI) received the full report of the research into Children's Ministry in NI at its meeting on 28th January 2005 and resolved that this summary report be published and made available to the wider church. The Board is most grateful to Dr Gareth Higgins, Kellie Turtle and Michael Blythman for carrying out the research.



# Children's Ministry in the Church of Ireland



Church of Ireland  
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