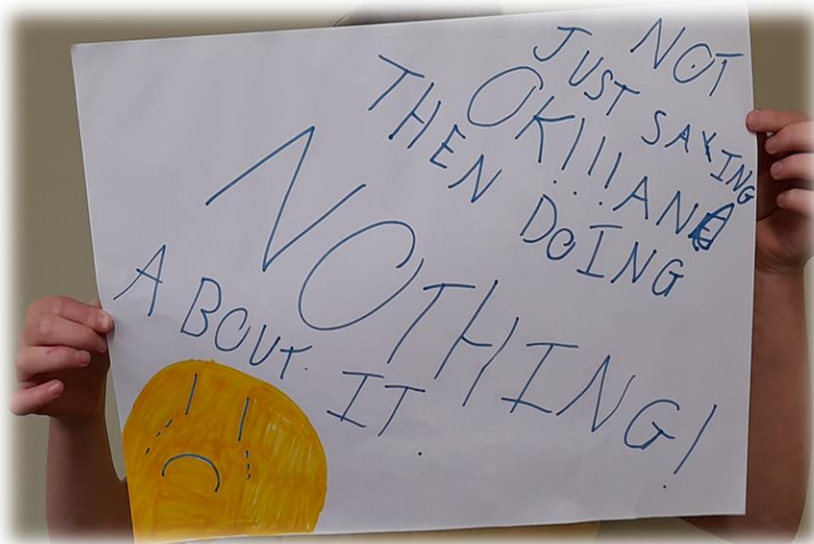


***Are we listening?***

**Summary Report**

Karen Beal January 2024



## **Context and Background Information**

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

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

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

## **Research Methodology**

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

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

Before undertaking this research, I met with three representatives from the Ethos Explorers at Bishop Bridgeman Church of England Primary School to see if they had any input to offer on the questions I was preparing. The Ethos Explorers have been involved in co-researching with a PhD candidate, a participatory project into child-

centred ethos development in a church school. Therefore, I thought it important to seek their views as researchers the same age as the participants in this study.

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

### **Research Methodology**

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### **Summary Findings**

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

**Graffiti table - some of what was written.....**

*We have longer (Sunday school)*

*It is fun when we have church parade*

*We do fun activities (funny PP, custard/jam doughnuts)*

*I learn about God*

*We sing hymns*

*They put out the Bibles*

*We have fun*

*We have biscuits and you get to play at the end of church*

*It has Sunday school*

*It is fun*

*When we get biscuits*

I like it at church  
when...

My favourite part  
of church is...

*Sunday school*

*Hymns/songs (without actions)*

*When we learn about God*

*It is in the morning*

*How the light shines on the stained glass to make a rainbow*

*The special days and important parts*

*Staying in church with mummy*

*Biscuits*

*When we can talk to each other after the service it gives us an opportunity to know what people have been up to*

## Less action songs

*Having options for older children*

Making (Sunday school) every week

*More sports*

*We would play outside more*

*Making the back of church brighter*

*Going out in the garden*

*I'm not sure*

Make (where we meet) brighter

*More activities*

*Bringing pets*

*Maybe a bit more (later) in the day (service starts at 9.30am)*

More cooking – Christian edition

*Make it later like 1.00pm*

*Snacks*

*Activities*

At church I would  
change things  
by.....



At church I feel...

Happy Loved  
Comfortable Safe  
Curious Calm

Other things...

*Church is brilliant*

I want drawing in church and more Christian activities

*It is fun*

*I love connecting with God*

Church is sometimes boring

*I connect with God*

Having to stand up a bit makes me frustrated sometimes

*I like that church is family*

I love church and I love everyone

What kind of place  
do you think church  
should be?

*A Place of God*

*Calm and Holy*

*A place where people find safe, comfortable and trust*

*A place where you can pray to God*

*Joyful Ambient Respectful Fun*

*Where no-one should feel excluded*

*A place where people feel comforted*

*A place to express feelings*

*A place where everyone belongs*

## Statements – we answered with Skittles or played ‘Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down’

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



## Conclusion and Recommendations

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

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

It appears that whether intentionally or not, a perception of what services and collective worship should involve/look like is fixed, whichever context participants were in, leading to a culture of being apprehensive about trying new things. In each case, when asked what would it be like if the participants were able to plan a service, at first, they found this a difficult concept. It would be interesting to carry out some of this research with the whole worshipping community to see if all of this is in fact not just age related but does in fact relate to adults as well and the culture we have created within our churches.

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

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

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

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

### **Finally....**

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