

Grace for a Brighter Future

A summary of ideas to make 'The Church' in Britain grow

I believe The Church in Britain can grow.

More children enjoying church today will mean more teenagers in a decade and more adults members twenty years from now. Many parents still value Church activities, so generational growth is possible if there is a massive, relevant investment. The scale of increased resourcing for such an exciting transformation requires a change of priorities. Leaders need to be open to questioning traditional habits. I advocate institutional structures that encourage a 'mixed economy' of rich tradition alongside 'outreach in new wineskins' enabling younger generations to meet Jesus.

This document is for those who desire Church Growth.

It is written to challenge decision-makers and those who pray for them. I share ministry insights to stimulate discussion which informs future planning. The aim is to inspire determination to tackle church decline at root causes. Radical change must tackle systemic issues preventing fruitful youth and children's ministry. I suggest institutional issues have been more damaging than cultural ones. This is good news! In an era of reducing influence The Church has the power to change itself more readily than wider culture. Please read prayerfully with a willingness to question unhelpful/restrictive practices.

Courage, optimism and perseverance are needed to reverse a century of child-loss.

The trend can be reversed, but it will take several decades of sacrificial investment to ease the current burdens of church membership decline. It took decades for the consequences of child loss to 'hurt', and similarly, prolonged effort is needed before feeling the benefit of increases. It is imperative that the right people are appointed to positions with authority to make decisions to realise this vision. I applaud the ministry of many talented Youth, Children's and Families Workers. Talented workers, often handicapped by 'the system', need to have more influence in top level decisions.

Grace for the Next Generation places Part-time Workers into Churches.

To create more, quality children's work **Grace for the Next Generation**, referred to in this document as *Grace*, was founded. Churches receive children's ministry managed by experts. *Grace* Workers spend one day per week plus one Sunday per month at each church. Innovative ideas have been encouraged and shared, such as a Sensory Prayer Garden, a Noisy Carol Service for under-fives and a Playground Club at a school not allowing Christian input. A One-year Mission led by GAP Year volunteers from Germany, The Ukraine and USA had extra-ordinary success reaching school children via puppetry and drama, as well as through well-received Holiday Clubs and an international event. Sound selection processes, inspirational training and strong management encourage stunning vocational ministry.

To tackle the fundamental issues my main proposals are:

A professional career-structure for Children's Workers

Youth, Children's and Families' Workers should be trained at the same Theological Colleges, have equal status and be as recognised as Ordained Ministers. Valuing their ministry will raise their status, attract higher calibre applicants, and give them more time/authority for more fruitful ministry. Professional vocations would help encourage skill-sets currently in short supply e.g. sport/high energy, I.T./Social media, mission-mindedness and male role-models. GAP Year volunteers from abroad could complement current talent e.g. craft and catering. I believe that if humble children's workers had had a greater voice in the past, mistakes might have been avoided.

Value both all-age and age-specific ministry equally

Both types of ministry are needed and their interaction better understood. Youth needs can be compromised in all-age settings. Midweek age-specific mission can be more successful at recruiting children from unchurched backgrounds. More 'joined up' thinking is needed to plan progression through children's, youth and adult ministry.

Research whether creationism is a reason for atheism

If there is a connection, those who hold to the creation story as fact should consider how this affects evangelistic strategies. Are there more atheists if Christians just 'let the story speak for itself?' From what age should honest debate be encouraged?

Denominations working together

'A presence in every community' could be the aim of *Churches Together*, not just the Church of England. Discerning where to invest should be done ecumenically with consideration to maximise long-term potential. Individualistic priorities must be resisted to allow investment (both financial and human resources) to prioritise the young. A national shift in thinking is needed to reverse generational decline.

Appoint 'Family Friends' to church services

In addition to 'Welcomers' who stay by the main entrance, a 'Family Friend' could be appointed who is free to move around families, providing support and information as needed. If it's difficult to recruit enough quality volunteers to do this (or for leading Junior Church), churches could re-prioritise and reduce the number of people needed at each service rota by cutting back or amalgamating other roles.

Children's Bibles offered to every child

It's much easier to give out Children's Bibles in Key Stage 2 and they are more likely to be read than Gideon Bibles distributed later. I've found that a Children's Bible read in the home is one of the best ways to discover/remember Bible stories. A new edition could be produced cheaply in bulk. This should include an introduction discussing Genesis 1-11 and explain the concept of 'the Grace of God' at the outset.

Contents

	<u>Page</u>
<i>Main Proposals:</i>	5
A Professional Career-Structure for Children’s Workers	5
Value Both All-age and Age-specific Ministry Equally	7
Research Whether Creationism is a Reason for Atheism	8
Denominations Working Together	9
Appoint ‘Family Friends’ to Church Services	10
Children’s Bibles Offered to Every Child	10
<i>Other Issues Identified</i>	11
More Youth, Children and Family Workers Needed with Specific Skill Sets	11
The Age-profile Needed in Churches to Allow Future Church Growth	12
Change the Law to Increase the Value of Church Assets	12
Expertise vs Long-standing Membership	12
Children Receiving Communion	12
Virtual Church	13
Plenty of Publicity	13
False Economy	13
Car Parks Help Outreach	13
Home Visiting	13
Atheist Supporters	14
Not All Christians Go to Church	14
Booking in Good Time	14
Community Singing	14
Healthy Snacks	15
<i>Statements Sometimes Used Unhelpfully</i>	15
Children Aren’t The Church of Tomorrow, They’re The Church of Today	15
Cultural Issues are Causing Church Decline	15
Some Churches are Growing	16
Don’t Tell the Troops We’re Losing the War	16
You Can Grow Your Own Leaders	16
All Lay Ministry Should be Affirmed	16
Ministers Have Less Respect Than They Used To	17
Churches Are Better Today, We’re Enlightened/People Aren’t Forced to Go	17
Church Means People, Not Buildings	17
Ask People What They Want	17
<i>Ideas Inspired by Literature</i>	18
Moving Afternoon Sunday School to the Sunday Morning Service	18
Using Statistics to Suggest Clues to the Reasons for Child-decline in Churches	19
A Shocking Suggestion is Actually Good News	20
Discerning the Principle (Institutional) Factors Contributing to Child-loss	20
A ‘Static’ Church	22
Christians Who Don’t Go to Church	23

My Story	23
Brief Periods of Children’s Work	23
Campaigning for Change	23
Vocation Frustration	24
Visiting Small Churches	25
Grace for the Next Generation	26
Setting Up <i>Grace</i>	26
Years 1&2	27
Golden Years 3-5	29
Five Year Review	32
Two Difficult Years 6-7	32
Difficulties in Recruiting Years 8&9	34
One Year Mission	36
Winding Down Years 9-12	39
Ministry Undertaken	41
Schools Work	42
Church Work	44
What Next?	47
Bibliography	47

List of abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
AMAZE	Association of Christian Youth and Children’s Workers
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CTBI	Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
GAP Year	One year break, usually taken before or after college/university
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
I.T.	Information Technology
M.Ed.	Master of Education
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
R.E.	Religious Education
SPREE weekend	Children’s activity weekend organised by Urban Saints
UCB	United Christian Broadcasters
URC	United Reformed Church
USA	United States of America

Main Proposals to Facilitate Future Church Growth

A Professional Career Structure for Youth/Children's/Family Workers

If there were one main cause underpinning Church decline, I would say that paid professional Church Leaders have looked after the adults whilst children's ministry has been left to the laity. The Church hasn't adapted to cultural changes because those best placed to advocate this have had too little status. Generational decline is the greatest cause of loss to Church membership, so to reverse the problem, one needs to prioritise children and young people. More good people are needed to help more youngsters to continue with their faith. As time goes on 'education' and 'dependency' continue later into an individual's life-span. Thus generational ministry must consider, not only children below the age of 18, but young adults not yet settled into a career and personal identity.

Children's work has been called the 'Cinderella Ministry',¹ resourced by the 'leftovers' after the adults have taken the best accommodation, resources and ministry team. To get the 'best' people to engage with youth and children's work, a system is needed so that they are chosen first and ahead of other roles in the church. Faith development through childhood and adolescence is so important, that the most capable, nurturing adults should be focussing on these years. Bright children don't put up with poor leaders and to lose them is to lose the influential leadership of the future. In the voluntary sector, many have observed the correlation between good leaders and attendance. I can add that the smartest children leave first, a point observed at a mid-week club led by an adult who clearly had learning disabilities.

If Children's Workers could be elevated to the status of Lay Preachers/Readers or Worship Leaders, commissioned or licensed in equivalent ways, that would be an improvement on the *status quo* and would cost little. When a Lay Preacher/Reader needs to move to a new church, their ministry resumes so much faster than a Children's Worker. Without nationally recognised status, I have seen them accused of arrogance for asking a prospective priest if their skills will be used prior to making the decision to joining a church. But if The Church is serious about having a vision to grow in the future, then I believe that nothing less than a fully professional career structure equal in standing to the ordained ministry will allow the conditions to make the vision possible.

Why Pay for Youth and Children's Work?

Children's work ranges from excellent to poor, or even non-existent. There is no system to monitor and distribute ministry personnel. If a volunteer lacks the necessary skills it's difficult to insist on training. In the absence of alternative volunteers and not wanting to hurt their feelings they may be encouraged and told they're 'doing a great job' (even if they're not). When a really good leader moves from an area, a volunteer replacement must be found from within the church membership. If there isn't anyone else with the potential for similar leadership skills, good ministry which had been structured soundly may disintegrate. The skills of the person who left may be wasted for many years before they are known, trusted and promoted to a similar position (if ever). For paid employment there is a well-trodden system for advertising and applying for roles to match vacancies to people wanting them. There is no such system for volunteer children's workers. There is a correlation

¹ Frank 2002

between people with strong leadership potential and moving geographically. They are more likely to move for paid positions (or their partner's), but rarely for voluntary ones.

A paid worker is expected to nurture their own faith at times that don't conflict with ministry undertaken. Volunteers often feel too busy to train or find another time in the week for 'spiritual input'. Hence the Sunday rotas which compromises relationships with the children for the spirituality of their leaders. This is a particular issue for young children and new/irregular attenders. Having a rota means more volunteers are needed, lowering the bar of perceived suitability for the role.

Given the shortage of talented Children's Workers relative to the number needed to make The Church grow, payment allows each one to devote far more hours to ministry. Volunteers have less time due to work/family commitments or failing health. I know children's workers who've been unable to maintain a reliable car because they sacrificed their career for their vocation. Such poverty makes it harder to act professionally. Young adults with a sense of vocation are more likely to become teachers or offer for ordination if they wish their ministry to be properly resourced and successful. Professional career structures include careful selection, training and apprenticeship to enhance giftings before final qualification and potential promotion. Young talent is likely to be put off from engaging in children's work because the role has little security or potential for being recognised as key ministry in many denominations.

Current Limitations for Paid Youth, Children and Family Workers

It's good that churches are now employing Lay Workers, but the very high turnover is regrettable. Some are 'promoted' to the ordained ministry where they are expected to prioritise adult ministry. Many give up because they are discouraged by poor management and find they are serving under non-experts. Good workers are frustrated by lack of opportunities, e.g. when a Church School's Headteacher died suddenly, a Schools' Worker was told not to go and talk to the children because that was the Vicar's responsibility. The instruction was given out of protocol, and not because of any lack of counselling skills. *Grace Workers* have regretted not being invited to work with Baptism families unless the children joined the groups they ran. What a missed opportunity! I admired one Schools' Worker for wearing a white scarf that looked like a stole when conducting church visits. It was clear that looking like a minister gave the visit greater credibility in the eyes of the staff and pupils. There have been many instances of *Grace Workers'* talents being wasted when they've given their time to attending church services led by others. As an example, a professional actor wasn't invited to contribute to Family Services until I intervened. On another occasion a Local Preacher ruined an important outreach service using his authority to dictate the theme and have the final say on the format of the service. The theme chosen was unsuitable for a mission service and the format caused frustration and missed opportunities. Key members of the congregation were given tasks that diverted them away from welcoming any newcomers. Local Preachers/Lay Readers, Stewards, Elders, Churchwardens, etc. have all enjoyed higher status than *Grace Workers* and this has hampered advance planning. It's much harder to run groups, develop a programme and react to new, unexpected opportunities when you lack authority and have to get permission from non-experts.

Advance planning is a particular problem when a minister leaves. Traditional systems operate which do not acknowledge the role of children's workers. People like Churchwardens become overworked and pick up responsibilities while the *Grace Worker's* work often reduces. They are prevented from developing their ministry because the congregation has 'more important things' to consider. On several occasions, the incoming minister will only talk to key people, and the *Grace Worker* is not one of them. This is frustrating because future ministry will only succeed if it has the incoming minister's

support. When I have tried to intervene on various occasions I have been told 'I shouldn't even be talking to you because I'm not in post yet.'

Advocacy

Advocacy for children hasn't worked well. At the age of seven I thought those who compiled church service books must be very stupid. On becoming a Junior, I was expected to leave Sunday School (which was fun) earlier to participate in tedious liturgy and say '...we are one body, because we all share the one bread.' This was obviously untrue because it would be another five years before I was confirmed and received the Host. Fifty years later, I still worship in many churches expecting their children to say the same untruth, even though they can't receive communion. This happens because it's what's printed in their service books. Child advocacy clearly isn't working!

Professionals are needed as advocates for under-18's who don't yet vote and lack life-experience. It's human nature to be biased towards the needs of oneself and peers. Given the age-profile of most decision-making church bodies, this should be balanced by respected advocates. Bias towards long standing members of the church is currently built into the system. Representation rules requiring key Children's Workers to be appointed to the committee is likely to be more effective than a system which nominates an existing member already on the committee to adopt such a role.

For The Church to have been losing children for over a century and not take have found an effective strategy to change that situation suggests something isn't right in the leadership structure at national level. Most children's work volunteers I know are humble people, unlikely to push their cause if it causes friction with church leadership. I can tell stories from the 1940s onwards of successful volunteer Children's Workers becoming a threat to the Minister. There is no mechanism for hierarchical intervention or for moving them to a different place to continue their ministry.

Big Picture Planning

The top leader in any organisation is the one with the most influence to have the greatest impact on the organisation. For long-term survival, any organisation must have good strategy for promoting the right people into positions of decision-making, including people who will ask awkward questions and challenge the *status quo*. Can a Children's Worker ever be promoted into such a role? It's good that degrees in Children's Ministry now allow them to be trained at the same colleges as ministers so that they 'talk the same language'. It could be helpful for them to train with the option to transfer to adult ministry, should they have less energy and engage less with cultural changes as they grow older. Professional Children's Workers should have a potential career advancement structure that allows them the possibility of being promoted to top positions in their denominations.

Value Both All-age and Age-specific Ministry Equally

I value all-age worship and, where it is done well, it brings families to church services without the children feeling threatened by separation from their carers to go to another room with strangers. I find families on the fringe of the church may prefer all-age services on their first few visits, but most children who feel confident in church, prefer age-group ministry (if well led). This view was shared by a number of Junior Church Leaders at the first all-age worship training session I ever attended. This was a group committed to training who didn't see their role as baby-sitting!

I feel very concerned that research undermines the value of child-focussed ministry because:

(1) It may not be fair to compare all-age ministry run by professionals to children's groups run by

volunteers. The latter would have greater potential for fostering faith if better resourced.

(2) Until I see evidence to the contrary, I still believe that bringing afternoon Sunday Schools into the morning service in the 1960s halved the size of The Church and that the issue lay in recruiting new members. It was an issue that parents of new, young children were under pressure to attend church themselves.

(3) Unexpectedly, young people left Sunday School at a younger age once it met alongside the main service.²

(4) I have met a lot of retired church members from unchurched families recruited through an afternoon Sunday School.

(5) There is an important tier of nominal Christian families who don't attend church but have a faith and desire a Christian education for their children. This is a difficult population to measure, but an important group for outreach if The Church is to grow generationally.

(6) Has enough account been taken of the ability of each model to recruit children from unchurched families? Parents may prefer to send their children to a club with friends. They might not want to attend church themselves, but appreciate an ethical space for their children to learn good values. (Once they get to know church members, they might come along to *Messy Church*.) Muslim and atheist parents have sent children to our Christian clubs. There is an increasing trend for parents to be happy for their children to choose their own faith.³ If The Church is serious about making plans to grow again, outreach to unchurched families would need to increase greatly. Initial recruitment is a really important issue.

(7) The needs of older children and youth aren't always met in all-age settings. It can be embarrassing to be asked to 'perform'! I know many teenagers who are very chatty in their peer groups, but say very little in the presence of adults. They may have deep questions that need a safe space for them to be voiced. Such questions may be specific to this generation of youth.

The Church has an important role demonstrating the benefits of all-age settings, but since the growth of education, society has become increasingly separated by age. I find that small communities where everyone knows each other well are places where mixing ages generally works best. The more disaffected a young person is, the more likely it is that they will prefer the company of their peers. Post puberty young people need places where they can seek romantic relationships. This is important for the continuation of the human race! What I am advocating is an interaction between all-age ministry and equally well-resourced child-centred ministry with programmes designed to encourage every young person to experience both.

Research Whether Creationism is a Reason for Atheism

Given my passion to see The Church grow, I advocate further urgent research to discover if there is a connection between these two issues. Regrettably, I believe that there is!

At one time, I was content to tell the Creation Story in schools 'letting the story speak for itself.' This strategy neatly avoided any controversy on the matter. My approach changed to 'Explain both views with respect for each.' Initially, this was because I read an article in a *Mensa Magazine* criticising Christians in the USA for clinging to Creationism against so much scientific evidence to the contrary. It blamed this for encouraging a closed-mind attitude that ignored facts, which in turn was blamed for self-centred foreign policy, ignoring the needs of the rest of the world. Shortly afterwards I

² Congregational Union 1965

³ Lumino 2018

became aware of resistance to proposals of new legislation insisting that every school taught evolution.

I became more alarmed after meeting a PhD student from Warwick University, researching 'Young People of No Religion'. I asked what causes atheism amongst the young and heard that many young people think that if you believe in God, then you have to be a Creationist. His 2015 thesis⁴ states: 'Following a religion did not appeal to participants because religion was thought to necessarily entail believing in a creator God, in miraculous events for which there was not enough evidence and following rules and commandments that would limit their experiences.' They thought that 'science was a superior theory that provided better explanations of the world than religion.' Bible Society 'Lumino' research showed that 40% of the population believed that 'science and religion are fundamentally in opposition to each other,' a statement said to be 'surprisingly common' and a recent idea more common amongst the young.⁵ David Kinnaman also gives 'Churches coming across as antagonistic to science' as one of the reasons why young Christians leave church in 'You Lost Me'.⁶

Of the reasons for atheism I have found on various internet pages, the origin of our world is the one that should be addressed most urgently. This resonates with conversations with so many young people I know and always appears to have been a factor in their decision. When I meet an atheist, I try to bring the conversation round to the Creation vs Evolution debate. I get told 'I didn't know you could believe in both God and evolution!' or 'I usually think that Christians aren't very intelligent!' A Christian physics undergraduate was greeted with surprise at her first Christian Union meeting with the words 'We don't get many scientists here!'

If I discuss the issue with those who work with youth, they generally agree instantly that it's a big issue. By contrast, if I mention it to those in Church Leadership, they tend to be surprised. It is therefore urgent to publicise the issue and undertake robust research to discern whether or not the problem exists. If it does, new strategies may need to be developed to help Creationists to communicate their faith effectively without driving some of their audience to atheism. (Bearing in mind that Christian children may fall away later when reflecting on conversations from many years earlier.) It will be important to come up with creative, non-judgemental solutions to maintain Christian Unity. It would mean Evolutionists should not be put off from presenting their perspective by Creationists, or vice versa. My hope would be that clear and fair dialogue can be developed, allowing good mission and evangelism to take place.

Denominations Working Together

Grace churches have funded their fee from legacies, restricted funds, affluent congregations and sale of property. All have had a desire to prioritise children's work. However there has been a mis-match between funding availability and opportunities in the local area. In some *Grace* Churches, it has been debatable whether it was worth developing a ministry which was already being done well in another church nearby. The local 'paymasters' have influence. (In *Grace* churches they often favour ministry that will benefit their own children rather than the needs of the local area.) There is a precedent for different denominations to work together very successfully to open a church in areas with new housing.

⁴ Wallis 2015

⁵ Lumino 2018

⁶ Kinnaman 2011

Given that resources are limited for each denomination, it makes sense for long-term investment if planning takes place ecumenically. This shouldn't be too difficult to organise, given the existence of CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland). Future planning should envision a healthy Church, for at least hundreds of years from now.

Appoint 'Family Friends' to Church Services

Many churches have a 'Welcomer' at the door, handing out books/notice-sheets from a static location. Supporting families attending a church service for the first time needs more mobility. Being mobile allows the 'Family Friend' to escort newcomers to a suitable area, to start up conversation (role-modelling the volume at which it's OK to talk before the service starts) and to let them know where the toilets and nappy-changing facilities are. During the service it can be helpful to point to the right page in the right book as some services can be very confusing to follow (using a quiet voice to explain to children what's happening at the front and what to watch out for). Adults over-hear and find this useful too. If the children are invited to come to the front, it's good to let shy children know that it's optional. Others are encouraged to participate if the Family Friend leads the way to the front and role-models doing any actions enthusiastically.

A well-established church member can go and fetch better toys, more books or anything that isn't immediately available in the family area that might be useful. It would be too embarrassing for nervous visitors to do this themselves!

Hopefully, the family area(s) are in a prime location for participating in the service, but where some noise won't cause a problem. If a child talks a bit too loud for the local culture, the Family Friend smiles so everyone knows that it's OK. Sometimes the potty or a nappy change is needed, so they lead the way to the facilities and stay to chat. The carer doesn't then feel a sense of exclusion for having left the service. It's also a venue for some of the best conversations! For Holy Communion services, it's important to explain options and what to do in good time and well before the visitors are invited to come forward. That way they have time to watch what others do and make an informed decision whether to remain in their seats or go forward. For those of us who are used to Holy Communion, it's hard to imagine the cultural shock that can be experienced by a newcomer!

Children's Bibles Offered to Every Child

A shocking report in 2011 stated that a third of British children didn't own a single book!⁷ 30% of Christian parents don't read Bible Stories to their children.⁸ No wonder children really appreciate being presented with Children's Bibles in schools. I have been doing this for many years now, courtesy of the charity *Bibles for Children*. Enthusiastic reports come back from children who've read them cover to cover within days of taking them home. I've noticed that the children who know the Bible Stories best aren't necessarily the children who go to Junior Church regularly, but those who have a Children's Bible at home that's read. This shows the limitations of modern Junior Church experience and the importance of helping parents to share their faith.

Schools vary in the extent to which they will use the Bibles in class before sending them home. Some send one home with every child with a note to return it if not wanted. Others insist on written permission before the Children's Bible can be taken home. Spare copies aren't wasted because

⁷ Flood 2011

⁸ Mark 2016

teachers beg for spares to give to their relatives. Gideon Bibles are great, but not all Secondary schools permit them to be given out and the presentations are often arranged in a manner to limit take-up. It seems better to give out Children's Bibles in Primary schools because more schools allow it, more children take them home and more of them are read.

Following more research, I would like to see new Children's Bibles published for this purpose, starting with an introduction to help both adults and children. This could discuss the issues around Genesis 1-11, promote an understanding of God's Grace and the advantages of Christian education.

Other Issues Identified

More Youth, Children and Family Workers Needed with Specific Skill Sets

Boys are more likely to attend a youth club run by a man. This is what I have observed and the concept of positive role-models makes sense here. The current boy:girl ratio is alarmingly unbalanced in many churches! I find that the child most likely to leave a Christian group is the oldest boy. Losing boys matters because it makes it harder for Christian girls to find a Christian partner. 'Quadrant' reported that a Christian father is far more likely to take the whole family to church than a Christian mother.

Sporty children seem to leave Christian groups at a younger age than those who like craft and are happy to sit still. This is partly because sporting activities take place on Sunday mornings. There is also a personality issue. I find churches have plenty of members good at craft and catering, and less who were able to run sporting activities. Losing active children matters, because it skews Church Membership to be biased towards particular personality types with a leadership that makes decisions favouring 'people like them'.

I.T. skills are more prevalent amongst the young, as is the use of social media. There are cultural differences between the generations making it important to encourage young adults to get involved in children's work and introduce new ways of working. Churches recognise this. They have been desperately keen for *Grace* to appoint young workers, even when their relevant skills were demonstrably less. I love working with older church members who are keen to pass on the baton to the next generation. Those who offer to resign their place on a committee in favour of a younger person are the ones to keep. They have the rare combination of humility, wisdom and the desire to adapt to cultural changes for mission purposes.

I propose that GAP Year students could be one way of addressing the shortage of young, energetic leadership and would speculate that third world countries might offer a higher male:female ratio of volunteers. To appoint from such countries could helpfully encourage cultural diversity in churches. The cultural/theological differences would need careful managing. From the *Grace* experiment with Time for God volunteers, we found that puppetry using CDs was an excellent medium for outreach where language could be an issue. I believe that sports ministry also lends itself to cross-cultural engagement.

The Age Profile Needed in Churches to Allow Future Church Growth

An analysis of the probability of someone attending a Christian activity at any given age and how this changes over a life time would be very useful for planning church growth. If this could be publicised in an accessible format, there would be a greater understanding of the importance of children's work. (See page 22.)

Change the Law to Increase the Value of Church Assets

Investment for the future is vital for any organisation aspiring to survive for generations to come. Investing in children is not cheap! (A recent survey claimed the average under-five costs their family over £7,000 per year.⁹ In total, each child's education costs the UK government an average of £73,000.¹⁰) However, there is a proverb that says, 'If you think education's expensive, try ignorance!' One *Grace Worker* was paid for out of the proceeds of selling a church building. Where a church needs to be sold, I would speculate that current planning laws reduce the value. As time goes on, it's normal for building restrictions to be relaxed, so this might be worth looking at. I'm not advocating church closure, but where it does become inevitable, it would be good to maximise the capital value.

Expertise vs Long-standing Membership

When starting to work in a new Church, there's a delicate balance to be struck between valuing the new Children's Worker's expertise and the congregation's community knowledge. Planning meetings are a good investment for shared ownership of the programme strategy. A tricky issue can be deciding when to be overtly evangelistic and when to go for a more gentle outreach approach. If the children's work 'expert' only has a short contract, it's not going to be possible to change direction dramatically on such issues.

Since churches rely heavily on volunteers, well established church members can work their way into positions of responsibility that they wouldn't have been considered suitable for in the world of work. Long standing members can be resistant to change and vocalise strongly their own needs. It can be very unhelpful when churches have meetings which dictate the direction of developing the programme without inviting the programme leader to be present. Strange decisions have sometimes been made as a result. For example, I have been required to suddenly add Christian content to a youth drama group six months after it started – changing the nature of the group completely.

Children Receiving Communion

This is a big issue as it's not easy to change important milestones in life. I have not yet promoted Communion before Confirmation in an Anglican church. This is because of families where one of the parents disagrees with infant Baptism, so the children haven't been baptised and would be excluded from the scheme. This has been the case despite the whole family being active members of an Anglican Church. (One father was a Curate!) The system can be divisive in a close-knit group of children. The differences between the denominations affect Christian unity in an age when families switch between them.

⁹ Aviva 2015

¹⁰ Sibietta 2019

Virtual Church

At time of writing, churches are being creative and finding new ways to worship together while their buildings are closed because of Covid-19. There are online platforms allowing interaction between the participants. Some provide anonymity, preferred by some. I.T. provides many new ways of 'Being Church'.

Plenty of Publicity

It's hard for established Church Members who are 'in the know' to appreciate the importance of publicity. I've heard that, on average, people don't make the effort to attend an event unless they've seen it advertised seven times! Families with busy diaries need plenty of notice. A reminder just before is helpful too. Publicity just before the event can be the most effective as there is less 'forgetting time'. Public buildings are getting less willing to display Christian posters, but fortunately there are new ways to advertise events! Churches are getting better at using the internet and the various social media platforms.

False Economy

Church members are generally used to family budgeting and may not have experience of business budgeting or understand the importance of 'investment.' I have regularly had to fight for a publicity budget because church members don't appreciate why it's important. Spending more on publicity usually means that there is better 'value for total money spent' in the long run. Cheap-skating on materials can undermine the quality of an event, thereby reducing the numbers who attend next time and the 'value' of the activity. For this reason, *Grace* sets up an expenses budget as a non-negotiable part of the contract with churches.

Car Parks Help Outreach

We live in an increasingly car-reliant culture and families don't automatically go to their nearest church. Churches with large car parks are at a considerable advantage! It's important not to sell off land if there's any possibility it could be needed for this purpose in the future. For long term planning, parking should be a major consideration when calculating future ministry potential.

Home Visiting

I feel I know a child better if I also know their family. The Scripture Union Wigmore Register used to encourage home visits, but this is getting trickier. Access is difficult to blocks of flats and visiting someone's home can feel like an invasion of their privacy (not to mention GDPR). Home visits can be valuable for relationship-building if done right. I like to visit on a warm day in the summer with an invitation and a gift. The gift is usually a copy of *Kids Alive!*¹¹ It could be a Christian birthday card/gift such as a Children's Bible or a *Bag of Hope*.¹² (The latter is available from UCB for the cost of postage

¹¹ Salvationist Publishing

¹² UCB

and contains a colour Bible-based booklet.) The doorstep conversation can be as long or as short as the home-owner wishes. It's important that the person visiting has the social skills to read their cues.

Atheist Supporters

It's curious to observe that some atheists love church services! One of my best supporters was an atheist, keen to assist with family outreach. She brought her young children to Sunday services and enjoyed them herself. Parents are increasingly willing to let their children 'make up their own minds' about what to believe.¹³ Lack of belief in Christian doctrine doesn't necessarily mean lack of interest in the church. Some like what the church stands for and want to support its community activities. Church history can be appreciated by all faiths and none.

An atheist headteacher has provided one of the warmest welcome to Christian assembly teams. She wanted the pupils to know where social 'value systems' come from. She felt one should use one's intelligence to evaluate belief systems and didn't wish the song-words 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding'¹⁴ to be used in the school.

Not All Christians go to Church

For some, it's impossible to attend church. A child can't attend unless adults organise it. Children tell me they are not a Christian 'because I don't go to church.' 'Going to church' is an easier concept to understand than the abstract word 'faith.' The Sunday School movement produced many Christians who prayed every day, but only attended church on special occasions. They would feel affiliated to that church.

However, when life gets busy, faith is likely to fade without regular spiritual input. The Church is needed for the organisation of future ministry for centuries to come. The importance of maintaining a strong Church should not be underestimated.

Booking in Good Time

It's helpful to know numbers in advance of an event for ensuring the right adult:child ratio and buying food/craft materials. There isn't an easy answer to the problem. It's hard to turn anyone away, especially if children are encouraged to 'bring a friend'. One church offered free tuck to those who booked early. The strategy worked because the children were good at sharing, but it's not a policy I'd recommend! 'First come first served' is only an incentive if a popular event fills up and turns children away on a regular basis. For some programmes I've offered a choice between 'craft' and 'sport' for one of the sessions. Late bookers can't choose craft. Avoiding waste is notoriously tricky whenever numbers aren't known reliably in advance, especially for *Messy Church* and Junior Church.

Community Singing

A special bond develops in community singing. Traditional carols seem to be the last set of Christian songs that all the generations knew and could sing together. Children don't seem to learn many of

¹³ Mark 2016

¹⁴ Hardwick 1995

these any more. School Christmas performances are increasingly using secular Christmas images with specially written songs. Assembly music seems to completely change roughly every two decades. It would be good to see a compilation of, say, 100 hymns/songs, some old, some new to cover a cross-section of life situations that everyone should learn. It would be complicated to compile the list but it could be added to over time. Individual organisations would, of course, add their own additional favourites and the writing of new songs would still be encouraged. The purpose of the list would be to facilitate multigenerational worship and equip people with music for major life events (including baptisms, weddings and funerals.)

Healthy Snacks

Tuck shops are a popular attraction at a youth club. The easiest snack to distribute at clubs are water, squash and biscuits. The cost is low, the 'best before' dates are long and no refrigeration is required. However, parents increasingly prefer healthy snacks to be given to their children and it is ethical to do so. A buffet can cater for different tastes. Activities involving food (e.g. Alpha and Messy Church) are popular. Never underestimate the power of food!

Statements Sometimes Used Unhelpfully

In this section I shall explore expressions quoted that were originally insightful, but sometimes misused to prevent another important issue from being discussed. I call them 'dangerous truths' because the statements are true, but can prevent the resolution of big issues.

'Children aren't The Church of Tomorrow, They're The Church of Today'

This was a once a helpful reminder that the needs of children couldn't wait until they were adults. However, it became a popular catch phrase that cut short many conversations about the future of the church. I have heard many students realising the problem of generational decline for the first time to express the politically incorrect statement, 'Children are The Church of the future'. It was guaranteed that they would be shouted down unhelpfully. An enlightened conversation would immediately stop.

'Cultural Issues are Causing Church Decline'

It is true that cultural changes have reduced church attendance. However, this shouldn't be an excuse for doing nothing. Cultural change may be beyond our control, but The Church can still adapt to change without compromising important principles. People blame Sunday football for tempting children away, but if Sunday School hadn't reduced so dramatically from the 1960s onwards, there wouldn't be any football training on Sunday mornings today. Creative people can find solutions to cultural challenges. For example, shifting communities cause young adults to lose contact with their childhood church so some denominations have national youth committees where membership is

independent of the current place of residence. It's great that we now have 'Pioneer Ministers' trained and empowered to create *Fresh Expressions*.

'Some Churches are Growing'

Recruiting new members to a church may make a church appear to be growing, even if there are actually more departures than arrivals. After moving to a new geographical area, Christians who take their faith seriously often 'shop around' for the liveliest church to meet their own spiritual needs. Worshipping in the lively church chosen, the bigger, national picture may not be obvious. Such churches do wonderful work, developing new styles of Church for today's culture and making converts. However, they may also take potential leadership away from smaller churches with strong local networks. It's good to see traditional denominations church-planting and developing fresh expressions, often using existing church structures and buildings. A 'mixed economy' based at one building offering diverse styles and opportunities for new experimental forms of worship could be more helpful than every generation inventing new denominational structures, which themselves could become old fashioned before too many generations pass.

'Don't Tell the Troops We're Losing the War'

People in top leadership positions have complained about 'Doom-and-Gloomers' to avoid acknowledging unpleasant predictions and attack those who have spoken out. Obviously, it's important to encourage everyone in ministry. But if The Church is to grow again, it needs pro-active leaders who tackle issues head on and honestly. There is merit in sharing good news stories, but some publications are specifically written for leaders who need to hear unpleasant facts with a view to problem resolution.

'You Can Grow Your Own Leaders'

Nurturing future leadership is vital, but may not be possible in a declining church with a high age profile. Young people who don't leave their home church aren't necessarily the strongest leadership material. Leadership training usually takes place outside the comfort zone and geographical area of childhood to experience different ways of doing things. I find that those who never leave their childhood community struggle to differentiate between a 'habit' and a 'rule'. Historical focus on talented youth might feel elitist today, but long-term planning must include developing strategic leadership.

'All Lay Ministry Should be Affirmed'

It's good to recognise individual vocations, but discussions about Children's Ministry regularly widen to every other ministry/age group. 'We need more children.' tends to be followed by 'We need more of every age group.' Consequently, the root causes of church decline don't get discussed or resolved.

In denominations short of priests, laity are asked to take on more responsibility. In an increasingly secular society, ministers have less influence. However, they still have authority within The Church to fulfil their ministry while Children's Workers are rarely viewed as key co-workers.

'Ministers Have Less Respect in the Community than they Used To'

Sadly, this is true in an increasingly secular society. Democratic processes for the governing of churches and lay responsibilities are likely to become increasingly important as priests spread themselves more thinly with responsibility for more and more churches. In traditional churches they maintain their position as leader of the church, carrying ultimate responsibility. I've heard humble denial of their own status used as a diversion to avoid discussing giving youth, children and family workers the status they need to do their work more fruitfully.

'Churches are Better Today Because We're Enlightened/People Aren't Forced to Go.'

It's very easy to make ourselves feel better by being critical of church history. It's too easy to feel smug that we know better than our ancestors. The word 'Victorian' is often used negatively, but their churches enabled a highly Christian culture! They must have done something that was right for the times they lived in.

'Church Means People, Not Buildings'

The word 'church' has several meanings. My dictionary lists four. There are times when it is helpful to remember the core values of being a 'church', but I have also heard the phrase mis-used to shut down an important discussion about making changes to a building so that it can serve the Christians who use it. Not everyone has the discernment to know when to apply important principles.

Ask People What They Want

Whilst it's good to do your research before launching new ministry, considering the results needs discernment. Motivation often occurs at a subconscious level so people aren't always aware of what influences them. They might not know what they will enjoy or benefit from until after it has been tried. Responses can be misleading. Young children, in particular, don't yet have the maturity to know what's good for them in the long run.

Parents say they prefer to take siblings to the same club because of transport, but may later prove willing to escort to different clubs because they care for their children sacrificially. However, groups with a wide age-range are more likely to lose members at the top end because children often want to leave earlier childhood activities behind and seek the company of older children.

Church members may ask for events to be spread through the year for time management reasons. However, I've found that bunching several events together to build up to a climax facilitates higher attendance. This is because of continuity of relationships and the opportunity to remind about the next event with minimal 'forgetting time.'

Ideas Inspired by Literature

(mainly researched 1999 – 2004 and underpinning future action)

Once aware of the loss of children from churches for over a century, it's clear this is a major cause of church membership decline. This is now a generally accepted fact. From a strategic point of view, there is one thing that is imperative now: We must **make sure that the current generation of children from families from a Christian culture grow up to be sufficiently pro-church that they allow their children to go to Christian activities.** This is because faith develops at a young age and parents are the gatekeepers for outreach to children. Adult conversions make dramatic, inspirational stories, but are not as numerous as one might think. (This doesn't stop us from praying for miracles or statistically improbable events.)

It would be crazy to ignore the impact of cultural changes which one would expect to have been the cause of child-losses in the twentieth century. However, a lot of reading and some number crunching showed me that the most dramatic loss of children from the church was in the 1960s and I believe this was mainly caused by bringing the afternoon Sunday Schools into the morning services. Further research could confirm (or disprove) my dramatic hypothesis because my message of hope needs as much validation as possible if it is to inspire sufficient 'change' to reverse church decline.

Moving Afternoon Sunday Schools to the Sunday Morning Service

The late 1940s and 1950s saw a period of considerable church growth.¹⁵ Attendance at the afternoon Sunday Schools had increased at the end of the second world war.¹⁶ The 1944 Education Act made Christian school assemblies compulsory and Religious Education (R.E.) the only subject schools had to teach by law. Sunday Schools needed to be 'different' to R.E. to justify their existence. By the end of the 1950s, Sunday School attendance had started to drop again. The initiative to move Sunday School to the morning service was followed by greater losses.

Promotion of all-age ministry in the late 1950s was very strong via the Family Church and Parish Communion Movements.¹⁷ To increase the spirituality of Sunday School teachers, Ministers introduced a rota so that they wouldn't miss out on worshipping for themselves and hearing sermons. At the time, the number of volunteers may have risen due to the meetings being moved to the morning services, but nevertheless needing a larger pool of volunteers to fill a rota can reduce the calibre of some of the volunteers.

In addition to the theological argument for moving Sunday School from the afternoons, there was a shortage of Sunday School teachers. At the time people were re-locating home more than before, had more cars and Sunday School leaders didn't want a weekly Sunday commitment interrupting their weekends. The concept of 'Youth Culture' had begun and children had a louder voice for choosing for themselves what activities they would like to do.

My hypothesis that moving Sunday School to the morning service was a disaster was published in *Quadrant* in 2004.¹⁸ Regrettably, the graph on which the evidence was based was omitted, but is reproduced below. It was controversial to suggest that Church leaders initiated a disastrous change and inevitably this has been disputed by some. I have heard arguments against my hypothesis that seemed motivated by defensiveness or 'keeping in with the right people'. Until I hear credible

¹⁵ Brown 2001

¹⁶ Brierley 1999

¹⁷ Sutcliffe 2001

¹⁸ Coupe 2004

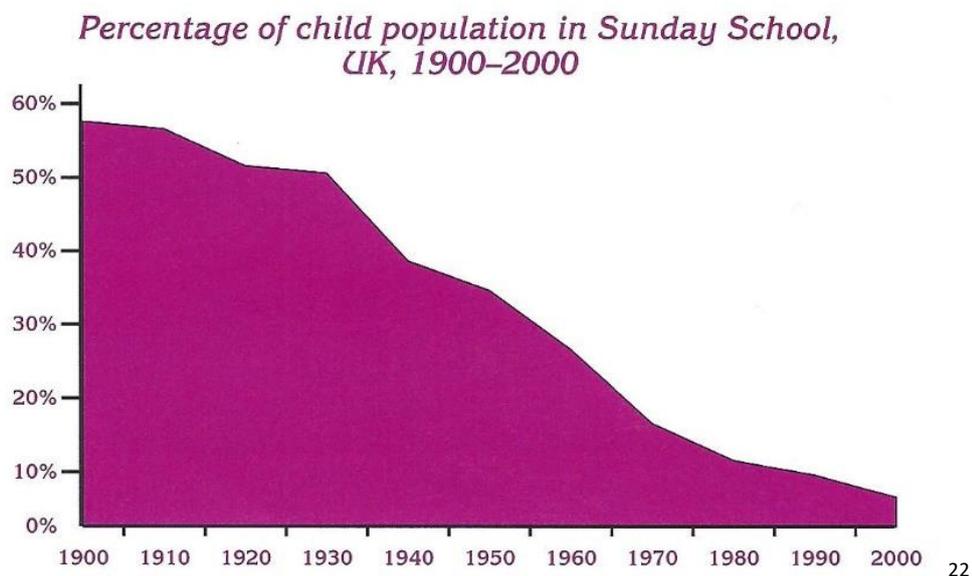
evidence to the contrary, I still believe that the effect of this national initiative has had the effect of halving the size of the Church from the 1970s onwards.

Further evidence for this belief has come from combining information from *The Rise and Fall of the Sunday School Movement*,¹⁹ *Family Church Reappraised*²⁰ and the conference *Sunday School Retrospective*.²¹ This was a conference with lectures by academics. Delegates were informed that in the 1880s, the Sunday School movement reached its percentage peak: 83% of the population. This was the percentage of the population attending Sunday School at some point in their childhood. It was stated that, around that time, there was a power battle won by ministers (with theological training) over Sunday School leaders (experienced at working with children). Having such different backgrounds, would have made it harder to resolve their differences. Not many scholars were becoming church members. The biggest drop in Sunday School attendance was in the 1960s when 80% of afternoon Sunday Schools moved to the morning service in just one decade.

The disturbing idea that national policy caused The Church to halve in size makes me worry when all-age church is promoted at the expense of age-specific activities. Both are needed. The next paragraph explains why I think the reasons for a century of child-loss has been predominantly caused by institutional, rather than cultural reasons.

Using Statistics to Suggest Clues to the Reasons for Child-decline in Churches

In this next section, there is a change to the way percentages are calculated. Instead of counting the children who went to Sunday School at any time in their childhood, the following graph counts the percentage attending Sunday School at any given time. It is a lower figure, but the same changing trends are still be identifiable.



The graph above is a percentage of the population as a whole to eliminate the impact of changing population size. To analyse it further it is helpful to transfer the data to make a graph that shows the 'rate of change'. I hoped that this could help to suggest causes for the decline.

¹⁹ Cliffe 1986

²⁰ Congregational Union 1965

²¹ Christian Education Conference 2004

²² Brierley 1999

A Shocking Suggestion is Actually Good News!

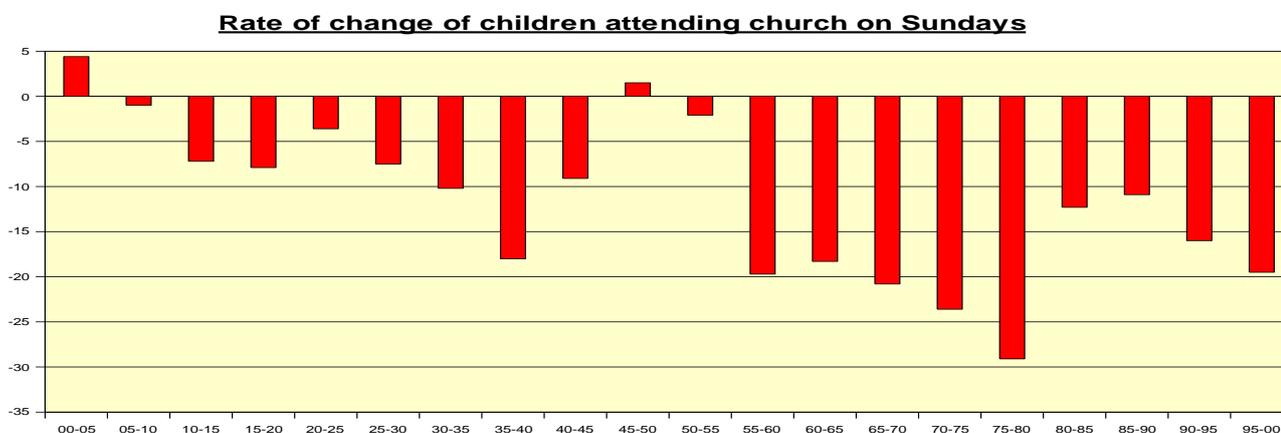
The 'rate of change of percentage of children' showed no obvious pattern(s). However, going back to the original data showing the number of children (rather than the percentage of the population), a pattern emerged. Creating a 'rate of change' graph for the number of children attending Sunday School suggested patterns with identifiable causes.

There being no pattern to the rate of change of percentage of children attending, but a pattern to the rate of change of the number of children attending, suggested to me an alarming thought. The reasons for the decline might be predominantly about the capacity for the number of children who could be accommodated in Sunday School for structural reasons and not because of changing culture. 'Capacity' might be about the number of good leaders available and not just the physical space or any adult:child ratio limits. Perhaps more children might have attended Sunday School if more good leaders had been available? The concept fits with my own observation that any group has a natural maximum and minimum size, depending on the size of space and quality of leadership. Going above that size compromises personal space and relationships so members are more likely to leave. Too few people and the members feel under pressure and there's insufficient social interaction.

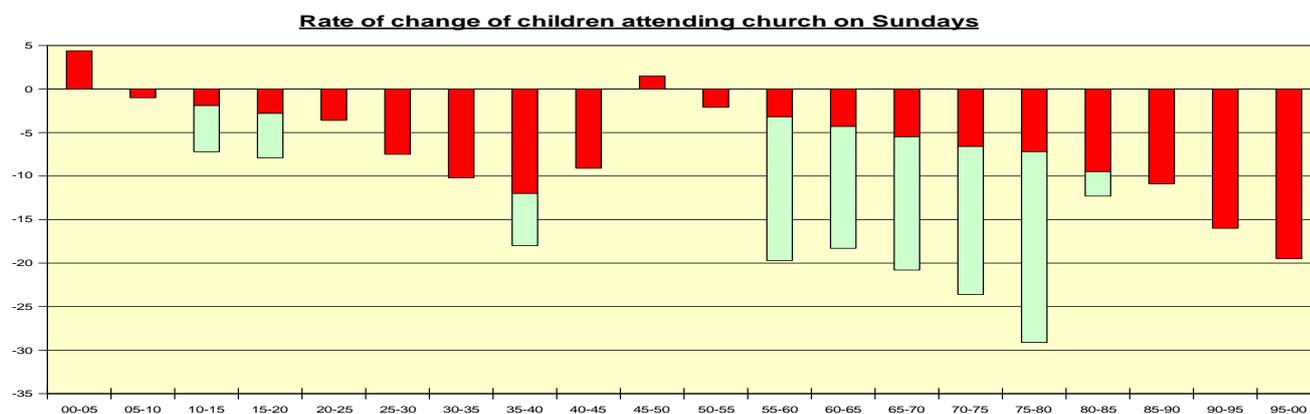
If child-loss was due to institutional reasons rather than because of wider cultural ones, this would be surprising and very good news! To change social culture is increasingly outside the power of The Church. But it is within the power of The Church to change its own internal structures. With humility to learn the lessons of history, future church growth becomes possible! If church structures caused the losses, changing them can potentially do the opposite!

Discerning the Principle (Institutional) Factors Contributing to Child-loss

Looking at the number of children attending Sunday School at a given time, the percentage rate of change graph looks like this:



There is a clear and remarkably upturn after the Second World War bucking the general downward trend. There were additional losses due to the First World War and probably at the start of the Second World War. The rate of losses increase at a steady rate after each war. Superimposed onto these trends, there is an unexplained cohort of losses first noticed in 1960. These additional losses last for about 26 years, roughly a generation. Removing this cohort and the war-time effect (in green below), one could speculate that losses due to institutional structures could look like the remaining graph in red?



The red shading shows the underlying trend.

The green shading shows changes (a) due to war and (b) change in church policy towards children's work

Whilst recognising that the analysis is speculative and in need of further research, I deduced that, apart from cultural changes, there were four main causes of changes to the number of children attending Sunday School:

- (1) Two World Wars**
- (2) Christian educational revival following the Second World War**
- (3) A generation of loss due to moving afternoon Sunday School to the morning service**
- (4) A background institutional problem causing growing rates of loss over time**

If the decline of children has been caused primarily by lack of quality provision and a change in church policy, Then the reverse is also possible. Investing in the young, good policies and organisational structure for allocating human resources ought to be able to reverse the situation. This was the hypothesis, which led to the launching of the charity 'Grace for the Next Generation'.

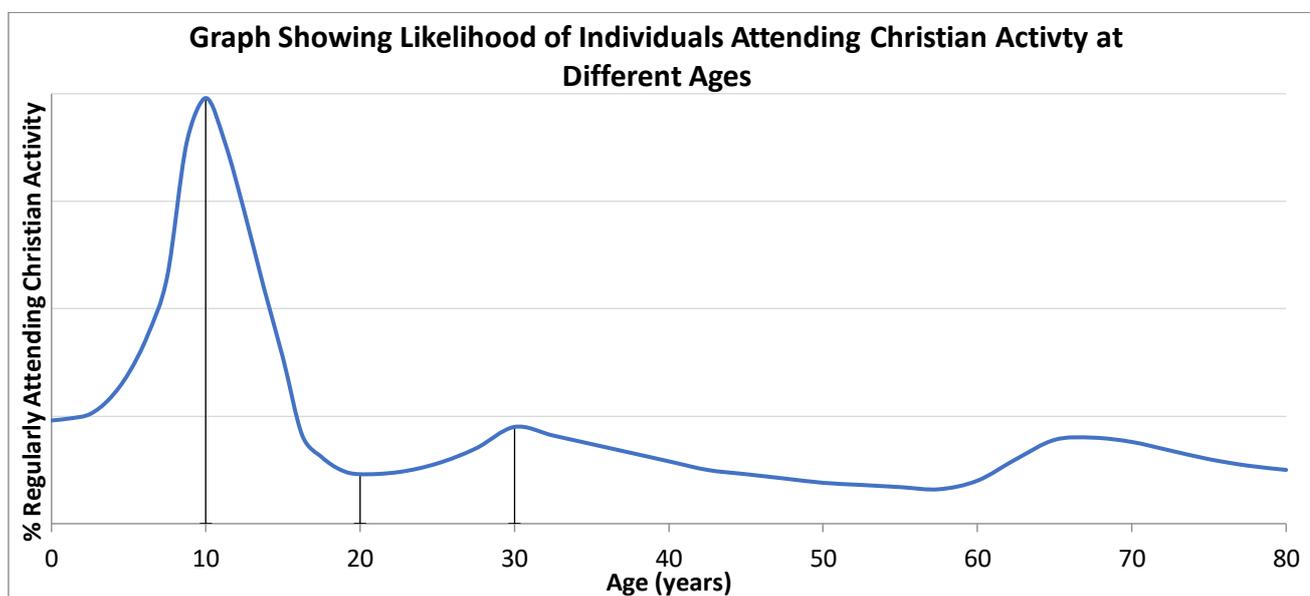
There are distinctive ways that the number of people attending Church in Britain *changes*. One is population growth/decline. (The Victorians had larger families than us.) Another is longevity. (It's great that we're healthier and living longer.) Longevity has kept church membership numbers artificially buoyant, disguising the more significant issues.

The two significant mission factors are, firstly, 'generational decline'. It has been said by David Voas that for each successive generation, there are only roughly half the number of members of various Christian, worshipping activities²³. The second significant factor is 'age-related' recognising that children who attend might leave. The likelihood of a person attending Christian worship varies according to their age. If Junior Church and Christian midweek clubs are included, the peak age for attending is likely to be about 8-10. The least represented ages are probably teenagers, unsettled young adult years and the elderly housebound. Those who fall away as minors, might come back later, e.g. as parents or after bereavement. At this point they may cite a 'conversion experience' or important relationships as their reason for returning to the flock. A minority of teenagers remain and are likely to stay for life. They may have 'caught the faith' passionately and become the inspirational leaders of the future. Others may continue coming to church because they are not rebels or because they struggle to make peer-friends and receive emotional support from the congregation.

²³ Voas 2015/2018

A 'Static' Church

The different reasons for the *changes* confuse the statistics and have disguised the seriousness of child-loss from the church. When analysing the age-profile of church membership, the following (estimated) graph needs to be taken into account. In a **'Static Church'** (i.e. neither growing nor shrinking), the membership age profile graph would look very similar to the graph below. This shows at what age church membership is most likely. Children join The Church, Teenagers leave, but may return when they become parents or become bereaved. (There will be some differences in the graph when drawn for different generations.) This is an important graph to research, draw and publicise. It makes the point that a healthy church needs to have lots of child-members. I think that ministers currently underestimate how many children need to be reached, just to maintain The Church at its current size. This provides a false security and a sense of complacency if there are any attending at all!



24

Since children in church are not 'brainwashed' or forced to continue their membership, church membership will inevitably decline as a percentage of the population, (even if there was no immigration of other faiths,) unless there is a strategy for recruiting children from families who don't come to church. This is an important role for child-focussed ministry.

The following equation summarises the church population. There are five variables on the right hand side of the equation. To increase each variable requires a different set of strategies.

The number of people who are church members	=	Children brought to church by family members x % who continue in the faith	+	Children going to Christian activities without adult x % who adopt the faith	+	Number of adult 'converts'
--	---	--	---	--	---	----------------------------

²⁴ Brierley 1998

Christians Who Don't Go to Church

We think of Victorian Britain as being strongly Christian. For many, belonging to a church didn't mean going to church every Sunday. For some families, it meant going to church for the 'specials' (i.e. Christmas, Easter, Weddings, Baptisms and Funerals) and sending their children to Sunday School. They may also have prayed and read the Bible regularly. Even in today's increasingly secular culture, I have met non-churchgoers who pray every day as a result of Sunday School attendance. The transformational effect of Christian clubs has shown participants to be happier and grow up to be less selfish, less vulnerable to alcohol/drug abuse, have more respect for authority and higher morals.²⁵ Many unchurched parents are anxious for their children to learn right from wrong and surprisingly happy to let their children choose their own beliefs and religion.²⁶ This provides hope for the future that child-focussed clubs can help the future church to grow. The importance of the tier of nominally Christian families who aren't church members should not be underestimated. It is from this group that new children from unchurched families might be the ones to grow The Church.

My Story

Brief Periods of Children's Work

I became a Sunday School Teacher at 16. My group of seven year old boys disliked the text-heavy workbook I was provided with. The following year I created my own visual, crafty materials, then left home for University. In my final undergraduate year, I successfully re-started a village Sunday School by cycling with invitations to the farms inhabited by Baptism families. Younger student friends continued to lead the group. It would be ten years before I did any more children's work. I didn't think of it as a vocation.

During a GAP year living back at home, I was invited to help lead my old Guide Company, but declined as I was about to move away for Teacher Training. Once settled in my first job (as a maths teacher in a Roman Catholic school) I found a church to settle in, joining the music group on my first visit. I was only invited onto the Junior Church rota once I became a parent.

For two years, my family lived in the USA, attending an Episcopal church. Curiously, the crèche rota of mums was replaced by a paid worker who was a Muslim. (There had previously been no Christian input, anyway.) Having a more regular carer facilitated the kind of loving, faith-nurturing relationship that encourages faith development.

Campaigning for Change

On returning to England, my family and I returned to our previous church and became increasingly engaged in its ministry. It was proposed to cut the ministry time to 0.5 of a Priest using a formula that counted how many people resided in the city-centre parish, but not the footfall of shoppers passing

²⁵ Kay & Francis 1996

²⁶ Lumino 2018

the church door. I counted 10,000 people in one hour! A clever compromise by the Diocese allowed full-time ministry to continue. Under a minister talented in mission, the church grew impressively.

I began studying for an M.Ed. part-time with a view to going back to teaching once my children were in school. This fitted well alongside a part-time paid role as Church Administrator. I was also Sunday School Co-ordinator and the group was doubling in size each year. I ran the Toddler Group, covering for the official leader who was a supply teacher. This experience gave me an interest in the psychology of dynamics of leadership and authority.

As Secretary of the Diocesan Youth Committee, I supported the Youth Adviser's successful campaign to maintain the Children's Adviser's position when the post-holder was retiring. The decision had been taken to scrap the post for financial reasons. Thanks to broad-based support and a generous gesture the paid position is still in place today. Peter Brierley's book *The Tide is Going Out*²⁷ had just been published.

Vocation Frustration

Four different Christians in four days said to me that there was no solution to Church generational decline. Four times a voice screamed in my head, '**There is a solution, we just haven't thought of it yet.**' That was the start of a clear vocation to challenge the view that decline was inevitable. As a result of moving house, my family and I joined the local United Reformed Church (URC) with thriving youth and children's groups. You can't claim to have a vocation in children's ministry and not care about the spiritual nurture of your own children. During our children's adolescence, it was important to go to a church where they were likely to choose to continue to worship into adulthood. By joining a church that met the needs of my children, I was joining a church that didn't need my talents because there was already strong leadership for youth and children's work.

At this time, there were a few churches employing Youth Workers, but no children's workers positions advertised locally. The paid Youth Workers I knew did not last for very long in post. Good people were either giving up, discouraged from poor management or 'promoted' to the ordained ministry within about two years. Personal information would be discussed by large groups of untrained Trustees. Excessive interference by non-experts and unreasonable expectations could make life impossible. The stories convinced me that it would be better to employ a Children's Worker who could recruit from an age-group more open to starting Christian activities.

I attended many conferences and training courses and spoke to as many people as I could. Losing children was blamed on changing culture – a comforting way to explain the problem blamelessly and an excuse for doing nothing. Some denominations have taken initiative e.g. *On our knees* calling Baptists to prayer for the situation, but others were defensive in their response, pointing out that Church influence was greater than Christian Research statistics suggested. Schoolwork was suddenly counted in. As a maths specialist, I find that a lot of people don't appreciate the difference between a snapshot and a trend. Demonstrating that the church has more adherents by counting them differently doesn't change the fact that membership is going down.

A long-term plan for church growth will need many strategies, so it is good to see Church Schools valued for their wonderful work influencing the young transformational. I have worked in hundreds of schools and love schools' work. It's refreshing to work in the comfort zone of a setting where attendance is guaranteed or easy to recruit.

²⁷ Brierley 2000

Visiting Small Churches

Alongside being Commissioning Editor 8-11s for Scripture Union SALT/Light materials I was the volunteer Children's Work Secretary for the URC East Midlands Synod. The former provided splendid training and mentoring for theological/educational thinking. My claim to fame was producing the first of the popular *Bible Timelines*.²⁸ As a volunteer in the URC, I had the opportunity to raise the profile of children's work and promote the *Child-friendly Church Award Scheme*. I was invited to visit many churches. The common theme would be, 'We used to have a thriving Junior Church, now we have no (or few) children. What can we do?' A few churches had some highly motivated young families and scope for developing their programme of activities. In small churches, I would look at the small group of elderly hopefuls, and wonder what realistic strategies could be suggested. Prayer was the first and most important. Strong catering and relationship skills provided further opportunity. I would suggest advertising their special Christmas services more widely. To provide for unexpected families visiting for the first time, bags of activities were suggested for the pews and an attractive crèche area with toys permanently available. For sustainable new activities, I would suggest engaging a professional children's entertainer and offering refreshments as part of the session, emphasising the importance of publicity beforehand. Quality relationship-building and a take home leaflet could encourage families to return at a future date.

Hearing the individual church stories, I realised the importance of recruiting new children, quality provision and having a critical mass to have enough children remaining into their teens for a viable youth group. If the Junior Church 'died out' because a viable group of youngsters grew up and moved from the area, one could guess there was quality ministry, but not enough recruiting of new families. If there were young children engaging with the church, but not staying, then the quality of ministry should be reviewed. The existence of a thriving youth group was helpful for holding on to older children and teenagers.

I was constantly aware that small churches were unlikely to have the financial resources to employ a full-time Children's Worker and, even if they did (e.g. via a legacy), would be unlikely to manage them well. Supposing an organisation existed to provide a specialist part-time worker? Thus *Grace for the Next Generation* was born in concept. First, God provided me with useful hands-on experience: as a Schools Worker Co-ordinator and School Governor.

It was a privilege to join an inspirational team, including a GAP Year student, with dedication and commitment to schoolwork ministry. A talented young man from India was a particular asset to the project which operated in an area with many Asian families. Together we created an appropriate setting for children to ask their deep questions. Both of us were present and the children came to us in pairs. I developed the work in schools as well as extending ecumenical one-off events/roadshows. It was much easier to recruit to after-school clubs than to a Junior Church on Sunday mornings.

²⁸ Coupe 2004

'Grace for the Next Generation'

Setting Up *Grace* as Limited Company and a Charity

Grace for the Next Generation was named after research that identified the biggest reason why children remained in church into adulthood was understanding God's Grace, rather than perceiving religion as a set of rules.²⁹ The mission statement is '*Grace for the Next Generation* exists to promote good quality Christian children's work. It will help churches to reach more children and to cater for their needs. This will be done by undertaking research, providing training, mentoring and other services.' *Grace* was started with a loan of £1,500 which was paid back quickly. I had advice on setting up a limited company from *Business Link* and then registered it with the *Charity Commission*. A solicitor drew up contracts between *Grace* and customer churches. An accountant was needed to (successfully) argue with the Inland Revenue that *Grace* was a not-for-profit service provider which didn't need to charge VAT. I am very grateful to my Directors who, from the beginning provided huge support and encouragement.

From the start, I was determined that *Grace* would be the very best employer it could be. Charities must keep their fees low, restricting funds for salaries and employee care, but I consulted *AMAZE*, an Association of Christian Youth and Children's Workers for help. They offered training and coached me through assembling a robust set of policies and staff handbook.

Initially churches were only asked to agree a one-year contracts as *Grace* was a new, untested organisation. One of the early challenges was agreeing a work schedule in the contract which needed to be signed before appointing workers and knowing their skill-sets. As time went on, new opportunities would arise and programmes needed to evolve in the light of experience.

To attract customer churches, I wrote a letter and pamphlet explaining that *Grace* offered a part-time worker one day a week and one Sunday a month. (Postage was cheaper in those days.) These were sent out to all licensed ministers and two other officials at churches of all denominations in a City Directory. All the responses came from active ministers in charge of churches from four denominations. Consequently, the next, bigger mailing went out to a wider geographical area and was only sent to priests in charge of Anglican, Methodist, URC and Baptist churches. The Methodist Connexion backed the scheme, promoting *Grace* in two Districts where I was able to attend the Conference Market Places. I subsequently received several enquiries about having a *Grace* Worker from ministers who had moved to new positions. It has been good that so many busy ministers have supported the *Grace* Project, recommending it to their colleagues.

As soon as a contract was signed, new churches were given information to help them prepare for their new worker and forms to complete so that *Grace* had all the information needed. *Grace* Workers being placed in a new church received forms for collecting information so that they could plan quickly and start ministry faster.

An early threat to *Grace* came from false news that *Grace* Workers were self-employed, a strategy often used to avoid employer responsibilities. This was not true. The issue was resolved with helpful intervention of the Methodist District Employment Adviser.

²⁹ Roberts 2003

Grace has been challenged by placements being geographically spread. Travelling has cost workers both time and money. Living far apart has made it difficult to meet regularly. It is for this reason that the work of the *Grace* Project can now be organised better through denominational structures. Some workers found it confusing having two managers: a *Grace* Manager and a Church Manager. The workers formed stronger relationships with some Church Members than with me because they spent more time with them, working alongside each other in ministry, (as with 'Temps' working for agencies.)

Feedback from churches has directly related to the calibre of their *Grace* Worker, for obvious reasons. Only a small minority of churches have complained about their worker. Churches have really appreciated the time *Grace* has saved them by doing all the employment administration for them. Employees have appreciated opportunities made possible through the existence of *Grace* and support when negotiating their work with churches.

Years 1 & 2 (2007 – 2009)

There were four customer churches in the first year of *Grace* operating, so I was the first and only worker. I travelled to four different places Monday to Thursday 20, 30, 60 and 15 minutes drive from home. Rush hours could generally be avoided. Organisation was key, so I kept a bag, folder and box-file for each church. My strategies for getting ministry started quickly included meeting key people quickly (leadership/volunteers/schoolteachers) and good advertising for a crowd-pulling event. There was a magic show at each church performed by a professional Christian Illusionist. These were very popular. I was able to advertise to the audience the new toddler groups and after-school clubs that were starting. These new groups began early October, well before the half-term holiday. The cooler October weather made club recruitment easier as children were keen to join indoor activities with their friends. I was very organised about how I kept contacts information, getting permission on each form signed. GDPR law has tightened up since but, done correctly, a contacts list remains a useful tool for organising publicity.

The monthly Sunday visits to each church could either support a new Junior Church or an All-age Worship Service. Both models successfully re-engaged the church with fringe members and attracted new people too. Innovative all-age services attracted new members to the congregation and featured music groups for young learners. Messy Church proved to be particularly popular and 'JAM' club was an instantly successful Junior Church, offering Jammy Dodgers to its members!

All but one of the midweek activities was successful. I started two Toddler Groups on consecutive days and both had similar attendance. The first one doubled in size the following Tuesday and remained strong permanently. The Wednesday group halved because of an illness taking up to three weeks to recover. Those who returned to the group were fewer in number in each successive week and, noticing the numbers were smaller, most didn't return again. This demonstrates the importance of a critical mass for a group to thrive. There was a re-launch, but the weather was atrocious! Since then, I have warned new customer churches that some initiatives can fail due to circumstances beyond the control of the *Grace* Worker, in which case, just try something different, taking encouragement from other activities that do succeed. The only real failure is to give up trying.

Liaising with schools with offers of input sometimes required persistence. It was thrilling to have so many local schools open their doors to extensive input with monthly Bible-based assemblies in nine schools, a lunch club and lessons on baptisms, weddings, the Last Supper, Bible Explorer and secular puppet lessons. On church premises I ran four toddler groups, two after-school clubs and an evening

youth club. The young people helped at church fairs and undertook gardening. One off events included two holiday clubs, a Bring and Buy Sale, Light Party, Remembrance Day activities, Stations of the Cross and supporting a school production by making props. Neighbouring churches joined in with ecumenical projects, demonstrating how to work together well. It was possible to achieve so much ministry in one year because the same planning could be used for more than one group.

One of the most memorable moments in that first year of *Grace* was a member of the congregation crying tears of joy watching eight children perform the first Nativity Play for very many years. At the end of one year, an average of 125 new children had attended each of the churches.

Grace Grows

Nine new churches joined *Grace* in its second year and a Methodist Circuit requested a *Grace Worker* to train and develop across all their churches. Three of the four original churches continued with *Grace*. (The church that left had lost its minister and changed priorities.) Preparations were made to select two additional full-time employees. The first selection process proved successful and would be repeated each year:

The *Grace* AGM was held in the morning and the interviews in the afternoon. Interviewees arrived at the start of the buffet lunchtime. Members of new churches joining *Grace* were able to meet and chat to members of churches with experience of *Grace*. In addition to the interview I set a written task and a practical session with children. The candidates prepared the lesson on the interview day and walked to a local school to lead it with rotating groups of children. In 2008 there were not many applications, but this improved over the following decade. We recruited one on the day and a British ex-pat living abroad interviewed later by Skype, emailing the written tasks adapted appropriately. The skills the *Grace* Directors were looking for were the ability to build relationships, provide fun activities, a passion for children's ministry and the ability to think on one's feet and prepare sessions quickly (to avoid burnout). A representative from *AMAZE* attended the first few interview days, gathering feedback from churches. I was particularly complimented for being a good communicator.

Two Men Appointed

The second year of *Grace* featured two male employees and, not surprisingly, youth clubs full of boys. One new recruit had many years of voluntary experience, enabling him to train longstanding Circuit Volunteers. The Circuits targets for the year were not just met, but exceeded. In another church he was able to demonstrate that it's still possible to grow Sunday family attendance, even if there is a large, more energetic congregation meeting nearby. The other new employee had a wonderful sense of humour facilitating strong relationships. He was very creative, had lots of ideas for learning memory verses and developed contemporary themed events such as Dr Who, High Octane and recent films released. Every *Grace Worker* appointed has had a very strong faith and sense of vocation.

Year Two

The first week of September was 'training week' and this pattern would continue each year. From the second year of *Grace* I was training and supervising other *Grace Workers* and they wrote annual reports, so I can comment on their experiences as well as my own.

Changes made in the second year included the system for claiming expenses. Instead of each church paying its own expenses, *Grace* paid them out for all. This cut down the total admin time, particularly as craft equipment was used across different places. Some congregations had felt the need to be unhelpfully frugal, rendering the whole year less fruitful in ministry and less cost-efficient in the long run. Churches in their second year with *Grace* all reported good development from what had been

achieved in their first year. All the schools experiencing a second year continued to welcome Christian input and were making additional requests for more visits. Some ministers delegated the role of 'Grace contact' to a lay person and either approach was successful, provided the contact person returned phone calls.

Golden Years 3-5 (2009 – 2012)

Grace continued to grow very quickly. In these years there were 7, 8 and 9 workers respectively. In year 3, the first week was busy with running a holiday club in the morning and training in the afternoon. One new *Grace* Worker came with a broken leg in plaster, demonstrating the exceptional level of commitment often found in those with a sense of vocation. Feedback afterwards, stated that it was fun and rewarding to 'hit the ground running'. A worth-while project quickly promoted team-spirit amongst the newly augmented *Grace* team. One person said it was tiring and hard to be 'on show' with a team of people they didn't yet know well. Year 4 got off to a brilliant start with the first week in September spent at St Deiniol's, North Wales (Gladstone Library) in a delightful, rural setting. With use of our own conference room, this was an expensive, but idyllic start to the year. Each of the workers contributed some of the training, and professionals were brought in (for insurance purposes) for training in safeguarding, and health and safety. An electrician did the annual PAT testing two weeks later at the *Grace* headquarters (my house). The Year 5 conference was held in a Bed and Breakfast venue near a railway station to help a worker with another job to attend part-time. It worked well to use the dining room for our meetings.

Innovative Ministry

With a bigger team, I received reports of new, enterprising activities undertaken. *Grace* was blessed with wonderful, hard workers:

Two part-timers combined *Grace* work with studying or voluntary work whilst offering for The Ministry. Sadly, both left after a year having blessed *Grace* and their churches with their calm wisdom, handling volunteers inspirationally, and enthusiastic introduction of electronic games for youth clubs to enjoy. Young workers brought maturity beyond their years, expertise in I.T. and social networking. They engaged superbly with children and their parents. Their innovative ideas included Crafty Café, Bangers and Beans, a Chocolate Stop at a church with high footfall at 3:15pm, Cross-Circuit Children's Workers' Forum, artistic design ideas for publicity and expert handling of some very disadvantaged youth. Young Mums brought their own children to activities, where possible, thereby helping to build up the numbers to a critical mass. This was particularly helpful on Sundays. One was known affectionately as 'The God Lady' owing to her enthusiastic school assemblies etc. Another worker set up a toddler group in a church with no congregation at the time. At first the group built up slowly. A group of friendly childminders formed a critical mass and the group grew quickly. Members formed the nucleus of a new Methodist congregation which would worship there in the future. Other *Grace* Workers brought expertise in craft and did a good job handling some difficult club members and tricky volunteer helpers. One worker spent time on a school playground, encouraging active play at lunchtimes because the Headteacher refused Christian input altogether. Publicity for Christian events held in church was, however, permitted.

Professional Actor

A new worker was appointed with a drama degree and a year's experience in Christian theatre. He produced a Bible overview drama which was performed at most of the *Grace* churches. He prepared his dramas thoroughly, including learning all the words by heart. Thus his preparation time was high,

but well justified. All dramas produced were stunningly brilliant. They included humour and suspense. The audience atmosphere was electric with everyone fully engaged and holding bated breath at key moments.

Our actor was teamed up with a *Grace Worker* with excellent administration skills who could organise publicity and negotiate invitations for performances. (She was also a great Children's Worker running a particularly successful Junior Church.) *Grace* publicised the Bible overview drama alongside the annual publicity for new customer churches. Disappointingly, there was no response for the drama apart from existing *Grace* churches. Both the drama flyers and *Grace* publicity were printed to the same standard and style, so one must assume that the need for help with children's work resonated more with Ministers than the opportunity to have a quality drama come to their church.

Gold Awards

One *Grace Worker* in particular deserves credit for exceptional ministry and achieving the 'Gold Award' at the first presentation ceremony at the Children's Ministry Conference. She developed a toddler group by inviting visits from the dentist, police, and Book-start and took the families to a local farm. The after-school club grew considerably with the introduction of a 'walking bus' from the school to the church. Volunteers and older children were given training via the 'Growing Leaders' course. She held a Praise Party and took 'Prayer Spaces' into school where she helped set up a sensory garden.

Two more *Grace Workers* achieved the 'Gold award' in *Grace* year 5. Particular praise is due to the capable, young *Grace Worker* who ran a challenging Youth Club. The group included some seriously disadvantaged young people with behavioural issues. The group became legendary in the local area for improving their lives and their behaviour through love, determination and a safe space to talk. Some of these teenagers came to *Messy Church* and really enjoyed the crafts. Other innovative work included a highly original programme leading up to Christmas and an *Alpha*-style course for children on Sundays.

In the Community

25% of a *Grace Worker's* time was requested for an area in which a chapel had been closed. The revenue from the sale of the building was the source of funding, gladly spent by a congregation sad to lose their building. This created a scenario where the ministry was acting on behalf of a church not there any more. A local church from a different denomination was very supportive and provided the *Grace Worker* a place to go to between activities. The placement was a long way from the *Grace Worker's* home, so it was important to have somewhere with a toilet, sink and kettle to use at lunchtime and between activities.

Asda and Tesco have both supported *Grace Workers*. An Asda requested a weekly, Christian craft club to take place in their café. After an initial period of success, numbers dwindled and the *secular vs religious* debate took hold. A Tesco Community Champion has provided funding so that a toddler group could afford healthy snacks.

Feedback from Workers

Positive experiences from *Grace Workers* included working with people with disabilities, encouraging inclusion and self-confidence. They loved the amazing drama brought to their churches by our actor. New employees reported sadness at feeling disengaged from their own local church, unable to attend on Sundays once working for *Grace*. (This was particularly true for young Christians used to a charismatic style of worship, now working in traditional churches.) It is clear from the annual reports

written in the golden years that *Grace Workers* really loved their work and achieved a huge amount with their time. They enjoyed being part of *Grace*, valued the support, resources and opportunities. There was thought to be a good balance between accountability and freedom to take initiative. They were pleased to have the freedom to use their skills and take advantage of local opportunities. Many expressed a hope that they could be more involved with developing *Grace*. They valued time spent with other *Grace Workers* and feeling part of a team. Team meetings took place on a Friday, which was otherwise designated a preparation day. Although the *Grace Workers* all wanted to spend more time together, this proved to be difficult to organise as they were spread over a wide geographical area. Increasing the number of dates for get-togethers would eat into Church time. Part-time employees with children at school preferred short hours in order to be at the school gate both ends of the day. This seriously limited the time spent together. The other issue concerning part-timers was that they needed just as much training and supervision as full-timers, but some resented having to spend a higher proportion of their time in such activities. This was inevitable, even though I limited the *Grace* tasks required of them. *Grace Workers* were generally very generous with their time. For example, using artistic talent to design publicity postcards and a logo for *Grace*. They also chose Work Wear for a stronger corporate image. The new logos and clothing greatly enhanced the *Grace* branding.

Timesheets and Appraisals

Timesheets were useful for spotting when a worker was doing too many hours (risking burn-out). They demonstrated that the contracts between *Grace* and the churches were fulfilled. Administration was generally unpopular, especially time-consuming tasks taking time away from ministry. *Grace Workers* didn't always like the clerical side of their work! I advised workers not to spend too long on timesheets and needed to explain their necessity.

Key people working alongside *Grace Workers* in Churches and Schools were asked to complete written appraisals in January. Churches were asked to decide whether they wished to renew their contract with *Grace* by the end of March. The two processes were kept completely separate for good reason.

I noticed that younger workers were getting lower marks on appraisal forms. This was surprising as churches nearly always expressed a preference for appointing a young *Grace Worker*. I addressed an imbalance by reducing the questions where experience counted and adding questions about energy, appreciating modern culture and relating to children, youth and parents.

Highlights of Year Five

Year 5 began and ended particularly well. The initial conference included a sponsored walk between villages with initials spelling out G-R-A-C-E. Church members in places starting with each of the letters needed were incredibly supportive, opening up their churches for refreshments and even offering to accompany us if we did it again! It was the year of the Olympics in London and the team wrote assemblies on sporting themes to offer free at the Children's Ministry Conference. In July, *Urban Saints* invited *Grace* to run the 8-11s meetings at their *Spree* activity weekend. Everyone was very excited about this and worked really hard as a team to create the programme. As in many of our churches, good use was made of the London Olympics as a theme. *Spree* was a superb weekend and the *Grace* team did brilliantly. *Grace Workers* demonstrated empathy and flexibility, adjusting plans appropriately to the needs of their young audience. I was exceptionally proud of our input! The presentations were fun, lively, prayerfully thought-provoking and well received. It was a really positive experience being part of an *Urban Saints* event. The team were particularly pleased

that so many children attending gave their lives to Christ. Every child attending received a 'Bag of Hope' containing age-appropriate Christian literature. It was disappointing to hear that *Urban Saints* had a policy to invite different organisations to run the groups each year as being part of a Spree weekend was the all-time highlight for Grace.

Five-year review (2012)

I asked *AMAZE* to conduct an external five-year review on the work of Grace. All the churches which had participated were sent a questionnaire and all the responses received were read by Leon Coates, along with a wide variety of other documents. Leon had already had considerable contact with Grace, so he was in a good position to add the written evidence to his own personal experience of the organisation (attending AGM/selection days and delivering training).

At this time, there were nine *Grace* Workers, serving eleven churches and three Circuits. For each church paying for a 25% share of their time a great number of children were ministered to. On average each church would see about:

25 families via regular attendance at either a club or Church,
a further 75 families attending events and holiday clubs and
a further 250 children in school via regular assemblies

The full review was posted on the *Grace* website. In the summary, Leon stated that '*Grace* achieves what it sets out to. In every church worked in there has been an improvement in the ability of that church to connect with children and families in ways that meet the needs of the local community. Even when *Grace* has moved on from a church it almost always leaves a legacy of volunteers able to continue the ministry, creating lasting links to children and families in the community. *AMAZE* is pleased to recommend *Grace* as a safe and effective solution for churches with limited resources to build up a lasting ministry with children and families.' *Grace* was complimented on effective management and supervision, a robust recruitment process, a comprehensive staff handbook and an expenses budget for doing the job well. The staff were highly praised for their ministry and the appreciation/high ratings they received from each church. It was stated that 'All churches reported an improvement in children's work as a result of their input.' Travel costs were an expensive drain on the *Grace* accounts, but the scheme was still considered by *AMAZE* to be good value for money.

Two Difficult Years 6-7 (2012 – 2014)

No New *Grace* Projects

The *Grace* model was working well while the customer base was growing. However, it was recognised from the beginning that it might not be sustainable in the long run, particularly if there should be a year when the number of customer churches reduced. Customer churches were asking for help with funding and finance has been, by far, the single biggest reason for losing customers. I cleared my diary to allow time to develop new ideas, focussing particularly on those that would produce a profit. Money raised from both Christian and secular education markets could then have subsidised churches with good ministry potential. I produced what I considered to be viable ideas but was not able to convince my board of directors to proceed with them. Consequently, *Grace* has been unable to adapt to a changing environment and is now being wound down to possible closure.

Longer Contracts

Grace had started off by offering one-year contracts because churches were unlikely to offer a longer commitment to a new organisation. However, it was noted that significant developments took place in the second year of a *Grace* Worker placement. It was hoped that offering longer contracts would lead to more applications for each post advertised. Thus, there was no publicity for churches to join *Grace* for 2012. It was resumed for 2013 when six new churches joined *Grace* and every church, new and existing, had a two-year contract.

A New Manager

The 2012 *Grace* Conference was the least successful of the *Grace* training conferences. We stayed in holiday chalets that were well designed for families, but felt claustrophobic for a training conference. The visiting speakers were appreciated, as always. It was five years since *Grace* began and the occasion was marked with a delicious, *Grace*-green cake made by one of the *Grace* Workers.

For various reasons, relationships became strained. Did every *Grace* Worker need to agree with every *Grace* Policy? The policy to respect the traditions of each denomination gave rise to debates on some thorny issues. I asked a Director/Employee to take over from me as supervisor and she was very popular with the workers. She had the tricky task of juggling several hats: Colleague, Supervisor and Director. A 'Buddy System' was introduced, helping *Grace* Workers to support each other.

To help publicise *Grace* (to attract new customer churches and applications to new roles), free puppet scripts introducing a theme from Lectionary gospel readings were put on the *Grace* Website. There was a strong field of applicants for new positions starting September 2013.

A Happier Conference

The September 2013 conference took note of constructive criticism from the previous year. Workers attending wished to have fun and be engaged in practical tasks. They liked to hear a variety of external speakers delivering expertise from different perspectives. We went to Gloucester on the trail of Robert Raikes, drawing inspiration from his life story. The accommodation was a flat above a shop which worked well, both for facilities and its location in the centre of the city. We also had two new recruits who were constantly smiling and positive in outlook.

A mid-year position became available via an experimental 'De-luxe' scheme. This was the first time *Grace* appointed a worker to one specific church. A brilliant young lady 'hit the ground running', successfully implementing new children's work into a large, active church.

This was the moment when finances were going down faster than at any other time in *Grace* history. (I had been spending more money than usual to try to build up the team spirit and some of the churches had requested a change to their contract.) There followed a 'year of austerity' and a new system for monitoring the accounts. The strategy worked so *Grace* has never been in financial difficulty. *Grace* has been blessed that churches are good payers. Most have been happy to pay by standing order. Some still need to write cheques. If the treasurer forgets to pay, a reminder soon sorts out the problem quickly. It is a real blessing for any organisation to have customers who pay well!

Year 6 ended with a lively weekend mission at one of the *Grace* Churches. An excellent series of sessions on St Paul was planned, utilising ideas and talents from the whole team. Year 7 ended with a busy and well organised series of events on Zacchaeus across a Methodist Circuit. The local *Grace* Worker took the lead and was kind enough to let all the *Grace* Workers stay in her home.

Change of Personnel

Several ministers left a *Grace* Church in year 7. This tends to cause panic in the congregation and busy people become even busier. There is a reluctance to consider the future, make any changes or develop what's already happening. When a new minister is appointed, they expect to have planning conversations with a few key church members, but they were unwilling to talk to a children's worker or me, their manager. This has resulted in a lean period of ministry for the *Grace* Worker and a wasting of the money the church has invested in them.

Several *Grace* Workers left at the end of year 7. Some of our workers left to be a teacher - a profession with better pay, permanent contracts and career development prospects. Whilst the turnover of *Grace* Workers has been higher than I would have liked, it remained considerably better than the average for church-based youth and children's workers.

Worker Feedback

The *Grace* Workers continued to exercise excellent ministry in their different churches, developing new opportunities that built on ministry that had gone on before. Recruiting volunteers to help them to run activities could be challenging. The *Grace* Workers' journeys to churches were at their longest and most tiring at this time, but the employees enjoyed the diversity of their work in different places. When a church and a *Grace* Worker parted company, the workers reported experiencing a sense of bereavement at the time of leaving.

By now, exit interviews were routinely taking place so that leavers could give an honest reflection on their time spent with the charity. The pastoral care offered by their new supervisor was much appreciated and I was perceived as having a more business-management skill-set. They commented that there were now similar schemes offering better value for money. It was noted that the fee that *Grace* charged the churches seemed a large cost at the outset but was increasingly valued by church members as they watched the ministry grow.

Other feedback included the suggestion for more ecumenical projects and more storage facilities. The whole team had enjoyed going to the Family Ministry Conference in Eastbourne. In particular, the team had gained insight from the recent Sticky Faith research showing the importance of *Grace*, relationships, tough conversations and acting out faith through social justice.³⁰

Difficulties in Recruiting Years 8 & 9 (2014-2016)

The following two years were characterised by recruiting fewer churches to join *Grace*, having less good applicants to invite to the interview days and having to re-advertise positions. *Grace* Workers appointed continued to have the same passion and skill for their ministry, but it was necessary for me to work at churches up to two hours drive from my home because we weren't able to recruit. Both reductions were thought to be caused by 'competition' and economic factors. It was good news that more churches felt able to employ a Children's Worker directly and there were more schemes available to help them to do so. One such scheme was placements for the new Children's Ministry Degrees. This development was an amazingly good development for Britain! Graduate Christian Children's Workers could now be regarded as professionals. Churches were applying for an Undergraduate Student Children's Worker for a similar number of hours each week as *Grace* Workers, but would be present every Sunday. (Our workers could only do one Sunday a month.) The

³⁰ Powell & Clark 2011

students were cheaper (thanks to student loans) and many were very experienced, capable Children's Workers before starting the course.

Employee contracts were still temporary as churches were only signing up for two years at a time. There seemed to be an increasing shortage of Christians with a Vocation to Children's Ministry of working age relative to the positions available. More positions were being advertised (mainly online, now) following the realisation that if a church was to employ a Lay Worker, a Children's and Families Worker was most likely to produce local church growth. Interviewees were no longer flattering me about what a wonderful, innovative project *Grace* was because it was no longer offering something rare. Lots of churches were now employing children's workers.

I had to pick up extra work when we couldn't fill a position. However, the new people recruited had great skill-sets which were appreciated by their churches. We appointed one worker with exceptional loyalty and talent for long-term relationship building. He had an amazing capacity to talk to children in a way that they would listen intently. Another had unusual maturity for her age. Being a good all-rounder, she had no trouble finding a new job when needing to re-locate. She was replaced by a wonderful 'local' who brings to her ministry an abundance of networking relationships and strong friendships. Both are to be commended for achieving so much fruitful ministry with their time. The large, thriving toddler group and after school club has quality Christian input and families are joining church worship. The work in that village includes facilitating year 6 pupils to plan assemblies. Employing a local person means there is a helpful cross-over between church-based ministry and her voluntary community work. Everyone benefits if the Worker is good. In 13 years of *Grace*, I can honestly say that we have been richly blessed by an amazing set of staff. I can not praise their work highly enough.

Managing a Smaller Group of Workers

A smaller group of *Grace* Workers made it sensible to offer more individualised training. Rather than going to the expense of paying for an outside speaker to travel to talk to a small group, we have attended courses, conferences and Spring Harvest. This has the advantage that everyone can choose sessions that will be helpful for them. We love going to help at Spring Harvest! The buzz of working in a large team with great worship has been inspirational.

A Lonely Volunteer

One Church had their 25% *Grace* Worker working alongside a full time *Time for God* volunteer for two consecutive years. Loneliness can be an issue for a GAP Year volunteer in a strange country. The volunteers wish to work hard and play hard and go home with a story to tell. They want to be able to say they had a wonderful time making friends (preferably some their own age) whilst doing good for the community they served. It must have been tough being full time when their *Grace* Worker colleague was only present for a quarter of their working time.

One Year Mission

(Three *Time for God* Volunteers in Northamptonshire 2016 – 2017)

The 'One Year Mission' was designed as a strategy for bringing a large number of families into a church in a relatively short space of time. It would be particularly suitable for a church with sufficient volunteers but few or no children. A key element would be to miss out the painful stage of outreach when fringe families come but never return because there were no other children present that day. If there is a national desire to re-grow The Church, it would be a definite advantage to have strategies for rebuilding churches quickly before opportunities are missed.

The year was a roller coaster of great achievements and challenges. The congregation loved having the volunteers and the project gave the congregation a boost of energy. The Superintendent Minister had previously worked with *Grace*. He would be the new minister starting at the church at the same time as the mission started. Once *Grace* and the church had committed to the project, the planning started with a great deal of hope and excitement.

We requested three volunteers from *Time for God* so that none would be lonely, even if one had to leave the project. Applicants were put forward one at a time, so the last wasn't interviewed until July. We were provided with three highly talented young ladies. with delightful personalities. We all enjoyed their company! The quality of the applicants recommended to us was high. They were cheerful, enthusiastic and willing workers from Germany, America and the Ukraine. Together they made an excellent team, managing the intensity of being together 24/7 extremely well.

Planning Ahead

There was a series of meetings between myself, the incoming minister and the committee responsible for mission. The chair of that committee chaired the planning meetings. A warm welcome was planned for the volunteers and a great deal of time was spent arranging their accommodation. Having three volunteers to house was much harder than two and restricted the choice of properties that we could rent.

The original mission plan was to have three stages:

- (1) Autumn term for fun secular activities to draw in families without threat
- (2) Spring term to prioritise Bible based activities
- (3) Serious Christian nurture in the summer term.

The hosts and key supporters would welcome the volunteers on arrival. Their first week would be the five-day *Grace* training conference and a church welcome the following Sunday. Home church members would meet them at the Sunday morning service. They would be introduced to the Circuit members at the evening service set up to welcome incoming ministers. This was to be led by the Superintendent.

Schools work was to start straight away, this having been organised the previous term. I visited each of the six local schools with a printed list of offers of different ways we could support the school. In the first instance, the volunteers would go into each school to be helpful in whatever way the school decided e.g. hearing readers.

I am very grateful to all the helpful volunteers who supported the project in many different ways. In particular, the hospitable couple who hosted the students for three months. This was much longer than had been originally anticipated. Other support included driving to the airport, helping with entry

visas, settling them into the English way of life, finding bicycles, ferrying them around by car and I.T. support (setting up and maintaining diaries).

Delayed Start

Two of the three had visa problems and both missed the *Grace* training week. One arrived two months late. The Superintendent Minister also had to miss the start of the project through no fault of his own. Consequently, some important groundwork got missed at the start of the project. Delaying the first main thrust of ministry meant they only worked 25 hours per week for the first two months.

The year was exceptionally hard work for me, particularly as, for the second year in a row, I had had to pick up an extra church we couldn't recruit to. My workload and mileage was excessive and I couldn't 'burn the midnight oil' because I was very careful not to drive tired. At best, the project could only take up a third of my time and it was an hour's drive from home (longer in the rush hour).

Children's Week

Professional Children's Entertainers were paid to do five after-school events, Monday to Friday, in the first week in November after the half term holiday. This major ministry launch had been postponed from September and was a critical week for launching the programme. A letter came summoning me for Jury Service in the same week! Fortunately, I was able to postpone this so that we didn't have to postpone the Children's Week again. Local families were treated to magic shows, animal encounters, pirate parties, circus skills and a balloon workshop. This was an excellent way to start building up contacts with families.

Soon afterwards, all three volunteers enjoyed attending the *Re-generate* residential weekend at the end of November along with some of the younger church members. They enjoyed exploring ethical questions from a Christian perspective and their faith was enriched.

Schools Work

Ecumenical meetings with other local children's workers happened very early in the year. The other churches in the area were incredibly supportive, helping us to increase school input very quickly with their blessing.

The schools work went exceptionally well. The team led two assemblies per term in six schools. Each term we did a drama and a puppet show, the contemporary themes being: X Factor, Countdown to Christmas, Great British Bake Off, Countdown to Easter, The Lion King and Joseph. For each of the six presentations, a day of professional training was provided. This training was particularly appreciated by the volunteers. Puppetry worked especially well for the project. We used pre-recorded CDs for the dialogues and songs. These worked well and are available from *One Way UK*. The volunteers were building up strong relationships with schools and particularly enjoyed sharing some of their culture with the pupils there. In return for our helpful input the Headteachers allowed us to publicise our events to the whole school, thereby recruiting more children to our events.

Most of the schools accepted the offer of giving out Children's Bibles using the *Bibles for Children* scheme. Since the area was predominantly nominally Christian, we were able to give one to every pupil in each School.

In one school, we ran a recorder lunch-club with a view that some might wish to join the church music group for family services.

Outreach Services

There were a few Outreach Family Services. The first was on Mothering Sunday. A good number of children came and made chocolate gifts for their mothers. This was considered to be a great success. The church already had two crèche areas. Toys were set up in a separate room far away from the church so that children could make as much noise as they liked, but the carers weren't part of the worship at all. There was also a crèche right at the front of the church so that the families there would feel included. I felt that newcomers would feel shy walking along the central aisle to get to this area and could be embarrassed if they needed to leave from the front. The church obligingly set up a third crèche area at the back of the nave area where they could hear the service and feel part of the congregation, but feel free to talk quietly without disturbing others. They could come and go discretely as the needs of the children dictated and be supported by a 'Family Friend'.

International Event

A much-anticipated event was to be an international event. This would provide an opportunity to sample delicious food as the three volunteers told us about their own countries and shared their culture. The congregation was very excited and looking forward to this. It was difficult to choose a time in the week for this event as everyone wanted to participate. The only time all the church members were available was Sunday morning. The international event was to be an outreach all-age service followed by a buffet lunch. The service would include 'workshop slots' and the girls worked very hard preparing their talks and displays to be presented to part of the congregation at a time. The buffet room looked stunning decorated with flags etc. The food was carefully labelled and presented beautifully. The event was thoroughly enjoyed by all who came and provided an opportunity to get to know newcomers.

Other Church-based Work

The local church members and the *Grace Workers* interacted superbly. The Volunteers enjoyed assisting the rota of leaders who ran the Junior Church groups. Their skill sets were particularly well used when they supported the existing mid-week outreach, notably the Toddler Group and *Messy Church*. Having excellent acting skills, they made significant contributions to the school visits at Christmas and Easter run on the church premises ecumenically. The church members are to be congratulated for already undertaking such excellent children's work in so many different areas and integrating the volunteers into the team so seamlessly.

Saturday events were unusually poorly attended, despite bringing in a professional Christian Children's Entertainer to run them. The volunteers were surprised that he was allowed to fire a water-pistol in the church!

The team helped at a Christian uniformed organisation meeting on the church premises. A young leader was being trained up and this delayed the time when we were able to do a recruitment campaign which successfully brought in a number of new members.

Two one-week holiday clubs were highlights in the year. They were well attended and thoroughly enjoyed. To advertise the clubs *Kids Alive!*³¹ was delivered to the door along with invitations to the club. The volunteers felt cautious about doing this, but produced amazing crafts for the children to make and looked amazing as pirates!

³¹ Salvationist Publishing

The Outcome

The mission achieved many good things. The volunteers all said how much they had enjoyed their year, including the training, the opportunity to experience a different culture and the hospitality of church members. They gained skills in language, public speaking and using public transport.

Everyone was delighted with the relationships built up with schools, including one that had previously been unreceptive to offers of input. The ecumenical aspect of the project worked well too. The final farewell Barn Dance was a very happy event, bringing in friends from the other churches and a good number of new families not known to the church prior to the project.

It was disappointing that more of the newcomers befriended during the year didn't continue to join in church activities on a regular basis. This was partly because the whole project started late and pressures on people's time meant that we never reached the last stage of the plan.

Church members felt that the project left a lasting legacy of happy memories which gave a real boost to the church. They experienced new ideas for outreach and felt they had greater confidence to try new things. A new worker appointed to continue the ministry after we left started her ministry armed with a 137 receptive families to contact and work with. (All contact details were collected with appropriate permission.)

Worth Repeating

I should love to do the project again, more ecumenically, should funds be available. The schoolwork was excellent so I would approach that in a similar way. Learning lessons from experience, there should be even more and better focussed pre-planning. Accommodation concerns mustn't take precedence over ministry planning. If a similar project were to be undertaken by *Grace*, I would lead meetings to inspire the whole congregation, give them the opportunity to 'brainstorm' and feel ownership for the whole of the final strategy. Ecumenical advance planning should also include discussions with and uniformed organisations etc. meeting on the premises and with whom contact would be desirable.

The selection process for the GAP Year students would need to take place earlier so that plans could take into account their skill-sets and visas ready in good time. It would be imperative to recruit mission-minded young people (some male) with good Bible knowledge and more confident at leading prayers.

An ongoing programme could allow a number of different churches to buy into an umbrella scheme for longer or shorter periods of time. This would allow more flexibility for timings to be better suited to each project cost-effectively. GAP Year students offer an exciting missional opportunity. One year is a short time for a mission, so the temporary nature of GAP Year volunteers needs to be managed in a positive way.

Winding Down Years 9-12 (2016 – 2020)

Grace has been blessed with talented workers and this continues to be the case through these latter, quieter years. The work has continued to develop in several churches especially as *Grace* churches tend to be in areas where the communities are generally pro-Christian. *Grace* is still reaching hundreds of children.

A Church Re-built

One church joining *Grace* was having its building completely demolished and rebuilt. Remarkably, the toddler group and *Messy Church* flourished again instantly after the period of closure. Their *Grace Worker* led lots of assemblies and ran excellent lunch clubs, often achieving 100% attendance. Recruiting volunteers to support the work on Sunday mornings continued to be a challenge.

Church Feedback (2018)

In the most recent survey of churches participating the most common reason stated for needing a *Grace* children's worker is lack of resources to engage with families and an aging congregation. Churches joined *Grace* because they had felt, on receiving the publicity, that it was an answer to prayer. Busy ministers appreciate the work saved by *Grace* recruiting, employing, training, managing and paying their worker. By far the most common reason for churches to leave *Grace* was financial. Some of the work started has continued, some hasn't. Critically there can only be continuation if there are church members with the time and skills to continue the work. Whether the work continued or not, churches were grateful for the good ministry that touched the lives of so many children.

Some churches have been delighted to report new families attending services on Sunday, especially family services. In today's culture, this a feat not to be underestimated, especially as most churches have their main service at the same time, on Sunday mornings. Not all congregations in *Grace* churches understood the concept of Fresh Expressions, but wherever *Messy Church* has been initiated, everyone has been delighted with it.

It was pleasing to note that there were no complaints about 'misfit' *Grace Workers* due to churchmanship or over-zealous evangelism. Neither were there issues reported over the creation vs evolution debate.

Almost every church has liked their *Grace Worker* and expressed deep appreciation for their hard work. Inevitably, some older members of the congregation have felt jealous that the *Grace Worker* didn't work with their age group. The main criticism of *Grace Workers* has been that they are not part of the local community. They have been perceived as talented and well-resourced. Puppetry has been much appreciated, where used. It is surprising how well puppets go down, even in a traditional church setting and it can fit well into many different styles of ministry. The enthusiasm and new ideas brought by every *Grace Worker* have been greatly appreciated! The aspects of *Grace* work most commonly mentioned specifically in the feedback from churches have been the variety of activities introduced to the church, links with schools (especially assemblies and clubs), *Messy Church*, Toddler Groups, modern technology and contemporary worship,

Ministry Undertaken

No Shortage of Good Resources

Grace Workers have been asked to share the resources they had used and found useful. (Being a creative bunch, they have also written their own.) I usually recommend adapting existing resources for good time management and to make more time for relationship building. Stories by Bob Hartman³² always received a high rating, as did anything published by *Scripture Union*. The *Relive* DVDs³³ and *Moses, Prince of Egypt*³⁴ were particularly highly rated. *Grace* Workers also loved the *Messy Church* books³⁵ and *Youth Alpha*.³⁶ *Pinterest*³⁷ was the most widely recommended website. It is a blessing that there are so many quality resources available. Lack of published materials is clearly not a reason for losing children from The Church!

Professional Entertainers

Grace has paid for each church to have an annual visit by a professional children's entertainer who can be 'crowd-puller'. This is particularly useful immediately prior to launching a new programme. My personal favourite is a Christian Illusionist with unparalleled people-skills and passionate about evangelism. He has sometimes covered for a *Grace* Worker who has needed to be absent from a club for training etc. A one-off treat doesn't need to have Christian content to successfully build contact with families who might be interested in Christian activities. Exciting events held in a church building tend to draw a pro-Christian audience and are unthreatening to anyone cautious about making contact with a Christian community. The Magic Shows used to be the most popular events and it has never been a problem maintaining an appropriate adult:child ratio because so many parents want to stay and enjoy the show with their children. More recently, animal encounters have been even more popular, but tend to be a bit more expensive. (Check that the animals are well cared for.) There are many professional children's entertainers serving the birthday party market who can be recruited.

Children's Week

Some *Grace* churches have planned to launch their new children's work programme with a 'Children's Week'. September is a good month to do this because it's the start of a new school year and the weather is usually sunny and dry. The children's week has consisted of five consecutive evenings of after-school events followed by an exciting Sunday morning all-age service. Schools etc. are more likely to advertise the five events if they are secular. If there is high after-school footfall outside the church, publicity can be offered alongside free refreshments or wrapped chocolates. Music and bunting can help the atmosphere. If there is to be an **animal encounter** this has proved best at the beginning of the week when numbers are at their smallest. Booking is likely to be needed to keep numbers down to protect the animals. At each event, children are invited to come back and bring friends. A **magic show** is good for the Friday because it can accommodate large numbers safely. Other events recommended are: **circus skills workshops, puppet shows, balloon modelling, clowns,**

³² Hartman 1995 etc.

³³ Relive 2000 etc.

³⁴ Dreamworks 1998

³⁵ Moore 2006 etc.

³⁶ Alpha2010

³⁷ Pinterest website

games evening, film night, forestry skills and pirate parties. Publicity beforehand is important, as is the literature that the participants take home, inviting them to the next series of events.

Children's Nurseries

When they first started opening in large numbers, nurseries for children under five weren't interested in Christian visitors, but they're gradually coming to realise the benefits of community engagement and free trips outside their buildings. The children love action songs, interactive stories and being active. Nurseries may not have a specialist music teacher, so they have appreciated help with putting together Christmas plays and 'Graduation' concerts. Performing in a large church building has been helpful as they don't usually have a large hall or the funds to rent one. The church building has been an exciting area to explore in the cold winter. I print lots of arrows and place them around the building floor for the children to follow. Pews (or rows of chairs) keep the children in place for story-time and the creche area is a big hit with playful children! Nurseries have chosen to bring their own refreshments because of allergies.

During the school holidays, after-school clubs are open all day. They have gratefully accepted free workshops and visits. A churchyard can make a good venue for forestry skills and we now know that contact with nature contributes to emotional well-being.³⁸

Schools Work

It is a real blessing that British schools are so open to Christian input! School/Church relationships go back a long time and may reduce as society becomes increasingly secular. We have found Secondary schools much harder to access than Primary schools so it's worth enlisting the help of *Youth for Christ* or a Christian teacher working there to gain access. Teachers are busy people and not often available to answer a telephone call. Headteachers are even more busy! The R.E. co-ordinator is often more available for an initial meeting. We have built relationships with reception staff, the gatekeepers who help you make contact. Christian input is more welcome if the Head is a Christian and the school serves an area which is predominantly Christian. School policies are worth checking – I've known a Roman Catholic School object to any mention of the devil, which makes it tricky to tell the story of Christ's three temptations in Lent! If a question and answer session is planned, it's helpful to know the questions in advance and have time to think about the answer. The trickiest question I've ever met was. 'My church says only Christians go to Heaven and everyone else goes to Hell. Is that right?'

Time offered to schools for free has sometimes been under-valued. In the case of *Grace Workers*, their sponsoring churches have been paying employment rates for their workers to go into the school and their time can be wasted. It is common for people hearing readers to be 'twiddling their thumbs' while the last reader goes to fetch the next. Sometimes schools forget to tell you in advance that an assembly has been cancelled.

Grace Workers have been very successful accessing schools and increasing input over time. This is because they have humbly remembered that they are visitors, welcome only at the school's invitation. They have offered a variety of services attractive to school, sometimes in a letter headed 'Services offered to your school'. Staff can then pick the activity they like the best. Schools sometimes have special projects they want help with. One *Grace Worker* helped to set up a '**sensory**

³⁸ Layard & Dunn 2009

garden’ and **‘prayer spaces’**. Other secular activities have included **hearing readers, helping with art lesson equipment** and providing a **playground games club**.

Assembly requests are often the first input to be asked for. It has been vital to respect all faiths and none. The pre-amble ‘Christians believe that’ is a good strategy for acknowledging the multicultural setting. Schools sometimes have their own special way of introducing prayer/meditation. Care is needed on sensitive subjects and an awareness of ‘British Values’. Schools are required to be inclusive and wary of the kind of religion that promotes intolerance. The parables make a good, safe start as most present Christian values that are not controversial. Assemblies should be engaging, but not leave the children too excited. Interaction strategies such as using sign language are a useful, quiet way for children to respond to questions. There’s usually no shortage of pupils keen to act in an assembly. For quick costumes, a set of assembly capes (or scarves) are useful. Capes are fast to make and quick to put on in the middle of an assembly. Just be careful with children wearing glasses as you pull them over the head! If the school has agreed, I have tried to arrange an annual year-group presentation at the end of assembly of Children’s Bibles. These are provided by *Bibles for Children*.³⁹

R.E. Lessons were most often requested on the theme of **Baptisms and Weddings**. I take large dolls wearing the outfits my son and daughter wore for their Baptisms and my own wedding dress. The latter has been used for many drama productions. I’ve put on too much weight to wear it now, but it’s the perfect width for the average year 6 girl, if a little long! The R.E. co-ordinator can tell you what’s on the R.E. syllabus and when. It’s worth asking the best time to present a **Bible overview** using the Scripture Union *Bible Timelines*⁴⁰ (or, for years 5/6 a *Bible Explorer* presenter).⁴¹

Puppetry Sessions have been possible because Grace owns a class set of puppets. They can be used for telling Bible stories or illustrating life-lessons neutrally. I use selected Aesop’s Fables because animal puppets can be used to illustrate a point without racial stereotyping etc. e.g. a monkey can be ‘naughty’ and make us laugh, exploring our ‘alter-ego’ safely. I’ve avoided any Aesop’s stories that warn, un-Christianly, that bad human character can’t be changed. Children really enjoy using puppets and bond with them like a friend. It’s a wrench to return them at the end of the lesson! Children have performed in assembly with their puppets. Using CDs makes it quicker to produce a polished performance as the children can concentrate on manipulating the puppet without having to use microphones.

Church Visits have been valued most at Christmas, Easter and in the warm summer months. My favourite topic is **‘Experience Easter’** because it provides the best seasonal opportunity to tell the Christian Story. Schools often ask for the theme **‘What’s in a church?’** with explanations on how each item is used. **History exhibitions** are popular in old churches. I like to make the exhibits interactive, with a short practical activity in each section. If the church has members who like acting, pupils love to **‘meet a Bible character’** dressed in costume and engaged in a Bible-time activity. They can ask some perceptive questions and learn a lot from such an experience. In Baptist churches, pupils enjoy going down into the **Baptistry**, often describing it as a ‘small swimming pool’! A School **Concert** held in a church feels ‘more special’ than one hosted in their own, cramped, school hall.

Clubs are popular in schools, especially if attendance avoids going outside to play in the cold, earns an ‘early lunch pass’ or creates a longer day for parents before they need to pick up their children! Primary pupils may need reminding about lunch clubs on the day and schools vary in their efficiency for doing this. Clubs can be secular (e.g. **stories, craft, games** or **Legó**), have a **‘thought for the day’**

³⁹ Bibles for Children

⁴⁰ Scripture Union Resources

⁴¹ Walk Thru’ the Bible

or be multicultural inviting interesting discussions about **‘what it means to have faith’**. Clubs can provide an opportunity for asking questions in a safe environment. Parental permission may need to be sought to attend a Christian club.

Church Work

It’s an interesting exercise for any church to review whether the children’s work programme is set up to provide continuity for children growing up, so that they are more likely to continue participating in church life without a break. The uniformed organisations are good at this. E.g. Boys/Girls Brigades having all their meetings on the same evening with age groups over-lapping. Belonging to a national network such as *Pilots* or *Energise* adds both ‘cost’ and ‘value’ in the form of professional support, resources and quality ‘branding’ that parents can trust. DBS checks are imperative for leaders. They are essential safeguarding reasons, (but do little towards ‘quality control’).

Age-focussed Groups

Parents appreciate clubs that children can attend with their friends (an important social aspect of growing up). Midweek clubs are more likely to have regular leadership than Junior Church. The stronger relationships resulting from this may be one reason why they are likely to have higher attendance. Children who spend their weekends doing sport or visiting a parent are more likely to be available. Parents may value the spiritual element and values promoted and, for this reason, children from other faiths (or none) may attend.

Having a **‘walking bus’** from school has been proved to make an after-school club more popular as it helps parents. (It must have a risk assessment and a guaranteed adult:child ratio.) Straight after school is a good time-slot for an after-school club if enough volunteer leaders can be found to help. Anyone working standard hours probably doesn’t finish work in time to help at the club and those not in paid employment may have other children they need to care for. (Volunteers with their own small children in attendance may be unhelpfully distracted!) The trickiest clubs for finding volunteers are those aimed at disaffected youth. *Grace* has been blessed with workers who’ve run such youth clubs very successfully by engaging with modern culture. Electronic games are expensive, but coming down in price and loved by young people. Trips found to be popular with youth have been: **10-pin bowling, laser quest, climbing walls and ice-skating**. One group was blessed by being allowed to create their own **‘youth lounge’** decorating it themselves. Groups aimed at churched youth are very different from open youth clubs. The needs of the young people attending each are very different, so they might not mix together well (unless, perhaps, there is a particularly strong ethos for evangelism). Unchurched young people are often resistant to Christian input, so it takes a very special kind of evangelist to reach them. Since young people don’t always want to be around their parents, ecumenical options for delivering youthwork are a good idea. **Residential holidays** such as those run by *Scripture Union* and *Urban Saints* are also a great way to deepen the faith of young people.

Holiday Clubs

There have been many *Grace* holiday clubs, sometimes using one of the wonderful resources available and sometimes home-produced. As a team, we have put together a club based on St. Paul, a road-show on Zacchaeus and enriched bought materials with high quality spiritual content. Holiday clubs are a great way to build up strong relationships with families and eagerly anticipated each year. If the holiday club only runs for a couple of hours Monday to Friday, they don’t serve working parents

well. An earlier start and later finish is needed for it to become useful childcare provision. However, childminders and grandparents enjoy the break and will provide transport to a holiday club. Children's Nurseries rarely do so. *Pulse* offer holiday clubs with longer days. Volunteers probably find two hours as much as they can manage and it's short enough to avoid an OFSTED inspection. (The need to register the club should be checked with Local Authority in advance.) A quick de-brief after each session gives leaders the chance to review what went well and share ideas to make it even better next time.

The more advance notice that can be given of the dates, the better. Some children can only attend for odd days, so each session has to be self-sufficient. After the holiday club finishes, inviting the families to come to church the following Sunday has worked less well than a **Friday Night Concert**. This is because, in holiday time, the families may have other commitments and often disappear to go away on holiday, children may visit the other parent on Sundays and unchurched families may be reluctant to come to a full church service. Working parents make the effort to come and support their child performing. When an evening concert isn't possible, finishing with a fish and chip lunch for children and carers also works well.

Messy Church

This is the most accessible, Christian all-age activity with worship that I know. 'Never underestimate the power of food' - or the need for children to be active. The variety of activities can accommodate different interests and varying attention spans. No-one has to sit still for very long! At a church lacking catering facilities, an order at the local chip shop has worked well. Many Grace churches have converted their all-age services to the Messy Church format because it is so successful! Other successful models have been *Godly Play* and *Café Church*.

Toddler Groups

Stay and Play has been one example of a name that emphasises that an adult carer, (not necessarily a parent,) must stay and take responsibility. Toddler Groups can be a very effective 'stepping stone' between Baptism/Thanksgiving and Junior Church. (They are a wonderful reason for a party to welcome a new member of the family, but not necessarily organised with a view to going to church every week.) A family 'naming ceremony' is a good thing⁴² and, even if it only brings people into church once, it's still a great outreach opportunity!

Childminders can help to build up a new/small toddler group and model excellent parenting skills. Should there be too many of them, a separate group might be needed. Because of the importance of the 'afternoon sleep' I have generally found that better parenting is generally exhibited at morning groups. In groups where parenting is an issue, it's good to have strategies to encourage the carers to join in with the activities alongside their children. Conversely, if life is tough for them, it's a helpful community service to provide a bit of space for them to chat, knowing the children are safe. Male carers are becoming increasingly common and it's helpful to have a male member of the congregation present to encourage their attendance, especially if there's only one of them.

A short, flexible programme is good. Starting by tidying the toys together to special music works well (e.g. singing 'This is the way we tidy the toys/share the work/help our Mums'). I often start a 'circle time' by passing round small board books singing 'I will share my books, I will share my books. I am big enough to share; yes I will share my books/my toys/with friends.' to the tune of 'Row your boat'. It works like pass the parcel, but with lots of books to pass round so that no one is kept waiting for

⁴² Layard & Dunn 2009

their next turn.' A short story works better with pictures that all the children can see. Action songs work better without the distraction of instruments and these can be followed by nursery rhymes enhanced by the noise of drums, tambourines and shakers!

I have found that the fastest way to kill a toddler group is a cold venue. Santa is scary for some little ones, but introduced carefully, his gifts can be given out with invitations to Christmas services. *Grace Workers* have also enriched their toddler groups with healthy snacks (courtesy of the Tesco Community Champion), *Bookstart* distribution, treats for Mum (e.g. making chocolates/pampering sessions for Mothering Sunday), visits from the police/fire engines, multicultural food, language improvement sessions and teddy bear picnics. A school-holiday coach trip to a children's farm is great for helping the group to 'gel' and building relationships with the whole family, including older siblings and working parents (who sometimes take the day off specially to meet the group!)

'Noisy Services' for Little Ones

Although all-age services may be designed to accommodate under-fives, their families may well feel they are too young and not want to take the risk of trying a traditional church service. The name 'Noisy Carol Service' has been very successful. Parents see the publicity and say 'My child's noisy' and come! The first one started with the small children playing inside the large circle of chairs sat upon by adults. There were different activities to do inside the circle that contributed to the telling of the Christmas story. Everyone was then given an instrument for marching round the church, finishing at a pile of small nativity costumes. The children dressed up and had their photos taken (with permission) at the stable scene. There were festive snacks and a simple craft, with families free to leave when this was finished. A 'Noisy Easter Service' works equally well. Harvest, Pancake Day, Mothering Sunday, Fathers' Day and Pentecost (the Church's birthday) are also good excuses for special services aimed at children.

One-off Events

Light Parties can be held on either Halloween or All Saints Day, depending whether it's realistic to ask the children to give up 'Trick or Treating'. The Church could make more of the traditional reason for Halloween and the idea that evil disappears when Saints arrive. 'Stations of the Cross' are the oldest form of 'moving story-telling' that I know. I've added a sticker to collect at each station to put into a leaflet to make it even more interactive. *Grace Workers* have also held **Back to Church Sundays, Harvest Lunches, Christingle services, Christmas Tree Festivals, Stable/Easter Trails, Great Mates (Valentine's Day), Pancake Racing, Praise Parties, Make Lunch, Midsummer Picnics and Family Meals**: Buffets cater for all tastes, while 'Bangers and Mash' or 'Soup & Puds' make for easy catering. **Line Dances** work better than a Barn Dance for singles and families. **Saturday events** are generally very popular. *Grace Workers* have come up with some great themes, including Dr. Who, High Octane, Forest Church, Around the World, Superheroes, Shrek, Monsters Inc, Toy Story and other popular children's films. Other one-off events that deserve special credit have included sponsored **charity events** raising money for local charities, often chosen by the children taking part. *Grace Workers* have manned stalls at a variety of different **community events**. Whatever's going on locally – it's good to be involved and visible.

All events should be well-publicised, with posters and flyers in addition to the usual 'Church Magazine/Notice-sheet'. Modern methods such as Facebook etc. should not be forgotten! One *Grace Worker* did a great job producing a regular magazine called *Little Voice*. It's hard work maintaining a regular publication, so it's worth doing just one, before committing to a periodical.

Establishing an Extra Crèche

It's worth considering having more than one creche area! For regular church families with the confidence to walk to the front of church, a prime position at the front makes the children feel part of the service. For children who need to make lots of noise at times, somewhere further back might be more suitable. A separate area with a video-link is ideal! Children can move between the two areas as the need arises e.g. when a baby starts to cry.

At an outreach service, newcomers should be able to arrive late without embarrassment, have easy access to the potty/nappy changing facilities and be able to get to the refreshments area after the service before a long queue develops!

Older children and their families don't need a special area but may appreciate a bag of resources to help them access the service. Once a group of children get to know each other, they often choose to sit together on the front row. When this happens, it's a sign of a positive group dynamic.

It would be impossible to list all the work undertaken by all twenty *Grace* Workers. They have worked very, very hard and achieved a huge amount of fruitful ministry. Their words and actions have touched the lives of thousands of children!

What Next?

Grace for the Next Generation was set up as a trailblazing entity, happily sharing knowledge gained. Larger organisations, especially Districts/Regions/Synods/Dioceses are now doing similar work with more resources. For personal reasons, a pressing need for me to prioritise family commitments is as strong as my original vocation. Winding down *Grace* has been remarkably unproblematic and for that I am grateful. There are just two customer churches and two quarter time *Grace* Workers and, at time of writing, the country is still on lock-down due to Covid-19. I am open to joining/setting up a new project in the future, if that should be God's will. For now, I am pleased that Children's Ministry is taking a higher priority than previously. I pray for more new policies to facilitate more initiatives that are dramatic enough for The Church to grow again. With God's help, future Church growth is possible!

Rachel Coupe
CEO *Grace for the Next Generation*

June 2020

Bibliography

Alpha International, 2010, Youth Alpha, London

Aviva Insurance Research, 2015, The Cost of Bringing Up a British Child, 'I' newspaper 28/5/15, London

Bibles for Children, Bath, <http://www.biblesforchildren.org.uk/>

Brierley P, 1998, Religious Trends 1, Christian Research, London

Brierley P, 1999, Religious Trends 2, Christian Research, London

Brierley P, 2000, The Tide is Running Out, Christian Research, London

Brown C, 2001, The Death of Christian Britain, Routledge, London

Christian Education Conference, 2004: The National Sunday School Union – An Anniversary Retrospective, Cambridge

Cliff P, 1986, The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement, NCEC, Surrey

Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1965, Family Church Reappraised

Coupe R, May 2004, The ‘Fifties Freefall’, Quadrant, Christian Research, London

Coupe R, 2004, Bible Timeline, Scripture Union, Milton Keynes

Dreamworks Animation, 1998, Moses Prince of Egypt, USA

Flood A, National Literacy Trust, 2011, Three in 10 UK Children ‘Own No Books’, The Guardian 1/6/11, London

Francis L et al, 2019, Assessing the Impact of a Paid Children, Youth and Family Worker, Journal of Research on Christian Education volume 28

Frank P, 2002, Every Child the Chance to Choose, Kingsway, Eastbourne

Hardwick J, 1995, 34 Songs for all Occasions, Mission Computers, Cambridge

Hartman B, 1995 etc, Lion Publishing, Oxford

Kay & Francis, 1996, Drift from the Churches, University of Wales

Kinnaman D, 2011, You Lost Me, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, USA

Layard & Dunn, 2009, A Good Childhood, Penguin, London

Lumino Research, Bible Society, 2018, Swindon, <https://lumino.bible/insights/national/>

Mark O, 2016, Passing on Faith, Theos, London

Mensa Magazine, circa 2008, Wolverhampton

Moore L, 2006 etc, The Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford

Pinterest website, <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/>

Powell & Clark, 2011, Sticky Faith, Zondervan, Michigan

Relive Resources, Schoolwork UK, <http://ww1.reliveresources.co.uk/>

Roberts D, 2003, God’s Plan for Children, Kingsway, Eastbourne

Salvationist Publishing and Supplies, Kids Alive!, Wellingborough, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/kidsalive>

Scripture Union, Milton Keynes, <https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/resources>

Sibieta L, 2019, BBC News, 2/12/2019, London <https://bbc.co.uk/news>

Sutcliffe J, 2001, Tuesday’s Child, Christian Education, Birmingham

United Christian Broadcasters (UCB), Bag of Hope, Stoke-on-Trent, <https://www.ucb.co.uk/bagofhope>

Voas D, 2018 Jan 12, A Lost Generation, Church Times, London

Voas D, 2005, Three Misconceptions about Religious Decline, Quadrant, 11/05

Walk Thru’ the Bible, Bible Explorer, https://www.bible.org.uk/wtb_child_events.php

Wallis S, 2015, Young Nones: Young People of No Religion, PhD Thesis, Warwick

It is possible to download a copy of this report and leave comments via the **Grace** website www.graceproject.org.uk