

# Children's Ministry Network Conference

## Mapping the Landscape of Training and Research relating to Children's Ministry in the UK

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### The Backdrop

Who we listen to determines what we hear. Where we stand determines what we see.  
What we do determines who we are – Robert McAfee Brown (theologian, Presbyterian minister).

It is important to have a context to place our findings within. I thought it would be helpful to start by understanding the climate we find ourselves in at present in Higher Education, the youth sector and Christian church.

Higher Education, for independent theological colleges especially as well as theology departments within universities is tough. The ever-increasing amount of quality assurance inspections, student data collection and breadth of market opportunities there is a real struggle to exist alongside larger institutions. Students are paying for an enriched experience so they are looking for the value-added by each course/university, even those responding to a vocational call. Student recruitment for Christian youth work has been on the decline for the past 5 years at both undergraduate and post graduate level.

Alongside this, austerity cuts have hit youth services harshly at both national and local levels, resulting in the decimation of statutory services in local communities. This has provided community groups, including the Church, with an opportunity to respond and it is encouraging to see how many are and the creative approaches that are being used. There has been an ongoing conversation around the viability of professional skills like the JNC for youth workers, currently there are 8 courses from 4 Christian providers offering this at under graduate level & CYM are now the only Christian trainers providing it at post graduate. Subsequently not only have employment opportunities been impacted but also the standards of provision being offered by untrained workers.

So where is the church in this? The local church reflects what is happening in society, so if its members are financially challenged by pay freezes, benefit changes, unemployment etc, the money in the collective purse is reduced. This impacts the funds available to recruit lay and ordained ministers and any investment into their ongoing ministerial development or training for other key workers. Job adverts have become more expansive with their 'catch all' approach for children, youth and family pastors/workers. When there is little money to spare, choices are difficult and need to be strategic. Previously churches may invest in a youth worker in preference to a children's worker because there weren't people comfortable working with young people but often parents are willing to support children's work, to keep it going. Now, often due to the decline in numbers attending church, the role may be combined.

It's a complex and challenging situation.

## **The Landscape of Training and Research**

Out of the 25 denominational and theological training providers approached 12 responses were received. Geographically these represented Scotland, the North of England and organisations like Godly Play and CYM that have regional trainers/centres. There was no information received from Wales nor Ireland so this is only a snapshot of how things are.

The training opportunities represented 14 CPD/Level 3/Certificate courses; 7 undergraduate degrees; 9 postgraduate Masters programmes focusing specifically on children's ministry. There was little more than a module or two or special focus events in ministerial formation.

The website [www.CYWT.org.uk](http://www.CYWT.org.uk) helpfully maps out and detailing a lot of the courses available.

For the purposes of trying to get a sense of the direction of thought around children's ministry in the U.K. 20 denominational and national organisations and individuals were invited to provide a brief summary of the research projects they were involved in on matters relating to children's ministry, its aims and potential outcomes.

The responses show an emergence of academic theological thinking about children coming from those doing independent studies at post graduate level and out of the Godly Play community. There was less formalised but still relevant and interesting insights from the Messy Church community. George Lings has more formalized research around Fresh Expressions. There was little denominational research beyond the Church of England and Methodist Church, although some individuals are focusing their inquiries within their denomination. For organisations like the Children's Society and Theos, research is integral to the work they do and they offer plenty on their websites. Others like Scripture Union, are using it to measure effectiveness of projects and for future development work like Guardians of Ancora.

The information gathered has been categorized under 3 overarching themes – discipleship and evangelism, church life and playful spirituality and wellbeing. Pdf versions of the posters are attached for your information.

At our conference Peter Hamill (Education Board of the Church of Ireland) mentioned an extensive inquiry conducted with volunteers, paid workers and ministers regarding children & youth ministry. Toni Hasler, observing the conference on behalf of Petra Institute for Children's Ministry UK passed on a piece of work focusing on 'A Church Where Children Are Welcome: A New Paradigm for Children's Ministry in Africa'. Although this was a contextualized piece four key principles emerged which I think we would all recognize as significant to how church welcomes and includes children under the paradigm of 'Hospitality' - relational, intergenerational, narrative and missional

## **Moving forward**

- So what might this mean for CMN and its members?
- How might we bring that into being collectively?
- Might this be the time to reconvene a conference with theological colleges to challenge and advise those training ministers to provide a more intentional programme of modules to help prepare them for ministering to the children in their communities?
- How might CMN create a community of research around children and family ministry that enables findings to be communicated effectively to draw people into the conversation?