

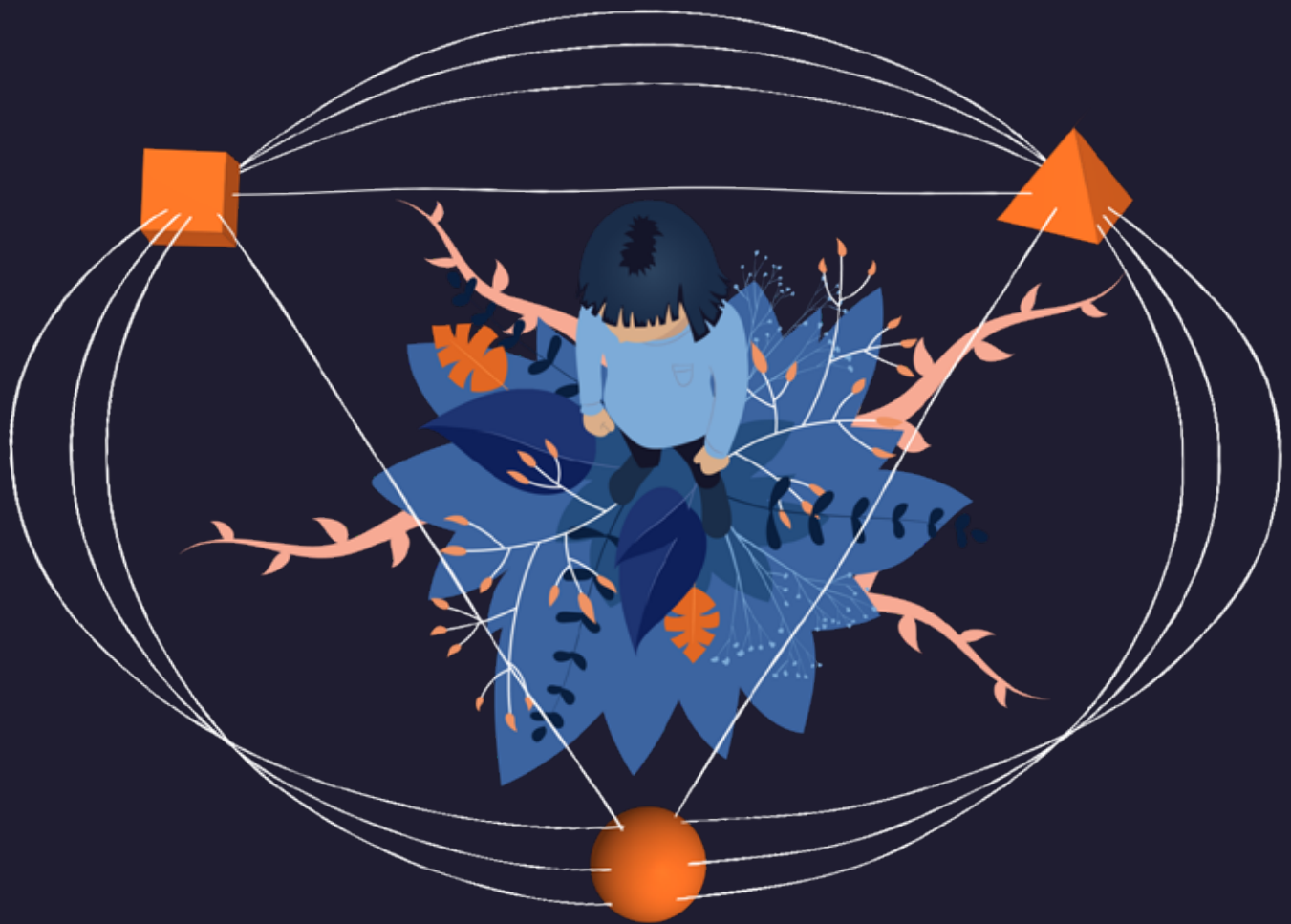
## **Research Space**

Research report

### **Faith in the Nexus**

**Casson, A., Hulbert, S., Woolley, M. and Bowie, B.**

# FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Church schools and children's exploration of faith  
in the home: A NICER research study of twenty church  
primary schools in England

Dr Ann Casson  
Dr Sabina Hulbert  
Dr Mary Woolley  
Professor Robert Bowie

# ABOUT NICER

## National Institute for Christian Education Research

NICER is a University Research Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University. It undertakes research to inform the contribution of faith to the public understanding of education, to aid the mission of church schools, universities and Christian education in communities, to develop and improve religion and worldview education, and to support the work of Christians in education and leaders in education. It uses qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research approaches in that work, and has developed novel approaches to investigating school ethos, character and curriculum in Christian schooling.

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Faith In The Nexus

Church schools and children's exploration of faith in the home: A NICER research study of twenty church primary schools in England

ISBN 978-1-909067-96-7

Published November 2020.

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Design and Print by Ben Cornwell

Artwork provided by Kieran O'Brien at [ministry.co.uk](http://ministry.co.uk)

**"I find this piece of research examining the intersection of children's exploration of faith in the home in relation to Church and school a most interesting one. In my 30+ years of ministry, I have always found children prepared to ask all kind of honest questions. Their curiosity is genuine, and this enables them to confidently initiate faith conversations especially within the home, often following up on something that began in the school setting. This is a practical report that allows the reader to actively engage with the information before them. This report has the potential to be a significant gamechanger in the kind of relationships we intentionally build between Church, school & home, thus enabling the home to better equip and encourage children's exploration in faith and spirituality."**



**Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin**  
Bishop of Dover and the Bishop in Canterbury

**"The Faith in the Nexus study provides a significant contribution to an understanding that central to children's well-being is their spiritual well-being. This is served by providing time and space for reflection and exploring the 'big questions' with which children are naturally comfortable. The report makes important recommendations to strengthen the church-home-school relationship which could not be more timely in a Covid and post-Covid society which is in need of spiritual resources."**

**Raymond Friel**  
Writer and speaker on Catholic education, former headteacher and multi-academy trust CEO

**"My first word is a Thank you to those who have prepared this report. For the light, it sheds on the positive results of the home, school, and church working together in close partnership for the good of each. I have always liked the image of the home, school, and church as a three-legged stool, and it is good to have evidence that all three legs are generally fairly stable."**

**The Roman Catholic Church would generally speak not about the home, school, and church – but about home, school and parish. It would be good to tease out the significance of the differences between speaking about the parish and the church.**

**A key learning point in the report for me was the reminder to appreciate those who have a sense of being 'occasional believers' – but without a desire to buy into everything that the church has to offer them. A positive initiative within the RC tradition has been the gift of the Wednesday Word – where the children bring the following Sunday readings from the school to the home on a Wednesday to share with their parents who may not be in church to hear them on the Sunday."**

**Revd Monsignor Canon John O'Toole**

**"This is such an important report. It still seems to surprise some people that children have deep, rich spiritual lives. Faith in the Nexus gives practical insights as to how school, home and church can offer connected, creative spaces in which the child's spiritual life can flourish. This will be an excellent resource to accompany the Church of England's Growing Faith Adventure."**

**Revd Mary Hawes**  
National Children and Youth Adviser for the Church of England & Chair of Governors, St Mary with St Peter Primary School, Teddington

# PREFACE

Nexus – well that is a new word! I had heard it before and I vaguely knew what it meant, but I do not think I have ever used it. I am therefore grateful to Ann Casson for bringing it to my attention and, especially, for highlighting its educational significance for church, school and family.



Unfortunately, connection is too often missing in our modern lives. Adults are particularly adept at keeping their working, family and spiritual lives in self-contained streams. That strategy is understandable given the pressures we live with in today's world. It may even be valued as the mark of professionalism. However, Nexus matters; connection matters. It is deeply unhelpful for children to be raised in an environment where the connections between home, church and school are ignored

*Faith in the Nexus* is a rare, possibly unique research project. Its focus on the nurture of the spiritual life of children through examining the nexus between home, school and church is not something I have seen examined in such depth before. The research focus on listening to children's perceptions of this nexus is particularly valuable. What we learn is that children have a lot to teach us.

In the Christian faith, families are the key institutions in the spiritual nurture of children. This and other NICER research, however, tells us that parents generally do not find this task easy<sup>1</sup>. This is a critical issue for the Christian church when the evidence is that young people are increasingly not responding to institutionalised faith. However, the Nexus research points to a way forward, because it shows us that schools have a key role in stimulating spiritual growth that both family and church can draw on.

For me, the most striking insight to emerge from the Nexus research is that children can drive the agenda. Curiosity, the desire to explore puzzling questions, enthusiasm for stillness and other formative practices all emerge as children's strengths. They, we are told, are instigators of faith-talk. This should be both a relief and a wake-up call for parents and church leaders. The Nexus research seems to be saying that the oft-made assumption that the adult role is to provide correct answers for children's faith questions is ill-conceived. Rather we should respect children's spiritual leadership and give more emphasis to engaging in exploratory conversations and sharing in faith-nurturing practices with them. Open-mindedness not slick answers is what this research tells us children need.

*Faith in the Nexus* offers great encouragement for those concerned about faith nurture. It tells us that schools can and do achieve a lot that stimulates children's spiritual growth. It does identify some challenges for both families and churches in building on this, but shows that much is possible if we focus on the relational strength that they offer and respect the spiritual leadership that children can bring. In the end relationships, not answers, seem to be the key to the growth of faith in the nexus.

**Emeritus Professor Trevor Cooling**

Canterbury Christ Church University

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<sup>1</sup> Olwyn Mark (2016), *Passing on Faith*, Theos



# WELCOME MESSAGE AND MESSAGE OF THANKS



On behalf of the National Institute for Christian Education Research and Canterbury Christ Church University, I am delighted to present to you the final report of the Faith in the Nexus project. It is a vital contribution to understanding the connection between home, school and Church, and children's spiritual lives.

The contents of this report are a blessing, even though they may challenge school leaders, Church leaders, parents and others who work to see children's spiritual life flourish to the full. There are signs of hope in the successful approaches that do reach into the inner spiritual lives of children. There is also more information about the obstacles that can prevent that fuller flourishing, and the key role for strong positive relationships between the different partners that shape the nexus of children's spiritual lives.

I offer particular thanks to all of the consulting groups and individuals who contributed to this project, to the schools, families and Church leaders (lay and ordained) who participated and provided the data, to 'Ministry' for their work in transforming the key messages of this report into the associated animation, to the Douglas Trust for funding and supporting the project, and to our Senior Research Fellow, Dr Ann Casson who successfully led this work with her team of specialists Dr Sabina Hulbert and Dr Mary Woolley at NICER. Thanks also to Dr Deborah Scott, Ann Pittaway, Nick Taunt and Revd Ronni Lamont for reading advance drafts and suggesting corrections and alterations. I would like to thank Ben Cornwell for producing the final glossy version and Gill Harrison for her support in the administration of the whole project.

## **Professor Bob Bowie**

Director of the National Institute for Christian Education Research  
Canterbury Christ Church University



# RESEARCH TEAM

## Dr Ann Casson



Ann Casson is a senior research fellow at the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) at Canterbury Christ Church University. Prior to becoming a full-time researcher, she taught Religious Education in secondary schools in the North East of England. Her present research project is Faith in the Nexus - investigating how schools and churches contribute to the spiritual development of young people.

## Dr Sabina Hulbert



Dr. Sabina Hulbert completed her undergraduate degree in 1995 from the University of Padua (Italy) with a specialization in Work and Industrial Psychology. During the following three years of her PhD (1996-1999) she focussed on the study of intergroup relations and group identification under the supervision of Professor Rupert Brown at the University of Kent. She has been lecturer in Psychology at the University of Greenwich from 1999 to 2002 and since 2002 she has been working at Canterbury Christ Church University as a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Academic Research Lead, having developed a significant experience in quantitative data analyses and advanced statistical techniques. She has collaborated in a number of funded research projects and related publications offering methodological and statistical support across a number of different disciplines including Psychology, Health and Education. She is an accredited PhD and Master level supervisor. Since 2018 she has also joined the NIHR Research Design Service at the University of Kent where she offers quantitative research methods support as a Research Adviser.

## Dr Mary Woolley



Mary taught history in Catholic schools in Birmingham and London before moving to the university sector to work in teacher education. She worked for ten years on PGCE, School Direct and Teach First programmes, working in partnership with school mentors to develop history teachers across Kent, Medway and London. Until recently Mary was Programme Director of the Education Studies BA at Canterbury Christ Church University, reconstructing a programme to explore global challenges in education from cradle to grave. Mary's doctoral research explored changes in history teaching across a 25-year period through an oral history of experienced history teachers. Mary is particularly interested in curriculum, teacher agency and teacher discourse. She is currently co-PI on a large-scale project, funded by Templeton, exploring beginning teachers' understandings of science/religion encounters. She has also worked on NICER's Faith in the Nexus report, exploring the role of parachurch organisations. Mary has several PhD students exploring topics as diverse as veterans, tutoring and Catholic education.

## Professor Bob Bowie



Professor Bob Bowie began his career in education as a teacher of English as a foreign language first in Istanbul and then in Japan, before training to teach RE and then working in two Catholic schools in Kent, latterly as Head of RE. While teaching he began writing textbooks and wrote a first and the bestselling second edition of Ethical Studies (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/ETHICAL-STUDIES-SECOND-Bob-Bowie/dp/0748780793/>) which included both explanatory writing and long extracts of key texts.

He also worked on a range of RE websites for the BBC, the Guardian and for many years, REOnline. Moving to university work, he led the secondary teacher education courses for secondary RE, and completed a doctorate in Dignity and Human Rights Education (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B076616PMF/>) where he argued that, contrary to some contemporary views, human rights education is compatible with faith. In the RE World he became Chair of AULRE (aulre.org), an association for tutors and lecturers in RE.

He then moved into primary research leading and supporting a number of major national research projects and he now leads NICER ([nicer.org.uk](http://nicer.org.uk)), an educational research centre at Canterbury Christ Church University. He teaches ethics and supervises doctorates in various aspects of Christian education and Church schooling.

He likes walking, growing vegetables and also finds meaning through a Christian worldview. He draws on the spiritual exercises the Jesuits taught him at school, returns whenever he can to the Taizé ecumenical and international community in France and is a practising Christian.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The Faith in the Nexus research project involved 20 church primary schools from the Church of England and Catholic sector in England. Focus group interviews took place with 187 pupils and 267 adults, parents (100), staff (112), governors (21) clergy (18) and others (16). 1002 people participated in an online survey 730 pupils, 164 parents and 106 stakeholders.

## STEERING GROUP

- **Emeritus Professor Trevor Cooling**, Emeritus Fellow of NICER
- **Revd Mary Hawes**, National Children and Youth Adviser for the Church of England & Chair of Governors, St Mary with St Peter Primary School, Teddington
- **Helen Jones**, School Leadership Consultant
- **William Lattimer**, The Douglas Trust
- **Revd Ronni Lamont**, Freelance writer and trainer, Faith and Nurture Adviser, Canterbury Diocese
- **Julian Stern**, Professor of Education and Religion, Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln





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# INTRODUCTION

A nexus is a focus for connection, where multiple lines from different places come into relationship around a point of focus. In this project, the Nexus refers to the connections between church school, the local church, and the home. The Faith in the Nexus project aimed to reveal the influence of these connections in children's developing spiritual life, and, specifically, how what happens in school (collaboration with church and others) impacts on children's faith and spiritual life at home.

An analysis (Mark, 2016) of 54 published studies, spotlighted the importance of the family and the home, but it also revealed the reluctance of Christian parents to engage with faith in the home. Indeed, very little is known about how children explore faith or spirituality in the home. However, research (Casson, Cooling & Francis, 2017) has shown that many church schools provide ample opportunities for children to explore faith and spirituality in school. This project investigated the ways in which church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitate opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home.

## The research methods

Faith in the Nexus (2017-2020) is an extensive empirical mixed methods research study, undertaken by the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) at Canterbury Christ Church University. The project involved 20 church primary schools; these were a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools, in differing socio-economic areas spread widely across the country. Focus group interviews with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) occurred between June 2018 and January 2019. The quantitative online survey designed by Dr Sabina Hulbert was administered to 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults in spring 2019 (see Appendix 1 for further information on research methods). The research was enhanced by an invaluable consultation process, which grounded the research and sharpened the focus on improving and strengthening current policy and practice.

## Report structure

Central to this research study is **the child's experience of faith exploration in the home, as reported by children**. In the research analysis of children's descriptions of their encounters with faith in the home, four distinct categories emerged:

- Talking about faith (Section A).
- Sense of belonging: family, school and church (Section B).
- Being: reflective practices (Section C).
- Doing: routines, rituals and relationships (Section D).

This report examines each of these aspects of spiritual life separately. It recognises that talking about, having a sense of belonging, being still, and participating in routines and relationships, are all essential elements of spiritual growth. The focus in each section is bringing to the fore the voice of the pupils in school, and this is complemented by a consideration of the views of parents, staff and stakeholders in each school. Each section considers the opportunities or obstacles encountered in facilitating children's exploration of faith at home. The quotes are attributed to participants, with a number linking them to the particular school, for example pupil-16. All the school details can be found in Appendix 1. Each section concludes with a 'questions for discussions' section. The appendices contain more detailed information on: research methods and the participating schools (1); two school case study exemplars (2); faith-based admissions and family faith affiliation and information (3); parachurch organisations named in the project (4).

# REPORT SUMMARY

Children express their spirituality and interest in faith in a wide variety of ways: by what they talk about, in their sense of belonging, in the moments of spiritual experiences in times of stillness, by what they do, and in the key relationships they develop.

## Section A - Talking about faith

**Insight:** The child is an initiator of conversations about faith-related matters, stimulated by activities, curriculum, and worship at school. This report employs the term 'faith-talk', to capture the sense of children's talk about faith or spiritual matters in the home. An examination of the faith-talk that parents and pupils reported occurring at home revealed common themes, such as questions that children asked about God, life and death, science and religion. Section A explores what faith-related matters the children (and parents) report that they talk about in the home and looks at who is involved. Church schools are places where talking about faith is normal; pupils point in particular to the RE classroom as a place where they can have open-ended discussions about faith. An analysis of parents' attitudes to children talking about faith-related matters reveals their views on their role in the transmission of faith and values to their children.

- Children are often the initiators of faith-talk in the home.
- Children value opportunities to ask open-ended questions about things of deep importance to them and things they wonder about, and for others to listen to their opinions.
- The stimulus for faith-talk includes activities, curriculum, and worship in school.
- Church primary schools can provide safe spaces to talk about faith and spiritual matters or ask challenging questions; pupils identified RE lessons as such a space.
- Responding to children's talk about faith is challenging; adults may struggle with how to respond, avoid, or close down such conversations.

## Section B - Sense of belonging: family, school and church

**Insight:** Underpinning the talking, the being still and the doing, church school families expressed a sense of belonging, primarily to the school, but also to the local church. The sense of belonging to the school community and the church community is revealing and relates to the strength of connection between church and primary school, visible in relationships between school leaders and church ministers and engagement with the local faith community. Broken or fragmented connections had significant negative consequences, but the investigation revealed the innovative methods and the opportunities schools embraced as they encountered obstacles. The report identifies the critical factors that sustain influential relationships between church and school.

- A strong relationship between church and the school has a strong association with attitudes and behaviours which facilitate faith-talk and interactions at home.
- Flourishing connections between school, home and church nurtures relationships between individuals and these institutions.
- Positive relationships between church and school are characterised by invitational worship, the celebration of festivals, the minister's presence, and a sense of belonging and connection to the church community and building.
- The powerful impact these positive relationships have on aspects of family faith life is mostly unseen but is apparent in the significance for church school families of their connection with the local church.

## Section C - Being: reflective practices

**Insight:** Reflection space and time in church primary schools have become commonplace; children talk eloquently about their reflection spaces or spiritual gardens. Children often spoke of the times and spaces they had for reflection at home and how these were significant for them: sacred times and spaces; the stillness children seek out at home; and pupils' and parents' perceptions of prayer. Pupils shared who they think really knows about their inner spiritual life. Children see reflection as crucial for wellbeing, and opportunities can be facilitated to encourage reflection.

- Children actively seek out spaces and times to be alone to reflect, think, and pray.
- Church primary schools provide several spaces and times, such as reflection corners and spiritual gardens.
- Reflection or prayer space and time is essential for young people's spiritual wellbeing.

## Section D - Doing: routines, rituals and relationships

Development in any dimension of life is marked by changes; the most visible changes are in behaviours. Section D looks at aspects that may lead to sustaining behaviours beyond the school.

**Insight:** In the church school, children encounter Christianity as a lived religion, through religious routines and rituals. However, the research data revealed fewer activities happening in the home; it was apparent that participants reported more talking about faith than doing. Nevertheless, analysis of parents' and children's interpretations of what they did at home demonstrated opportunities to live in the rhythm of the church's year. The findings revealed few encounters with Scripture in the home.

Relationships are critical to sustaining exploration of faith in the home. Children's relationships with each other in school, community, the wider world, and with significant individuals such as grandparents, are expressed in caring for others, and pupil leadership. Skills and attitudes that children develop as they are helped and help others to relate to God and each other, can be consolidated in different environments like home and church.

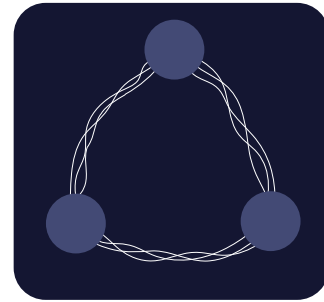
- Church primary schools offer a view of Christianity as a lived religion.
- Church families experience the pattern of the church's year; festivals are moments of critical engagement.
- Parents' confidence in talking about faith or spiritual matters increases when the primary school offers encounters with faith and beliefs and visits to church.
- Relationships are crucial to sustaining opportunities to explore faith.
- The leadership skills children develop in school are underestimated outside the primary school environment.

## Conclusion

There are implications for church primary schools, and evidence-based recommendations can be made for facilitating opportunities for children to explore faith and spiritual life in the home. In this neglected area of research, the findings highlight how church primary schools facilitate opportunities for children to explore faith-related matters, and the challenges they encounter and overcome. The findings pose some challenging questions for all concerned with the spiritual development of young people.

## References

- Casson, A., Cooling, T. & Francis, L. J. (2017). *Lessons in Spiritual Development: learning from leading secondary schools*. Church House Publishing.
- Olwyn Mark (2016), *Passing on Faith*, Theos



# SECTION A

## TALKING ABOUT FAITH

### Key findings

- Children are often the initiators of talking about faith or spirituality in the home.
- Children value opportunities to ask open-ended questions about things of deep importance to them and things they wonder about, and for others to listen to their opinions.
- The stimulus for this talk about faith includes activities, curriculum, and worship in school.
- Church primary schools can provide safe spaces to talk about faith, spiritual matters, and ask challenging questions; pupils identified RE lessons as such a space.
- Responding to children's talk about faith is challenging; adults may struggle with how to respond, avoid, or close down such conversations.

### Introduction: talking about faith in the home

Children bring home from the church primary school and talk about many questions and topics, including faith-related matters. This section (A) explores the 'faith-talk'<sup>1</sup> that occurs at home but is sparked by church primary school activities. It focuses on the aspects of faith children talked about at home as identified by the children and the parents.

The findings emerged from analysis of focus group interviews with pupils, parents, staff and clergy in twenty schools. The researcher visited each school, with a set of open questions. The aim was for the participants to define what happens to do with faith, in school and at home. So instead of asking pupils to talk about Religious Education or collective worship, the researcher asked participants: "What happens in school that helps children explore faith and the spiritual dimension of life? What happens at home that helps children explore faith and the spiritual dimension of life?". The pupils spoke about what they talked about, and what they did in school and at home. With each group the interview took different turns, but an analysis of the transcripts highlighted some distinctive themes. This section explores the themes as described by pupils and parents.

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<sup>1</sup> This report employs the term 'faith-talk', to capture the sense of children's talk about faith or spiritual matters in the home.



1. Asking questions about faith at home
    - Questions about God
    - Questions about creation
    - Questions about death
    - What happens in school to stimulate talk about faith?
  2. What aspects of church school life do families talk about?
    - Talking about values
  3. What is now known about faith-talk in the home?
  4. What facilitates faith-talk at home?
- Questions for discussion, signposts to further reading.

# Asking questions about faith at home

**Key words:** children's questions, God, science and religion, death, religious education, big questions, world views.

## Asking questions about faith at home

Young children naturally ask questions at home to seek information, to confirm or challenge what they already know. During the focus group interviews with pupils, parents, teachers, clergy and other stakeholders, the researchers identified a number of areas around which children ask faith-related questions when they return home from school. We summarised these areas in the survey question which asked: How often, when at home, do you or does your child ask questions about...?

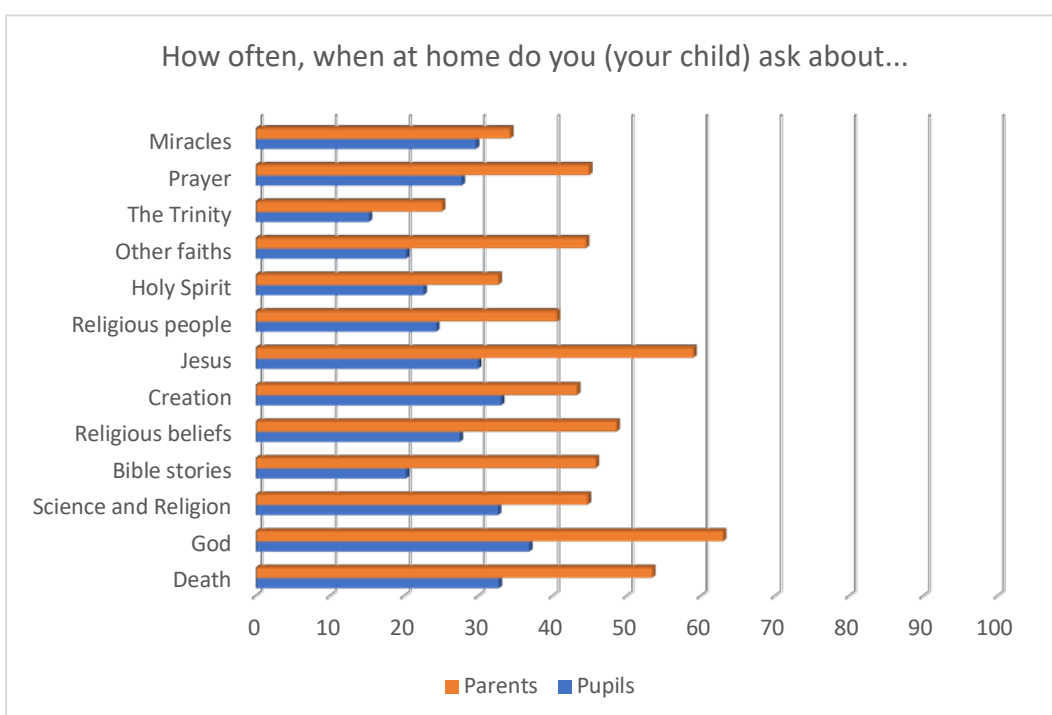


Figure 1: average answers from the 574 children in Year 5 and 6 and the 152 parents who completed the survey, focusing on the things children ask about when at home. Each of the thirteen fields was rated from never (0) to all the time (100).

- Children ask more often about God, science and religion, death and creation and least often about the Trinity, other faiths and Bible stories.

**Insight:** we could conclude that children ask questions about things that they do not know, they do not understand and therefore want to know more about from their parents. But if we reflect on the content of the above answers, we suggest that children ask questions at home around areas they are curious about, that they find interesting and which, at the same time, they can grasp and talk about. Creation, death, science and religion and God are some of the more puzzling dilemmas children have started to confront at this age.

## Understanding the results

- Throughout the survey, parents (who also include grandparents and carers) report higher scores than the children, but follow the same pattern of answers.

When we compare answers from children and parents, we can see first of all that parents (who also include grandparents and carers) report overall higher scores than children (see Figure 1 where orange bars are higher than the blue). This could be for a variety of reasons: either parents are more susceptible to demand characteristics and want to portray an image of high engagement, or they simply have a better perception or memory of what happens at home. Regardless of this systematic overestimation, parents agree with the children on the relative high frequency with which God and death are asked about and the low interest in the Trinity.

- Gender differences: girls report consistently higher scores than boys.**

The results in Figure 1 aggregate the opinions of respondents from a variety of schools with different characteristics and mask gender differences. If we break down the children's answers by gender, as shown in Figure 2, we find that girls report consistently higher scores than boys. This is regardless of which school they attend and whether they are in Year 5 or 6. (Some differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  while other are not).

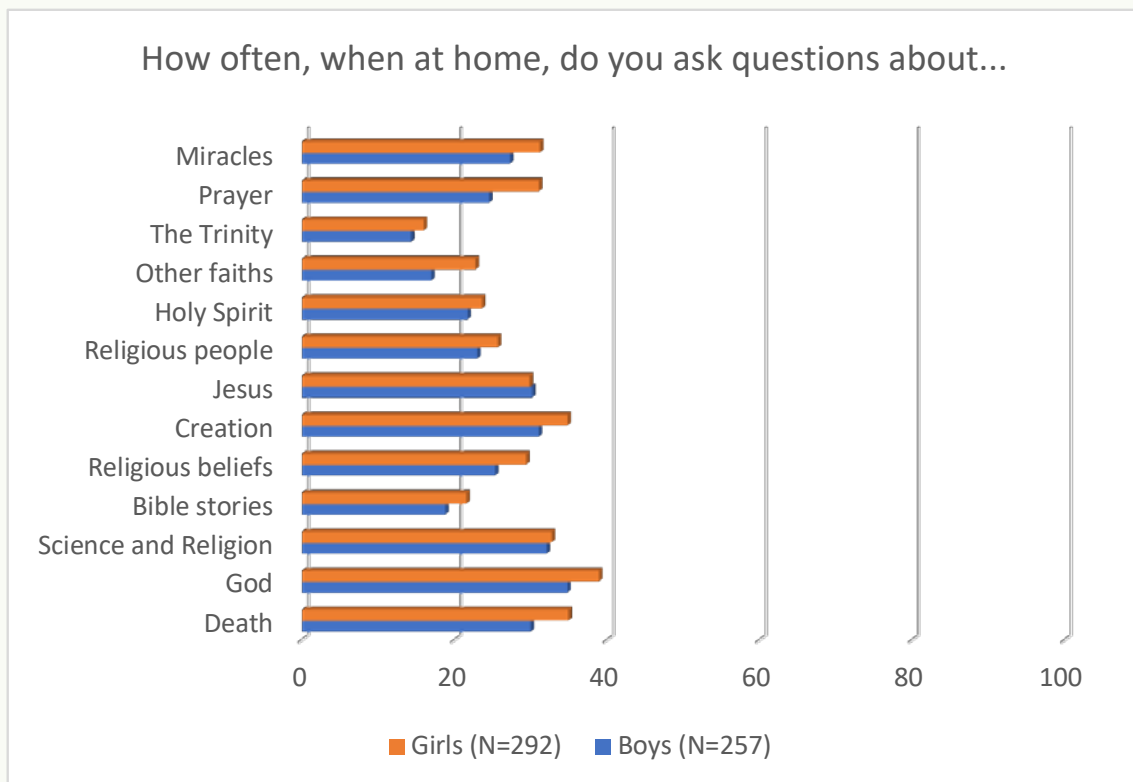


Figure 2: Pupils' answers broken down by gender.

- Differences between schools.**

The picture becomes much more complicated once we break down the overall scores by school given that our data, for these questions, comes from 17 different schools. (Only schools with a sufficient number of respondents are included here – see further Appendix 1). We have run a number of different analyses in which we grouped the schools according to all the various characteristics we measured, for example: geographical location, school size, estimate of socio-economic status based on the number of school meals, and level of parental support offered by the school. One of the school categorisations we found more helpful in understanding and explaining individual level variance is the type of religious school considered.

The four main types of church primary school<sup>2</sup> involved in this study were Catholic, Anglican Voluntary Aided (VA), Anglican Voluntary Controlled (VC), or Anglican Academy.

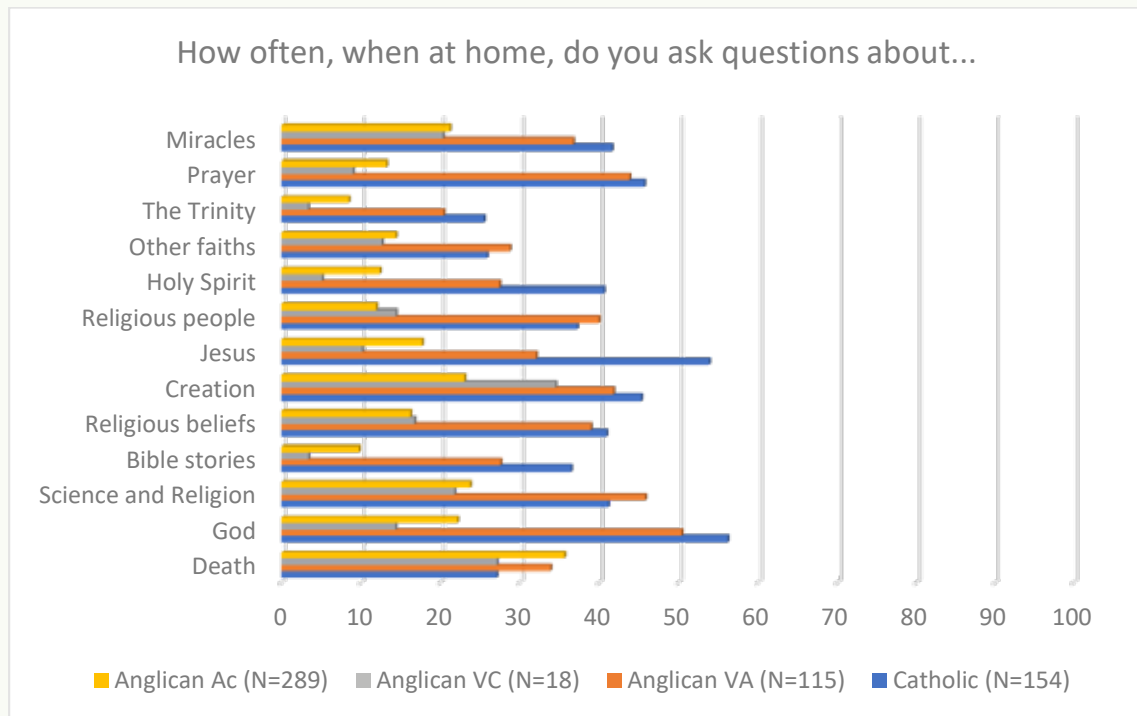


Figure 3: Pupils' answers according to school denomination.

Children from Catholic and Anglican VA schools seem to spend more time asking questions about all of the areas we explored, with the exception of death where there is no significant difference.

Children who attend schools with faith-based admissions policies (who may possibly belong to families who are more engaged with their church) report asking about every aspect we investigated, with much more frequency. (*All differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level with a large effect size*). The only exception is death. Children, when at home, ask about death-related questions with the same occurrence, regardless of their school admissions policy.

Many church primary schools have faith-based admissions policies.

[In England, it] is unlawful for maintained and independent schools to discriminate against a child on the grounds of the child's religion or belief in school admissions. However, faith schools are exempt and are permitted to use faith-based oversubscription criteria in order to give higher priority in admissions to children who are members of, or who practise, their faith or denomination. This only applies if a school is oversubscribed<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic primary schools are schools where the school buildings and land are owned by the Catholic Church. The Church has a substantial influence in the running of the school. Day to day costs are state funded. The Church covers 10% of the capital costs for the maintenance of the premises in all voluntary aided schools. Anglican Voluntary Aided (VA) primary schools are state-funded schools where the Church of England contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school. Anglican Voluntary Controlled (VC) primary schools are state-funded schools where the Church of England has some formal influence in the running of the school. Anglican Academy schools are schools run by the Church or diocese sponsored multi-academy trust, or a local or national non-faith based multi academy trust.

<sup>3</sup> Long, R., & Danechi, S. (2019). Faith Schools in England: FAQs. Briefing paper 06972 House of Commons Library

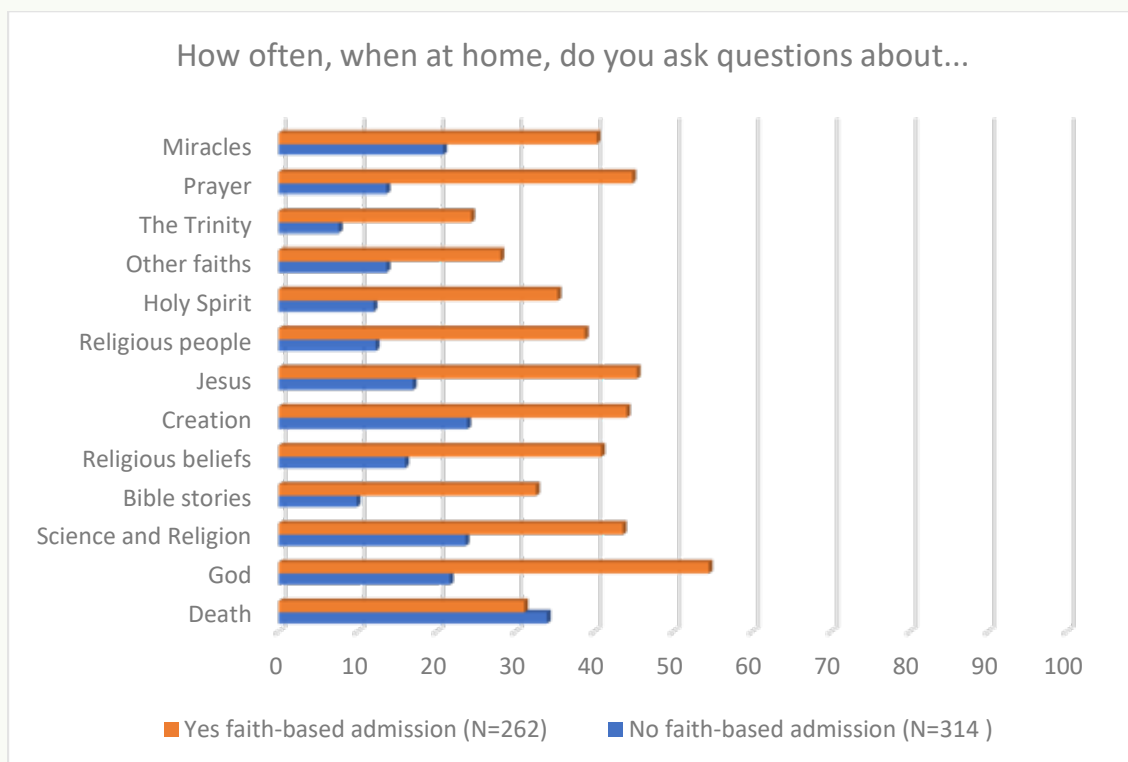


Figure 4: Pupils' answers in schools where there is a faith-based admissions policy.

However, this does not mean they only admit pupils who are baptised or are from families who attend church; for example on average, 68% of pupils in Catholic primary schools are baptised Catholic<sup>4</sup>. Within Anglican schools the number of Anglican pupils will vary considerably, often depending on whether the school is over-subscribed.

The findings do not suggest a causal link, but do raise more questions. The admissions criteria of the schools have an interesting role in explaining many of the attitudes and behaviours we surveyed. However, this differentiation was not the main focus of this study and we will leave this for future research to explore. See further analysis of this differentiation in Appendix 3.

## Questions about God

*Is there a real God because what if there was a real God? Why are people dying in Africa? Why are they starving to death? Why are people dying in their mummy's tummy? (Pupil-18)<sup>5</sup>*

In focus group interviews, parents and pupils often mentioned children's questions about God. Children questioned God's existence, and responsibility for evil and suffering in the world. Sometimes the questions explored the relationship between God and Jesus. For example, a pupil at School-2 wondered if *it was Jesus in his body, but like Jesus was God's disguise and he came down or was Jesus God's proper full son*. There was little mention of other Christian concepts, such as the Holy Spirit or the Trinity.

*If I was a mighty God and people [were] starving when they were a baby, I would do something about it. I wouldn't watch them die. (Pupil-18)*

*You can believe in the God you want to believe in, and it doesn't matter if someone tells you not to believe in God, but you have to choose what God to believe in. (Pupil-19)*

*It makes me wonder if God is actually real [or] if someone just made the whole thing up. I do know that Jesus was actually a real person, but no one actually knows if he was God's son. He was just a very wise man. (Pupil-18)*

Parents drew attention to the number of questions that children asked and the challenge of answering them. Some expressed concern as they wanted to provide an answer for the child. Questions about the nature and existence of God are challenging: parents expressed frustration that they could not provide an answer. Often the parents focused on providing **an answer** rather than exploring the issue together. Parents in several of the schools suggested that part of the problem was that they did not want to contradict or challenge the 'answers' provided in school, although they were unsure as to what these were.

*[He] comes home and asks what was there before God. How do you answer that, you know what I mean? He's really, really deep into it. He wants to know answers. He's asking questions that I can't really answer. (Parent-5)*

*Do they give you a question like "who are God's parents?" or something like that? Did you find an answer to that? (Parent-10)*

School and church leaders suggested that parents would often turn to them to answer these questions. A number of both church and school leaders argued that parents did not have the language or knowledge of faith-related topics, and that there was an underlying assumption by many parents that 'others' such as teachers or clergy would 'know' the answers to these questions.

The children are coming up with questions that the parents can't answer... I just don't think people think they've got the vocab. Or the knowledge to do so. And kids ask questions and [parents are] not well placed to answer them. (Minister-9)

**Insight:** a thread that weaves through the whole report is the assumption that the 'right' language or skill-set is needed to engage with faith, and certain people have this and others do not. Faith and spirituality are framed as something you either possess or do not possess. This assumption was expressed by parents, staff and clergy. However, what emerges from this research are examples of fluid, flexible approaches to engagement with faith and spirituality.

Another reason why parents found these questions challenging was that not all shared the Christian beliefs of the school. For some, talking about faith-related matters highlighted the difference between the church school approach and their own beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> (Pupil-\*) refers to participant and their school; all quotes are anonymised. Detailed information about the schools is found in Appendix 1.



*Although I don't believe in God, if my daughter asks me anything, I'll try and explain it. It means you have to be very honest with them. She'll say, "Why don't you believe in God?" Well, I'm fortunate in that my husband has the same opinions... So it's not that we are anti-religion and anti-God, it's just that we have the same beliefs. (Parent-9)*

This potential conflict in world views was particularly visible as a division between science and religion, in the questions children asked about Creation.

## Questions about creation

***Adam and Eve didn't really listen to what God said to them. I thought that they were actually going to listen. Did God know that they were going to do something wrong? (Pupil-10)***

Children are introduced in the school curriculum to some of the big questions about the nature of the world around them, and we know from other research<sup>6</sup> that they study this in different ways: in history, science, and RE. Parents and pupils drew attention to different understandings of Creation, parents framed a conflict between a story of Creation in seven days and a scientific account. However, for a group of pupils in School-10, who had explored the issue of science and religion in RE, it was not a choice of science or religion.

*We've been focusing [in RE] on cosmology, evolution, and the Creation story... My opinion is [science and religion are] both equal because science... does have proof and things like that and it's more believable. But I think both of them are equal because... no one knows if God's real because it's not like we go up to heaven and be like "Oh hi God. Can I go and tell everyone on earth that you're real?" (Pupil-10)*

One parent in School-1 explained how she found Old Testament stories challenging as *both myself and my husband are scientists* indicating an absence of confidence in reconciling faith and science, such as through a sense of metaphorical, allegorical, symbolical or spiritual meaning in such stories.

*My husband is a firm non-believer, and my children have said to him, "Daddy, why don't you believe in God?" and he's said to them, "Because I'm very much science-based". (Parent-4)*

Another in School-16 described the arguments over Creation her primary school child would have with their older sibling, *who's incredibly science-oriented [for who] of course well it was the whole Big Bang theory*. For some families, the conflict between science and religion was seen as a choice between belief and non-belief. Science and religion are not mutually exclusive, however the current curriculum in school emphasises the difference rather than the overlap. As pupils in School-10 discovered, exploring cosmology, evolution and Creation illuminates the connections rather than the differences.

An issue that was apparent in quite a few of the focus group interviews with parents and children was the difference between parents' discourse about faith and religious worldviews, and children's understandings or interpretations. However, the disparity should not be over-emphasised: while many children described themselves as believing in God, it was often tempered with a statement such as *we all believe in God, but we [do] not massively, strongly believe (Pupil-9)*. For many, their world views were not vastly different from their parents. Nevertheless, it was apparent that for many children, it was the RE curriculum that sparked their interest in these questions.

<sup>6</sup> Billingsley, B., Abedin, M. & Nassaji, M. (2020). Primary school students' perspectives on questions that bridge science and religion: Findings from a survey study in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 177-204.

**Insight:** children seek to explore faith and the big existential issues by asking questions. They may be seeking to confirm or to have challenged ideas encountered in school. Parents were often looking to provide a definitive answer or solution, but children may be rather just seeking to explore these issues with parents, teachers, and others. There is a need to encourage adults to talk and stimulate thought with the child, rather than avoid talking about faith for fear of giving a wrong answer. It is important for all adults, whether as parents, teachers, clergy or other stakeholders to acknowledge that for many of the children's questions there are no definite right or wrong answers. Being open to exploring together could facilitate more opportunities to explore faith-related matters at home.

## Questions about death

***"Are Gran and Grandad, going to come to ours soon, or are they going to die because they're quite old?" (Parent-15)***

Children's questions about death were challenging for parents. When we asked pupils to comment on the findings, they suggested that children ask more questions about death because nobody fully answers these questions. In interviews, parents noted that it was always the children raising questions about death, parents did not instigate this. Some parents wondered whether the questions about death were sparked by something they had talked about in class. One group of pupils explained that their recent questions about death were inspired by the festival of remembrance celebrated in the church. Several pupils mentioned that being in church made them think about people who have died recently, *Church makes me think about my Grandpa who's just died. (Pupil-16)*

*I also feel sad because we see the poppies and it reminds us of the people who died in the war. When I go to the church, it makes me think of the teachers who died to save us, and ... the ones who passed away in the church. (Pupil-18)*

Parents reported the challenge of the questions, particularly when they arose in response to a bereavement. For example, one parent explained that after her father's funeral, the children *had a lot of discussion about heaven and how you get to heaven and what if I want to go to heaven well you have to die, and we don't want you to die (Parent-1)*. One parent in School-14 explained that one of the reasons she struggled to answer these questions was because she did not know the 'right answer', so she encouraged the children to ask their grandfather, *the difficult questions you know things about death*. Other parents turned to the school, to answer the child's questions.

*We had a bereavement in the family, [my children] took it really difficult... I mentioned it to Father, and part of Tuesday worship, [was] about bereavement. The personal touch was nice, also the teaching assistant that I spoke to she found some books as well, which was really useful. **Because you can't really explain things.** (Parent-14)*

School staff suggested that they were a source of information and guidance at difficult times, and they had a role in supporting these parents in *times of stress or emotional turmoil*. *Parents will come to us at those times, and ask for prayers (Staff-12)*. A member of staff shared how a parent had asked for her help in responding to her child's questions about death.

*I had a mum ask me the other day, how do you answer the question when they say why does everybody have to die? ... Actually when she said that I thought maybe I mean I can answer that question through my belief with God (Staff-14).*

The schools' role in supporting parents at times of bereavement, highlights the wider role of church primary schools in the pastoral care of families.

*I think the teachers are very empathetic here. When I lost my Mum two years ago they were amazing with [my son] across the board... giving him books that we could read at bed time about grief. They very much accept the fact that we die and that children also suffer because of that. (Parent-4)*

**Insight:** as children seek to comprehend death, their questions pose a particular challenge. Parents' reluctance to engage with these questions is problematic, deferring to school or rarely to the church for answers is not a solution. The topic of death is problematic for a Western society that has sanitised it, and hidden it away, yet this research has highlighted how often children ask questions about death. This confirms findings from previous research that parents are reluctant to engage with death and underestimate the child's understanding of the concept of death. When adults failed to supply the information they sought, children were likely to persist with their questions.<sup>7</sup> It is an area that needs to be brought to the fore in church schools.

## What happens in school to stimulate these questions in the home?

An analysis of the focus group interviews with pupils revealed that classroom Religious Education (RE) was often the main stimulus for many of the questions pupils brought home. For pupils, RE was a space to *express our feelings; it's also about thinking and expressing your thoughts* (Pupil-4). It was a space to explore questions, share, and challenge opinions. A pupil in School-16 explained that RE encouraged them to go home and **"re-think"** more deeply about the issues; *it just makes it a bit more exciting when you re-think [because] it's about God, and I really like thinking about God.*

*There [are] all these questions [in RE]. We've got to think more. (Pupil-5)*

*[RE] makes it fun, and it encourages people, and I know my class is ambitious about asking questions, they like questioning about God. If God made the world who made God and like the dinosaurs and stuff and did He actually make it in 7 days? (Pupil-19)*

*RE is absolutely amazing... People say that we don't ask questions, but in this school they make us think... when they make us ask questions. We always have a big question for each lesson which we have to answer and have to think really deep about. (Pupil-4)*

Some parents suggested that their children had a positive attitude to RE which sparked the questions at home. For example, *I would say RE's probably one of their favourite lessons [he] talks about it a lot... It has a big impact on them, and again my husband is an atheist as well, so it really brings up those discussions between them* (Parent-19). One parent in School-13 explained if there was any religious talk at all at home, it would have been sparked by RE. Some schools shared what happened in RE and this encouraged parents *'to think about what they're learning and you can always do things at home to reflect it as well* (Parent-7).

School leaders in the Anglican primary schools drew attention to the impact of the new resource *Understanding Christianity* developed by the Church of England Education Office in partnership

<sup>7</sup> Longbottom, S. & Slaughter, V. (2018). Sources of children's knowledge about death and dying. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 373(1754)

Chouinard, M. M., Harris, P. L. & Maratsos, M. P. (2007). Children's questions: A mechanism for cognitive development. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, i-129.

with REToday.<sup>8</sup> In school this had a noticeable effect on staff's confidence in teaching Christianity. One head teacher argued that the theological knowledge of all staff had been quite poor, but since training in this new resource, he had noticed a breadth in their understanding of Christian concepts, which inevitably impacted on their teaching of Christianity. Another head teacher claimed that his staff were now more motivated and it had invigorated the RE teaching. Several RE leads mentioned pupils' positive engagement with this resource in school and as a stimulus for questions at home. Although this resource had made an impact on teachers and pupils, many parents and other stakeholders such as clergy, had limited knowledge about this new approach.

RE within the Catholic primary schools had a similar influence on pupils' engagement with questions about faith and existential questions, as a pupil in School-1 explained *often your work [in RE] encourages you to think a lot more*. RE was seen by many pupils as a space where they grappled with more complex stories and concepts in the Bible (see section D.3). The findings suggest that RE is perceived by pupils as a space and time that encourages them to think, explore faith-related matters, and that this exploration spills over into the home environment.

**Insight:** RE was perceived to make an important contribution to stimulating the questions in the home. However, many parents, clergy and other stakeholders were not aware of the depth of study and the level of discussions that pupils engage in within RE.

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<sup>8</sup> *Understanding Christianity* is a resource produced by the Church of England Education Office, in partnership with REToday, to support the teaching of Christianity in Religious Education, helping teachers to support pupils to develop their thinking and understanding of Christianity through exploring theological concepts within Christianity. Key to its implementation in schools is training for the teachers, professional development that is effective and embedded. <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/>

# What aspects of church school life are talked about in the home?

One of the survey questions asked pupils, parents and stakeholders how much children talked about a selection of faith-related activities that happen at school:

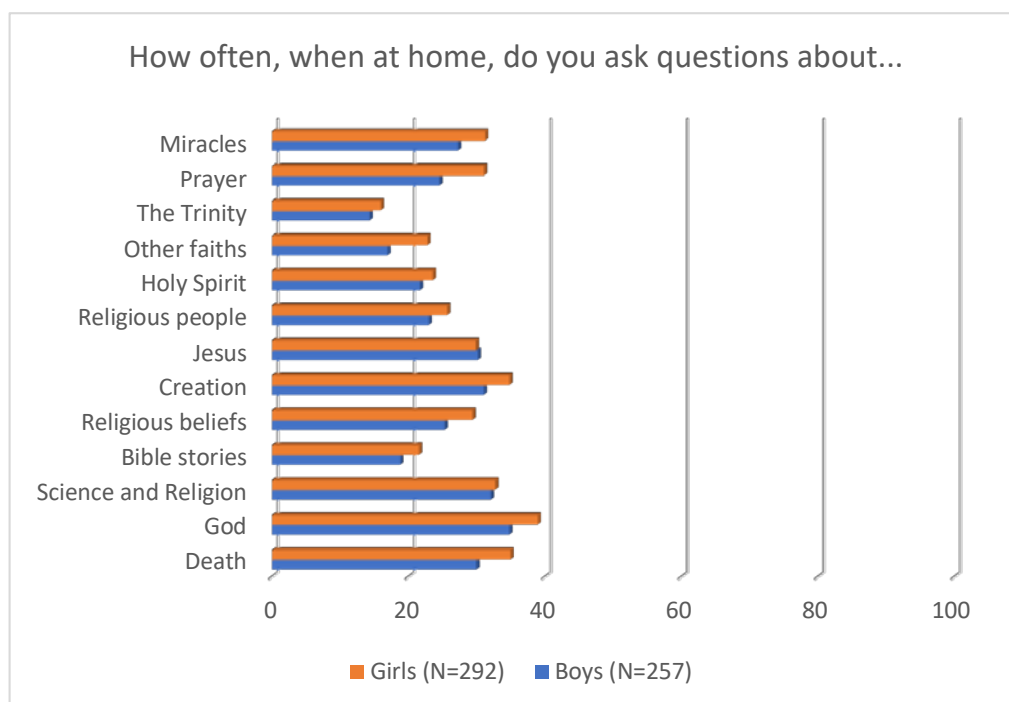


Figure 5: Average answers from the three types of respondents with regards to what is talked about at home.

The findings suggest that one of the most talked about topics at home is 'school values'. Church schools in England set out the values that underpin their school mission. Each school selects a number of values that inform their Christian ethos. These are abstract constructs which represent the core of the children's experiences and the messages that the school wants to transmit. Despite relative differences between these three groups in terms of the use of the answering scale, school values are considered unanimously important in all schools. Throughout the survey, parents (who also include grandparents and carers) report higher scores than the pupils, and pupils' average answers seem to gravitate around the mid-point of the scale for most areas. However, both parents and pupils follow the same pattern of answers.

Prayer; faith, beliefs and spirituality, together with assembly or collective worship, and Religious Education all receive scores in the mid-range and constitute the next block of content, with not much difference between them in terms of time spent talking about them at home. These concepts are explored in Section C where we look at reflection and prayer, and in Section D where we consider worship.

The cluster of least talked about items includes the telling of Bible stories, activities in the local church, reflection time, Messy Church and Godly Play. Some of these do not happen in all schools, for example Messy Church (see section B.4) and Godly Play (see section D.3). Interestingly, pupils did talk eloquently about reflection time in the focus group interviews (see Section C). With regard to Bible stories and activities in the local church, the reasons why they are not talked about a great deal are explored in section D.

## Understanding the results

It is worth mentioning that the order in which these activities were rated by participants was randomised in each presentation of the online survey, and it is therefore not helpful to look for any presentation order as this was in fact not constant.

- **Gender differences: girls report higher scores than boys**

Gender differences in children for responses to this question only reach statistical significance with regard to RE, assembly or collective worship, and school values where girls report talking about these things at home more than boys (see Figure 6).

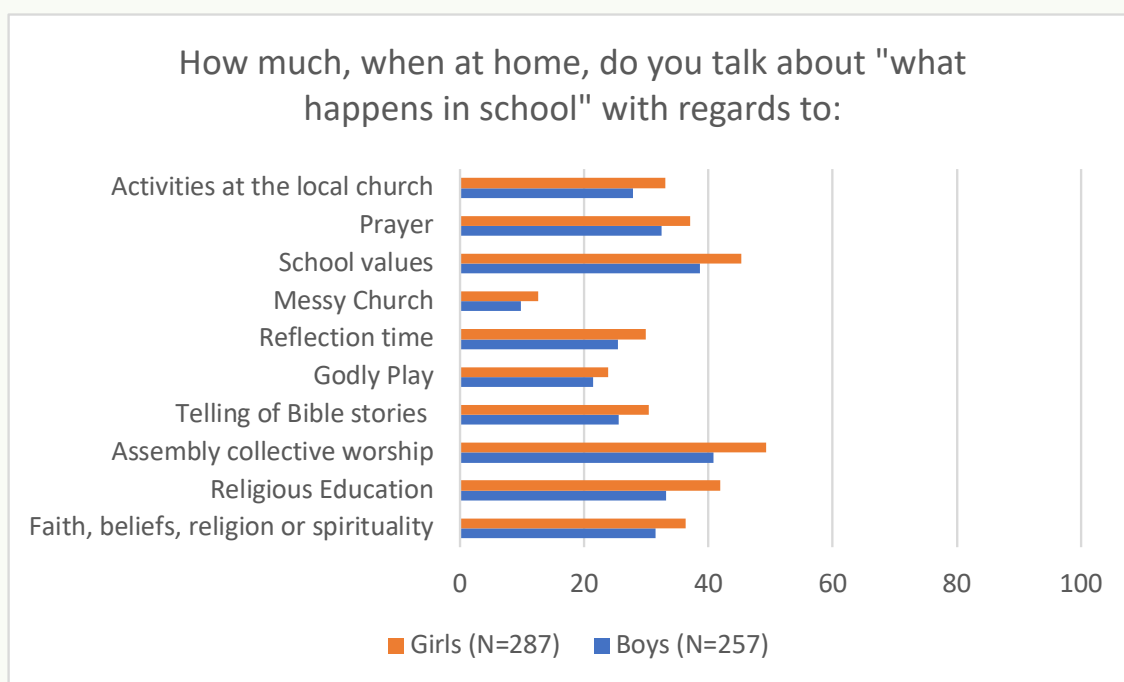


Figure 6: Pupils' answers broken down by gender.

- **Differences between schools**

Figure 7 breaks down average scores from children according to the same school classification we used earlier, but this time using a spider web representation rather than a bar chart. This view allows us to better compare patterns across schools. From this figure, we can appreciate how the Catholic and Anglican VA schools (see Appendix 1) have almost identical patterns and differ only slightly in the extent to which assembly or collective worship is talked about. This is still the most talked about topic in both schools, but the Anglican VA children rate this even higher than children from Catholic schools.

The Anglican VC and Anglican Academy schools (see Appendix 1) sit more centrally than the other two school-types, indicating an overall lower engagement with talk about faith across all areas surveyed. They also have a different shape of pattern driven by particularly low scores given to reflection time, Messy Church and Godly Play. Prayer also sits in at an intermediate level in their pattern of answer, lower comparatively than for Catholic and Anglican Academy schools.



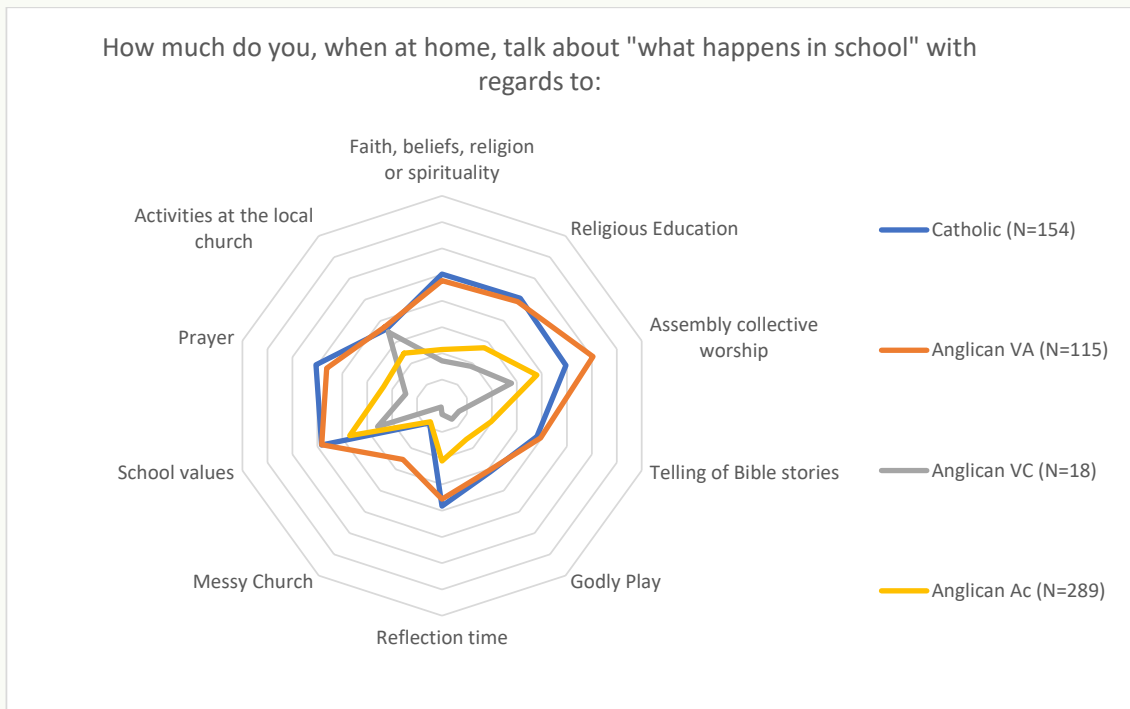


Figure 7: Spider web diagram representing pupils' answers by school denomination.

- Children attending schools with faith-based admissions criteria are more engaged in talking about faith-related matters than those who are not.

From Figure 8 we can see that children attending schools with faith-based admissions criteria report talking more about faith-related matters than those at other schools (which is similar to the findings described above concerning children's questions when at home). All mean differences are significant at the  $p < .001$  apart from those for Messy Church where the difference does not reach any statistical significance. Areas such as prayer and faith, beliefs religion or spirituality show the greatest gap between the two types of schools. We can only speculate on the true meaning of this classification and the effect that school admissions policies have, but it is somehow intuitive to assume that it captures children's or families' interests in and engagement with religious activities in general.

The findings do not suggest a causal link, but do raise more questions. The admissions criteria of the schools have an interesting role in explaining many of the attitudes and behaviours we surveyed. However, this differentiation was not the main focus of this study and we will leave it for future research to explore. (See Appendix 3 for further analysis of the effect of faith-based admissions policy)

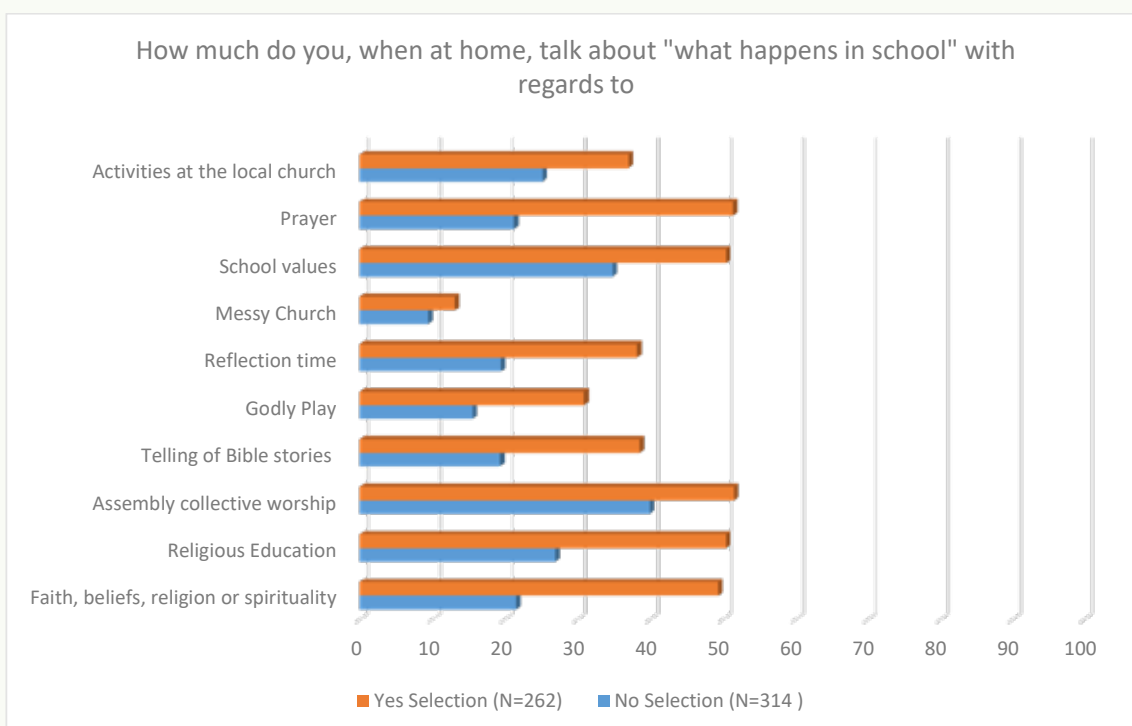


Figure 8: Pupils' answers in schools where there is a faith-based admissions policy, and schools where there is not such a policy.

## Talking about values

This sub-section looks at 'school values' in more detail. This topic was frequently mentioned by parents as frequently talked about at home, namely school values. A strong lived out Christian values system is perceived to make an active contribution to the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of pupils. In all the twenty church primary schools, the school values chosen were seen to reflect the Christian ethos of the school. A wide variety of values are chosen. In some schools the values are visibly rooted in Biblical texts. Some focused on the Fruits of the Spirit, others selected a core of three or four more generic values, such as kindness, ambition, caring, and community.

In the focus group interviews the parents reported a great deal more talking about school values at home than pupils did. In fact, while the pupils would make reference to a wide variety of aspects of faith talked about at home, the majority of the parent focus group interviews referred primarily to school values. The influence of school values on faith talk in the home is best illustrated by looking at a particular example in School-17 where values talk was embedded in the school and permeated through to the home.

### Our Values

*Hope, honesty, patience, joy, forgiveness, tolerance, thankfulness, respect, kindness, friendship, gentleness and love. (School-17)*

In School-17 the parents shared how school values shaped their understanding of values at home. For example, a parent explained:

*In the house, forgiveness is one thing because they [are] always stepping on each other's toes and always doing something. And [I say] "is that being forgiving? Are you kind to that person?" I also have a [poster from school] of that value in my house, and I use it. Once I pull it out, they go, oh! **It's like a calling card for me; it helps me make sure I've been saying that throughout.** So it's very helpful. A useful tool to use. (Parent-17)*

The pupils also spoke a great deal about how they expressed the school values at home, offering examples of when they showed forgiveness, kindness, and love to their families. The parents in School-17 'knew' the school values, because the school focused on a different value each week. They encountered the values when they frequented assemblies, read the newsletter, access the website, and in conversations with their children.

*In assemblies, [the head teacher] does a lot on value stuff, and it's so lovely to see because I think it makes the children kind, and it makes you appreciate that. (Parent-17)*

*We get [the values] in the newsletters online as well and on the wall. And they just come home and tell you. ... There is no way you'll miss it. (Parent-17)*

Within the school, effective communication of the Christian values was seen as important. The values were expressed in a multitude of different ways, all in a simple language understood by the child. They were highly visible in displays, signage, collective worship, and classroom talk; prominent on the school website and in direct communication to parents via weekly newsletters. The website encouraged parental engagement as it is regularly updated with information and photographs of what is happening in school. The values were prioritised and promoted by all members of the school community; teachers, lunchtime supervisors, and office staff.

*I think [there's a] big emphasis on our values. Monday assembly introduces the value, and Friday assembly, [is] the celebration of that value. (Staff-17)*

*[I often say] "You've got to be a bit tolerant, somebody might be having a bad day," they understand, and then they forgive. (Staff-17)*

The head teacher explained how values language was the core of the school Christian ethos; it had been embedded in every school policy, in communication with families and the community. Within school it was part of everybody's language; for example, if there is fighting on the playground, the supervisor will say 'tell me what value you're going to need in order to resolve this.' It had been a deliberate decision to ensure that this values language was translated into the home environment.

*Through the children and their understanding, the parents gain a better understanding. Through our communications with the parents, it's everywhere. It's on our wall outside, newsletters, websites. It is our branding, through and through everything. It is just part of us rather than we'll use it when we need to say something profound.*

A prime concern of the research project was to investigate how local churches and other agencies supported the church's primary school. A characteristic of the approach in this school was the close cooperation between school, church, and local Open the Book team. The local vicar who was fairly new in post explained how, following on from her predecessor, she worked closely with the school when planning her assemblies; she was guided by the head and tailored her assembly around the weekly value. The school was also supported by a local, active Open the Book team (see section D.3). They explained that they matched their weekly Bible story to the school values; they were beginning conversations with the school about choosing the story and value in a partnership.

This prioritisation has resulted in the translation of school language about values into the home.

The school has noticed the effect on the families; parents have noticed the difference and see their children able to articulate and express the values in their behaviour. The parents were supportive of the values inculcated in school; indeed, it was often the reason they chose the school. The parents spoke of being in partnership with the school and expressed a strong sense of belonging to the school community, to the extent to which they shared the same value system. However, it was apparent in many discussions with these parents that there was often a tendency to defer to the school on issues of behaviour and values. Further exploration is needed here, as to why parents defer to school. Is it a particular view of the authority of the school, or a lack of confidence on the part of the parents?

**Insight:** the confidence with which parents talk about the school values with their children is lacking when talking about other faith and spiritual topics. Maybe this is because values talk reflects implicit, rather than explicit talk about faith. Parents expressed an awareness that the values are Christian because it is a church school, but they were not necessarily aware of the Christian, or Biblical roots of the values.

# What do we now know about faith-talk in the home?

**Key words:** Co-constructors, Instigator, absence of faith-talk.

## Children are instigators of faith-talk in the home.

The traditional understanding of faith-talk in the home is in the transmission from parent to child. What became apparent in this research project was that, more often than not, talking about faith was instigated by the child. In some homes, the child's questions led to a conversation between parent and child.

*When they come home, they pose you a question, and you think, oh well, actually I don't know how I feel about that. I'm not sure if I've thought about it quite that way before. So not only is it good for the children, but I think it also encourages the parents and the adults to actually **think about what it is they're saying** because you never want to fob a kid off. **You want to give them the right answer if you can.** So it makes you consider it. (Parent-9)*

Children may be the instigators despite the absence of religious language, or faith encounters in the home, or parents' lack of interest in this dimension of life. For example, one parent, who described herself as a non-believer, explained that talk about faith was always sparked by school activities.

*I've always said that I don't [believe] that my beliefs are what they are. It would be her generally that brings something up that she's heard or learned at school. So it's all school-based. (Parent-9)*

A key conclusion from this analysis is that children need to be viewed as active participants in religious socialisation and spiritual development, rather than as more passive recipients of parental influences.

**Insight:** children initiate faith-talk in the home. Others may be reluctant to talk about faith for a variety of reasons; this poses a major challenge to support for an exploration of faith and spiritual life. These findings call into question the traditional understanding of the parental role in transmission of faith. Many children are not passive recipients, but actively seeking meaning.

## Talking about faith between generations

A key question is with whom children talked about faith. The children turned primarily to their immediate family, parents, siblings and grandparents. Often when considering faith-talk in the family, the focus is on parent-child interaction, but for many children, talking with siblings was more common.

Grandparents played an important role in many children's lives in particular with regard to faith beliefs and practices. Parents gave examples of times when they encouraged children to talk to their grandparents. The involvement of grandparents was important for many and there was a sense expressed by some of a difference in beliefs between the generations. For example, *my grandparents are religious, my parents are not, me and my brother are*, was one response from one pupil in the survey.

*If I have any questions about my faith - my grandparents are Eucharist Ministers. I find that they are often people to explore my faith with as in asking questions about God. (Pupil-1)*

*My dad's Catholic, so when we go round to his, they'll sit there and have conversations. He taught the difference between a cross and a crucifix and, sometimes she's like "mummy that's a cross. It's not a crucifix because there is no dead man hanging off it". (Parent-17)*

*I have some conversations [with my Dad] about God and Jesus, but we put it in different perspectives like the Crucifixion [from] the Roman perspective and God and Jesus' perspective and paint a picture of how it was from different perspectives. (Pupil-5)*

Previous research<sup>9</sup> has highlighted the important role that grandparents play in the faith formation of their grandchildren, by reinforcing a parent's faith or substituting for it. The role of grandparents in talking about faith and encouraging faith-related activities in the home emerged as an important theme in the research.

**Insight:** the way grandparents are seen to readily talk about faith with children highlights the crucial role they have in exploring faith. It may be that a person removed from the role of immediate parenting is sometimes more helpful for exploratory conversations, as a child's view of their authority is different from that of the parent.

## Is it different in Christian households?

A question often asked when sharing these findings is how it is different in Christian households. The response always involves another question as to what is meant by Christian. The Faith in the Nexus research revealed that talking about faith-related matters was reported more by participants in schools with faith-based admissions policies (see Appendix 3). We could conclude that families in these schools were more likely to be involved in faith activities outside of school. It was notable that in these schools parents were more likely to speak of instigating talk about faith. For example, *we often use circumstances to bring things up. If something's happening at home or they're disagreeing, or there's a question, we would say, "What would God do? What do you think Jesus would do in this situation?"* (Parent-8). In other schools, parents who described themselves as attending the local church noted that it would be difficult to pinpoint what prompted the conversations, as similar conversations would happen at home, school, and church. One parent reflected how the school could reinforce what happens in a church and at home, giving an example of how her daughter used knowledge gained in school in her church Bible study class.

*We talk about how then that applies in the here and now. It's about making faith a living breathing thing rather than this dusty thing that really has no relation to your life. (Parent-3)*

Three Christian parents in different schools suggested that their child would talk more about God, Jesus and faith at home, than in school. However, the question of whether Christian families approach faith-talk differently hinges on an interpretation of what it is to be Christian. The Christian identity expressed by the majority of participants in this research was a fluid identity, with the majority describing themselves as Christian, but with a variety of ideas of what that means for themselves (see Appendix 3). The views of parents who described themselves as Christians were not that different from those who did not consider themselves to be religious (see further Appendix 3).

However, one of the challenges highlighted by many parents, including those who described themselves as Christian, was that they wanted to be open-minded. They sought to let their children make up their minds and they did not wish to unduly influence a child's opinions. This parental concern to be open-minded, to help children making their own decisions, is common to many aspects of family life. For example, one parent explained:

<sup>9</sup> Deprez, M. D. (2017). The Role of Grandparents in Shaping Faith Formation of Grandchildren: A Case Study. *Christian Education Journal*, 14(1), 109–127.



*[My daughter] and I have often lots of "What do you believe mummy? What do you think?" I don't want to influence that. I just turn it round and say, "Well, what is it that you think?"... But I don't want to influence that because she'll then just repeat what I say... It's about helping them to understand that we're all allowed to believe, to make your mind up, and that is fine, that it isn't black and white. (Parent-3)*

**Insight:** this focus on open-mindedness or allowing the child to make up their own mind is a feature of the individualisation of society and a presumed autonomy of the individual. The expectation that a young child can construct their own identity does not take account of the need for the critical skill to evaluate the blocks, the parts, the threads needed to weave such an identity. Nor does it account for how independently an individual might be able to choose freely among other influencing factors.

## **The absence of faith-talk at home**

For some households, talking about faith was something that only happened in school, or it was something children might talk about, but adults did not engage with, it was a case of 'they [the children] talk' rather than 'we talk.' *They talk about what's happened in school, and when they go to church [with school], they tell you what the priest has said and things.* (Parent-12). It was apparent from pupils that, for many of them, faith-related talk and activities happened in school, not in the home. In the home some children spoke of silent reflection time on their own (section C.1) and quietly reading the Bible by themselves (section D.3). School and church leaders identified the obstacles to talking about faith as parents' lack of confidence, interest or knowledge when speaking about faith, and faith-talk being seen as normal for school, but not home.

**Insight:** adults need to become aware when children are seeking to explore challenging issues. They need to understand that children are not always seeking a definitive answer, but just want someone to explore these questions with them. This might help parents who struggle to respond, and help avoid a closing down of these conversations.

# What facilitates opportunities for faith-talk in the home?

**Key words:** Christian ethos, permission to do God-talk, values talk, Religious Education.

## Faith talk is 'normal' in church schools

Critical to this is making space and time for faith-talk to happen, and encouraging a positive response from all adults within the school community to children's exploration of faith. Participants would often say the language of faith was in all aspects of school. Parents, pupils and staff stressed that talking about faith was not confined to RE or collective worship, but permeated throughout the school, in everyday conversations with staff and encounters with the church in school.

## Permitted to talk about faith

Parents in several schools suggested that the school 'gave permission' for talk about faith, which they did not feel was allowed in society. *I don't want her being closed off to that. [In] society sometimes they're not allowed to... we like the discussion, [she] often brings it up.* (Parent-10). A question to explore further is why some people feel faith-talk is not allowed in society today.

## Rich Christian ethos

Participants pointed to the richness of the faith environment within church primary schools, the displays in the school hall, and the many extra-curricular activities that happen. This rich environment normalised talking about faith or spiritual matters. It was apparent in the ways in which talking about death was seen as 'normal' within a church school environment. It was also apparent where an active connection with the local church or faith community supported this explicit communication of a Christian ethos within school.

## Values talk

The language of Christian values translated easily into the home environment, where other Christian beliefs and concepts did not. Parents were confident talking about Christian values in the home. Clear communication of the Christian roots of these values might be a way to give parents more confidence in talking about faith in the home.

## RE curriculum: a questioning approach

The influence of the RE curriculum in providing the spark for questions about faith was clear in the interviews with pupils and parents. In the RE classroom, the topics discussed in RE centred round big existential questions which intrigued the children, and encouraged them to ask questions and to reflect on their opinions. It also inspired them to ask questions elsewhere. One concern is that many parents were not aware of this 'big existential questions' approach, nor did they have sufficient knowledge or understanding of the ways issues such as Creation, science and religion were discussed in the RE classroom.

## Support of church school families at times of crisis

The ways in which a number of school staff supported families to have difficult conversations about death, for example at times of bereavement, enabled relationships based on compassion and trust to grow within families, and between families and schools. This could give confidence to parents to address their children's questions at these times.

**Insight:** more often than not, the stimulus for talking about faith in the home is activities, curriculum, and worship in school. Parents' experience and encounters with faith within the church primary school, give more confidence to parents' expressions of faith, and can enable them, regardless of their world view, to engage with the child's questions about faith.

## Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

### Questions for discussion

1. Has anything in this section surprised you or were you expecting something that was not mentioned?
2. What are the three most significant things said by pupils that you will take away from this section?
3. What is of particular relevance for greater engagement with families?
4. Has this section suggested anything that would make a difference in practice?
5. In what ways can space and time be made for children to explore the big questions about life and death?

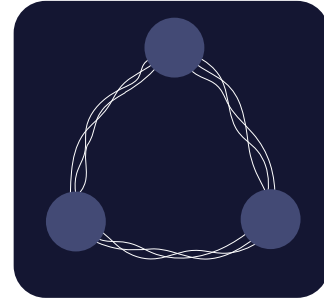
### Where to look for further reading and resources

For further exploration of the challenges and opportunities described in this section:

1. Go to NICER's website for research reports, academic articles and CPD resources  
**[www.nicer.org.uk](http://www.nicer.org.uk)**
2. Search the online catalogue of 'The North East Religious Resource Centre' for religious resources
  - The North East Religious Resource Centre (RRC), the largest religious resources centre in England, consists of a friendly and knowledgeable team of 8 resource specialists working in two regional centres in the North East of England. It holds over 37,000 physical, online and downloadable resources relevant to home, school and church contexts. Every resource has been vetted by RRC staff to ensure accuracy, reliability and quality. Some are bespoke resources developed by the RRC to address areas otherwise not supported. If you have any specific resource needs, please search our online catalogue or get in touch.

**[www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard](http://www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard)**

The online catalogue is accessible at **<https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard>**



## SECTION B

# SENSE OF BELONGING

### Key findings

- A strong relationship between church and school has a strong association with attitudes and behaviours which facilitate faith-talk and interactions at home
- Flourishing connections between school, home and church, nurtures relationships between individuals and these institutions
- Positive relationships between church and school are characterised by invitational worship, the celebration of festivals, the minister's presence, and a sense of belonging and connection to the church community and building
- The powerful impact these positive relationships have on aspects of family faith life is mostly unseen but is apparent in the significance for church school families of their connection with the local church

### Introduction

Underpinning the talking (Section A), the being (Section C) and the doing (Section D) was the sense of belonging expressed by children; a sense of belonging primarily to the school community, but also for many pupils and parents a sense of connection with the local church. As with Section A, the findings in this section emerged from analysis of focus group interviews with pupils, parents, staff and clergy in twenty schools, and of the subsequent online survey. The aim was for the participants to define what happens to do with faith, in school and at home. In the interviews the questions were open; the researcher asked: "What happens in the local faith community that affects, influences or helps children explore faith and the spiritual dimension of life at home?" In response to this question, pupils and parents talked about the interactions between church and school. With each focus group the interview took different turns, but an analysis highlighted the importance of a connection to church through the school.

1. Pupils' sense of connection to school
  2. Pupils' sense of connection between school and church
  3. A sense of belonging to church
  4. Opportunities and challenges to sustaining connections between school and church
- Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

# Pupil's perception of a sense of connection to school

A theme that emerged from the interviews was interactions with the local church in school, the presence of the minister in school, or the school worship in church. In designing the online survey we decided to follow this up with a series of questions looking to measure pupils' and parents' sense of connection to church.

In the online survey we asked Year 5 and 6 pupils to rate on a 6 point Likert<sup>10</sup> like scale: "How strong do you think this connection is?" In addition, respondents could slide a bar from 0 to 100 to indicate: "How connected YOU feel to your School?" and "How connected YOU feel to the local church?". In all cases, a higher number represents a stronger, more positive answer. The scores given to the school connection and to the church connection were also subtracted from each other to create a new variable called "Gap between school and church connection" so that a positive score indicated a stronger connection with the school than the local church, while a negative score indicated a stronger connection to the local church than to the school.

Children reported very high levels of connection to their school. The average pupil personal connection to the school (M=65.71, s.d. =31.39) is higher than the pupil personal connection to the local church (M=37.48, s.d. =35.96 on a 0 to 100 scale). Given the extremely high levels of variability observed around these mean values, it makes sense to break down this single value and plot these answers by school.

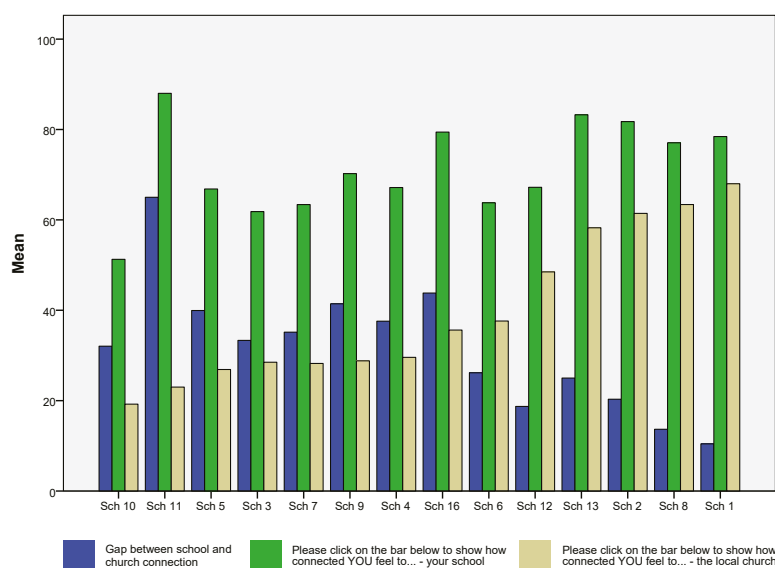


Figure 1: Bar chart representing the average levels of connection to the school, to the local church and the difference in these two scores, reported by pupils in 14 of the schools surveyed (only schools with sufficient number of respondents are included here – see further Appendix 1).

Looking at Figure 1 we can observe that the extent to which children feel connected to their schools varies, (these differences range between 51.06 for School-10 and 88 for School-11). Figure 1 shows this – note that the green bars are always higher. However, the variability in feelings of connection to the local church reveals a much wider range (from 19.30 for School-10 to 68.17 for School-1). These differences are represented by the blue bars which chart the difference, in favour of schools, of feelings of attachment.

<sup>10</sup> A Likert Scale is a type of rating scale used to measure attitudes or opinions. Respondents are asked to rate items on a level of agreement.

## Understanding the results

To understand even further the variability in answers and feelings of connection to the school and the local church, we have divided the 0 to 100 range into five categories. In this way we can look at the percentage of respondents per school who report 0 connection to the school or the local church (minimum score) as well as those reporting maximum connection, a score of 100. In between there will be three intermediate categories mapping the percentages (scoring 1 to 33, 33 to 66 and 66 to 99).

Figures 2 and 3 display these percentages. We can look at Figures 2 and 3 in different ways. The way the bars are ordered here is in descending order of the frequency of pupils reporting a score of 100. Looked at in this way, pupils in School-1 report a higher connection to the school and also to their local church. However, we could look at the cumulative percentages of the yellow and purple section, which would give us the percentage of children scoring from 66 to 100. From this perspective then School-16 would score the highest in terms of connection to the school while also showing low levels of connections to the local church. School-10 on the other hand seems to be the one reporting the lower scores with regards to both connections. Clearly Figures 2 and 3 offer a richer and deeper understanding of the simple average scores.

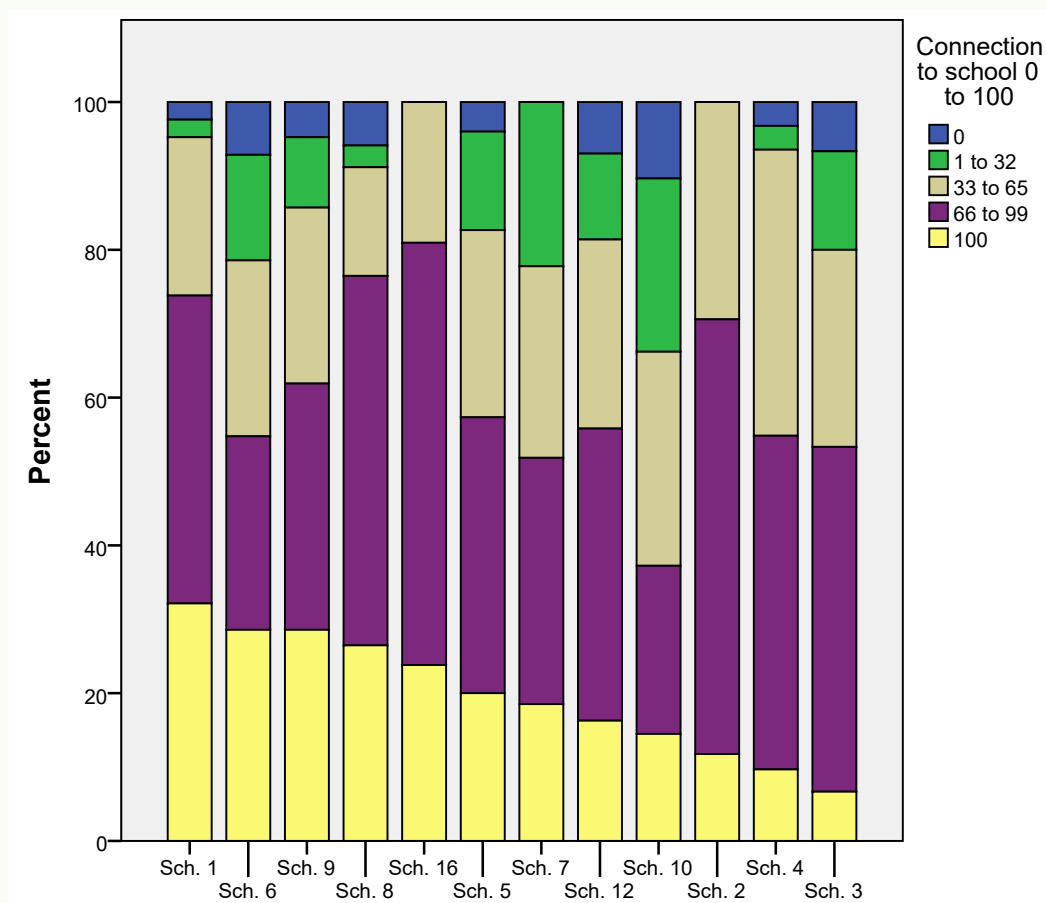


Figure 2: Bar chart representing the percentage of pupils reporting each of the five levels of connection to the school by school number.

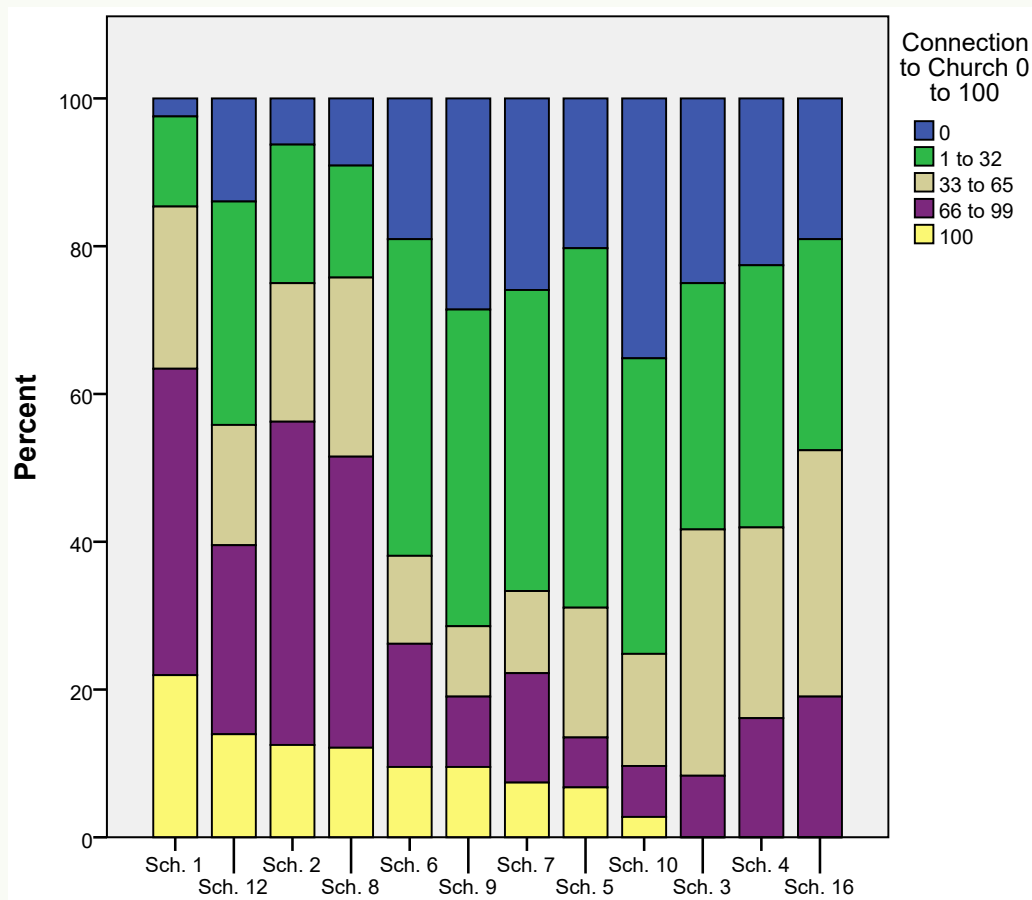


Figure 3: Bar chart representing the percentage of pupils reporting each of the five levels of connection to the local church by school number.

Two of the schools where pupils reported very strong connections to school were in areas of multiple deprivation (School-11 and School-5). In the focus group interviews, parents described the school as being like a family, *I know a lot of schools have got good teachers and head teachers but it's quite rare to get something so lovely like a family* (Parent-5). Staff were perceived to go beyond what other schools did, including helping parents sort out problems in the home.

*They recognise every little thing... if you come in one day, and you don't feel good... they pick it up and they give you a call and [say] "are you OK?"*  
(Parent-11)

Pupils also reported a strong connection to school in three small rural village schools with less than 100 pupils (Schools 2, 4 and 16). Parents spoke of a sense of an integrated community. Traditionally small rural schools were embedded in the church and the local community, but as one head teacher pointed out, in 2019 many pupils came from outside the village. Further research with a larger sample is needed to establish whether the critical factor may be the small size of school, or that parents have deliberately chosen a small school simply because of that sense of community or because of the remoteness of the region.

A very strong connection to school and to church was expressed by parents and pupils in the online survey and in the focus group interviews by parents and pupils in Schools 1 and 8. A more detailed analysis of the data from two of these schools (1 and 8) is in Appendix 2. Pupils' perceptions on how these two schools facilitate opportunities for faith-related activities in the home are found throughout the report, for example in sections C.1, C.2 and D.5.



### Why is the connection to school important for facilitating opportunities for children's exploration of faith in the home?

The more children feel connected to the school or to the church, the more they display attitudes and behaviours that facilitate faith-talk and interactions at home. The influence of the strength of the connection to school is seen most clearly in pupils' expressions of behaviours such as caring for others (section D.5). A sense of connection to school also has a positive impact on asking questions and talking about faith and values (section A), and experience of reflection spaces (section C.1). The sense of connection to school is an expression of relationships (section D.4) which create a climate where children's spiritual development can flourish.

## Pupils' sense of connection between school and church

**Key words:** minister, occasional belonging, church worship, local church, sense of belonging.

One of the questions in the online survey asked participants to evaluate the extent to which school and church appear connected to each other on a 6-point scale ranging from "Extremely weak connection" to "Extremely strong connection". (Cumulative percentages per school are reported in Figure 4). We can observe that all the schools have a prevalence of positive answers which indicate a very strong connection between school and church. There is, however, also a large variability between schools.

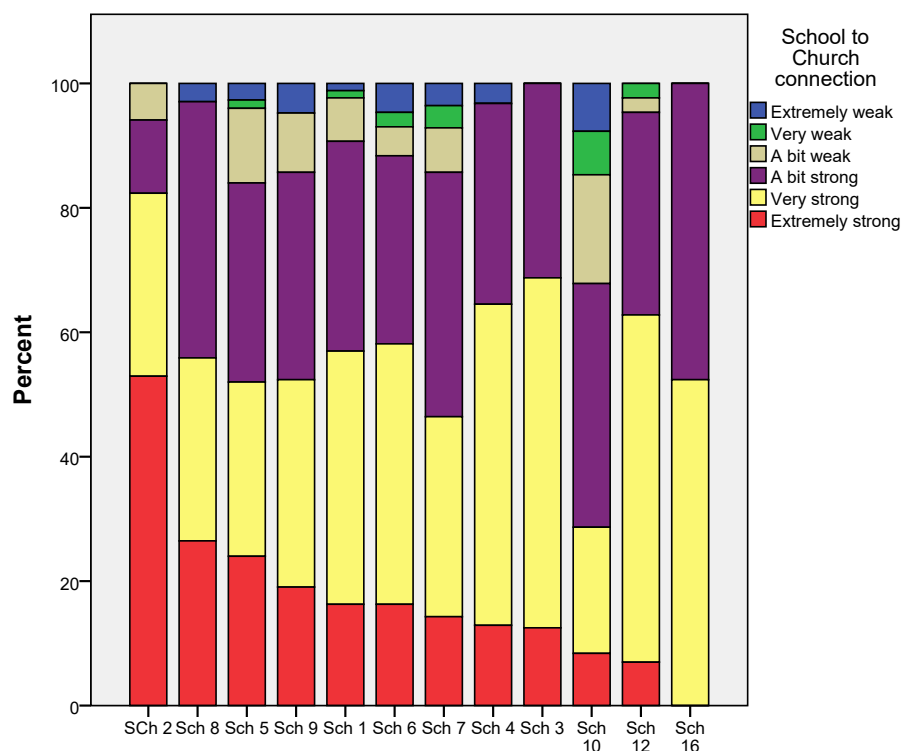


Figure 4: Bar chart representing the percentage of participants reporting each of the six levels of connection between school and local church by school.

## Understanding the results

Pupils in School-2 and 10 provide the highest and lowest if we add together the red, yellow and purple proportions of such answers, respectively. School-16 has no pupil responses in the extremely strong category, but none of the pupils there report a weak connection. The high positive response in School-2 is intriguing; it is a small village school with the local church in close proximity, but one where the school staff report a lack of connection with the local minister. The school leadership has developed strong alternative connections to church in spite of this (B.4), which obviously gives the impression to pupils and families of a strong connection with church. School-10 is a Junior school (7-11 year old), for which the principal feeder infant school is a non-church school. Many pupils encounter the local church for the first time when they enter the school in Year 3.

### Pupils' and parents' descriptions of the connection between church and school.

In the online survey pupils were asked to write in an open text entry box on the ways in which their school and church were connected. An analysis of the responses revealed that pupils saw this connection in terms of the following:

- The presence of the minister<sup>11</sup> in school.
- Participation in worship at the church.
- School work displayed within the church.
- Close physical proximity to the church.

#### 1. Minister in school

The most common response to the question was to talk about the presence of the minister in school either generally or specifically in collective worship or RE lessons.

- The vicar comes into school.
- Minister is in school to do assembly; talk about God.
- Priest answers questions in RE lessons – about God and Jesus.
- [The priest] is very often wandering around the playground talking to people. (Open text answers from online survey)

Parents' responses in the focus group interviews echoed the pupils' perceptions.

#### A presence on the playground

*[The minister is] often in the playground just to talk to the parents and to listen to the parents actually more often than not. (Parent-7)*

<sup>11</sup> Although a variety of terms were used by participants when referring to members of the clergy, the term minister is employed throughout this report.

*Obviously the level of interaction I see from [the minister]... it's very rare that you have a day when you don't see him... He's normally knocking around in the background somewhere. You do get that sense of the link. (Parent-9)*

### Prioritising time for school

*[He] makes the time to come in every week as well, so that's important. (Parent-16)*

### Involvement in the everyday life of the school

*[He] is forever in school... He's a standard figure, he does the drama productions, he goes on school trips, he goes on residential with them... he's a very known figure. (Parent-14)*

*We didn't have a lollipop lady and [the minister] was our lollipop lady. She also goes on the residential for the Junior School so they get to know her well then. (Parent-15)*

### Being good with children

*The [minister] from the church... [is] very good with the children, I don't know what she's like with the rest of the community, but she's very good with the children. (Parent-19)*

*When [the vicar is] talking he really engages the children... I just think that's lovely for them to be that engrossed in what he's saying and enjoy what he's saying and want to take part. (Parent-9)*

In two schools which were without a minister at the time of the research, the parents harked back to how it had been with the previous incumbent. One parent explained, *when [X] was there he used to be there most mornings saying hello to them* (Parent-4). The different ways in which school and church sustain the relationship between school and local minister is explored further later in Section B.4.

## 2. Worship in church

The second most common response to the question of how school and church were connected was to point out how often the school went to the church for services.

- Going to the church for festivals and Mass.
- School choir singing in church.
- Pray and worship in church. (Open text answers from online survey)

For pupils and parents, going to the local church for regular worship as a school emphasised the strength of the connection between school and church. The minister's role as a leader of worship both in school and church drew the two together.

*I think because [the minister] comes over quite regularly he is a very familiar person who the children know. Again he's just an extension of their community if you like. So when they go over [to the church] they're very natural there. They do a lot of things over there. It's not just the highlights of Christmas and Easter. (Parent-3)*

### 3. Displays of school work in church building

- *The church displays school work.*
- *We put Christmas trees in church.*
- *Sometimes the church has some stuff that we make at school. (Open text answers)*

The close connection between school and church was visible for some, in the presence of school work on display in the church. Sometimes this was related to faith or RE. One school had a prayer board that went back and forward between school and church; it was in school during the week and brought into church for Sunday services (see section C.2). Sometimes space in church was used by the school for various curricular and extra-curricular activities, for example a parent in School-3 recalled her son's visit to church, *I think it was something to do with science and making parachutes.* (Parent-3).

*We did a project... where a group of our children worked with a group of parishioners and with an artist. The children partnered up with an adult from church and they developed and made pictures of the Stations of the Cross.*  
(Staff-14)

In Catholic primary schools often the work of the children undertaking their sacramental programme would be on display in church. In one Catholic primary school where the local church had been closed, staff were very aware of the loss of a space for their children's work to be shown in church, (see the innovative solution to this obstacle in section B.4).

### 4. Proximity of church building to school

All of the above factors were influenced in part by the physical proximity of the church building; for pupils and parents this was visible evidence of the connection of school and church.

- *We are extremely close to our church.*
- *The church is part of our school. We share a hall. We go to church.*

Two schools shared hall space with the parish church; in several schools the local church was across the road from the school, or the school and church shared a name. This is one factor beyond the control of school leadership and the impact of an absence of a church and active church community in proximity, presents a challenge. (How some schools sought to overcome this issue is explored further in section B.5).

## Sense of belonging to church

This sub-section looks specifically at how families interpreted their sense of belonging to church; as seen above, the research highlighted how pupils and parents expressed a strong sense of belonging to the school community, there was much greater variability in the connection to church (see Figure 3).

### Irrelevance of church attendance measures

Measuring belonging in terms of Sunday church attendance does not seem relevant for many families' sense of belonging. However, for some local church communities and clergy, the presence of church school families in church for special events was the most visible sign of this sense of belonging. As a Governor in School-18 explained, the previous curate had been enthusiastic about school and church being together, as a result he argued that, *you do see more children in church now*. Some clergy justify their lack of involvement and engagement with church primary schools by saying the school families or the school staff were non-church going or non-practising Christians.

**Insight:** this research has highlighted an expression of a sense of belonging to church through school, which is perhaps best expressed as a sense of being occasional believers. The problem with viewing a sense of belonging through the lens of church attendance is that for many parents and pupils this was not a priority. In fact many defined themselves as Christians who do not attend church. A consideration of how church school families describe their faith identity gave a picture of a fluid, flexible identity, which for many individuals has tenuous connections to the Christian identity as defined by the church (see further Appendix 3). If ministers do not work closely with school, they are disconnecting from people who consider themselves to be part of the Christian family.

A sense of belonging was engendered for parents, through attending celebrations of the Christian festivals in the local church with school. *[The school] go over at Easter and Christmas and then it's involving the parents as well. Like we're allowed to come into the church to share that with the church and the children* (Parent-10).

What is of interest here is that the parents spoke of feeling included in the local church community, because at these times they were more involved. The idea that through school, they were allowed to come into church was common in some of the conversations with parents. A sense of the school giving permission, being a gateway to access church, is interesting. Unfortunately, at the time this line of thinking was not followed up, but it offers an insight into a common idea that church is not for people like them, who may have fluid, flexible ideas of Christian identity.

### The Eucharist, Holy Communion, Mass in school or church

Few participants mentioned the celebration of the Eucharist; it was only mentioned in 5 out of the 17 Church of England schools. This does not mean celebration of the Eucharist did not take place; just that it was not mentioned in response to questions about what in school helps families explore faith. The challenges of greater engagement with the Eucharist were identified by staff and clergy as the lack of accessible age-appropriate liturgies for children, and that parents were not so keen to attend.

In the Catholic primary schools, attendance at Mass was mentioned frequently, expressed in family engagement in the sacramental programme of preparation for First Holy Communion, and regular half-termly or weekly Masses in school or in the church.

*The Masses [are] in the church, anyone can come. For example... I know some elderly people that don't have families and they appreciate when they come to church they see the whole school before them.* (Parent-1)

For parents and pupils, joint celebrations of Mass with local parishioners also emphasised the connection with the church. The differences in engagement here are a visible sign of denominational differences.

### **Different ways of belonging**

There was a sense of belonging to a wider church community through a variety of activities that took place in school and in the church building. The implications of this sense of belonging to church meant, for some, greater involvement in the church foodbank or refugee programme. Others had felt encouraged to go to a church service. For example at Easter or Christmas time, *Just for me for our faith important services like Easter and we always go on Christmas day which is nice... [We've] come to midnight mass (Parent-14).*

*Now when you talk to parents and you ask "do you go to church?" they will say [yes] if Open the Book and things like that [are] church. (School-17 Open the Book team)*

Many parents and pupils interpreted going to Messy Church or going to activities run by parachurch organisations as 'going to church'. This research did not explore the extent to which the Sunday congregation saw attendance of these activities as belonging to the church community. The response of clergy varied; some viewed these activities as separate, while others had a wider sense of church community, including the families who attended for example Messy Church.

*Within school [those] who don't necessarily go [to church]... they would see [the church next to school] as their church. (Staff-14)*

Several clergy noted the allegiance church school families had to the church building. They would have requests from school families for baptisms, marriages, funerals at the church linked to the primary school long after they had left. There was a sense that this was the only church building known to them, and from their experience in primary school with which they were familiar.

**Insight:** these findings illustrate a sense of belonging to church, not defined in terms of regular church attendance. They highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging to church for facilitating opportunities to explore faith in the home. There is a need for further research to explore this sense of belonging, and the attitudes to church.

# Opportunities and challenges to sustaining connections between school and church

**Key words:** relationships, pastoral care, priorities, fragmented relationships, absence of church.

## Opportunities

Several opportunities could be identified that enhanced or sustained the connection between school and church, such as strategically prioritising connections between school and church. Relationships between school and church cannot be left just to happenstance; they need to be strategically prioritised. There were a variety of ways schools and churches did this: some schools highlighted the involvement of the clergy in school as a governor, others the working relationship between school and church leader. In one school the leaders worked together, for example jointly planning the religious programme for the year.

*It's simply a question of priorities. What do I decide to spend my time doing? I would like to get over [to school] more often than I do. You know, in the middle of everything else it's just good fun just to come down [to school]. (Minister-7)*

The connection was perceived to strengthen if members of the school community, including leaders, were present in the parish. However, the engagement of school leaders or school staff in the local parish was seen as problematic. Many school leaders pointed out that they did not live within the parish and could not be present in the local church at the weekend.

Schools with strong connections to church had robust channels of communication, for example sharing information in each other's newsletters. Alongside efforts by school leaders, the local churches ensured parents were informed of events and activities organised by the local church. Including information on school events in church newsletters, with an open invitation to the parishioners was another sign of a sense of one community.

A positive relationship between the school community and the local minister was seen as key to sustaining a strong connection between school and church. As seen above, parents and pupils saw the presence of the minister in school as a visible sign of the connection between school and church. One consequence of an active connection with school is that the minister can develop a strong pastoral and spiritual relationship with the families.

*One of the things I would do is just come and spend time on the playground at the end of school and you pick up quite a few little things that people either have saved because they know they'll see you on the playground or they may be a bit nervous about [calling]. (Minister-7)*

Some ministers who were active in school insisted it was important to recognise that school families constitute part of the parish. For example, *[the school] is such a large constituent of the parish. You can get to be present [with] quite a large constituent in one go so it's quite an efficient use of time* (Minister-7). It is a problematic area as some ministers explained that their congregations could be resentful of time spent in school as they did not see the evidence of parents, children or staff in church on Sunday.

In areas of multiple deprivation, participants noted the role of the church in supporting families. For some clergy, the main focus of their connection with the school families was pastoral care. As the minister in School-11 explained, *I am simply trying to make sure I have a presence where I can be and join in and support everything I can support... it's also largely involved with dealing with issues through the [Family Liaison Officer]*. One pupil explained he knew the local vicar because

she brought food parcels to his house; another added that she had helped his family when they had rent problems. Establishing a presence in school led to being recognised outside school in the local community, as one minister explained it was about being there, offering support at times of bereavement and need, but also at times of celebrations, such as weddings and baptisms.

One of the ways the school and church connection was strengthened was by the presence of other church organisations in school. The main ones encountered in this research were Open the Book and Godly Play (see section D.3 and Appendix 4). The presence of members of the church community in school was a visible sign of the connection between school and church, even when there was not a local church building. The Open the Book team in School-17 explained that their presence in school was critical, *as there's not a Church of England or any place in the centre of [this estate], this school is a very, very important place.* (Open the Book Team School-17)

Messy Church was a way that families experienced this connection to church: one successful example of this was found in School-16, where school and church worked together to promote Messy Church so the message is reinforced (Governor-16). It was a two-way process; members of the local church community were developing relationships with the families, and there was a growing involvement of families in church. The involvement of the local clergy in Messy Church gave families a sense of belonging to the wider church community and opportunities to participate and, for example to celebrate baptisms.

*So it is very slow but it happens and people are engaging and recognising it's their church and not just the church of the gathered congregation on Sunday. (Governor-16)*

There was a recognition that although it was early days, the families who engaged with Messy Church were not the same as the regular congregation. Elsewhere, other schools had had less success in establishing a flourishing Messy Church. Lack of time, paid children's workers and a reluctance from families to engage on a regular basis were some of the challenges identified.

The role of bridging figures was crucial. Church primary schools worked with local church representatives such as churchwardens, lay readers and foundation governors. The role of foundation governor or parent governor is a valuable bridge between school and church. Many governors contributed to the research findings, all taking seriously their role as a critical friend to school, but also looking for opportunities to strengthen the connection between school and church. Often this role as bridge-builder is not sufficiently recognised.

## **The challenges to developing connections between school and church**

While pupils and parents in many schools reported strong connections with the local church, as seen in the examples above, there were some schools where the connection was less robust. For example in School-11, which was without a local worshipping community, pupils and parents reported a weaker connection with church, in both survey and focus group interviews.

However, what was interesting was the responses of participants in Schools 2, 5, and 12 who perceived the connection with church to be strong. However, the school leaders in these schools reported significant obstacles in establishing any connection with the local church. The obstacles identified were: lack of a fruitful relationship with the local minister, or a local church community and building. This section looks at the innovative ways these three schools had developed to work around these obstacles and develop a sense of a strong connection to church.

In schools where there was not an active connection with the minister of the local church, several reasons were given for a lack of active support or engagement from a local church community.

- The local minister had chosen not to be involved with the school in any way.
- The local church had been closed or merged, there is no regular worshipping community, or the community is small and elderly.



- A long interregnum can cause what is often a fragile link, dependent on ordained clergy, to become broken.
- The many other pressures on ordained clergy time, such as funerals or parish commitments for example, mean a presence on the school gate in the morning is not possible if [the minister] is committed to celebrating a morning service at that time in church each morning.

At the time of the research, Schools 2 and 5 had no active relationship with the local vicar. As a member of staff in School-5 explained, *we've not had the greatest relationship with our local church, we haven't with our vicar and it's always felt quite stiff and quite judgemental*. One way that Schools 2 and 5 overcame this obstacle was to develop and sustain relationships with ministers from other denominations. The head teachers sought to strengthen relationships with ministers of other denominations, such as Baptist, Methodist or Pentecostal. The benefits of these innovative solutions are mutual, for example in School 5 the local Pentecostal pastor enjoyed doing assemblies and noted that children are eager to attend his holiday club as they 'know' him. The parents and pupils appreciated his visits, they all 'knew' him and suggested he knew them all. His presence in school meant when they met him outside school at the church or holiday club, there was already a relationship.

*[The parents] are coming to things and seeing Pastor X doing a rock band and they're seeing it in a different light. They're coming to worships here and we had the Christingle here for the first time. (Staff-5)*

In School-2, a small rural village school, the participants in the survey reported one of the highest senses of connection to church (see Figure. 4). The head teacher in this school had developed a good relationship with the local church wardens and foundation governors. Ministers from other local parishes and other denominations were invited into school to celebrate collective worship. These measures enabled collective worship to happen in the church and meant that members of the church community would invite church school families to celebrations such as Mothering Sunday in the church. The local Methodist minister brought an Open the Book team into school quite regularly. Thus, she was known to children and their parents, and spoke of the value of this when she met them outside of the school setting. She invested in the school community as she believed it was important for a long-term relationship with these children. In times of need, such as bereavement, families would be able to approach her or another minister for support.

*It is all about relationships. At times of bereavement or crisis... they can see someone they can relate to. Going in over the years pays off... [It] might be another minister later in life at the time of their parents' funerals. (Minister-2)*

The lack of a local church building and local church community presented an obstacle for schools to establishing a flourishing connection with a local church. In School-12, a Catholic primary school in an area of severe multiple deprivation, the local church had been closed. *We were bereft, really. We were left without that. There were no parishioners. You know parishioners would normally do things... we haven't got the parishioners to do it.* (Staff-12). They now shared a priest with three other primary schools and were grateful that he came into school to celebrate Mass on Holy Days. The head teacher and staff raised concerns that there were already enough barriers preventing their school families from engaging with church.

*As soon as [the parents] know they've got to come [to] instruction [before Baptism] that's a barrier. They're not confident people a lot of these. So they'll go somewhere else where they don't have to do that. (Staff-12)*

The school's solution to this absence of local church building and community was innovative. It came about at the time of the sacramental programme (the preparation for First Holy Communion). Traditionally, children's names and work would be displayed in church and local parishioners encouraged to pray for them. Staff keenly felt the absence of this involvement. So the head teacher had linked up with a local convent, and the Religious Sisters supported the children through the sacramental programme.

The children went up to the convent during the year and met with the Sisters who would pray for them and celebrated with them in their chapel. Many of the Sisters had taught in schools; they enjoyed engaging with the children. The children, many of whom came from large families, appreciated having someone talk with them and pray for them. As two pupils in School-12 explained, *the Sisters were nice and they pray for us and they gave us a drink and an ice lolly. [They]'ll show [you] a way to be with God.*

One thread that emerged from many of these alternative connections between church and school was the value of intergenerational connection. Interviewing both the pupils and the older generation, it became evident that the connection was mutually beneficial. The Open the Book teams, the Religious Sisters, and grandparents spoke of the impact of engaging with children on their faith development.

It was often the grandparents with whom children talked about faith (section A.3), who knew about the child's spiritual life (section C.3), and who gave the child a Bible to read (section D.3). A detailed analysis of the role of grandparents is beyond the scope of this research, but is definitely worthy of further investigation.

**Insight:** for these church primary schools, the key to sustaining this connection between school and church was strategic prioritisation. There is a need to recognise the importance of the connection and the influence it has on facilitating opportunities for the exploration of faith in the home. One of the clear findings from analysis of the online survey results was that where there is the perception of a strong active relationship between church and school then there was more evidence of faith-related activities at home.

The connection did not always have to be with the local parish church; in the absence of such a connection, some school leaders established connections with other denominations, parachurch organisations or religious orders.

There is compelling evidence of significant negative impact on local church and school relationships when the lead clergy person at the local church does not positively engage with the local school or is not confident about communication with children and families. However, this is mitigated by school leaders establishing innovative connections with other denominations, people from the church community, parachurch organisations and religious orders.

## Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

### Questions for discussion

1. Has anything in this section surprised you, or were you expecting something that was not mentioned?
2. What are the three most significant points you will take away from this section?
3. What opportunities for or obstacles to greater collaboration could you identify?
4. Has this section suggested anything that would make a difference in practice?
5. Where are the connections and who are the connectors between school and church in your school, or church?

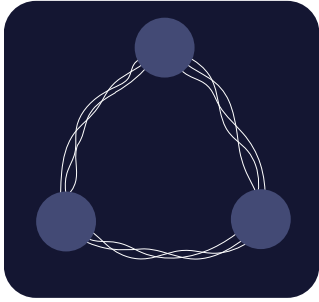
### Where to look for further reading and resources

For further exploration of the challenges and opportunities described in this section:

1. Go to NICER's website for research reports, academic articles and CPD resources  
<http://nicer.org.uk/>
2. Search the online catalogue of 'The North East Religious Resource Centre' for religious resources.
  - 'The North East Religious Resource Centre', the largest religious resources centre in England, consists of a friendly and knowledgeable team of 8 resource specialists working in two regional centres in the North East of England. It holds over 37,000 physical, online and downloadable resources relevant to home, school and church contexts. Every resource has been vetted by Religious Resource Centre (RRC) staff to ensure accuracy, reliability and quality. Some are bespoke resources developed by the RRC to address areas otherwise not supported. If you have any specific resource needs, please search our online catalogue or get in touch.

[www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!/dashboard](http://www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!/dashboard)

The online catalogue is accessible at <https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!/dashboard>



# SECTION C

## BEING

### Key Findings

- Children actively seek out spaces and times to be alone to reflect, think, and pray.
- Church primary schools provide several spaces and times, such as reflection corners and spiritual gardens.
- Reflection or prayer space and time is essential for young people's spiritual wellbeing.

### Introduction

This section focuses on reflection time and space. The provision of space and time for reflection has become commonplace in many church primary schools; children talk eloquently about reflection spaces or spiritual gardens in school. This section emerged from the frequency with which pupils spoke of reflection and prayer in the focus group interviews. The richness of material and the importance the children placed on reflection led to a decision to devote a whole section to children's experience of reflection and prayer.

1. Reflection spaces.
2. Prayer.
3. Who knows about a child's spiritual life?
4. Spiritual wellbeing: why do children value reflection spaces at school and at home?

Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

# Reflection spaces at home and school

**Key words:** Reflection, quiet, calm, alone, in nature, spiritual gardens, reflection corners

## Prayer or reflection time

The children used the terms reflection and prayer interchangeably. Sometimes they spoke about reflecting, other times praying. However, a few differences could be identified.

- Reflection was about quiet space and time for thinking about big questions of God, the world, concerns for others and for self.
- Prayer was about praying to God or for relatives, and prayers could be written down or read.
- Parents were more likely to talk about children praying at home than reflecting.
- Prayer tended to be framed within the Christian tradition as opposed to reflection which appeared less connected to traditional practices.

**Both reflection and prayer are used within this report in ways that echo the children's usage of the two terms.**

This section looks at children's experience of reflection at home, and then the different ways in which primary schools facilitate opportunities for reflection, in spiritual gardens and the classroom. A consideration of pupils' ownership and sense of responsibility for reflection space and time spotlights a major theme of this report, that of the active agency of children; children construct reflection spaces according to their understanding of a need for space and time.

- Children value space to be on their own to reflect.
- Reflection at home is, in general, a solitary activity.
- Children reflect about God, others, the world and themselves.

In the shared space of the focus group interviews, children spoke of reflection time and spaces. The space to be alone was often found in the child's bedroom and reflection corners. The foundation governors in School-2 reflected that while for adults the obvious place for prayer was in the church, this was not so for children, *when you speak to [children] they have a quiet time in their bedrooms and very often they're away from everything* (Governor-2). Some children described how they created reflection corners in their room at home; these were often inspired by reflection spaces in school.

*I would lie on my bed or in the garden in my hidey hole. (Pupil-16)*

*For reflection I lay on my bed and I shut my eyes... I reflect on like the world and how lucky we are to have the things that we have. (Pupil-5)*

*At home when it's like a special event like Christmas or Easter I've got this big table in my bedroom and I make it like a prayer focus. I keep it there until it's finished and then I just pray next to it every night before I go to bed. At the moment I've got a cross and some candles and then I've put little candles on it as well. They're all in the shape of a love heart. The sheet that I've put over it is purple so for Advent. I've started to make a little Advent wreath. (Pupil-7).*

One parent in School-12 described in amazement the prayer corner her son had made in his bedroom. She had assumed it was a 'whim', stimulated by his role as a pupil chaplain last year in school, but had been surprised that it remained an ever-changing space. These spaces created by children were dynamic, changing like the reflection spaces they encountered in school.

Many of the children shared how they reflected or prayed alone in the peace and quiet when outside. As a pupil in School-4 explained it's mainly the nature that calms you down. For children, reflection time has a positive effect on their wellbeing; this is explored further in C.4.

*You can hear birds tweeting you can just relax and there are nice sounds to hear and listen to. (Pupil-4)*

*I get some quiet time when... walking my dog... It actually calms me down taking it for a walk say in the mornings because it's nice and peaceful... Relaxing I like taking it down the field and it just really calms me down. (Pupil-4)*

## **What do children reflect about at home?**

Children reflect on many things to do with faith and spiritual wellbeing when at home, such as concerns for other people, wondering about creation, mulling over their behaviour and thinking about or praying to God.

*I've always just wondered how we were. I know that God made us. (Pupil-4)*

*I'm not atheist. So I believe that I believe in God and when I know I've done something wrong or if someone's ill or something I feel I need to I pray to God. (Pupil-19)*

*I pray because I like talking to God. (Pupil-2)*

Many children prayed for grandparents, or thought about grandparents who had died, while others wondered about Creation.

*Sometimes in a way I talk to myself and because I sometimes think that I'm talking to God ... my great Nan is 94 and I pray about her. (Pupil-16)*

*At home I think to myself how could something create like the little details like in us like the organs even in the little ants and butterflies it's if you've ever seen a butterfly's wing it's amazing like every butterfly in the world is absolutely different... even snowflakes it's just amazing like that just really strengthens my faith and it does to other people too but yeah that's what I think a lot. (Pupil-4)*

For some pupils the time was spent reflecting on their behaviour, what they had done wrong or what would happen in the future.

*When I'm usually at home and I know I've done something wrong I know I should apologise [but] I usually go to the beach and it's just a nice place where you can hear the sea. And the seagulls and it's just a nice place to relax. (Pupil-19)*

*I've got a field across from my house and I like to go there to like reflect and on nice days I go there all the time and just so I can think about what I've done wrong or something that I want to happen in the future. (Pupil-19)*

The focus of children's reflections falls into the four areas (God, others, the world, and self), the relational consciousness previously identified by Hay and Nye<sup>12</sup> in their study of children's spirituality. The traditional understanding of prayer often focuses on God, and children spoke of praying to God, more often not with formal prayers, but 'just talking to God'. Concern for others and the relationship with other people was perhaps the most common focus mentioned by the children. Children spoke of an experience of the natural world particularly when reflecting outside or in a spiritual garden. Having time to reflect when outside in the natural environment, whether when walking outside, in woods or on the beach, or sitting in the spiritual garden was emphasised by many children. They sought a quiet space and time to reflect about themselves, their future and to reflect on arguments or misbehaviour at home.

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12 Hay, D. & Nye, R. (2006). *The Spirit of the Child*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

## How do schools facilitate reflection in the home?

Children's descriptions of reflection activities at home echoed the practice in school. Reflection spaces in school were mentioned by pupils in all twenty schools. A wide variety of school provision of reflection spaces was observed. Some schools had a dedicated room; others carved out spaces in the foyer or in the main hall, in corridors, classrooms and playgrounds. Many schools had a mixture of all of these, and the richness of the school environment can be seen in descriptions from two contrasting schools. Two examples considered side by side highlight some differences in the approach and the language of prayer and reflection. School-1 is a Catholic primary with a very strong connection to the local church (see Appendix 2). School-5 is an Anglican primary which does not have an active connection with the local church (how they had faced this challenge is explored in section B.4).

**Spiritual spaces in a Catholic primary school:** in School-1, when the children were asked to describe the spaces in school where they could reflect or pray, they suggested such spaces were everywhere in school and offered the following examples:

*The stained glass window reminds me that Jesus' love always shines through. It's a good place to go and pray for those you miss or those who have passed away.*

*There's a cross and it says that the bishop has blessed it and opened it.*

*Posters of Mary because each class made their own poster - we put them up on the wall.*

*In our classroom we have these posters that say how you can pray, like silent and thoughts, and there are a lot of different ones and we use them in liturgy sometimes.*

*In each classroom there's the prayer table and if you want to make a liturgy with your friends or something you can always grab a thing or two like your class cross.*

*The Stations of the Cross [in the playground]. Each class has its own so everyone works very hard to keep it special, religious... I'd take you there because it's quite a nice place to pray.*

*There's also in the playground a friendship bench so if you're sad and you've got no-one to play with you sit there and someone will come up to you and include you in their game.*

*There's a prayer garden... it has benches and a cross in the middle... I wouldn't take you there because it's probably very muddy but it's a very nice place.*

*We made our own Lampedusa cross and that has been put up in one of the Stations of the Cross. And it always reminds us to go and pay our respects for refugees.*

Reflection space in an Anglican academy: in School-5 pupils, staff, governors and parents drew attention to the number and variety of reflection spaces. There was a deliberate policy to develop these spaces.

*There's small areas dotted around school where children can go and reflect. There's a lot of thought gone into developing spirituality and that's very closely connected with faith, [with] the areas around school, so many of them about prompts for reflection and prayer. (Governor-5)*

*[I like] the one in the hall because we have a bowl with shells in. We do pray and then we put a shell in and everyone really likes it... Every single different class has their own unique and different reflection station in there. (Pupil-5)*

*Miss has a fingerprint one and in our classroom we have like these foam balls to put on our worries and then we throw them in the box. (Pupil-5)*

*A reflection station is for saying prayers and **talking about God** and how amazing he is. (Pupil-5)*

*I like to come [because] **I can deeply think about God and Jesus.** (Pupil-5)*

*Because like... with the homeless people we have things that they might not imagine to have and sometimes they get taken for granted that's why we have reflection stations. (Pupil-5)*

In the Catholic primary School-1 the focus of the reflection spaces seems clearly linked to the faith tradition, the posters of Mary, the saying of the Rosary. In School-5 the reflection space is for talking to God and supposes no pre-existing knowledge of traditions. Pupils explained that they needed these spaces to say prayers, to talk to God and share their worries about others less fortunate than themselves. These differences of emphasis on religious tradition may in part be explained by a sense of connectedness to church in each school. Perhaps a sense of connection to church frames reflection and prayer more in traditional language, or it may be that the differences can be explained by the denomination.

## **Spiritual gardens in school**

Reflection in the outdoors was common in many of the church primary schools; often a particular space such as a spiritual garden had been developed in the school grounds. In School-4 the spiritual garden is a well-used space, *it is a place to reflect and it's a place where people enjoy to go and pray and it would be the first [place] I would take a visitor.* (Pupil-4)

*We have this well and we have stones next to the well. Every time we go in there to calm down, we can take a stone and we'll say a prayer. We put the stone into the well and we believe our prayer goes up to God. God reads it and it helps us out. (Pupil-4)*

The experience of reflecting in the spiritual garden was eloquently expressed by a pupil in School-4, who shared how she appreciated the quiet of the spiritual garden as at home she lived with four brothers who were always noisy.

*I know this might sound a bit weird but I like [the spiritual garden] for some reason. Do you know the little flint stones and by the trees there's lots of sticks and I like to build like houses for bugs. Then when I've finished it I pray sometimes and then I destroy it for some reason... I usually just like the nature that's around. It's such a wild place and it's mainly the nature that calms you down when you go and hear nature and see all the fascinating things like you might see another type of bug. ... It's like wow I've never seen that before. (Pupil-4)*

Pupils stressed that a key characteristic of the spiritual garden in school was that *it's mainly the quietest space in the school.* (Pupil-4). *You've got to be quiet otherwise it's not a reflective garden,* (Pupil-3).

*I would go into the reflective garden to think about how lucky I am and how would the refugees sleep when it's raining at night... I'd go there to be quiet and relaxed. The other parts of the playground are really noisy. (Pupil-16)*

Pupils appreciated this quiet time and space for spiritual development and their spiritual wellbeing (see section C.4). Children did not tend to mention gardens at home as being a quiet space, but focused on quiet times when out walking. Interestingly, only one child, from all the schools involved in the research, spoke of a church as a place for quiet reflection, where she could *think about the words that are being said and like why they're being said* (Pupil-5).



## Pupil ownership of reflection space

A theme that emerged – particularly in schools with interactive reflection spaces – was how pupils expressed ownership of these spaces. In common with many of the other schools, the spiritual garden in School-5 had been designed by the pupil worship committee. This group of pupils had volunteered to be responsible for overseeing reflection areas. The committee described the space and explained how they had worked on the design, and what had influenced them in choosing the elements they had put into the garden. It had been designed as an interactive space appealing to all the senses. They were already thinking how they could improve on this for their next one, *I'd probably make it more spacious for more people to go because you're only allowed 5 in at a time... so I think we need some more space* (Pupil-5).

*Where it's like this really nicely decorated garden area where there's a bench where you can go and sit and go and pray. There's these boxes where you can write down worries or you can write down your prayers on it. (Pupil-5)*

*God He made all of our senses to be used for every single different task so why let them go to waste when we could use them to loop back to God. (Pupil-5)*

*There's some wind chimes... There's some flowers there's a mirror there's a chalk board there's a couple of prayers up. (Pupil-5)*

The influence of worship committees and pupil leadership roles in church schools is considered in more detail in D.5. The children approached their responsibility for developing these reflection spaces for pupils with great seriousness and concern.

**Insight:** reflection spaces provide space to think, to seek meaning, to contemplate and be still. The diversity of provision in school could be seen to influence the ways in which children sought or created time and space to reflect at home. Such spaces are appreciated and sought out by children.

The children's comments highlight a need for spaces to be alone, and to sit and think. Children's desire for solitude, for time to think is perhaps not sufficiently recognised in home, school or church. Adult-led initiatives for children emphasise providing activities, rather than facilitating opportunities for wondering and silence.

# Prayer at home and school

**Key words:** Prayer, formal or informal, times or spaces, Prayer clubs, trees, books, boards.

*I don't think you really need anything to pray. You just like think of what you want pray and then put your hands together and just pray. (Pupil-16)*

## Prayer at home

When children spoke about reflection at home it was something that happens as and when, there was no set time. However, occasionally children drew attention to specific times for prayer, most commonly at bedtime. It is striking that when pupils spoke about reflection or prayers at home it was usually about being alone to reflect. There was mention of prayers with family members taking place at bedtimes and mealtimes.

*Sometimes before I go to bed I do a prayer but I mean sometimes because I don't always. I don't fully believe in everything about God but I believe in Him, some of His things. (Pupil-18)*

*Sometimes before I go to bed I just say a prayer in my head of things that happened in the day like saying sorry for bad things I did and asking for forgiveness and saying thank you for the good things. (Pupil-7)*

*We normally do a prayer before we eat... but we do it with our theme in assembly... So I'll... tell my Mum and we'll come home and pray before we eat. (Pupil-16)*

Parents noted that when prayers were said together, the children often wanted to say prayers learnt at school. By this they meant formal prayers such as the school prayer, end of day prayer, grace before lunch or the Lord's Prayer. For example, one parent explained, *my youngest is in the nursery and she comes home and she will say her prayer and... "Mummy can we say the going home prayer?"* (Parent-5). In many homes prayer was only sparked by school activities. It must be remembered that for many children in a church primary school, the first time they hear of God or encounter prayer may be in school.

## Prayer times in school

*I think prayer is incorporated in the day. There's the school prayer which is said every day. So at the end of the day they say Grace and it just becomes second nature. And it's something that everybody joins in with. They all know it. They've all learnt it off by heart and they are really proud of the fact that they can recite it and tell you about it. (Parent-10)*

The day in the church primary school is marked by prayer: first thing in the morning, before lunch and at home time. These markers are important. A teacher in School-18 told how when away on a school trip the children insisted on saying their home time prayer on the bus home. Others told of how, when on residential stays away from school, the children wanted to say the school prayer at lunchtime and bedtime. In School-13 pupils were involved in writing the school prayers, and regularly updated the prayers.

*[Our school prayer is about] being a peaceful and happy school and being kind, [but] I believe it should be more about God. And we've had it for quite a while as well. (Pupil-13)*

*It's about our Church. I think we should make it about our school and mix it with a bit about God and Christianity. (Pupil-13)*

This section looks at three quite different examples of facilitation of prayer in school, namely prayer clubs, meditation and space to write prayers on prayer trees, books and boards.

## Prayer club in school

The prayer club in School-8 provided interesting insights into these children's experience and interpretation of prayer. Their descriptions and language differ from previous examples of reflection space and time. The difference is explained in part by the unique nature of the school population of School-8 where 70 percent of participants described themselves as Christian (see Appendix 2). For many of the children in the prayer club, prayer was part of their daily routine in and out of school.

*Well, I pray when I wake up in the morning I pray every day. I pray before I leave and I pray for everyone. (Pupil-8)*

*We can pray when in the back yard when it's all silent, so it's more concentrated. (Pupil-8)*

*We always pray in class before lunch and at the end of the day. (Pupil-8)*

The pupils were keen to explain why they attended prayer club, focusing on developing a relationship with Jesus and God. Some pupils explained that they had been encouraged to attend by their parents. They were keen to explain that it was not just about sitting and praying, but they tried something different each week: one week they had made shields and swords, another they had used bubbles, *the bubbles rise up and it's like your prayers going up.* (Pupil-8).

*Prayer club is an organisation for kids who maybe haven't met Jesus or maybe they want to or maybe they're part of a church and they want to get to know Him more. It's in school, it's not like out of your extra time if you don't have any time. (Pupil-8)*

*Prayer club is the community where you pray to God and you sometimes get to know God more better. (Pupil-8)*

*We write down our thoughts because they ask questions... last week we were writing down why you pray, like because you want to hear God. (Pupil-8)*

The focus of the prayers echoed the themes highlighted by children in their reflection space and time, with an emphasis on prayer for others and thank you prayers.

*You pray for school. Sometimes you pray for people in your family to make people heal up.*

*We pray for people who are less fortunate than us.*

*We pray for our friends and family like people that are close and people like our friends and like "Love your enemy".*

*Thank you prayers for the world and life and things.*

*I pray and I thank God for everything He has done and I just normally just thank Him.*

They came to pray because it made them feel, happy, relaxed, and patient and you can feel the hope through it. Pupils shared how they would help someone who did not pray.

*I have a friend who doesn't even know how to pray, we were eating and I started praying and she asked me "what are you doing?". She had no idea what praying was so I told her that praying is just talking to God about what you need. So I told her that when you eat you pray for the food. If let's say*

*you're in church you pray for anything, or anywhere you can just pray for anything. (Pupil-8)*

*You could tell the person it makes you feel good when you pray because you just get that overwhelming happy feeling. You feel like everything in the world that is bad has gone, but like it's not. And also it makes you see that God is the only one person in the world that can do everything. He's not really a person, he's a living spirit type thing. (Pupil-8)*

*Well you don't have to put your hands together you can just close your eyes and you could just say "When you just say anything that comes into your mind and when you want just tell God because He's the only one that can do miracles and stuff like that". (Pupil-8)*

*So if someone was praying and they were getting in a muddle I would say "Well make sure you're concentrating on one thing and one thing only and then put your hands together and say a sentence to give more hope to someone" and if they still didn't understand I would tell them to go on the Internet and learn all about it. (Pupil-8)*

The pupils' responses give a fascinating insight into children's understanding of prayer. Two children tried to explain how you did not need words to pray, it was about what is inside your head.

*They don't even have to find the words, they can just be praying and then God will know what you want. (Pupil-8)*

*If you have the words in your head then you have the words anyway so you wouldn't have to pray. (Pupil-8)*

What was apparent in talking with this group was that prayer was not just a school-based activity. They prayed openly at home, and in church. This was not the only school to have a prayer club. School-9 also had a prayer pals club, where pupils led on organising and staffing a prayer corner in school.

*It's just a nice place to sit lots of children down and just talk. If they've got anything sad on their mind I'll just sit them down and say "Do you want to share?" It's just like it's a place where they can feel safe and nothing bad is going to happen whilst they're there. (Pupil-9)*

The understanding of the prayer space as needed for pupils' wellbeing is considered further in Section C.4, and pupils' faith-related leadership roles in school are explored in Section D.5.

## **Meditation**

Mindfulness practices in school are becoming more common, either as a stress reliever or as a focused way of reflecting. Pupils in School-7 explained that they always had a brief meditation after lunch. In this Catholic primary they liken this experience of meditation to saying the Rosary.

*It's supposed to clear like all of the worries and stress that's all around.*

*Yes and it just calms us down and gets us more into God.*

*I think like that when we do our Rosary prayer group because when you are doing it most people felt much more calm. (Pupil-7)*

In School-7 this meditation time was clearly linked by staff and pupils to Christian practice. In other schools parents linked it to spiritual development.

*They're being taught how to process... to think about their own spirituality... For them to realise that what they do affects other people too. (Parent-19)*

Many schools previous to the period of research had brought Prayer Spaces<sup>13</sup> into school or an adapted version of this. In School-5 when they had a similar day's experience in school, they had extended opportunities to parents and to members of staff.

*The spiritual journey one, they did for staff as well which was quite good... We've done about three now haven't we? We've had them about three times. Light a candle or whatever... That is absolutely amazing. (Staff-5)*

Many staff come into church schools with little experience of reflection and prayer, or even of the Christian faith. A few staff and parents shared with the researcher how they had come to faith through working in the church school. The effect on staff of working in a church school, experiencing daily worship and prayer is an area that deserves greater attention and further research.

## Prayer trees, books and boards

Several of the schools had opportunities for children to write down prayers; sometimes there was a prayer tree in the foyer or the school hall.

*By the seat in the little waiting area quite often you'll see a child picking a heart and they'll read it and then hang it on the little [prayer] tree so that's on a daily basis really. (Staff-5)*

The minister in School-16 suggested that the presence of a prayer tree was offering children a way to explore and understand prayer.

*The idea of being able to write things down, things which are concerns which matter to them and it could be anything. When you read some of the things that are on there... It's not about my family or me, it's about somebody else who they realise is perhaps in a difficult time. So you're starting to get an understanding of prayer which is really quite essential for anybody and I think something we've all lost. (Minister-3)*

School-5 had put a prayer box in their reflection garden – inside was a small book in which pupils could write prayers. One of the lunchtime supervisors had been struck how the children often wrote about concerns from home, for example ill-health of family members rather than issues from school such as schoolwork or falling out with friends. The school had built on this use of prayer books. They intended to encourage pupils to take the books home to write prayers in, hopefully, facilitating conversations about prayer in the home, conversations which would not normally be initiated in the home environment.

*They've... got a book where they can just go... and if they want to write a prayer or write their feelings they can have quiet time at playtime or they can go to the reflection area and do that. (Parent-5)*

An interesting way of connecting school and church through prayer existed in School-14, where a prayer board was held in school during the week and sent across the road to the church for the weekend services. This is a visible way of expressing the connection with church through shared prayers.

*We've got the prayer board which... goes between the school and church. So children can write down their prayers and then that board goes to church on*

13 <https://www.prayerspacesinschools.com/>

*a Sunday so that it's visible in church of who the children want to [pray for]. One of the TA's husbands died really suddenly and, again, lots of children put messages for her and that was lovely. When I went to church and saw her name up and thinking the children are thinking about her as well, that was a very powerful thing. (Governor-14)*

**Insight:** there are a wide variety of ways in which they engage with prayer in school, which are not present in the home. What was striking was that parents' responses to questions about prayer focused on formal prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer or school prayers. There is a difference in the way parents spoke about prayer and reflection and the way children did. This is a gap which needs to be addressed.

# Who knows about a child's spiritual life?

**Key words:** Family, grandparents, no one

Spiritual life: this term is used in a broad sense. In the online survey and in the interviews, it was left up to the participant to define what they meant by this. Year 5 and 6 pupils were asked “who is the person most likely to know about your spiritual life?” The responses provided an interesting insight into who young people talk to about faith and spiritual matters. The question of “how much do others know if you have a spiritual life?” generated a much lower response from children (M: 30.48) than from parents (M: 63.56) and stakeholders (M: 49.18). One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that adults presume they know more about children's spiritual life than children think they do.

Unsurprisingly, children thought members of their family were most likely to know about their spiritual life. The most common response by far was ‘my mum’ (46% of pupils in Years 5 and 6 in online survey). Some pupils mentioned their father, or other family members, such as their grandparents. The important role of grandparents is highlighted throughout this report (for example see section A.3).

*My mum because she looks after me most of the time.*

*My mum, dad, auntie, cousin, grandma and great grandma.*

*The people who live in my house.*

*My grandma because she goes to churches, reads the Bible and the words God and Jesus said.*

The mix of other responses included friends, a few mentioned teachers, or the local ministers. A quarter of pupils chose not to answer this question or claimed that no one would know about their spiritual life.

*I keep it to myself because maybe I don't know I just keep it to myself I just like to keep it personal because I don't want other people to I just I'm not sure. (Pupil-4)*

**Insight:** there is an important role for family in supporting and nurturing a child's spiritual life, but it also raises the question of what schools can do to support parents in this role as schools practise a creative range of approaches to nurturing spiritual life. Some examples have been shared above, but there is also the potential for much more to be done in this area. Supporting grandparents in their critical role here could be one way forward. Although the focus in this section has been on reflection and prayer, there has been little mention of the role of the local church in the development of these spaces and times. There is little reference to churches as a place for prayer or spaces for quiet reflection. There are very few references by pupils to the local minister as being someone who would know about their spiritual life.

# Spiritual wellbeing: why do children value reflection spaces at school and at home?

**Key words:** Spiritual wellbeing, spiritual resilience, death, worry and despair.

This Section C concludes with a focus on children's need for reflection or prayer space and time for their spiritual wellbeing, because it is in this space that children place some of the most serious things in their lives.

- Children seek reflection times and spaces as essential for their spiritual wellbeing

Pupils described reflection time and space as a time when they could talk to God. For many reflection was directed to God, often with concerns about family. Through one lens this could be seen as contributing to spiritual development, through developing a relationship with God as pupils in the prayer club in School-8 described it.

Children used reflection space when they felt sad: in particular, when thinking about someone who had died, and when they were worried about others or concerned about their own actions or future. A pupil in School-4 explained why they needed a spiritual garden, for times when people were sad.

*It's really important because, if we get sad [and]... **just want to be alone we can pray up to God to please let us feel happy again and make all our worries go away.** We can do it about anything. So whether it's you're just generally feeling sad or a like a relative's died. You can always go to these places and you can just relax and think about it. (Pupil-4)*

*I do pray when I get a bit sad because it kind of makes me feel a bit more... It makes you feel safe. (Pupil-8)*

This feeling of safety or deep sense of security in these spaces is something that must be recognised and valued. Children's interpretation and use of these spaces can be seen to contribute to their wellbeing.

Pupils in many of the schools spoke of going into their reflection space or spiritual garden to think about or pray for someone who had died. In School-6 a reflection or memorial garden had been developed in response to the death of a pupil.

*We had the reflection garden made because we've lost children and members of staff. (Governor-6)*

*I don't really think about anything. I just pray for somebody back in my life. (Pupil-11)*

*I once went in there when my cat died. It just helped being alone. (Pupil-4)*

*[I go in] if somebody's sick in my family, or somebody's going to die. (Pupil-9)*

*[The reflection garden is] for when people have died. We send the balloons. One person from each class goes into the reflection garden and lets go of the balloon. (Pupil-6)*

*[The] reflection garden – it's where we look back at people who have either left or died. (Pupil-17)*

One pupil explained how he had made a grave for his pet, like the spiritual garden in school.

*At home recently my rabbit died and we got this really beautiful grave*



*around it like a quiet place that we have at school and... I really surrounded it with pebbles and stuff. (Pupil-19)*

That these spaces are used at times of crisis such as death is not surprising. Children's concern with death and the questions they ask is explored in Section A.1. This use of the spaces is important and also needs to be acknowledged and supported in school, but also perhaps recognised in the home and in the local church. A few children did mention sitting on a bench in memory of a grandparent or visiting their grave, but to what extent this need is acknowledged by local churches is not clear.

Often the focus of children's reflection was concerns and worries they had about their actions, or about what was happening within the family or the wider world.

*With the foam balls one, [it] helps people to get the worries out of them. (Pupil-5)*

*There'll be a prayer, reflection area. There's a worry box, a thought box. So if they have anything that they want to put in there they can, any questions, any thoughts, anything. **Maybe there is quite a high need with some of the children so there's just that, almost off-loading.** (Staff-11)*

Pupils, parents and staff remarked on how pupils appreciated the quiet space and time of reflection because it enabled them to unwind, to calm down and to relieve stress.

*On the other hand we have certain children that know when they need to calm down and they'll go and take themselves to the reflective area just so that they can have a minute and calm down it's nice to have that area. (Staff-5)*

*I would go in the reflective garden because I just want to rest really because sometimes if your day has been (bad) you just want to think about like yourself... I would go in the reflective garden if I was stressed or anything. (Pupil-16)*

In School-11 the pupils interpreted reflection in terms of time out to reflect and reconsider their behaviour, *in classrooms we have reflection areas. It's basically sometimes we use them for like time out* (Pupil-11).

**Insight:** what emerges through analysis of children's responses to the research questions is a need for space to think, reflect and pray. There may be differences in language and framing of prayer and reflection between schools and between home and school, but pupils' appreciation of this time and expressions of need was common across all schools. In the church primary schools, these spaces were in classrooms and in the playground, at home the children made their own time and spaces. Few children mention church as a place to reflect; the absence of role for the church here in what children identify as a time of need is critical. This space and time is essential for spiritual wellbeing; many children – like adults – had no or little quiet time in daily life.

## Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

### Questions for discussion

1. Has anything in this section surprised you or were you expecting something that was not mentioned?
2. What are the three most significant things said by children that you will take away from this section?
3. What is of particular relevance for encouraging prayer and reflection?
4. Has this section suggested anything that should make a difference in practice?
5. What do you think are the main implications for children's spiritual wellbeing?

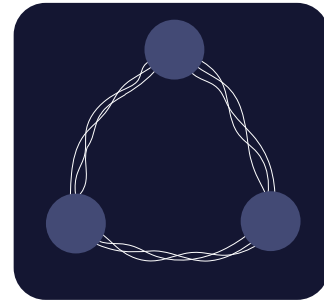
## Where to look for further reading and resources

For further exploration of the challenges and opportunities described in this section:

1. Go to NICER's website for research reports, academic articles and CPD resources  
<http://nicer.org.uk/>
2. Search the online catalogue of 'The North East Religious Resource Centre' for religious resources
  - 'The North East Religious Resource Centre', the largest religious resources centre in England, consists of a friendly and knowledgeable team of 8 resource specialists working in two regional centres in the North East of England. It holds over 37,000 physical, online and downloadable resources relevant to home, school and church contexts. Every resource has been vetted by RRC staff to ensure accuracy, reliability and quality. Some are bespoke resources developed by the RRC to address areas otherwise not supported. If you have any specific resource needs, please search our online catalogue or get in touch.

[www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard](http://www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard)

The online catalogue is accessible at <https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard>



# SECTION D

## DOING

### Key Findings

- Church primary schools offer a view of Christianity as a lived religion.
- Church families experience the pattern of the church's year; festivals are moments of crucial engagement.
- There was little evidence of children engaging with the Bible at home.
- The leadership skills children develop in school are underestimated outside the primary school environment.
- Relationships within the Nexus are crucial to sustaining opportunities to explore faith in the home.

Development in any dimension of life is marked by changes; the most visible changes are in behaviours. This section looks at aspects that may lead to sustaining behaviours beyond the school. Sections 1, 2 and 3 look at opportunities to live in the rhythm of the church's year and experience regular encounters with Scripture. Sections D.4, 5 and 6 draw together a thread that has run throughout this report; the critical relationships needed to sustain exploration of faith in the home. What do children say they do at home?

1. Encounters with the Bible at home and in school.
2. Living the rhythm of the Church's year: the Christian festivals.
3. Caring for others.
4. Pupil leadership.
5. Relationships within the Nexus.

# What do children say they do at home?

In the online survey we asked separate questions about what children did at home and what activities they talk about or even ask questions about, when at home. Pupils and parents report lower scores on “doing things at home” than in other areas such as talking about, asking questions (A), and reflection and prayer (C). Figures 1, 2 and 3 show how *talking* about spiritual matters (Figure 1: average scores around 30 for pupils and 65 for parents and stakeholders) and asking questions about similar issues (Figure 2: average scores around 30 for pupils and 45 for parents) happens more often than the *doing* (Figure 3: average scores around 20 for pupils and 40 for parents and stakeholders). Although the high standard variations around these average scores suggest big differences between schools in these answers, the overall trend still remains observable even when we break down and analyse results by school, by gender and by a series of other categories that differentiate participants.

**Insight:** the key concern is that pupils and parents report lower scores on “doing things at home” than in other areas. If we accept that for engagement with religious activities to be sustained, habit forming routines and rituals are critical, the evidence here suggests more attention needs to be paid to this. Otherwise a consequence is the development of a spirituality that is discarded when school is over.

## Understanding the results

The average answers and estimates of pupils are generally lower than those of parents and stakeholders, which seem instead to overestimate children’s perceptions. We can only speculate that probably adults are more subject to expectation biases and general social norms which drives them to provide what is probably a more optimistic picture than the one offered by the children. Girls also report significantly higher average scores than boys across all schools and area.

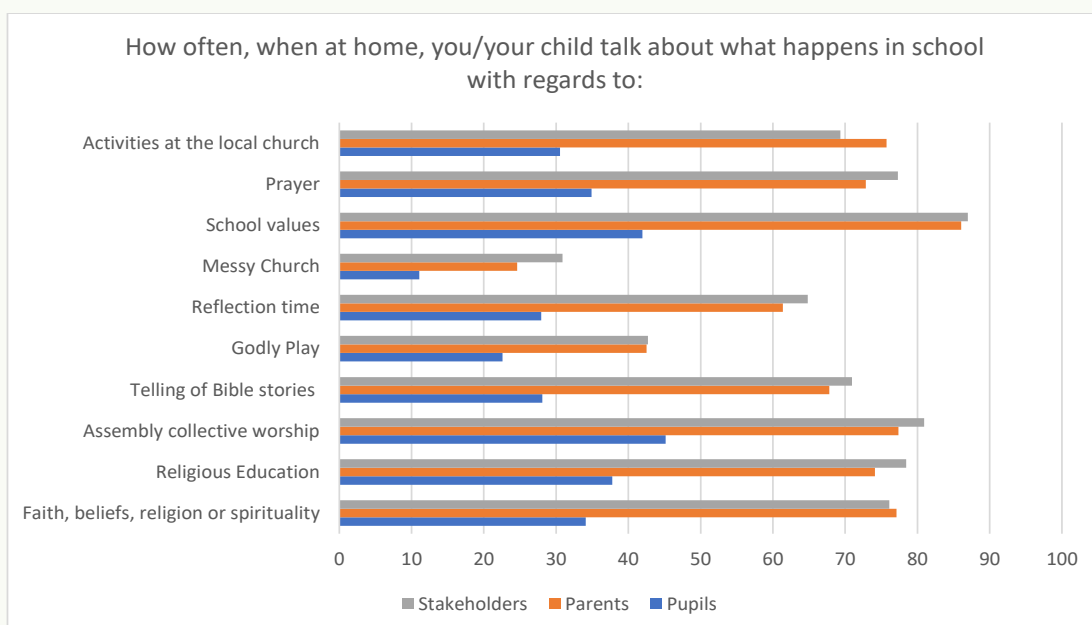


Figure 1: Bar chart representing the mean scores for the three categories of respondents around issues that are talked about at home.

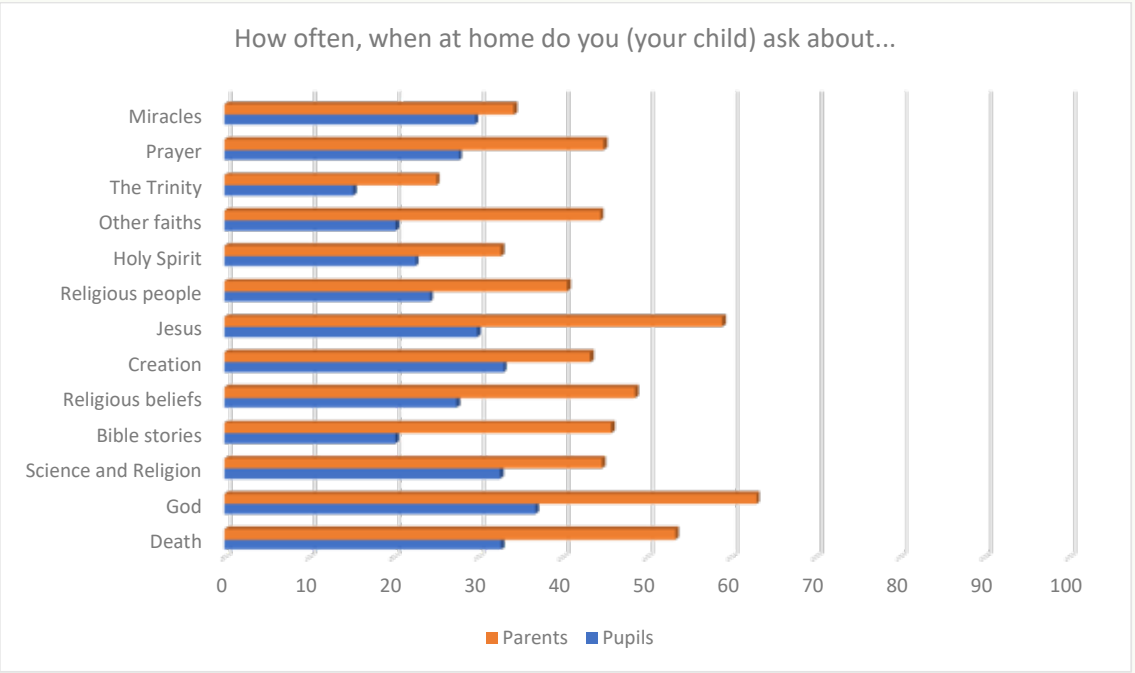


Figure 2: Bar chart representing the mean scores for the three categories of respondents around issues that are asked about at home.

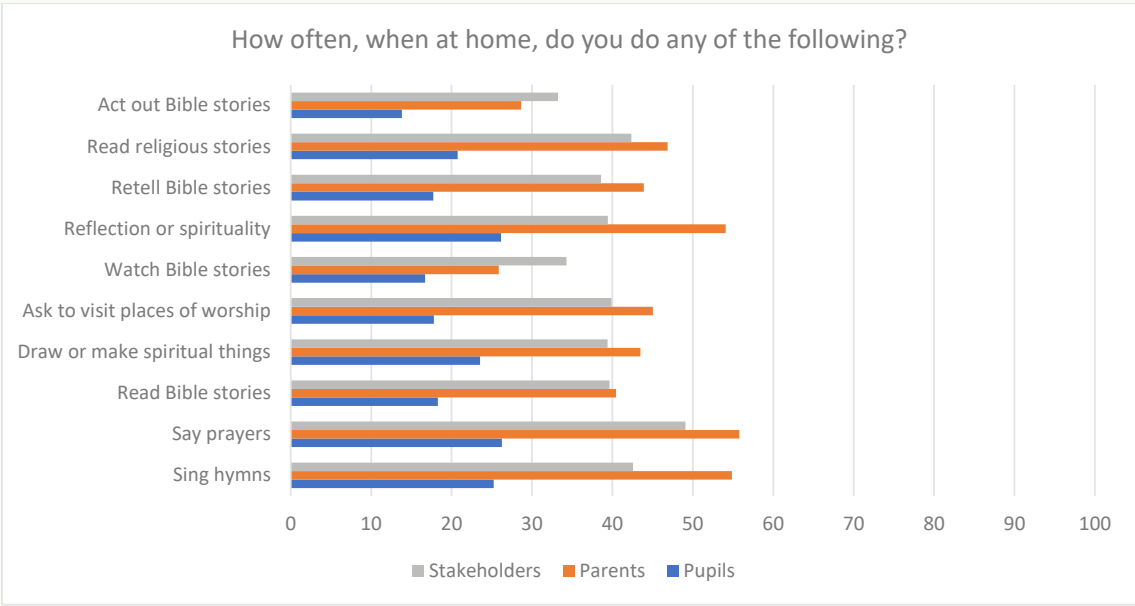


Figure 3: Bar chart representing the mean scores for the three categories of respondents for questions about things that children do at home.

# Living the rhythm of the Church's year: the Christian festivals

**Key words:** Pattern of the Church's year, Posada, festivals.

## Key messages

- Many of the faith-related activities that happen in the home occur at times of the key festivals. Families engage more with collective worship such as Christmas, Easter and Harvest, although Pentecost was noticeable by its absence. This engagement is influenced by the rhythm of the church year expressed through school.
- Parents and pupils reported that the most common faith-related activity that happened in the home was children singing hymns or worship songs they had learnt at school. Parents appreciated this as it reminded them of their school days.

## What does the rhythm of the Church's year look like to a family in a church school?

All schools are structured on routines and have a rhythm of the year marked by term dates. A church primary school also embeds the pattern of the Church's year, with the significant markers being the Christian festivals. A minister in School-8 explained why she deliberately emphasised the rhythm of the Church's year in school.

*I really do buy in passionately to the idea of the church year and the seasons and the moving from Lent into Easter and Pentecost into the autumn into the changes of the seasons and then Christmas. I think if you get them in Reception and you've done that cycle once and then in Year 1 they do it then by the time they get to Year 5 they're like "We know this one". So by the time they leave my hope is [if] they go to a non-church school but they'll be thinking "Oh, it's this time of year" and they see something on the television or they read something in the paper and they go "Oh yes, that's what you do at this time of year". So in terms of taking stuff home what goes into their nice annual story then will keep going round and round every year [by] the time they've had it for 7 years they'll have got it. (Minister-8)*

The findings from focus group interviews highlighted that the Christian festivals are significant points when families connect with the Christian faith, when they were most likely to do something at home connected with faith. Three main times of the year were mentioned: Harvest, Christmas, and Easter. Less frequently mentioned were Remembrance Day, and school-based markers such as welcome and leavers services in church. Notable by its absence was Pentecost or Whitsun, across all schools and all stakeholders. When the researcher drew attention to this absence, schools stressed that Pentecost was celebrated in school, but was probably not an occasion when parents would be invited in for a service.

*At home – we do stuff mostly around festivals like the Christmas crib service (Parent-2)*

*You get a sense of the rhythms of Christian life because there are Nativities and Church services. (Parent-8)*

*The types of things you'd expect you know kind of nice dates in the calendar. (Parent-16)*

## Worship at festival times

When in the focus groups the conversation turned to collective worship, parents shared examples of when they had actively participated with school, generally at festival times. *[The] Easter service is lovely that's when we help in church* (Parent-14). These are often times when schools send out activities to do at home or invite parents in for celebrations in school.

*I think during Easter [children] are also encouraged to do some work with the family and bring it in. They have the advent calendars as well... it has got suggestions that you can do with the family, thinking about praying and doing a particular prayer one day. So they try to make it interactive in that sense.* (Parent-7)

*In Lent we have Walk the Way of the Cross and a number of parents come to that and visit each station and they get to ask questions.* (Staff 1)

*[At] Christmas, Easter... it's standing room only with parents, grandparents.* (Minister-6)

A few parents shared the effect of this experience of worship. For some, it encouraged them to attend the Christmas services in the local church, like the crib service or midnight Mass. For one parent in School-14, attending a Harvest festival had spurred her to act and engage with the local foodbank. The cycle of celebrations influences the families' perception of the rhythm of the year and offers key opportunities to facilitate exploration of faith in the home.

*It didn't come to me until I came to Harvest festival one year and thinking that actually all the harvest is taken down by the food bank. That for me wouldn't have happened if I'd not had the relationship with the school.* (Parent 14)

## A time of giving

An emphasis on caring for others, through donating food or raising money is a characteristic of many primary school. However, within these church schools, this emphasis on giving is more pronounced at Harvest, Advent and Lent. The celebration of Harvest in school was closely connected with giving to others. In recent times this has become linked to supporting local food banks. Many schools had similar activities happening in Advent and Lent. For example, the reverse Advent and Lent calendar requires participants to give to others. In schools this involved bringing in different items of food for the foodbank or doing a random act of kindness for others. This focus on service, on faith in action is explored further in section D.5.

## Singing hymns and worship songs

One theme which emerged from the interviews with parents across the schools was that the most common faith-related activity that happened in the home was children singing hymns or worship songs they had learnt at school (see Figure 3). Many parents went on to explain that they enjoyed this because it reminded them of their school days, hymns that they had sung or stories they knew.

*He comes home singing hymns. [It] delights me because you know I haven't provided [that] experience with him.* (Parent-16)

*It's the same hymns so we can all sing together actually. It's quite nice that they're singing the same old hymns.* (Parent-7)

*I'm not massively religious, I was brought up as a Roman Catholic, lapsed... They've learned the stories that I've learned in my past... I love the fact [he] comes in and sings all the songs.* (Parent-15)

Parents often suggested that they had chosen the school because they wanted their child to have the same experience as they had had. Several parents had attended the same primary school (19.2% N=32), or another church primary school (39.8%, N=66). For many parents, the only experience of faith-related activity was limited to this primary school experience (41%, N=68).

**Insight:** this reflection on hymn singing at home highlights two important points: namely that it is the child who brings the music and singing into the house; and secondly, the music and stories children bring home resonate with parents' own experience of school. Is there an opportunity here for church schools to build on positive experiences of faith linked to parents' primary school experience of faith?

## Family engagement with liturgy in the home

Other activities might happen at home at these times of festival. Pupils spoke of preparation for school plays or liturgies for Advent and Lent. Some participants spoke of children acting out worship at home with younger siblings or toys.

*Me and my sister... set up like this little worship table. We put a blanket on [a box] and we put our bowl of lavender on it. [We] thought that would represent like the colours of Christmas. We put the Bible on and always read stories to my other two little sisters. Mainly the Noah's Ark and the one where Jesus went on Palm Sunday. (Pupil-5)*

An example described by many pupils and parents in School-1, involved **the Posada**<sup>14</sup>, a travelling crib sent home from school with a different child each day in Advent. The whole family was encouraged to take part in the little service.

*[The] travelling crib is a box, [our teacher], with her dad cut out a Mary, a Joseph and a donkey out of wood and it's got a nice velvet cloth and a candle and a prayer leaflet. So every night [two children per class], will take home a travelling crib... You'll get it out and you'll arrange it on the cloth and you'll say some prayers as a family and you'll light the candle and it's like your own little mini-Liturgy type Mass. (Pupil-1)*

*They have an argument who's going to light the candle and who's going to blow it out... And remember to bring it back the next day. (Parent-1)*

The child is expected to initiate this and lead it. As one member of staff interpreted this, it was a lovely way for them to bring faith to mum and dad. The head teacher stressed this was part of a year-round programme of informing and engaging parents with the festivals and Holy Days. This example highlights two themes that emerged from the research:

*When they bring [the Posada] back the next day, [they say] "oh where did you do it?" and they always talk about how special it is and at the end of the day when they are going home and they come "Mummy it's my turn. I've got the travelling crib" Yes it's a really special thing. (Staff-1)*

Families talked about faith-related matters in the home more than they participated in faith-related activities in the home. However, what emerged from the research was that families engage more with faith-related activities at certain times of the year linked to the key Christian festivals; evidence of increased school activity at these times rippled into the home environment.

<sup>14</sup> Modern day Posada uses Nativity figures of Mary and Joseph who travel from place to place. This gives each 'host' the chance to create their own celebration in their home or place in the community. [https://www.sacredhearthook.org/posada-travelling-nativity#:~:text=The%20Travelling%20Nativity%20\(or%20Posada,time%20to%20prepare%20for%20Jesus.&text=Modern%20day%20Posada%20uses%20Nativity,travel%20from%20place%20to%20place.](https://www.sacredhearthook.org/posada-travelling-nativity#:~:text=The%20Travelling%20Nativity%20(or%20Posada,time%20to%20prepare%20for%20Jesus.&text=Modern%20day%20Posada%20uses%20Nativity,travel%20from%20place%20to%20place.)



Children may instigate and shape religious traditions in the home, see section A.3 with regard to children instigating conversations and section D.5 which looks at children's leadership of worship or liturgy. Artefacts brought into the home or given as a gift can become a focus of faith interaction, for example the importance of a gift of a Bible (see section D.3). The findings suggest that activities and objects act as bridges between spiritual practices in schools, and the home.

# Encounters with the Bible at home and in school

**Key words:** Bible stories, Bible as gift, children’s or adult Bible

The survey results revealed that reading the Bible or talking about Bible stories was not seen to happen frequently at home. Two or three schools reported high scores for these questions; two of these schools are explored in more depth in separate reports (see Appendix 2). The rest of the schools have scores in the bottom part of the scale demonstrating the overall low engagement children have with the Bible.

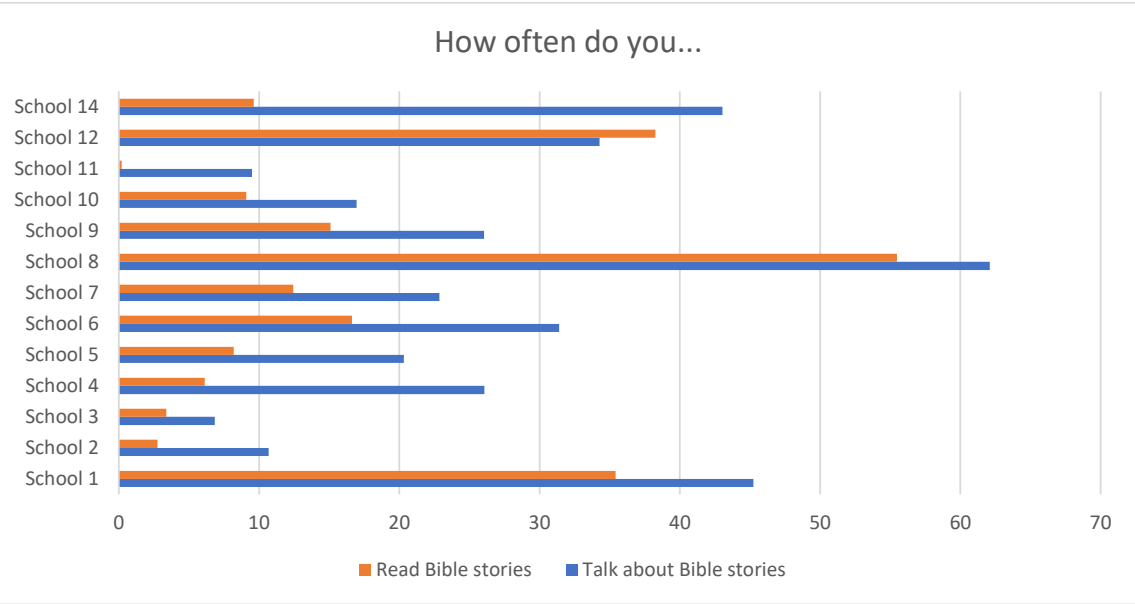


Figure 4: Bar chart representing the mean scores from pupils on questions relating to Bible engagement.

Some participants mentioned reading or listening to Bible stories at home. Those that did read the Bible spoke of reading it at night by themselves. It was a solitary activity.

*Quite often my son would pick up a Bible that’s not instigated by me, it’s what he chose to do. (Parent-15)*

*I read the Bible, and I pray ‘cos I have a little Mary thing I pray to her before I go to sleep every night. (Pupil-16)*

*I read sneakily my Bible at night but the Bible is really special to me because it was [from] my Grandma and Grandad from when I was born, but my Grandma’s died now so it’s really special... Don’t tell my parents this. (Pupil-14)*

It was apparent for many that the presence of a Bible in the house was because it had been given as a gift by grandparents, school or church. The practice of giving the gift of a Bible as a child leaves school misses the opportunity for the children to engage with it earlier; at home for instance, if the practice was a presentation at 7 years old or at the start of Key Stage 2.

*Did yours get given a Bible as well when they left the infants? ... They really liked that. ... They'd read it if they came in. It's got nice pictures. (Parent-15)*

*The children are given Bibles, they are given prayer cubes in Reception. We give them Bibles, when they leave they are given a Good News and a children's Bible is given in Year 1. (Staff-14)*

*The governors buy every child in Year 1 a Bible. (Staff-17)*

One more example of a similar initiative to gifting a Bible was found in School-5, where a selection of different versions of the Bible could be borrowed from the school library. These were popular with the children. The head explained that there had been a deliberate selection of a variety of types of Bible; the Minecraft version was particularly popular with boys. The school had sought to ensure that there were Bibles at the appropriate age level for every class.

*We have children who are reading Bibles at the moment and that's their reading book of choice... They're choosing to read Bibles there's loads of them. Our children are coming in and saying they've asked for a Bible for a birthday or Christmas present and they've brought them in to show because they've asked for them. (Staff-5)*

Year 5 and 6 pupils in three schools suggested that the Bible is for young children; it is not something older children or adults read. Pupils in School-12 explained that they had read Bible stories when they were little, but no longer did so. This is perhaps reinforced when the only Bible they encounter is a children's Bible. A children's version of the Bible does make it accessible to children, but it also reinforces a perception that the Bible is just meant for young children.

*We have books like children's Bibles but they don't really read them often. (Parent-2)*

*In Year 1... You get like a little kiddy Bible that you come home with and you can read it and it's like a kiddy Bible about Noah. But it doesn't include [stories] like the one like Abraham. [It only has] stuff like Noah's Ark, Adam and Eve and stuff like that. (Pupil-18)*

## **What happens in school to facilitate exploration of the Scriptures at home?**

There were two main areas where children encountered the Scriptures in school, namely Religious Education lessons and collective worship. Year 2 pupils in School-15 recalled Bible stories that they had studied in RE.

*A boy who was collecting money but he wasn't, he had too much and he didn't give any back. And one day Jesus came and he couldn't look at who came and he climbed up a tree and then God came to him and then Zacchaeus I think it was the name. And he had faith, so that's what I did in RE. (Pupil-15)*

*We've learnt about Jonah and the whale. So it talks about God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell the people to be rather nice to each other. (Pupil-15)*

There was a perception among Year 5 and 6 pupils, that they explored more complex stories in RE than those they heard in collective worship. One example given by a pupils was that in worship they would do the Nativity, but in RE in Year 6 they look also look at the story of Herod and the Killing of the Innocents. The role of RE in providing a space and time for children to explore is important. Section A.1 looked at how RE sparked questions and talking about faith at home, but there was not such a clear link with RE and engagement with the Bible at home.

*[I read the Bible] mostly in school. (Pupil-3)*

*RE is where you talk about God and the Bible. (Pupil-16)*

*[In RE]... normally we use the Bible to know more. (Pupil-7)*

*With our [RE] teacher we start from the beginning of the Bible and work our way through to the end of the Bible... we cover all of the Bible. (Pupil-4)*

## **Bible in Collective worship**

Within school, the other time and space where children regularly encountered the Scriptures was in collective worship.

Pupils drew attention and particularly remembered when the stories were acted out or when humour was brought into it.

*In assembly they read you lots of Bible stories, lots of things to do with the Bible. (Pupil-16)*

*When Father does his worships, he tells the story about the Bible and Jesus and stuff like that... especially like for the little ones because he wants to make it like funny but like make them understand it. Last time I was at the front when [he] did one he was spraying water everywhere. (Pupil-14)*

Some parents, pupils and staff stated that Bible stories were used in worship to provide a moral message, as an example of the school value for that week, or to give examples of how people should behave. A parent in School-9 gave an example, *[The minister] would say we were looking at courage he would maybe find a story from the Bible that reflects courage and talk to us about it*. This idea of Bible stories as moral stories was highlighted elsewhere by parents; a parent in School-19 explained that the newsletter would give a Bible verse linked to the value of the week. The perception of the Bible as a source of moral teaching is not new. There is, however, a question of whether for some that is its only function.

## **Open the Book**

One initiative that facilitated encounters with Bible stories and characters in school was the presence of Open the Book (OtB) teams in collective worship (see Appendix 4 for further information about Open the Book in the participating schools). Two schools (8 and 17) had active OtB teams mentioned by pupils, parents and staff.

*Open the Book is when there's these people that come in to perform a kindness story for Key Stage 1. (Pupil-8)*

*It's basically teaching [the younger pupils]... most of the time, regularly about a Bible story, a particular Bible story that can help them learn about the Lord. (Pupil-8)*

Parents in School-17 welcomed the invitation to OtB assemblies and this seemed to overflow into family and home life as they could engage with children who came home talking about the Bible stories.

*The Open the Book on the Friday. Rather than just hearing about it in lessons you actually get a little show to watch which I think is good. They seem to take a lot from that. I came into the last one and then my daughter comes and she was saying about Noah's Ark. (Parent-17)*

*Yes mine asked to watch it on YouTube. And David and Goliath they've asked me for. (Parent-17)*

*She actually turned round to me and said "it's in one of the Testaments. I can't remember if it's the Old or New" and I was like [gasps]. It's the animals and everything she's just got into it. So I think that it's good that they take part in it and that you have people coming in that act it out and get the children involved in it as well. I think it's a good thing. (Parent-17)*

In School-8, parents were not invited to attend performances; there was evidence that the parents knew OtB sessions existed, but not necessarily more than that. School-17 had built in the opportunity for parents to attend OtB collective worships and gave them a motivation to attend by including celebration rewards for children to be presented at the same assemblies. The OtB team in School-17 felt welcomed by the school and saw interactions with parents as part of the very experience of OtB.

*[Parents] really... like it, they come and say "I really enjoyed that one." (OtB-17)*

*There are more parents coming in to watch now. We are also getting parents asking if their children can take part because the children have asked them to do it. Another thing is the parents come over to us and talk about it. Well that never used to happen in the beginning. The parents are keen for their children to have a knowledge of Bible stories. ... The receptiveness of the parents has been remarkable. We were prepared for rejection. Basically I've had feedback saying "I really enjoyed that. That story really meant something to me. I'd never heard that story before". (OtB-17)*

There was a feeling from the team in School-17 that certain groups of parents saw occasions such as OtB collective worship as a substitute for church. They suggested that some parents that come *actually regard that as church*. The volunteers in both schools felt they were doing more than simply following a set sequence of Bible stories; one of the OtB team in School-17 described it as a *ministry not a production*.

This analysis suggests that encountering the Scriptures through OtB could be seen in School-17 to increase the confidence with which parents approach faith. The potential relies on excellent communication between volunteer team and teachers, the inclusion of parents in sessions, and, in this case the ability to integrate OtB into the existing value education curriculum in the school.

## Godly Play

Another initiative which offered encounters with the Scriptures in school is Godly Play (see Appendix 4 for further information). However, the online survey revealed that this was one of the faith-activities least talked about at home (see Figure 4, M=22.58). In School-18 Godly Play was well established and mentioned by several pupils, but parents explained why it was not something talked about at home.

*Children like it but don't want to talk about it... I think Godly Play's quite hard for children to explain I guess because **they're so within their own thoughts aren't they?** (Parent-18)*

*I think Godly Play is designed [to] leave them asking. It triggers questions that may not necessarily surface immediately. That's why they can't really tell you about the Godly Play because they're thinking perhaps of all these questions and they're wondering so they can't really tell that. It's more like "mm, I'll just see about that". (Parent-18)*

The pupils in School-18 enjoyed participating in Godly Play, because it made them wonder, and gave them the opportunity to make things; craft activities are an essential part of Godly Play.

*Will one of us ever be in one of those stories? Will we be told in the future?*  
(Pupil-18)

*What's the one in the desert? Abraham. I like that because like his family never ends. There's never a stop to his family... It makes me think... "Why does Abraham's family never end?"* (Pupil-18)

The findings about Godly Play are intriguing as the pupils who participate in school thoroughly enjoy the experience. However, it is maybe as one parent suggested, that the thinking and wondering remains '*within their own thoughts*'. Another explanation could be that children do not talk about this at home, because it is something that is done within school, but not talked about outside the Godly Play session.

**Insight:** there were a variety of initiatives that sought to facilitate opportunities for children to encounter the Bible in school. However, the majority of these did not seem to ripple into the home environment.

- Children rarely read the Bible at home; when they do, they are more likely to do so in private.
- The gift of a Bible may facilitate exploration in the home.
- In school, engagement with Bible stories occurred in RE and in collective worship through initiatives such as Open the Book.

The crux of the research findings is that there is potential scope here for increasing opportunities for children to explore Scripture in the home. The major challenges are a lack of resource in the home environment – whether Bible or family knowledge and understanding of Bible stories. Opportunities which did appear to make ripples included gifts of Bibles, a variety of Bibles in the school library and experiences of Open the Book, particularly when parents are invited in. Children's engagement with the Bible at home was limited. The surprising finding was that several children spoke of the gift of a Bible from grandparents, school or church.

# Relationships with others

**Key words:** Faith in action, caring for others

Development, including spiritual development, is marked by changes, the most visible of which are changes in behaviours. Key relationships are needed to encourage and sustain those changes, and thus facilitate children's exploration of faith or spiritual life in the home. These include:

- Relationships with others in the wider community – faith in action.
- The development of pupil leadership qualities.
- Relationships within the nexus of church, school and home, and with significant individuals such as grandparents and other role models.

## Caring about other people

One of the questions which we sought to explore further was the connection between spirituality and everyday behaviours in children. A section of the survey was designed specifically to ask participants to rate the frequency of certain behaviours that might be seen as a reflection of Christian values and spirituality. The results of the five questions asked are summarised in Figure 5. This shows, first of all, that all three categories of participants rated the behaviours as happening fairly often. As observed consistently across the survey, parents' and stakeholders' average scores are higher than the pupils' ones but follow generally the same trend. In this case we can observe that "caring about other people" is the behaviour observed more often while "helping people in the local community" is the one with the lowest frequency. The analysis also revealed that caring about other people is more strongly associated with a connection to school than a connection to the local church.

## *Understanding the results*

While these could be seen as essentially the same thing, as "other people" could be interpreted as people in the local community, there is a clear sense that we are considering social elements placed at a distance from the individual. 'Other people' here represent probably other school children, friends and family; namely members of the inner social circle of the individual. The local community, on the other hand, is understood as comprising neighbours, other schools and that wider social circle of people we encounter but do not necessarily interact with as often. More in depth analyses revealed average differences between schools and an overall consistent pattern of ranking together with the usual gender differences.

In the effort to further understand the role of schools and church in nurturing these prosocial behaviours, we looked in more detail at these reported feelings of connection with the school and church and these five behaviours. Results showed that the stronger the feelings of connection to the school and the church, the more likely it is that all behaviours are observed. However, the strength of this association is larger when it comes to feelings of connection to the school. If we were to speculate on this result we could say that schools encourage these behaviours more than the church does. Although we have to be cautious given the correlational nature of this data.

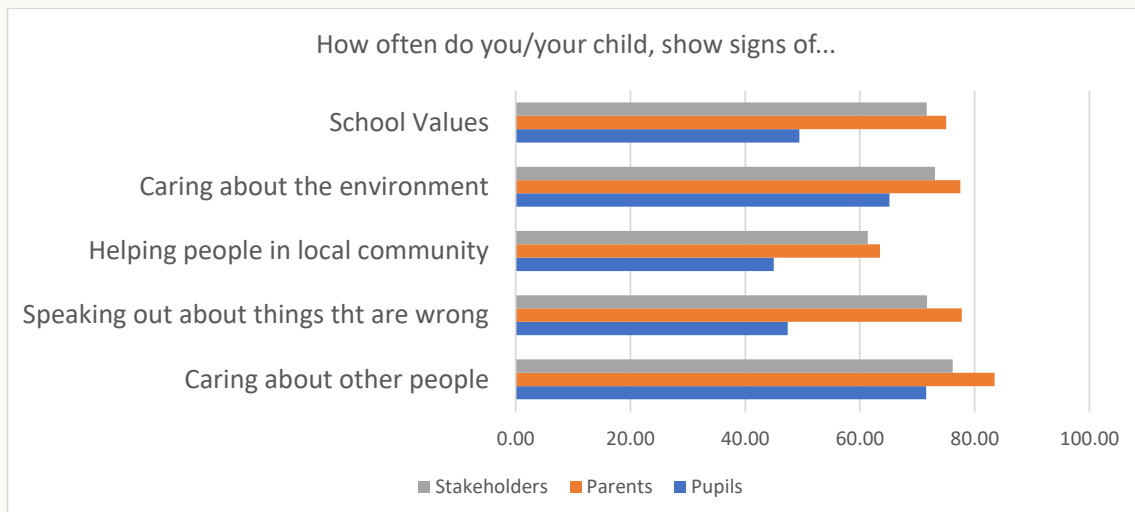


Figure 5: Bar chart representing the mean scores from all participants on questions relating to five behaviours.

Primary schools of all types promote values of helping others in their global and local community. Developing behaviours based on Christian values such as forgiveness and compassion are encouraged in a diversity of ways in church schools. Caring for others through involvement in community action or raising money for others are activities common in many schools.

## Faith in action

Parents in several schools argued that essentially 'faith in action' should be the core of faith-related activity in church primary schools. When questions were asked about how children explored faith at home, some parents suggested that it was not about talking, praying together, or religious rituals, or going to church but about what you did to help others.

*I think for me it's action... 'cos personally **with our family, I find it hard to find time to sit down and have quiet time and praying but we do a lot of things for our community** – the food bank. We focus a lot on that and also to helping refugees, we talk about that quite a lot and [the children] see it in action... It's living it not just the religious part of going to church every week... it's more about actually **how can you live out your faith** with your family... Particularly with children where unless they're going to sit down and be reading the Bible or you know it is very much through behaviour and learning and awareness of others and saying sorry. (Parent-1)*

*I believed I was just as much a Christian as my parents even though I didn't go to church. There will be lots of families within this school who don't go to church and that doesn't matter because what they're teaching here is **how to live a Christian life. And for me, as a parent that's actually more important.** It's not this abstract thing. It's not you go to church, you've done your bit, now we get on with life. **It's about how you live your life.** (Parent-3)*

This argument needs to be addressed here, that looking at how children explore faith in the home, maybe should focus on how they live their lives or live out their faith. In section A.2 we looked at how talking about values was the most common faith-related talk reported by parents.



A focus on moral values is often all that many parents expect from a church school. Response to the open text question “what do you expect for your child from this school?” focused on inculcation of moral values. For example:

- Provide adults to be good role models for pupils. To show that Christian values are important to be a better version of yourself.
- Give them a strong moral compass and act with compassion.
- Help them to grow as well-rounded human beings, in spiritual, emotional, moral, academic, and other ways.
- Hopefully set the key values for a good future and a good life among all other people no matter who they are.

Such responses came from all parents, whether they described themselves as Christian or not (see further Appendix 3). This offers a positive narrative which looks at how the Christian values of faith, hope and love are core universal values that resonate with many people.

**Insight:** church primary schools do facilitate opportunities to explore faith in action in the home, and parents are fully supportive of this in the home. It is an area perhaps neglected by the local churches. Ideally, a holistic view of faith will include all aspects, with a different emphasis at different times. For some participants in this research, maybe only one or two aspects were seen as important. Church primary schools have an important role in offering opportunities to explore all elements and dimensions of faith and spirituality.

# Pupil leadership

**Key words:** Young leaders, spiritual councils, worship committees

Pupil leadership programmes were found in many schools, although the quantitative data found no significant connection between these programmes and children initiating activities in the home. One explanation for this is that children in all schools had an active role in instigating faith-related activities in the home, whether or not they were involved in leadership roles. Nevertheless, it is essential to look at the extent of the leadership and responsibility that pupils had in school.

## Caring for others

One example of activities that schools had in place to encourage pupil leaders and to put faith into action was the Archbishop of York Young Leaders Award (AYYLA) which had been adopted by School-6.<sup>15</sup> This is a leadership and character education award, which seeks to empower young leaders to change society and inspire others. The previous year the young leaders had helped a premature baby unit at the local hospital. Within School-6 the AYYLA was developing pupils' skills and attitudes. Pupils identified that it was encouraging them to think of others, but also it was developing leadership skills. Pupils argued that participating in the award had made a difference.

- *It encourages you to do things that are not things that you would do in your everyday life. So you would, like, clean the town. You wouldn't do that every day. (Pupil-6)*
- *It's an opportunity to do fun things in and out of school, to help other people in your community. (Pupil-6)*
- *I wasn't really the helpful sort of person but then [in] Year 6 I was just helping more people because of the Archbishop of York Award.*
- *It made me more confident to do more things.*
- *It made me understand that it's better to help people than to be mean to people.*
- *One of my favourite things [is] the easiest and the thing that I've really got... put a smile on someone's face. I've already done that. ... If you're walking around you can just put a smile on someone's face by doing the smallest thing but you can make the biggest smile.*
- *It makes me feel better knowing that I've helped some people and that I've done all I can because knowing that there's people out there that need help.*

## Worship committees

About half the schools in the research had a distinct spiritual leadership role for pupils. These teams had a wide variety of names from prayer pals to worship leaders, worship committees, and prayer clubs to the spiritual council. The groups had a variety of aims, but usually there was a focus on organising or participating in collective worship or liturgies, supporting the prayer of other pupils, or creating and sustaining places for prayer and reflection. For example, in School-1 children regularly organised and led worship liturgies, as Year 6 pupils explained:

*When we're preparing the Liturgy, anyone can prepare a liturgy, there's prayers and there's words that you can just base it around and to keep a general flow. Because it's quite hard to build a liturgy from scratch. There's lots of singing and quite often [the teacher] will have some kind of whizzy idea to keep it interesting. Last week [we] asked people to stand up on stools and say the mission statement and say what they thought about it. (Pupil-1)*

*I did one a couple of weeks ago... we always... have something that you can do as an activity. So we asked if they can pick up a pebble, bring it to their place and just hold the pebble and just think and close their eyes and pray and that's always something that I think is very good to do in our children liturgies because... we always send them with something that they can do. (Pupil-1)*

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15 <https://www.archbishopofyorkyouthtrust.co.uk/youth-trust>

*We did happiness and we put glitter on people's hands. We then asked people to shake everyone's hand and go round the circle and then we're going to describe it and we said "that's the happiness." We did that in a field and we found it was a nice light place and it stopped people from like fiddling and it just got people to pray a lot more and think a lot more. (Pupil-1)*

The children had often volunteered for these roles. There were clearly staff guiding the work in the background; but the pupils relished opportunities for independence and autonomy, using their ideas and vision.

*It was so good because our teachers weren't telling us what to do. We just had to think and use our imagination and use our knowledge of RE to make this... It really helped with us remembering and getting to know the Bible stories even more. (Pupil-4)*

Other examples are the adventurous, autonomous prayer pals of School-9 (section C.2), and pupils creating, evaluating and supporting reflection spaces (section C.1). Young people provided a range of motivations for joining these worship leader teams, from their own faith, to a desire to *encourage others to think about God and stuff*. Often, but not always, they were confident young Christians, happy to share their experience and vision of a Christian school.

*We created a group because we thought we needed... to show that collective worship and celebrating God was important. I'm part of it because I go to Church and I know quite a lot about God. (Pupil-13)*

Pupils spoke fluently about the Christian values in their school, how they understood these and how they were trying to recreate them in everyday life. One Anglican diocese had a programme to support and develop the young worship leaders. Pupils in School-13 had taken part in workshops at the cathedral and brought back into school some new ideas to help shape worship. Research findings suggest the leadership qualities these young people are developing are not explored, or applied outside of school.

**Insight:** a picture emerges from this research of confident, articulate young people offering leadership and insights, as they seek meaning on faith-related matters. There was little evidence seen of this rippling into the church environment.

# Thinking about relationships within the Nexus

The research drew attention to the connections between home, church and school, the Nexus. A clear finding is that enabling exploration of faith and spirituality in the home is associated with the strength and depth of these connections.

*You want to be in a welcoming environment. So leading on from the school part of it, it does make it more positive that children have access to a faith in an environment that is positive to them. (Parent-3)*

The relationships that sustain these connections are important as they enable the spiritual dimension of life to flourish. Examples of these relationships are found throughout this report: parents' relationships with school leadership and staff, strong relationships between school and church leaders, and most critically the people children trust to know about their spiritual life.

The strength of families' sense of belonging to school was clearly visible in the way parents in School-17 talked about the school values (section A.2). Families' sense of belonging to church emerged as perhaps a more fragile relationship (section B.3) but was strengthened by relationships developed between families and the local minister or members of the church community. The relationship between school leaders and church leaders (section B.4) is essential for sustaining the connection. When it is fragmented or broken, school leaders feel the need to search out other connections to replace this.

The most important relationships formed by the children were revealed in analyses of responses to several different aspects of this research: who knew about a child's spiritual life (section C.3), with whom children had faith conversations (section A.3), the role of grandparents and the children's own roles as peer leaders (section D.5). Children develop spiritually as they are supported to help others to relate to each other and to God.

**Insight:** the critical role relationships play in sustaining connections in the Nexus cannot be underestimated.

- Attention needs to be paid to these critical relationships as they are a key factor in facilitating a child's spiritual wellbeing and exploration of faith.

The value of recognising children as leaders now, rather than potential leaders of the future is seen in the examples of young people involved in faith in action and the worship committees in school. The active agency of young people weaves as a thread throughout this whole report. We need to recognise them as co-constructors; when given responsibility, children rise to the challenge. It is essential to work with them rather than for them or at them. This research has shown how relationships with adults who are willing to explore faith and spiritual life with the child are essential for spiritual development.

## Questions for discussion, and signposts to further reading

### Questions for discussion

1. Has anything in this section surprised you or were you expecting something that was not mentioned?
2. What do you think are the three most significant activities that happen in the home?
3. What are the implications for developing children as leaders in the church?
4. Has this section suggested anything that would make a difference in practice?
5. In what ways can the Nexus work together to encourage greater fruitful engagement with Scripture.

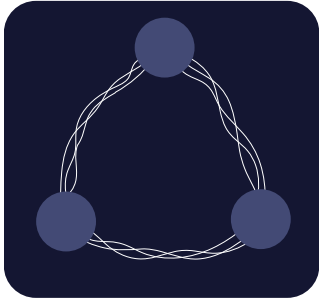
### Where to look for further reading and resources

For further exploration the challenges and opportunities described in this section:

1. Go to NICER's website for research reports, academic articles and CPD resources  
**<http://nicer.org.uk/>**
2. Search the online catalogue of 'The North East Religious Resource Centre' for religious resources
  - 'The North East Religious Resource Centre', the largest religious resources centre in England, consists of a friendly and knowledgeable team of 8 resource specialists working in two regional centres in the North East of England. It holds over 37,000 physical, online and downloadable resources relevant to home, school and church contexts. Every resource has been vetted by RRC staff to ensure accuracy, reliability and quality. Some are bespoke resources developed by the RRC to address areas otherwise not supported. If you have any specific resource needs, please search our online catalogue or get in touch.

**[www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard](http://www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk/#https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard)**

The online catalogue is accessible at **<https://uk.accessit.online/nrt14/#!dashboard>**



## SECTION E

# THE CONCLUSION

### The research question:

**In what ways do church primary schools (working in collaboration with churches and interested stakeholders) facilitate opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home?**

#### Introduction

The Faith in the Nexus research project involved an in-depth study of how children explored faith in school and home. The lead researcher had the pleasure of visiting twenty church primary schools across England, from tiny rural village schools, situated deep in northern hills or leafy southern valleys, to large urban schools beside noisy transport arteries. Pupils, parents, staff (teaching and non-teaching), governors and other stakeholders participated in interviews and an online survey (see Appendix 1 for details of schools, numbers of participants and research methods). We are immensely grateful to all who gave their time and effort to participate in this study; for reasons of confidentiality they cannot be named.

The original question asked how church primary schools facilitate opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home. Now we know more about the relationship between and the significance of multiple factors, such as faith-based admissions criteria, home, school, and church strategies, and the presence of fruitful faith-related conversations, prayer, and other practices in the home environment. The importance of these opportunities for children's spiritual wellbeing provides a strong impetus to ensure that children have the time and space to explore faith and spiritual life in the Nexus of home, school and church.

The research team identified several approaches and strategies that encouraged exploration of faith or spiritual life in the home. However, it cannot be stressed enough that these are not only relevant for schools, but also for the other elements that make up the Nexus; home and school. Where these approaches are modelled effectively in the church primary school, then the ripples are clearly evident; children carry these practices into the home. For children's spirituality to flourish and mature fully, it is important that these strategies need to apply to all spheres of a child's life.

# The key messages

The following were identified as approaches that facilitated opportunities for the child to explore faith and the spiritual dimension of life:

1. Focusing on children's (and families') **spiritual wellbeing**.
2. Providing space and time **for the child to reflect**, think and pray.
3. Embedding frequent opportunities for children to talk about and explore existential questions, and religious concepts and encouraged **acceptance of children's talk** about faith and spiritual matters.
4. Enabling and **prioritising encounters with experiences of lived religion** in the form of a variety of faith-related activities, places, people, Scriptures and events.
5. **Acknowledging the child as the dynamic initiator** and co-constructor of faith and spirituality in school as well as home, and helping adults to identify this engagement at home.
6. **Sustaining a strong connection between local church and church school** (clergy, building and community), and understanding the diversity of ways in which people connect to church.
7. **Identifying and removing barriers** to collaborative working within the Nexus.

All of the strategies or approaches are interconnected, mutually supporting working together to create a climate where a spiritual dimension can flourish. The next section looks at each of these in more detail and provides links to the relevant sections of the report.

## 1. A focus on children's (and families') spiritual wellbeing

Concern for the spiritual wellbeing of all children should be the main focus for the Nexus. Children search for meaning through questions: they desire a sense of belonging, seek out reflection time and space, and value relationships. All these aspects contribute to spiritual wellbeing. The findings from this report suggest that there needs to be strategic prioritisation of children's spiritual wellbeing. What is clear from the research is that no one way is sufficient in itself. A variety of approaches, from different people and different spheres of life, are needed to create an environment in which spiritual development can flourish. The approaches outlined below offer some ways that the three parts of the Nexus – school, home and church – can contribute to enhancing spiritual wellbeing.

## 2. Space and time for the child to reflect, think, and pray

What emerges through analysis of children's responses to the research questions, is a need for space to reflect, think and pray. In the church primary schools, these spaces were in classrooms and in the playground; at home the children made their own times and spaces. Few children mentioned church as a place to reflect. This space and time is essential for spiritual wellbeing. Many children, like adults, had no or little quiet time in daily life. Section C explored the children's need to be still, the spaces and times they found and those they constructed in school and at home.

- Children actively seek out spaces and times to be alone to reflect, think and pray.
- Church primary schools provide several spaces such as reflection corners and spiritual gardens.
- At home, children seek out or create their own spaces – their bedroom before sleep or walking in nature.
- There is a need for reflection or prayer space and time for young people's spiritual wellbeing.

### **3. Frequent opportunities for children to talk about and explore existential questions, and religious concepts**

One of the key findings to emerge from this research was children's desire to explore existential questions, particularly about God, the Creation, science and religion, and death. Adults' responses to these questions varied. Some suggested the child look for an 'expert' to answer the question such as a teacher or local clergy. Here there was an underlying assumption that 'other' people know the right answer to these questions. Others did not engage in conversation as they were concerned about influencing their child's beliefs. Children for the most part were looking for time and space to explore these questions rather than a definite answer. For many parents and pupils, it was grandparents or the older generation that they turned to and who were seen as mostly likely to engage in open conversations. Section A explored this in some detail, the following conclusions were reached:

- Children value opportunities to ask open-ended questions, and for others to listen to their opinions.
- Church primary schools can provide safe spaces to talk about faith and spiritual matters or ask challenging questions. Pupils identified RE lessons as such a space.
- Some adults struggled with how to respond; others avoided or closed such conversations down, but the role of grandparents or the older generation in engaging in these conversations cannot be underestimated.

### **4. Encounters with experiences of lived religion in the form of a variety of faith-related activities, places, people, Scriptures and events.**

- Church primary schools are spaces where people and places of faith are encountered daily. It must be remembered that many pupils entering church primary schools will not have experienced this before. In church schools, talking about faith is normalised. It happens in formal and informal settings across the day. It permeates the daily routine and is not confined to collective worship or Religious Education lessons. Several parents spoke of faith talk or faith-related activities being permitted in school; the assumption underlying those comments was that it was not permitted elsewhere. Encounters with people for whom faith is important offer children insights into living faith, as opposed to a faith or world view described only in textbooks. They offer an understanding of the fluidity of faith; faith as lived by a diversity of individuals rather than the absolutist picture painted in many textbooks. Parents' responses to the question of what they expected from the school focused on the value system, they looked for a school that would provide their child with a moral framework, with a value system that would shape their child's outlook on life (see A\* and Appendix 3). References to encounters with Scripture were limited in the data generated (D\*). The absence of a strong presence of Scripture in the home was clear. The most effective approach noted by parents was when the value system was lived out, permeating all policies and behaviours in school.
- Church primary schools offer experience of Christianity as a lived religion rather than a textbook religion.
- Church families live out the pattern of the church's year; festivals are moments of key engagement.

### **5. The child as the instigator of talk about faith and spirituality in school as well as home**

A theme that emerges across all aspects of this research is that children are active agents in religious socialisation and spiritual development. They are not passive recipients of a faith transmitted through school, church or home. Primary schools often recognise and encourage this role for the child; to what extent this is encouraged in the local church varies immensely.



Recognition that children are active agents is woven into every aspect of this report.

- Children are often the initiators of talk about faith or spirituality in the home.
- The stimulus for these conversations includes activities, curriculum, and worship in school.
- Leadership opportunities in school, formal or informal, gave pupils confidence to develop and take ownership of their spiritual development.

## **6. A strong connection between church school and the local church (clergy, building and community) and the diversity of ways which people connect to church**

One of the clear findings from analysis of the online survey results was that where a strong, active relationship between church and school was perceived, then there was more evidence of faith-related activities at home. The connection did not always have to be with the local parish church. In the absence of such a connection, some school leaders established links with other denominations, parachurch organisations or religious orders (section B.4). One factor that could be seen to influence this sense of connection was whether the school had a faith-based admissions policy or not. In one way, it is not surprising that home discussions about faith are more prevalent in homes whose children attend schools with admissions criteria that require evidence of faith affiliation or regular family church attendance. However, many parents and pupils attending such schools do display a fluid and flexible interpretation of Christian identity (see Appendix 3).

One issue to be explored further is what it means to belong to church. The concept of occasional believers includes many of the church school families, who perceive themselves as belonging through their connection with the school. These findings were explored in Section D, where some clear conclusions were drawn.

- A strong relationship between church and the school has a strong association with attitudes and behaviours which facilitate faith-talk<sup>16</sup> and interactions at home.
- Flourishing connections between school, home and church nurtures relationships between individuals and these institutions.
- Positive relationships between church and school are characterised by invitational worship, celebration of festivals, the presence of the minister in the school, and a sense of belonging and connection to the church community and building.
- The powerful impact that these positive relationships have on aspects of family faith life is mostly unseen but is apparent in the significance that church school families put on their connection with the local church.

## **7. Barriers to collaborative working within the Nexus**

Many barriers were identified which prevented collaborative working within the Nexus, such as:

- No local church or Christian community.
- Broken, fragile or fragmented relationships between school and church; between church and school families; and – very rarely – between school and families.
- Lack of engagement with, interest in or competence in encouraging the spiritual wellbeing of children.

For some church schools, the challenges of sustaining this connection between church and school were structural, for example no local church building or community. For others the challenge was rebuilding broken or fragmented relationships between leaders, or overcoming misunderstandings or interpretations by both church community and school families of what it means to be connected

<sup>16</sup> This report employs the term 'faith-talk', to capture the sense of children's talk about faith or spiritual matters in the home.

to church. The ways the church schools sought to address these issues are detailed in section B.4.

Several schools embraced the challenge of supporting families with no or limited knowledge or language about faith, or with a lack of skills to negotiate an exploratory discussion of spiritual matters. The spiritual and pastoral support offered by church schools to the school families is highlighted throughout the report.

## What needs to change?

These findings suggest a need for greater awareness and understanding of the value of the relationship between church and school, and school approaches that encourage children to explore faith in the home. Schools, families and the Church needs to restore their faith in the Nexus and the possibility of what that interplay could bring. This should not be seen as a nostalgic return to an imagined harmony of certainty, but as a welcome and inclusive Nexus that focuses on the needs of people and understands the diversity of self-understanding that different components of the Nexus have. We suggest it should be driven by the welcome of “The Feeding of the Five Thousand”, an open service of hospitality. There is a clear need for all Christian educators, ministers and parents to focus on children’s spiritual wellbeing and recognise that making opportunities for children’s faith exploration in the home must be a priority. They must show a willingness to listen to children where they are, in their own words, in the spirit of Jesus’ welcome to children and to those on the edge. For parents and carers this means a willingness to talk with their children in these conversations, with the facilitating help of Christian educators and ministers, but not to be discouraged by uncertainty, or lack of confidence in knowing what to say.

We believe that changes can be made by targeted and effective dissemination of the key findings to significant influencers and animators through a sustained campaign that is integrated with stakeholder activities and strategies, in particular *Growing Faith* in the Church of England and through the institutional support of those influencers and animators, whoever they are.

## Recommendations

**There is a critical need to invest in the Nexus, to ensure it focuses on the experience and spiritual wellbeing needs of the child. This investment is needed to create an environment where the spiritual wellbeing of the child flourishes, where there are plentiful opportunities for children to explore faith-related matters, ask questions about the ultimate things, and find space and time to reflect.**

- I. The evidence in this study should inspire collaborative working between church school, church and home: encourage churches and schools to prioritise and understand their relationships with each other; establish effective means of communication within the Nexus and thus overcome the silos between ministry provision and school needs across the Dioceses.
  - Relationships between school and church should not be just left to happenstance; they need to be strategically prioritised.
  - We invite a change of heart to open up the possibility of a better link between church and school and family which is not dependent on prior signs of allegiance or identity, or familiar markers of membership, but is led by the Spirit in the places of need that family and children experience. Church leaders should be persistent in seeking to build links into schools either directly or indirectly through lay led initiatives.
  - School leaders should be bold in seeking out the links with the church where there are none, seeing the church as a community-supporting service, and where there is no capacity with a local ordained ministry to reach out into the lay Christian

community and to other ministries to find other sources of nurture, with advice and guidance from the Diocese where necessary. However, school leaders should not sidestep the priority of forging, repairing or sustaining a strong connection with the local parish church.

- The formal identification, recognition and nurture of these animators, who have formed links with school in the provision of spiritual support, is a clear priority. Dioceses, coordinating between their youth structures and the Boards of Education, should seek to map animators (lay or ordained) and their schools to support and sustain them. We recommend structured support for these specific ministries at Diocesan level with special focus where there is an interregnum.
- Churches should consider and plan how they may be seen as places of spiritual reflection and prayer for children. There is some evidence that children do not readily see churches as spaces for prayer and reflection in the way they do see their own bedrooms, reflection corners and prayer spaces or spiritual gardens in schools. We recommend that churches learn to make more visible the life of prayer and reflection for school visits. It may be that some children only see the church as a place of worship through a seasonal service such as Christmas. Trips, RE or speakers visiting schools should include opportunities to explore these moments – such as the person who slips in during the day to sit on a pew, or lights a candle and says a prayer, or meets with a small group others to prayer together.
- Decisions about closing churches need to be informed by an awareness of local schools. We propose that the Church closure decision process should build in a risk analysis involving a direct consultation with the related school to understand any impacts for a local church school.

We suggest that Church ministers and representatives continue to adopt welcome and hospitality in stance and practice towards all school families, and seek to understand the different ways those parents and families might see themselves as connected to the Church, beyond traditional signs of Sunday participation. We encourage the practice of invitation to seek reconciliation, with help from facilitators, where relationships have broken down between school and church. Specific support should be given to places where that breakdown is irretrievable, in particular with support for informal spiritual animators. A change of leadership could be identified as a priority for restoring relationships, with these opportunities clearly identified centrally within Diocesan systems of information organisation.

II. There are recommended approaches that school leaders can adopt:

- School leaders should map school values, or preferably virtues, to specific practices in the life of the school so there are clear exemplifying outlines of these. We recommend the use of virtues as these focus on aspects of character which can link from exemplifying Biblical examples to a school practice or habit. For example, the concept of Abraham's open tent, warm fire and offer of food to strangers relates the welcome a school might seek to offer all in its community. The willingness to see the good in others, even those different from ourselves (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan) might support a church school in always seeing the good in everyone. The reading of Bible texts as carriers of virtues, not simply carriers of moral rules, is a helpful change of insight here. These should be grounded in the Christian vision and narrative life of the school, part of its story of where it is and the community it serves.
- School leaders can enhance the impact of their school life in ways that reach children's homes: when they make physical provision for the spiritual life of children in their schools; are attentive to opportunities to connect the spiritual and faith life of the school with the natural world; invest in study of the Bible through good religious education and Bible gifting opportunities; and frame the life of the school around the festivals and seasons of the whole year, with rich opportunities for charitable activity. Associated projects and communications which bridge between school and home impact the spiritual life at home with prayers and practices that can go home,

with a little helpful guidance. This study did not look at other consequences of such policies but it did find evidence that pupils in schools with faith-related admissions policies reported more engagement with faith at home. The researchers do, however, recognise that church schools have a mission of service to the common good as well as a mission to those of the Christian faith. School leaders, in consultation with their Governing Bodies and Diocesan authorities, should be aware of this finding.

III. We recommend a sustained and coordinated effort to (re)establish clear home practices. We think:

- Households can be encouraged to learn from schools of the power of spiritual and reflection gardens, prayer corners and other spaces of sanctity, and to have these spaces identified in the home. Parents and carers can be encouraged by schools to help create appropriate spaces for spiritual flourishing in children's personal spaces.
- Christian families could try to incorporate seasonal home practices that refer to the cycle of the Church year of festivals and also seek out opportunities for attention to charity initiatives for those in need, where this is possible.
- When children initiate a *special conversation* at home, such as through a 'big question' on a matter of ultimate concern, these should be viewed as a precious moment of opportunity. Home is, and should be, an exploratory space for talk. When a child asks a question about ultimate things, this is an important opportunity. Parents and carers should not feel they must give comprehensive answers, should not be afraid of recognising questions that might be difficult, and should not be afraid to offer simple truths. There are resources for parents in how to handle these conversations which should be signposted (by churches and schools). Here it is important to spot special chats when they happen and to try whenever possible to allow space for it (even if it comes at an inconvenient time), to listen attentively and share openly. We suggest that key here is the ongoing possibility of conversation in the adult-child relationship. The aim should be to keep talking and keep developing the space for spiritual talk in the home. These moments and spaces are sacred. Sometimes, more confident grandparents or elders are well placed to respond to these questions, and opportunities for that interaction should be encouraged where possible and appropriate. Clear support with helpful language for uncertain parents, and a specific recognition of the priority of inter-generational discipleship is essential.
- As with our previous study '*Passing on the Faith*', we found some reluctance among parents and carers around how to understand the place of passing on faith with children. We recognise the fear of being too forceful around belief and how this might push children away, and also the lack of confidence in spiritual development among parents who are not sure of their own religion and world view. We think there is another path for approaching this dilemma that involves maintaining and nurturing the space for spiritual talk at home, rather than hiding it. Homes should be encouraging spaces that allow faith-talk to be part of the relationship between adult and child.
- Children are positive in their talk about their bedrooms as places with sacred space (for prayer and or reflection). It is also clear that they see places of sacred space in the natural world, and also periods of journey, such as the daily school 'pilgrimage'. Families should recognise and encourage these different 'spaces'. Children may not be worshipping in *the Temple* but may instead be out on the *mountainside* or *on the road*. Homes might be able to learn from school practices of having reflection or prayer corners or reflection spaces in gardens or by windows that look out onto greenery.
- School prayers go home. We encourage more adventurous strategies about the nature of these prayers and the reestablishment of traditions of collective prayer

in Christian home environments. The recent clapping for NHS workers reveals how collective rituals can be started, and common initiatives are more sustainable than individual ones. Church and school collaboration on prayers to go home could assist this, but we suggest a specific programme for prayer and reflection is needed, and one which provides different alternative types of prayer or reflection to make space for families at different places on their journeys.

IV. Children's encounters with Bible texts remain an area of significant concern. Religious Education remains a vital part of the school curriculum, and the evidence in this study found clear signs of an educational reward from investment in high quality resources and development opportunities provided when schools committed to the *Understanding Christianity* initiative. *Understanding Christianity* is making a positive difference in RE, but we believe there is a clear need to review the approaches taken around engagements with Biblical narratives in the wider life of the school. However, it is clear that there is a need to rebuild confidence among teachers as voyagers into Bible narratives, recreate a visibility of the Bible in the life of school, and explore new practices. The absence of clear, successful practices in our findings mean we cannot recommend models that we know work. These suggestions are more speculative:

- We propose that schools should adopt an inclusive multi-strand approach to the Bible, treating it simultaneously as a cultural resource for the curriculum generally (in particular the arts and humanities), a theological source for religion and belief, and a spiritual source for prayer and collective worship.
- *Cultural resource* entails a reframed outlook that recognises the role of the Bible as a principle elder text for civilisations, rather than an exclusive text only belonging to a certain group of believers. The Bible is an ancient treasure of many different peoples' stories of faith throughout history. It has perforated history, culture and the arts, and that continues to speak to people of many different backgrounds. We recommend schools see the Bible as a cultural resource for all, as well as a theological source in Religious Education and a spiritual source for prayer and collective worship.
- We propose that schools consider the engagement of Biblical narratives across the arts and humanities, such as in literacy, particularly around the literary forms that receive priority in the literacy curriculum, as well as a resource for RE.
- School literacy coordinators should make sure Bibles are available in school libraries and in the curriculum provision, for all levels. Commonly used versions that match those used in connected local churches should also be included. Above all, schools should not simply have children's Bibles or picture book Bibles; many Bible texts in standard Bibles such as the New Revised Standard Version, New Jerusalem Bible and International Standard Version are quite readable by young children.
- We propose the school practice of Bible giving as a school phase welcome gift, rather than exclusively a *school departure gift*. For instance, the start of Key Stage 2 might be a suitable time. Schools can then frame their education programme to help with the exploration of the text that they may gift to a pupil. A good connection with the local parish community and Church can support this initiative, providing resources to gift Bibles.

It is hoped this research project has highlighted the changes needed to ensure the most significant benefit to the family exploration of faith and spiritual life and will encourage adults in school, home and church to step into the world of the child and explore the spiritual dimension of life together.

# Glossary

## Academy

Academy schools, introduced in England in 2000, are state schools directly funded from central government rather than through local councils.

## Churchwarden

A lay official in a parish or congregation of the Anglican Communion, usually working as a part-time volunteer.

## Collective worship

All pupils in England and Wales must take part in a daily act of Collective Worship, unless they have been explicitly withdrawn by their parents. It can be a single act of worship for all pupils or separate acts of worship for groups of pupils.

## Foundation governor

All schools in England have governing boards or boards of trustees that provide strategic leadership and accountability in schools. Foundation governors can represent the local church community, ensuring the continuation of the character and ethos of the school.

## Godly Play

A Christian movement centred on childhood spirituality with trained facilitators who use story-telling, artefacts and response time to create space for 'wonder'.

## Holy Days (of obligation)

In the Roman Catholic Church, are religious feast that must be observed in the same manner as Sunday.

## Lay reader

Is a person authorised by a bishop in the Anglican Communion to lead certain services of worship, to preach, and to carry out pastoral and teaching functions.

## Messy Church

Is found in many Church of England parishes. It is seen as a way of being church for families involving fun, craft activities; based on creativity, hospitality and celebration.

## Minister/ pastor/ vicar

Although a variety of terms were used by participants when referring to members of the clergy, to ensure consistency and retain anonymity, the term minister is employed throughout this report.

## Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)

Is academy trust that operates more than one academy school.

## Nexus

A nexus is an important connection between parts of a system. In this report the Nexus refers to the connections between home, school and church.

## Occasional belonging

Refers to those who express a sense of belonging to church, but are only occasional churchgoers.

## **Open the Book**

Is part of the Bible Society. It has a dual purpose of bringing Bible stories into schools while also providing a volunteering opportunity for 15,000 Christians across a variety of churches.

## **Parachurch organisation**

In the context of this report it refers to organisations that work within or across denominations and provide faith activities for schools.

## **Posada**

Modern day Posada uses Nativity figures of Mary and Joseph who travel from place to place. This gives each 'host' the chance to create their own celebration in their home or place in the community.

## **Religious socialisation**

Is an interactive process through which children's religious beliefs and understandings are shaped.

## **Remembrance Day**

Since the end of the First World War, November 11<sup>th</sup> is the day to remember the members of the armed forces who died in the line of duty.

## **School values**

These are the values chosen by the schools, which are perceived to make an active contribution to the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of pupils.

## **Spiritual life**

Is an open and inclusive term. In this report, it is understood in the context of the school's statutory obligations to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society. It is relevant for people who might express their spiritual life within a faith tradition or those who express it outside any faith tradition.

## **Spiritual development**

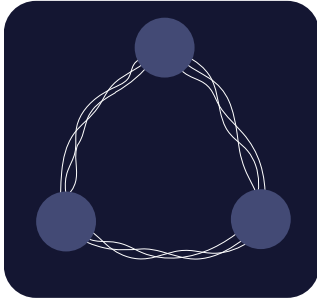
This research places spiritual development firmly within a Christian framework. The role of education is to enable all to reach their God-given potential and live life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Spiritual development is an essential element of being human, as all are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26); it is growth in an openness to the spiritual dimension of life, characterised by 'critical openness'.

## **Voluntary Aided (VA) primary schools**

State-funded schools, where the Church of England or the Catholic Church contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school.

## **Voluntary Controlled (VC) primary schools**

State-funded schools where the Christian foundation has some formal influence in the running of the school.



# APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX 1**

Faith in the Nexus research methods

## **APPENDIX 2**

Quantitative results reports on School-1 and School-8

School-1 quantitative survey report

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## **APPENDIX 3**

Faith-based admission and family faith affiliation

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Faith affiliation analysis of church school families

## **APPENDIX 4**

Parachurch organisations in the Nexus



# APPENDIX 1

## FAITH IN THE NEXUS RESEARCH METHODS

**Research question: In what ways do church primary schools (working in collaboration with churches and interested stakeholders), facilitate opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home?**

The Faith in the Nexus project worked with twenty church primary schools in England who actively encourage children's exploration of faith and the spiritual dimension of life, and recognise that a fruitful school, home and church relationship is key to this.

The schools were recruited through opt-ins from a scoping survey during autumn 2017, existing networks, and letters to Diocesan Directors of Education. Engagement rates were varied, but have resulted in a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools, geographically spread from north to south, with examples from differing socio-economic areas (see Table 2).

### Research Methods

This research study adopted a mixed methods approach with the aim *'to draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both [qualitative and quantitative] in single research studies and across studies'*.<sup>17</sup>

An initial interview with the head teacher took place in the spring and summer of 2018, which provided the researcher with an overview of the nature of the primary school. The first qualitative research visits were undertaken in an eight-month period from June 2018 to January 2019. Each visit was unique, but followed the same format of semi-structured focus group interviews with pupils, parents, staff, local clergy (where possible) and other interested stakeholders. Pupil interviews usually consisted of a selection of students from Years 5 and 6, plus more focus interviews with the worship committee or spiritual council. The engagement of parents in the process varied from a small group of 3 to a maximum of 10 (see Table 3 for number of interviewees).

The qualitative research was followed up by a quantitative online survey designed by Dr Sabina Hulbert. The survey was informed by the qualitative data, and aimed to capture the views of a greater number of parents and pupils using mostly closed-ended questions with answer options informed by the extensive interviewing phase. The survey was administered twice; in spring 2019 and at the end of the summer term. 17 schools participated (See Table 2 for number of participants). A total of 1002 responses were collected from 17 different schools, with a response rate per school varying between 21% and 100% of the eligible quota.

Please note that in some of the analyses, the schools with a very low response rate are at times eliminated and the results only from the schools with highest engagement levels within the study are reported.

The survey tool comprised between 12 and 19 questions (depending on the type of respondent) organised in 7 sections. The specific wording of each question had to be slightly adapted to suit the three different types of participants: pupils, parents (including grandparents and carers) or stakeholders (including teachers, administrators or clergy), but the focus remained on the children, their needs, their actions and beliefs.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, R. B. & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.

Table 1: The survey tool

Section	Parents	Stakeholders	Pupils
Demographics	Gender, primary school attended, household size, family type	Gender	Year group, gender, household size, family type
How much do you know...or is talked about	How much do you know about what happens in schools with regard to... (10 topics)	How much do you think parents know about what happens in school with regard to... (10 topics)	
	How much does your child talk about these things (single item)	How much do you think children talk about any of these at home? (single item)	How much, when at home, do you talk about what happens at school with regards to... (10 topics, same as those above)
How much is done	How often does your child do any of the following, at home... (10 topics)	How often do you think children do any of the following at home... (10 topics)	How much when at home do you do any of the following... (10 topics)
How often is asked about	How often does your child ask about... (13 topics)		How often, when at home, do you ask questions about... (13 topics)
Are there signs of...	How often, when at home, does your child show signs of... (5 topics)	How often, when at home, do you think children show signs of... (5 topics)	How often, when at home, do you show signs of... (5 topics)
Who starts this	These things are generally started by: the child or others	These things are generally started by: the child or others	These things are generally started by: me or others
Spiritual life, School-Church connection and School role	To what extent do you think your child has a spiritual life at home?	To what extent do you think children have a spiritual life at home?	How much do other people know about your spiritual life?
			Who is the person more likely to know about your spiritual life?
	Connection to school; connection to local church; school church connection.	Connection to school; connection to local church; school church connection	Connection to school; connection to local church; school church connection
	What should the school do for your child?  Other than the school, who helps you in answering your child's questions about faith?	What should the school do for children?	

All closed-ended questions used either a Likert-type<sup>18</sup> answer format or a slider scale anchored from 0 to 100 to record participants' opinions according to the specific wording of the root question.

<sup>18</sup> A Likert Scale is a type of rating scale used to measure attitudes or opinions. Respondents are asked to rate items on a level of agreement.

Participants had the option to complete the survey in a pen and paper version or online (supported by the Qualtrics platform). Consent forms and participant information sheets were also used in accordance to ethics guidelines. All data was coded and analysed using IBM SPSS version 24, and stored in accordance with GDPR guidelines and University protocols.

Consultation process: The first of the consultations with practitioners and policy makers in October 2017 helped shape the research questions and processes. The second in 2018 sought feedback on the initial findings, and the third in summer 2019 encouraged participants' thoughts on ideas for dissemination of findings. This consultation process was invaluable as it has meant that the research has been grounded in practice, with a focus on improving and enhancing current practice in this field.

Transcription: 139 semi-structured interviews were transcribed by a transcriber. These transcriptions were then uploaded and coded with the help of the NVivo 12 software. Key themes were allowed to emerge from the data. Initial coding resulted in a large number of nodes, and a secondary level of analysis narrowed the focus into the key areas of interest for parents and pupils.

Table 2: School information

School <sup>19</sup> Code <sup>20</sup>	Rural/urban	Size	Type of school <sup>21</sup>	Age range	Percentage eligible for Free School Meals <sup>22</sup>
		Pupil numbers			
1	Urban	<450	Ca/VA	5-11 years	<5
2	Rural	<100	CE/VA	4-11 years	<15
3	Rural	<200	CE/VC	3-11 years	<15
4	Rural	<100	CE/Ac	4-11 years	<20
5	Urban	<350	CE/Ac	3-11 years	<25
6	Urban	<450	CE/Ac	3-11 years	<15
7	Urban	<400	Ca/VA	4-11 years	<10
8	Urban	<250	CE/VA	4-11 years	<10
9	Urban	<350	CE/Ac	4-11 years	< 5
10	Urban	<350	CE/Ac	7-11 years	<25
11	Rural	<100	CE/Ac	4-11 years	<30
12	Urban	<250	Ca/VA	3-11 years	<40
13	Urban	<250	CE/Ac	4-11 years	<15
14	Urban	<250	CE/VC	4-11 years	<10
15	Urban	<300	CE/VA	5-7 year	<20
16	Rural	<100	CE/VA	4-11 years	<10
17	Urban	<250	CE and M/VA	3-7 years	<40
18	Rural	<250	CE/VA	4-11 years	<15
19	Rural	<350	CE/Ac	4-11 years	<30
20	Urban	<450	EC/VA	4-11 years	<15

19 A Likert Scale is a type of rating scale used to measure attitudes or opinions. Respondents are asked to rate items on a level of agreement.

20 Schools are anonymised. In text references employ a number to identify each school, e.g. School-1

21 Ca: Catholic; CE: Church of England; CE and M: Church of England and Methodist; VA: Voluntary Aided - a state-funded school which a Christian denomination contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school; VC: Voluntary controlled - a state-funded school in which a Christian denomination has some formal influence in the running of the school; Ac: academy school.

22 Free School Meals is used as a proxy for disadvantage.

Table 3: Number of participants.

	Focus group interview	Online survey
Pupils	187	730
Parents	100	166
Stakeholders	167 (see below for breakdown)	106
Staff	85	
Senior leaders incl. head teachers	27	
Governors	21	
Clergy	18	
Other stakeholders incl. parachurch, and school visitors	16	
Total	454 (from 20 schools)	1002 (from 17 schools)

## Sample interview questions

### Objective

Draw out the key features of this school that the participants think may influence how families respond to faith in the home.

#### 1. The church primary school

Icebreaker: Tell me one good thing about this school? What would you show a visitor to this school? Why do you like coming to this school? Is there anything you would change about this school?

#### 2. Faith/spiritual dimension in school

What happens in school that helps children explore faith/spiritual dimension of life?

- When, where and how do these activities happen?
- Give me an example.
- Why do things like that happen in this school?

#### 3. Faith in the home

What happens at home that helps children explore faith/spiritual dimension of life?

What do you think helps parents explore faith/spiritual dimension in life at home?

#### 4. The faith community

What happens in the faith community that affects/influences/helps children explore faith/spiritual dimension of life at home?

What can the faith community do to increase the confidence with which parents approach faith in the home?

#### 5. Faith in the Nexus (school, home and faith community)

What happens at school that affects/influences/helps children explore faith/spiritual dimension of life at home?

How can primary schools increase the confidence with which parents approach faith in the home?

# APPENDIX 2

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS REPORTS

### ON SCHOOL-1 AND SCHOOL-8

#### Introduction

This appendix offers an insight into the ‘workings out’ behind the report findings. It details the analysis of the quantitative online survey findings of two schools: a Catholic primary school (School-1) and an Anglican Voluntary Aided primary school (School-8). These two schools were chosen as examples because:

- There was a sufficient number of respondents for a detailed analysis to be meaningful (and a high proportion of eligible Year 5 and 6 pupils completed the survey, 64% and 41% respectively).
- In an initial analysis these two schools consistently produced high scores across all the questions in the online survey.

#### Survey structure

The online survey (see Appendix 1, Table 1) had mostly close-ended questions where participants were asked to record their opinions and answers by sliding a marker onto a scale. The two extremes of a measuring scale were anchored by relevant terms and corresponding numbers ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 100. This measuring approach was chosen because it was extremely intuitive even for younger participants and therefore language free as much as possible.

The root of the question was adjusted to fit the perspective of the three different types of participants: parents, grandparents or carers; stakeholders, that is teachers, governors or clergy; and pupils. Each part of the questionnaires examined a different number of areas and these will be listed at the beginning of each section of results.

### 2.1 School-1 quantitative survey report

#### What kind of school is School-1?

School-1 is an urban 5-11 years Catholic primary school situated in the South East. It has less than 5% of pupils on Free School Meals.<sup>23</sup> School-1 has a faith-based admissions policy; they follow the guidance of the Catholic Education Service.<sup>24</sup> In response to the question:

*How would you describe your family's faith? You could say: "We are not religious" or "we are Christians, Catholic, or Muslim or Sikh" or "we have beliefs but we don't attend church"... or anything else that best describes your family.*

Of the respondents who answered this question

- 23% described themselves as 'practising Catholics' that is to say they stated they were Catholics who attended church or Mass.
- 75% described themselves as Catholic or Christian with no mention of church attendance.
- 2% did not describe themselves Christian, for example, 'we are loving' or 'we are a mix of Catholic and agnostic'.

<sup>23</sup> Free School Meals is used as a proxy for disadvantage.

<sup>24</sup> "To get into a Catholic school you don't necessarily have to be Catholic. As is the case with most schools, who gets in is highly dependent on how popular a school is with parents. Catholic schools will always prioritise Catholic pupils in their admissions, and if they have space for more, all are welcome to apply. In 90% cases, Catholic schools can cater for the local Catholic demand. In these instances, parents only need to provide a Baptism certificate as proof of Catholicism." <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/guidance-for-schools/admissions>

The responses of pupils, parents and key stakeholders in the qualitative interviews are found throughout the main body of the report, for example: spiritual spaces in school (C), liturgy (D).

## Participants

We received responses from 96 pupils, 52 parents, and 17 stakeholders from School-1. A breakdown of their gender and additional demographic information is contained in Table 1 and 2.

*Table 1. Breakdown of gender of participants by category.*

Gender	Pupils		Parents		Stakeholders	
Male	46	47.9	6	11.5	1	5.9
Female	47	49.0	45	86.7	16	94.1
Undisclosed	3	3.1	1	1.9	.	.
Total	96	100.0	52	100	17	100

Of the 96 Pupils, 47 (49%) were in Year 5 and 49 (51%) in Year 6. The majority of them lived in a household with only 2 children as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2. Number of children living in the household as reported by pupils.*

	N	Percent
1	11	11.6
2	48	50.5
3	23	24.2
4	8	8.4
More than 4	5	5.3
Total	95	100
No answer	1	
Total	96	100.0

Of the 52 parents who responded to the survey, the majority (82.4%) had also attended a church primary school and a third of them (N=15, 35.7%) had actually attended the same primary school as their own child.

## Results

### The things that are talked about

One of the survey questions asked pupils, parents and stakeholders how much children talked about a selection of faith-related activities that happen at school:

- Pupils' average answers seem to gravitate around the mid-point of the scale for most areas (see Table 3 and Figure 1).
- Most talk at home seems to revolve around school values ( $M=60.52$ ,  $s.d.=28.59$ ), which are not necessarily directly linked to spiritual or religious activities, they are abstract constructs which of course represent the core of the children's experiences and the messages that the school wants to transmit. It is therefore reassuring for the school to see that children give these conversations a lot of importance.
- Prayer: faith, beliefs and spirituality, together with assembly/collective worship; and religious education all receive scores in the 50s range and constitute the next block of content with not much difference between them in terms of time spent. We can appreciate that all of these themes are expressly Christian and religious. Unsurprisingly Messy Church is clearly talked about very little as it is an activity more associated with the Anglican tradition. Telling of Bible stories, Godly Play, activities in the local church and reflection time then represent another cluster of activities which gets talked about but less so than the previous ones. We could possibly interpret these as being either more difficult things to share in a conversation or things that are talked about less because they happen less frequently at school.

It is worth mentioning that the order in which these activities were rated by participants was randomised in each presentation of the online survey and it is therefore not helpful to look for any presentation order as this was in fact not constant.

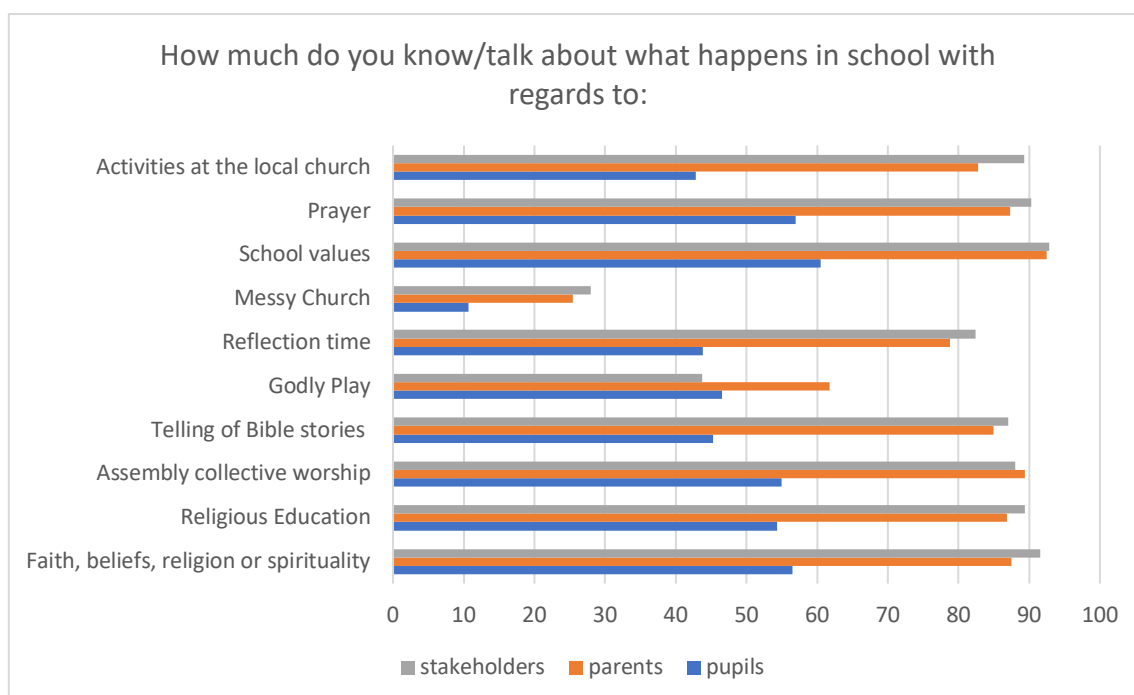


Figure 1. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.

- If we then turn our attention to parents' answers, which of course also include grandparents and carers, we can immediately notice how all average answers are hugely higher than those reported by the children.

It is intriguing, but very difficult, to exactly attribute a reason to this trend. It could be that parents overestimate what is really happening, that they perceive each of these themes to be talked about much more than the children actually do or think they are doing. Or it could be that parents are simply more susceptible to expectations, usually referred to as experimenter bias, and therefore want to project a more positive image of their families than the children do. Or it could even be that parents (and stakeholders we could anticipate) report higher scores because the way in which the question was formulated to them was slightly different and asked how much they knew about what happens in schools in each of these areas. It could be that parents' knowledge is a result not only of conversations they have with their children but also of conversations with other parents, with teachers and of other forms of communication, maybe written, with the school. What is interesting is however, the fact this trend is not observed in every school and in some of the other schools included in the sample (and not reported here), the trend is actually reversed and children have overall higher scores than the parents (and stakeholders) in pretty much all answers.

Table 3. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
Talk about...	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Faith, beliefs, religion or spirituality	80	56.53	26.58	50	87.46	13.46	15	91.53	9.02
Religious Education	86	54.37	30.79	50	86.86	15.40	17	89.35	19.57
Assembly/Collective worship	80	55.00	28.57	48	89.375	32.61	16	88	12.39
Telling of Bible stories in worship	82	45.24	29.36	47	84.93	22.76	16	87.06	11.52
Godly Play	72	46.56	32.44	43	61.79	31.93	12	43.75	39.76
Reflection time and/or places	80	43.78	26.11	45	78.82	9.83	15	82.4	17.12
Messy Church	71	10.71	20.02	40	25.42	14.56	11	28	23.97
School values	84	60.52	28.59	50	92.44	20.60	16	92.81	8.13
Prayer	80	56.9	31.41	52	87.26	13.46	16	90.25	11.36
Activities in the local church	80	42.79	30.19	48	82.79	15.40	15	89.26	18.22

Regardless of this, what remains similar is the relative importance attributed to some themes and the amount of time spent proportionally talking about them. Parents, as well as children, think they know more about school values than other concepts or activities. Messy Church similarly is the activity less talked about. All the other activities could then be split into two clusters: one including assembly/collective worship, faith, beliefs and spirituality, prayer and Religious Education – which report scores in the high 80s; and then all the other activities. Even if the exact pattern might be slightly different between parents and children, the clustering we suggest and its ranking is exactly the same in the two types of participants. This result is particularly interesting if we consider that children filled in their questionnaires at school while parents did it at home or in their own time separately from their children.

The stakeholders' answers are somehow closer to the parents' ones than the children's. First of all, the average scores are generally all higher than the parents' and therefore the children's. We are, however, not observing just a simple response set; some areas have much lower average scores than the others and these are, again, Messy Church and Godly Play. Reflection time also seems to be a topic considered difficult by the stakeholders for families to discuss. All the other constructs/activities receive very high and very similar scores in the high 80s.

### The things children do at home

We asked our participants: How often do you (your child/children) do any of the following at home?

- Sing hymns
- Say prayers
- Read Bible stories
- Draw or make spiritual things
- Ask to visit places of worship
- Watch Bible stories
- Reflection or spirituality
- Retell Bible stories
- Read religious stories
- Act out Bible stories

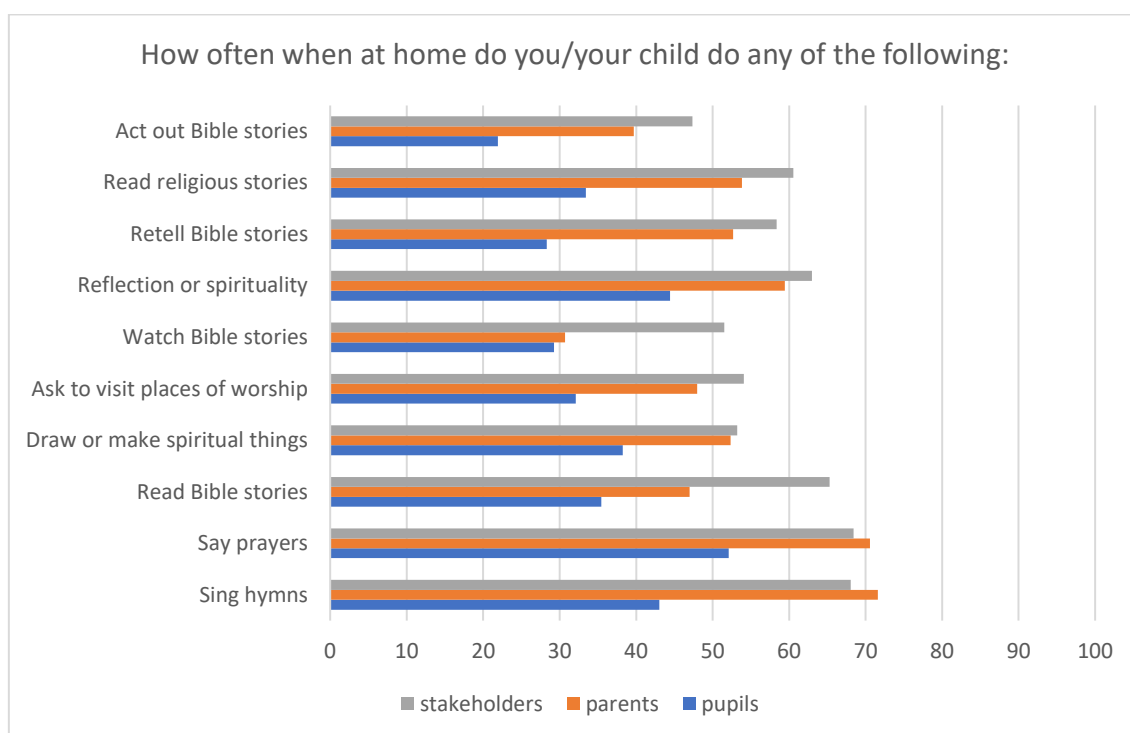
The answers of each of the three groups are summarised in Table 4 and Figure 2.



- Of the Christian activities that we asked our pupils about, prayer, reflection or spirituality, and singing hymns are the most frequent. The scores reported range from 52.11 for saying prayers and 43.04 for singing hymns. They are also probably the most stereotypical religious activities a believer can engage in.
- Act out Bible stories, retell Bible stories and watch Bible stories are still things the children do but they receive the lowest of the ten average scores between 21.93 and 29.28. The third cluster of activities comprises drawing or making spiritual things, read Bible stories, read religious stories and ask to visit places of worship. Scores here range between 38.25 and 32.11.

In general, all of these scores are lower than the ones observed in the previous section. We could conclude that children talk about religious and spiritual things at home more than they actually do them (see further analysis in section A). Our participants are still young children between the age of 9 and 11 and although they can do a lot on their own at home, a lot of time is of course spent with their parents and possibly talking to them during activities such as going to and from school, meal times and bed time. It is reasonable to think that children have more time for talking about than doing things. This result was echoed in the qualitative findings explored in section D.

Figure 2. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.



Parents' scores, once more, are much higher than the children's apart from those relating to the amount of time spent watching Bible stories on some sort of device. Stakeholders' ratings are, in turn, very close or slightly higher than the parents' ones. In all three categories of respondents the trend is for females to give higher estimates than males although some differences are not statistically significant.

Table 4. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
Do...	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Sing hymns	83	43.04	36.11	52	71.58	25.81	15	68.06	25.55
Say prayers	80	52.11	35.87	43	70.57	25.81	16	68.43	22.25
Read Bible stories	85	35.42	30.73	47	46.97	27.47	14	65.28	25.40
Draw or make spiritual things	83	38.25	32.23	46	52.32	27.68	15	53.2	29.06
Ask to visit places of worship	80	32.11	25.44	43	47.97	28.05	15	54.06	31.16
Watch Bible stories	82	29.28	28.58	43	30.72	30.15	14	51.5	26.45
Reflection or spirituality	81	44.44	29.68	43	59.44	27.69	15	63	24.16
Retell Bible stories	81	28.30	27.82	43	52.68	23.47	14	58.35	22.42
Read religious stories	82	33.43	27.90	44	53.81	27.83	15	60.53	23.11
Act out Bible stories	82	21.93	24.48	44	39.68	28.72	14	47.35	24.35

### The things children ask questions about

Somehow, we expected that talking about certain themes in the home is different from actively asking questions about them. We therefore expanded on some of the previous areas of spirituality in this section of the survey where we asked pupils and parents: How often when at home do you/ your child ask questions about?

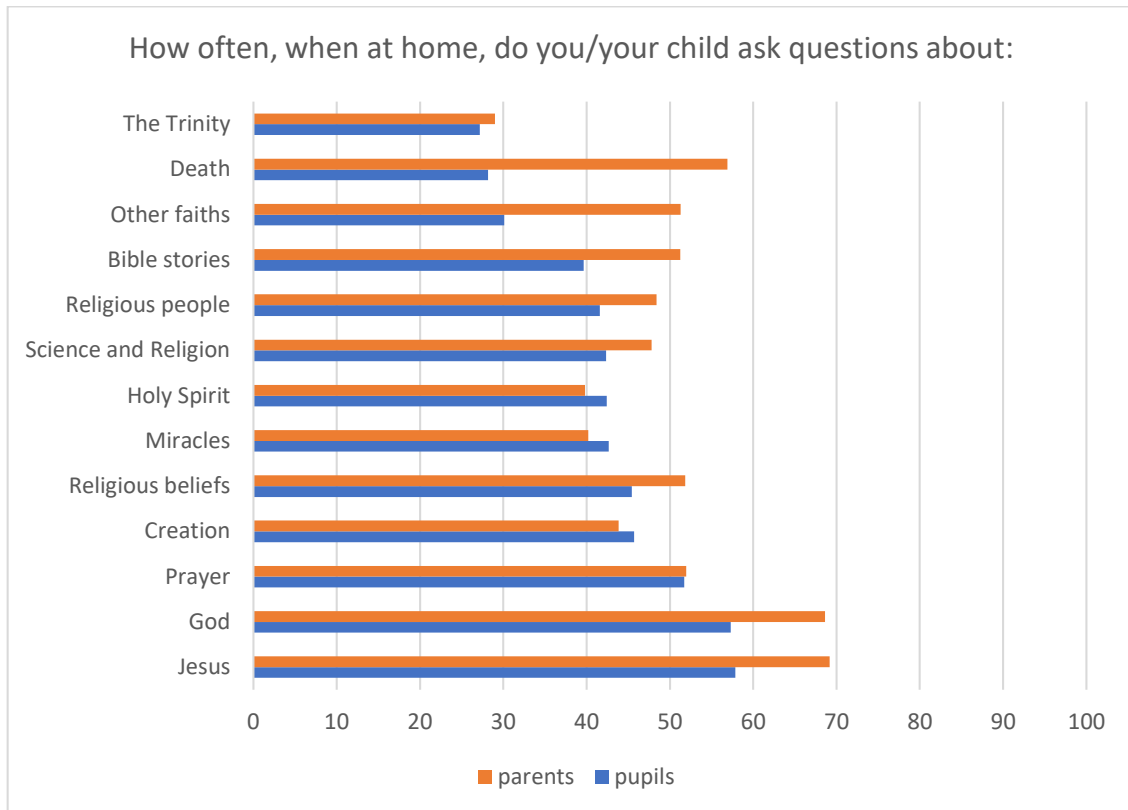
- Jesus
- God
- Prayer
- Creation
- Religious beliefs
- Miracles
- Holy Spirit
- Science and religion
- Religious people
- Bible stories
- Other faiths
- Death
- The Trinity

The answers our participants gave reveal some interesting patterns here:

- There is, first, a cluster of topics that is asked about the most: Jesus, God and Prayer, with scores ranging from M=57.85 to M=51.73 for children and from M=69.17 to M=51.59 in parents.

For this high scoring cluster, differences between children's and parents' responses are still visible but they are now smaller than they were for previous questions. In fact, parents rate death as a more asked about topic than Prayer.

Figure 3. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.



- There is then a cluster of issues that children ask about very little: the Trinity, death and other faiths, with scores ranging from  $M=27.16$  to  $M=30.09$  in children and from  $M=51.29$  to  $M=28.97$  in parents.

Here again, parents are, in general reporting higher scores than the children and these differences are rather large apart from the Trinity, where both categories report the lowest and very similar score.

Table 5. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.

	Pupils			Parents		
Ask about...	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.
Jesus	81	57.85	34.40	45	69.17	23.60
God	84	57.29	34.77	45	68.62	22.22
Prayer	82	51.73	35.83	42	51.95	28.46
Creation	82	45.70	30.74	46	43.82	29.34
Religious beliefs	82	45.41	33.32	46	51.82	26.72
Miracles	79	42.64	32.09	45	40.20	28.60
Holy Spirit	79	42.41	35.55	46	39.80	28.31
Science and religion	79	42.31	28.06	45	47.80	33.32
Religious people	79	41.59	33.87	45	48.37	28.53
Bible stories	81	39.62	32.16	46	51.23	25.76
Other faiths	82	30.09	30.19	44	51.29	24.75
Death	83	28.14	32.23	47	56.89	28.55
The Trinity	79	27.16	32.77	43	28.97	26.60

The rest of the issues then, form an intermediate cluster: Creation, religious beliefs, miracles, Holy Spirit, science and religion, religious people and Bible stories. Scores in children range from M=45.70 to M=39.62 and in parents from M=51.82 to M=39.80. What is interesting is that, for these topics, children and parents are in greater agreement and differences fluctuate in both directions but are in general rather small.

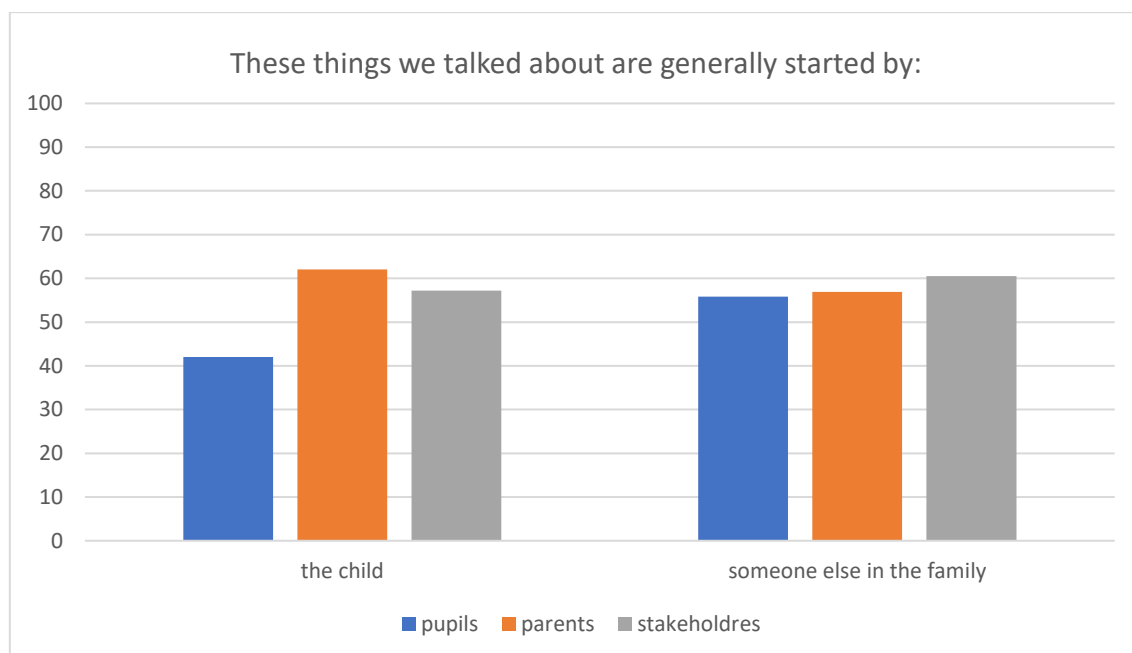
Children think they ask a lot about Jesus, God and Prayer probably because they find them interesting and because they are concepts they understand, they can picture in their mind. They are probably motivated to know more about these issues but at the same time it might be that they have had conversations at school that they want to expand on. Somehow, that is not the same for the Trinity, death and other faiths. These could be topics that children either do not consider interesting because too abstract (the Trinity) or which they know plenty about (other faiths) or even they do not need to know more about.

- Death is a controversial concept, one which parents think they get asked about much more than the children estimate. One could wonder to what extent a conversation where an answer generates more questions is rated as asked about more or less. Survey questions are unable to provide much detail in terms of how the issue is perceived, but some useful insights might come from the qualitative interviews.

Dividing the areas of faith-talk in these three clusters is useful because it allows us to clearly select those topics which are most or least asked about. However, this last result also highlights the fact that several of these issues, all of those forming the middle cluster, are actually assigned the same score, with very little differentiation, especially from children, between them. This homogeneity might be either the result of some methodological bias, the fact that respondents get bored or lose the ability to discriminate between concepts, or it could demonstrate the fact that several aspects of spirituality are treated the same way and are asked about, either at the same time or as part of the same questioning process.

Either way, parents and stakeholders think that these conversations are started by children or by someone else in the family, to an equal degree. Pupils however, show a clear differentiation between the roles they or someone else in the family has as initiators, with lower scores attributed to themselves than others.

Figure 4. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents think the activities above are started by the child or by someone else in the family.



In order to capture a wide range of both attitudes and behaviours we also asked participants, in a direct manner: How often do you/your child, when at home, show signs of?

- Caring about other people.
- Caring about the environment.
- School values.
- Helping people in the local community.
- Speaking out about things that are wrong.

Figure 5. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents think children show signs of the five behaviours listed.

- There is agreement between the three categories of respondents that children in this school express signs of caring about other people very often.

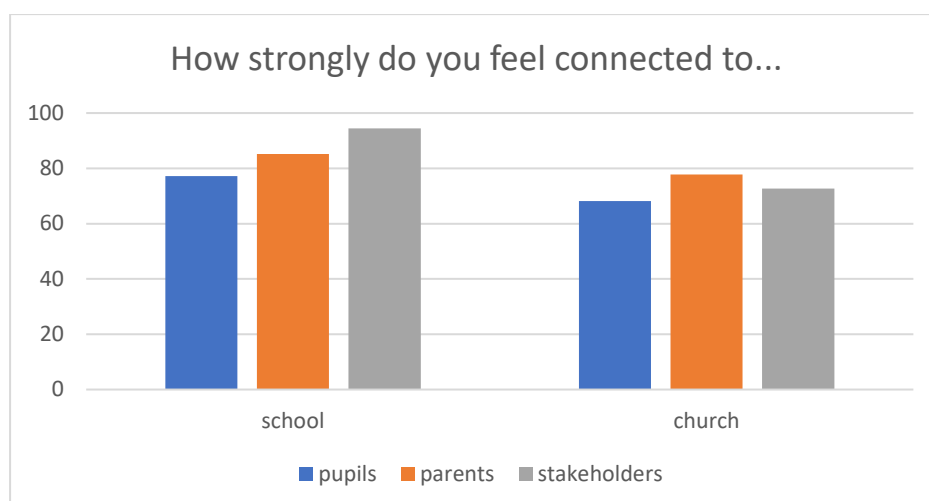
However, this care is not reflected in helping behaviours towards people in the community. It could be that this is a sign of collectivism in the way originally operationalised by Triandis (1988)<sup>25</sup>, where individuals care about significant others in close proximity to their inner self but do not expand that inclusive attitude to others outside their “inner circle”. Collectivism according to this perspective, represents a social construction of self but only includes a small and restricted number of others, not society in a wider sense. When it comes to showing signs of speaking out about things that are wrong, parents and stakeholders seem to think it is a more frequent occurrence than children do. Similarly, these two categories of respondents seem to rate all five areas of behaviours in a more similar way.

*Table 6. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.*

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
Show signs of...	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.
Caring about other people	83	74.54	24.30	46	84.86	15.35	17	83.05	13.74
Caring about the environment	82	70.02	29.09	49	81.14	16.54	16	84.87	10.65
School values	83	61.06	31.07	47	79.08	18.22	16	82.87	14.31
Helping people in local community	81	46.65	32.32	44	65.38	25.14	16	71.75	20.33
Speaking out about things that are wrong	80	46.18	33.24	46	82.13	16.03	16	82.43	12.15

- All three groups of respondents feel very connected to the school, with all average scores being higher than 70. However, all three categories also report a statistically significant lower sense of connection to their church than to their school ( $p < .01$ ).

*Figure 6. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents feel connected to the school and to the local church.*

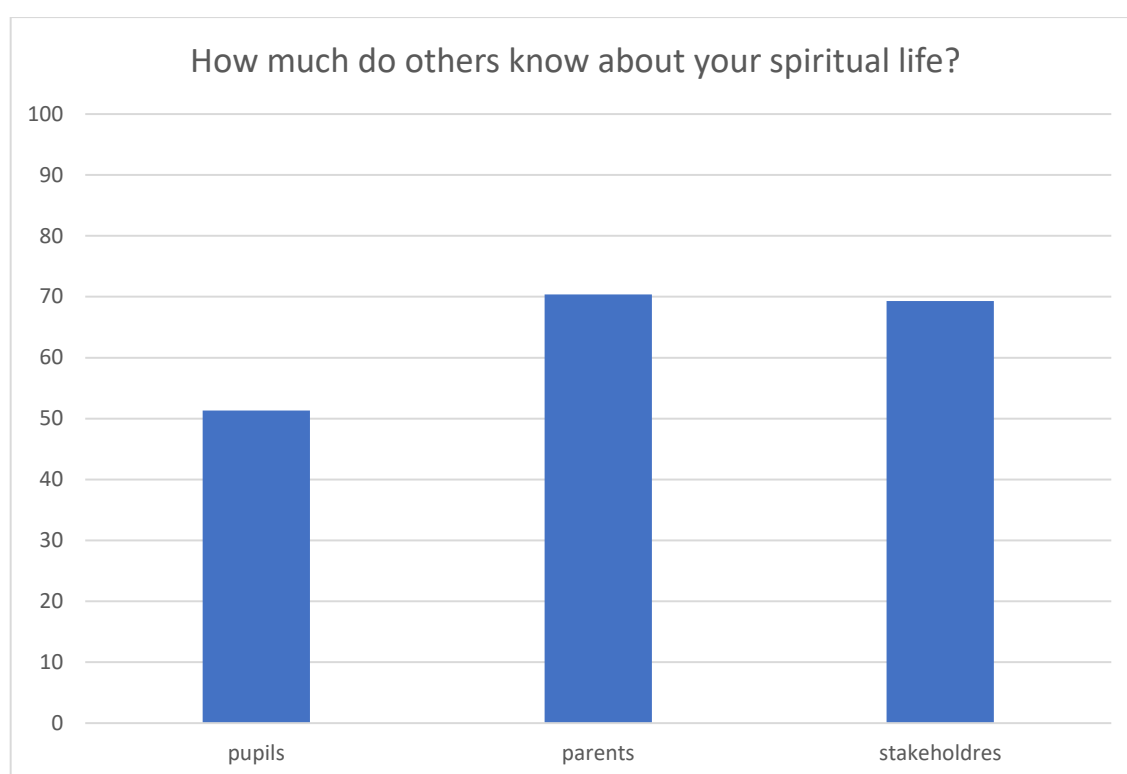


<sup>25</sup> Triandis, H. C., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M. J., Asai, M., & Lucca, N. (1988). Individualism and collectivism: Cross-cultural perspectives on self-ingroup relationships. *Journal of personality and Social Psychology*, 54(2), 323.

All three categories of respondents report the connection between the school and the local church to be “a bit strong” but not extremely strong.

- Finally, children are not very convinced that other people (either at school or at home) know they have a spiritual life (M=51.30 for pupils; M=70.38 for parents; and M=69.28 for stakeholders). While parents and stakeholders consider themselves more aware of children’s spiritual life than the children seem to perceive.

Figure 7. Bar chart representing how aware others are of children’s spiritual life.



## 2.2 School-8 quantitative survey report

### What kind of school is School-8?

School-8 is an urban 5-11 years Anglican Voluntary Aided primary school situated in the South East. It has less than 10% of pupils on Free School Meals. School-8 has a faith-based admissions policy which follows a common pattern in case of over subscription; priority is given to Looked after Children, then to children of families who are on the church electoral roll and worship regularly. In response to the question:

How would you describe your family's faith? You could say: "We are not religious" or "we are Christians, Catholic, or Muslim or Sikh" or "we have beliefs but we don't attend church".... or anything else that best describes your family.

Of the respondents who answered this question

- 20% described themselves as church going Christians.
- 48% described themselves as Christian.
- 16% described themselves as of other faith backgrounds or a mixed background.
- 12% described themselves as non-religious.

The responses of pupils, parents and key stakeholders in the qualitative interviews are found throughout the main body of the report, for example talking about prayer in C.

### Participants

We received responses from 34 pupils, 13 parents, and 17 stakeholders from School-8. A breakdown of their gender and additional demographic information is contained in Table 7 and 8.

Table 7. Breakdown of gender of participants by category.

Gender	Pupils		Parents		Stakeholders	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	11	32.4	.	.	5	29.4
Female	23	67.6	13	100	12	70.6
Undisclosed	.	.	.	.	.	.
Total	34	100.0	13	100	17	100

Of the 34 Pupils, 14 (41.2%) were in Year 5 and 20 (58.8%) in Year 6. The majority of them lived in a household with only 2 children as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Number of children living in the household as reported by pupils.

	N	Percent
1	8	23.5
2	14	41.2
3	4	11.8
4	6	17.6
More than 4	1	2.9
Total	33	97.1
No answer	1	2.9
Total	34	100.0

Of the 13 parents who responded to the survey, only 5 (38.5%) also had attended a church primary school and 2 of them had actually attended the same primary school as their own child.

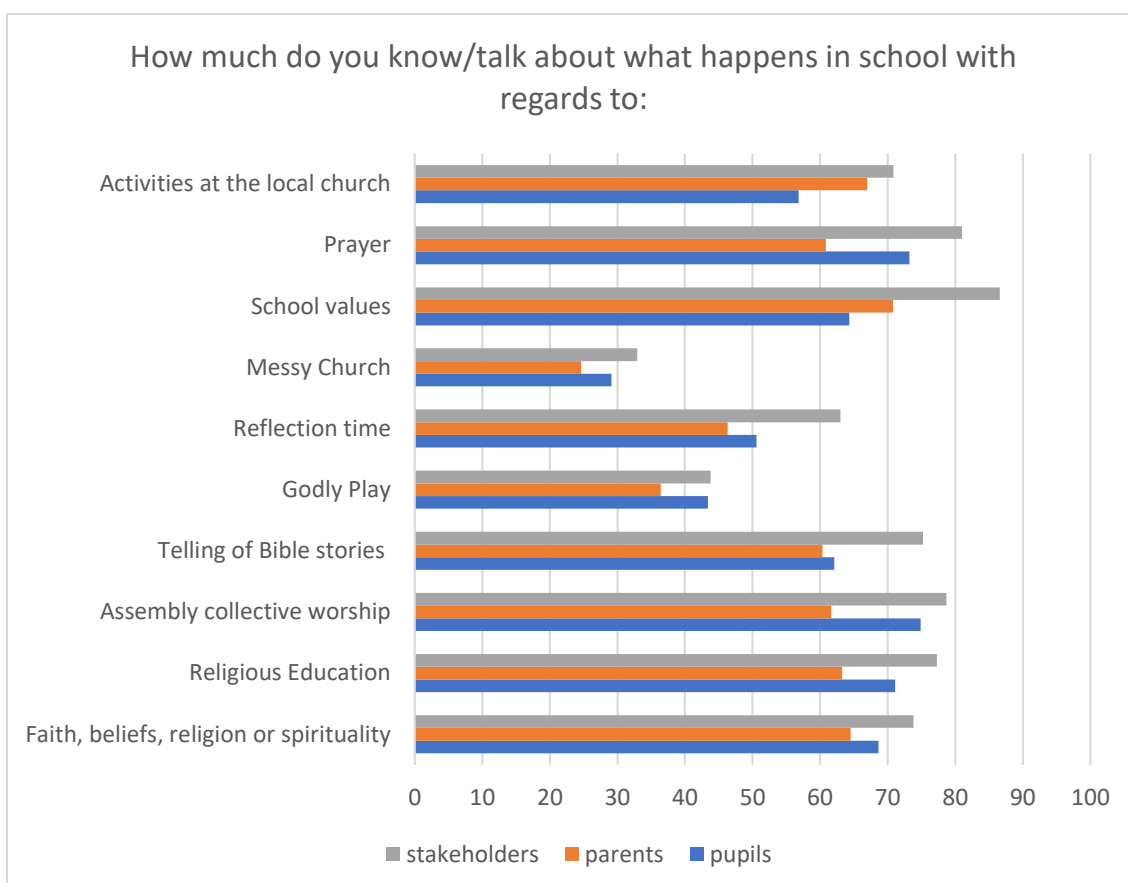


## Results

### The things that are talked about

In this section, we asked participants: How much each of these ten things that happen at school, are talked about in the home?

Figure 8. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.



- The majority of pupils' average answers are in the top part of the scale, between 60 and 70 demonstrating that this school has excellent communication strategies and engagement from children.
- Still, we can identify a first cluster of high importance areas (blue bars) which include most aspects of school spiritual life: assembly and collective worship; faith, beliefs and spirituality; prayer and RE. We can imagine these being easy things for the children to talk about, rather practical ones and for which they are equipped with the right language.
- Many other conversations then take place around a second cluster of concepts: school values, telling of Bible stories and activities at the local church, which we can see as either things that happen less or things that are a bit more difficult to talk and have conversations about. Conversations that revolve around school values might not be necessarily and directly linked to spiritual or religious activities; they might be abstract constructs, which of course represent the core of the children's experiences, and messages that the school wants to transmit. It is therefore reassuring for the school to see that children give these conversations a lot of importance. Nevertheless, pupils still give a lot of time to conversations around most other aspects of school spiritual life including again, the telling of Bible stories as well as activities at the local church, which is still scoring above the midpoint of the scale.
- This points to the very strong relationship between school and local church which is

considered in more detail later on. Messy Church is clearly talked about very little and not surprisingly, as it is an activity not directly related to school time. Together with Godly Play, and reflection time, this therefore represents a third cluster of activities which gets talked about much less so than the previous ones. We could possibly interpret these as being either more difficult things to share in a conversation or things that are talked about less because they happen less frequently at school.

It is worth mentioning that the order in which these activities were rated by participants was randomised in each presentation of the online survey and it is therefore not helpful to look for any presentation order as this was in fact not constant.

If we then turn our attention to parents' answers, which of course also includes grandparents and carers, we can immediately notice how all average answers are very similar to those given by pupils but generally lower (although statistically not significant). The only two domains where parents report knowing more about them than children talk about, are school values and activities at the local church.

- What is intriguing about this trend is that this is the only school of the sixteen we surveyed, where parents' estimates are lower than those of the children. In all other schools and therefore also in the cumulative scores, parents usually report much higher averages than children.

*Table 9. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.*

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
Talk about...	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Faith, beliefs, religion or spirituality	34	68.62	32.20	12	64.5	38.19	16	73.8	13.65
Religious Education	32	71.12	24.29	12	63.25	34.79	15	77.29	14.31
Assembly/Collective worship	33	74.87	26.05	12	61.67	34.76	16	78.68	19.1
Telling of Bible stories in worship	32	62.09	31.91	12	60.33	38.66	17	75.25	18.28
Godly Play	31	43.42	35.94	12	36.42	36.77	16	43.8	22.70
Reflection time and/or places	34	50.59	28.61	12	46.33	30.16	15	63	21.35
Messy Church	32	29.12	34.52	11	24.64	33.29	14	32.92	22.78
School values	33	64.33	29.12	12	70.83	30.10	15	86.62	14.46
Prayer	34	73.23	30.56	12	60.83	32.51	15	81	25.23
Activities in the local church	34	56.82	30.86	12	67	29.56	14	70.85	21.12

It is intriguing but very difficult exactly to attribute a reason to this trend and to explain why this school is different from others. It could be that parents are less engaged than in other schools and therefore report lower scores, or the opposite, that they are actually more accurate in their answers than parents in other schools, that they are closer to their children and do not overestimate their answers.

Whatever the reason, we have to consider that parents' knowledge of what takes place in schools is a result not only of conversations they have with their children but also of conversations with other parents, with teachers and of other forms of communication, maybe written, with the school. The pattern of responses is somehow different from the children's because parents seem to know most about school values and activities in the local church. Nevertheless, Messy

Church is still the activity less talked about, followed by Godly Play and reflection time. It is worth remembering that children filled in their questionnaires at school, while parents did it at home or in their own time separately from their children.

The stakeholders' answers are noticeably higher than both the children's and the parents' and seem to create two clusters: one with the usual three low scoring activities; Messy Church, Godly Play and Reflection time; and then a high scoring cluster encompassing all other activities, with some but not drastic differences in scores. Overall, stakeholders think that this school is engaging children and parents to a high extent.

### The things children do at home

We asked our participants: How often do you (your child/children) do any of the following at home?

- Sing hymns
- Say prayers
- Read Bible stories
- Draw or make spiritual things
- Ask to visit places of worship
- Watch Bible stories
- Reflection or spirituality
- Retell Bible stories
- Read religious stories
- Act out Bible stories

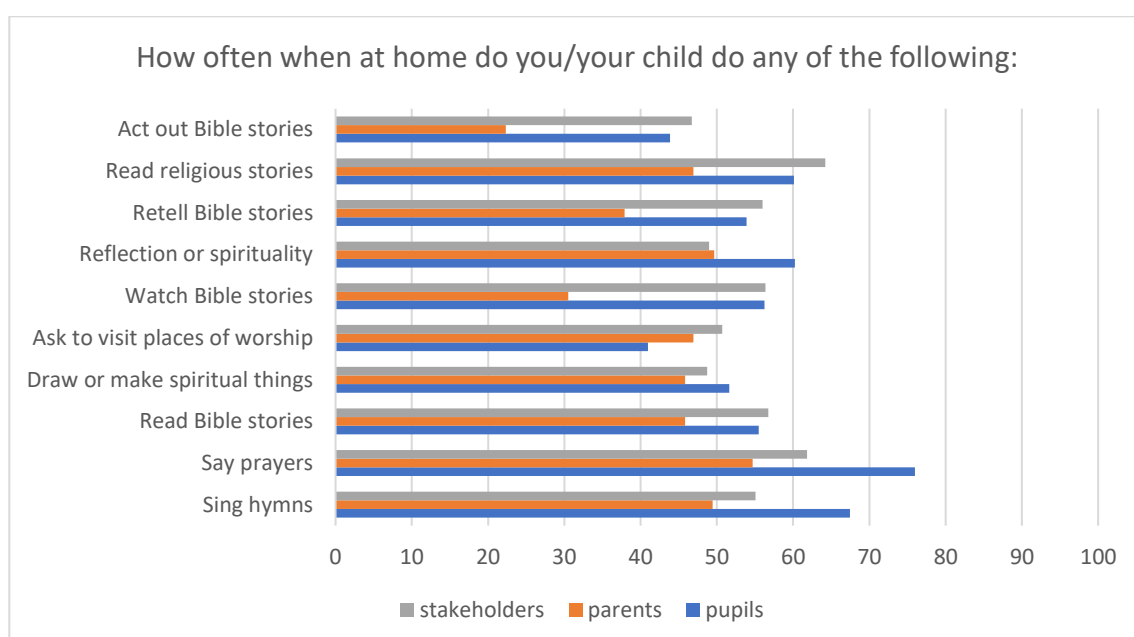
The answers of each of the three groups are summarised in Table 10 and Figure 9.

Of the Christian activities that we asked our pupils about, saying prayers and singing hymns are the most frequent with scores of 75.96 and 67.45 respectively. These are also probably the most stereotypical religious activities a believer can engage in.

Act out Bible stories and ask to visit places of worship are still things the children do to a good extent, but they receive the lowest of the ten average scores 40.96 and 43.87 respectively. The third cluster of activities comprises all other areas surveyed with scores ranging from 51.62 to 60.21.

**Insight:** While in other schools and in the overall trend, we observed a big difference between the time children say they spend talking about spiritual activities and doing spiritually related things, this school does not follow that pattern. Children still seem to have a lot of time to engage with spirituality, not just talking about it.

Figure 9. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.



Parents' scores, once more, are lower than the children's ones and this time – significantly so in some areas – the gap and the trend is increasing. The only thing parents think the children do more than the children themselves is asking to visit places of worship. Stakeholders' ratings are, in turn, very close or slightly higher than the children's ones apart from say prayers and sing hymns, which the children reported doing a great deal. In all three categories of respondents, the trend is for females to give higher estimates than males, although some differences are not statistically significant.

*Table 10. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.*

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Do...									
Sing hymns	33	67.45	33.84	11	49.45	35.47	15	55.06	17.44
Say prayers	33	75.96	33.56	13	54.69	26.62	16	61.81	13.12
Read Bible stories	33	55.48	36.40	12	45.83	36.85	16	56.75	20.21
Draw or make spiritual things	32	51.62	28.37	12	45.83	34.43	15	48.73	13.93
Ask to visit places of worship	32	40.96	29.97	12	46.92	40.13	14	50.71	18.56
Watch Bible stories	33	56.24	36.25	12	30.5	26.71	16	56.37	18.67
Reflection or spirituality	32	60.21	29.21	12	49.67	30.30	14	49	18.10
Retell Bible stories	33	53.87	33.68	12	37.92	35.05	15	56	20.65
Read religious stories	32	60.12	30.57	12	46.92	39.39	14	64.21	14.75
Act out Bible stories	33	43.87	30.72	12	22.33	29.11	14	46.71	13.79

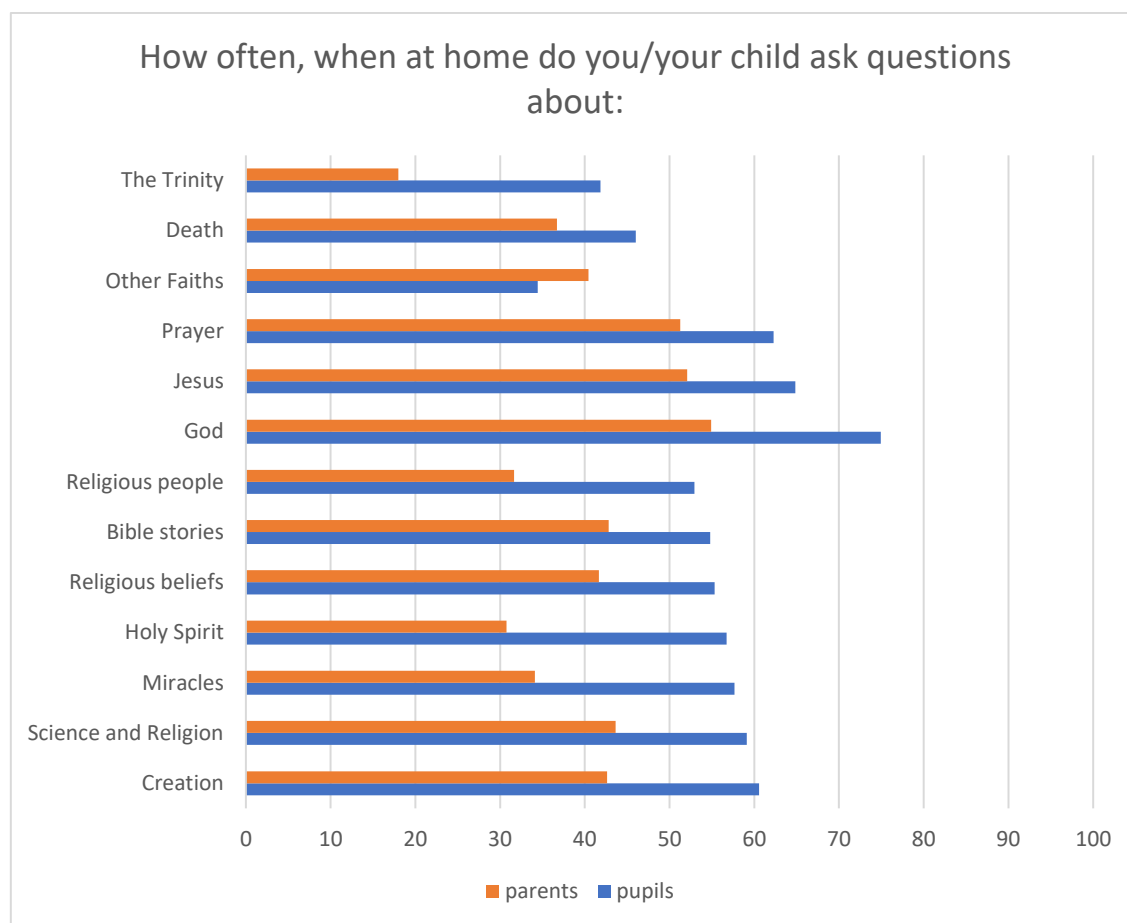
### The things children ask questions about

Somehow, we expected that talking about certain themes in the house is different from actively asking questions about them. We therefore expanded on some of the previous areas of spirituality in this section of the survey, and we asked pupils and parents: How often when at home do you/ your child ask questions about?

- Jesus
  - God
  - Prayer
  - Creation
  - Religious beliefs
  - Miracles
  - Holy Spirit
  - Science and religion
  - Religious people
  - Bible stories
  - Other faiths
  - Death
  - The Trinity
- The answers our participants gave reveal some interesting patterns here. There is, first, a cluster of topics, which is asked about the most: God, Jesus and Prayer, with scores ranging from M=74.94 to M=62.29 for children and from M=54.91 to M=51.25 in parents. For all the answers in these sections, parents still provide lower average scores than the children.

There is then a cluster of issues that children ask about very little: the Trinity, death and other faiths, with scores ranging from M=46.03 to M=34.45 in children and from M=40.41 to M=18.00 in parents. Here again, parents are reporting lower scores than the children and these differences are rather large, apart from the other faiths, where parents are reporting an observed average score higher than the children's.

Figure 10. Bar chart representing average scores on each answer from the three categories of respondents.



The rest of the issues then, form an intermediate cluster: Creation, religious beliefs, miracles, Holy Spirit, science and religion, religious people and Bible stories. Scores in children range from  $M=60.56$  to  $M=52.93$  and in parents from  $M=43.64$  to  $M=30.77$ .

**Insight:** Regardless of their differences, scores in both parents and children are some of the highest observed in the overall sample. These average scores are higher than the cumulative ones observed in the whole sample. This school is clearly one where home conversations about spiritual matters take up a considerable amount of time.

Children think they ask a lot about Jesus, God and Prayer probably because they find them interesting and because they are concepts they understand, they can picture in their mind. They are probably motivated to know more about these issues but at the same time, it might be that they have had conversations at school that they want to expand on. Somehow, that is not the same for the Trinity, death and other faiths. These could be topics either that children do not consider interesting because too abstract (the Trinity) or which they know plenty about (other faiths) or even they do not need to know more about.

Table 11. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.

Area	Pupils			Parents		
	N	Mean	S.d.	N	Mean	S.d.
Ask about...						
Creation	30	60.56	29.04	11	42.63	35.59
Science and religion	30	59.10	28.43	11	43.64	34.07
Miracles	34	57.64	34.99	11	34.09	28.67
Holy Spirit	33	56.72	37.92	13	30.77	30.41
Religious beliefs	34	55.32	32.88	12	41.67	34.87
Bible stories	32	54.78	35.59	12	42.83	35.75
Religious people	33	52.93	33.12	11	31.64	29.46
God	34	74.94	29.32	12	54.91	32.91
Jesus	34	64.85	35.49	12	52.08	32.21
Prayer	34	62.29	34.60	12	51.25	34.24
Other faiths	33	34.45	30.66	12	40.41	40.73
Death	33	46.03	30.59	11	36.72	28.89
The Trinity	32	41.84	32.89	11	18.00	25.77

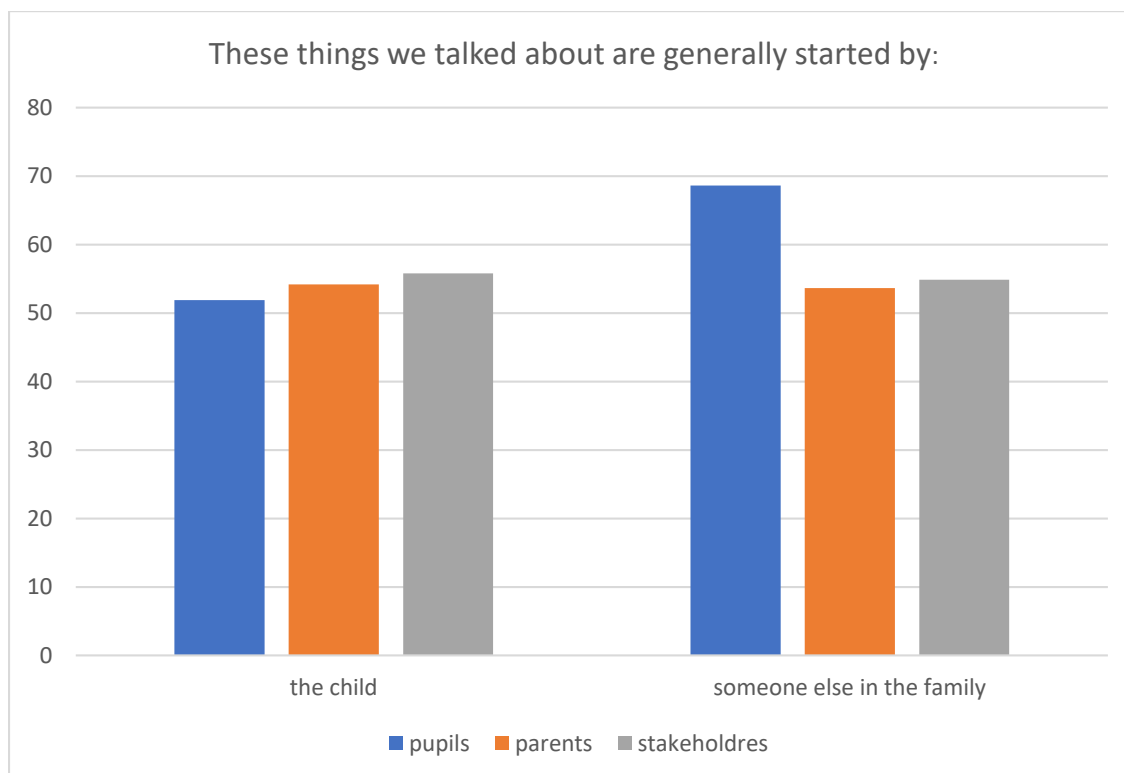
- Death is an interesting issue in this school. While, we have already observed, all ratings are overall higher than those reported in the whole sample of sixteen schools, the extent to which children and parent report asking about death is ranked lower than in other schools.

In the majority of schools, death is one of the topics asked about the most, while in this school the reverse is observed. Children and parents report asking about death very little. Survey questions are unable to provide much detail in terms of how the issue is perceived, but some useful insights might come from the qualitative interviews.

Dividing spiritual areas of conversation in these three clusters is useful because it allows us to clearly select those topics which are most or least asked about. However, this last result also highlights the fact that several of these issues, all of those forming the middle cluster, are actually assigned the same score, with very little differentiation, especially from children, between them. This homogeneity might be either the result of some methodological bias, the fact that respondents get bored or lose the ability to discriminate between concepts, or it could demonstrate the fact that several aspects of spirituality are treated the same way and asked about either at the same time or as part of the same questioning process.

Either way, parent and stakeholders think that these conversations are started by children or by someone else in the family, to an equal degree. Pupils however, show a clear differentiation between the roles they or someone else in the family has as initiators, with lower scores attributed to themselves than others.

Figure 11. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents think the activities above are started by the child or by someone else in the family.



In order to capture a wide range of both attitudes and behaviours we also asked participants, in a direct manner: How often do you/your child, when at home, show signs of?

- Caring about other people
- Caring about the environment
- School values
- Helping people in local community
- Speaking out about things that are wrong

- There is agreement between the three categories of respondents that children in this school show signs of caring about other people very often.

However, this care is not reflected to an equal extent in helping behaviours towards people in the community. It could be that this is a sign of collectivism in the way originally operationalised by Triandis (1988), where individuals care about significant others in close proximity to their inner self but do not expand that inclusive attitude to others outside their "inner circle". Collectivism according to this perspective, represents a social construction of self but only includes a small and restricted number of others, not society in a wider sense.

When it comes to showing signs of speaking out about things that are wrong, parents and stakeholders seem to think it is a more frequent occurrence that children do.

Figure 12. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents think children show signs of the five behaviours listed.

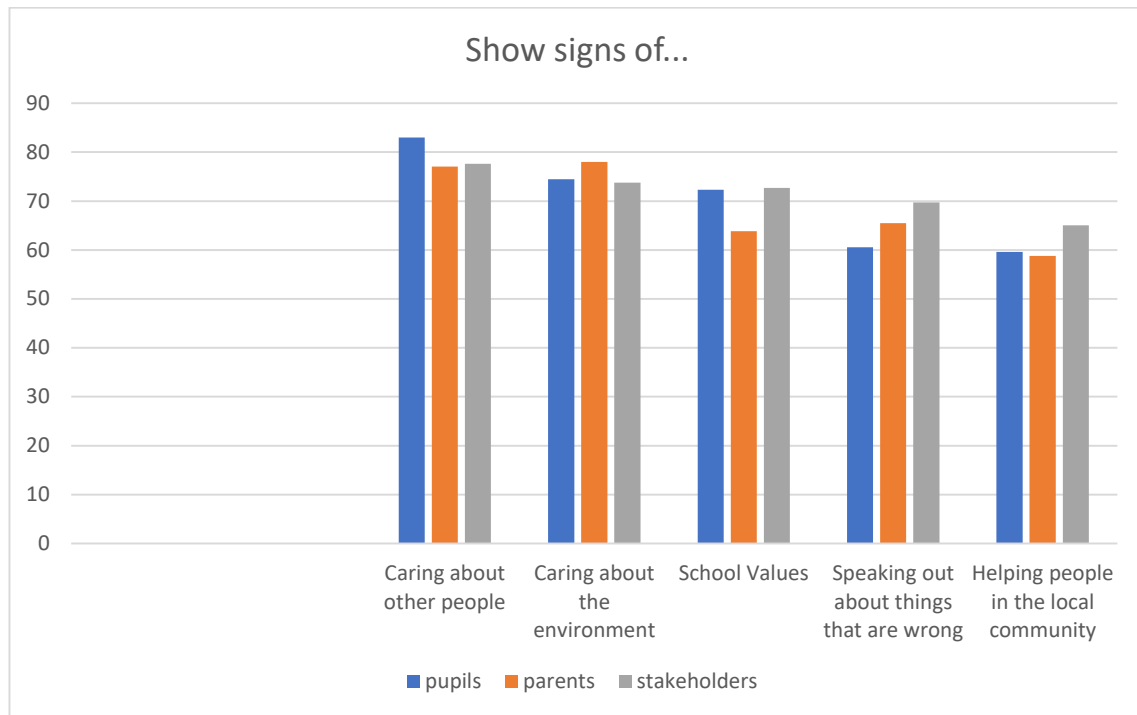


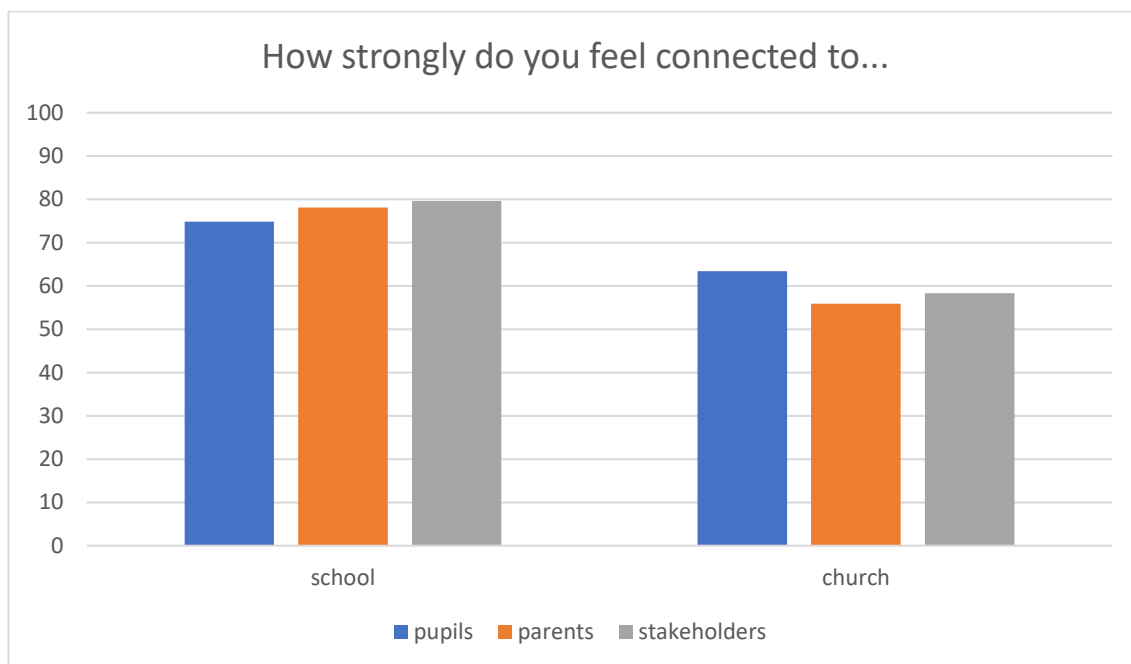
Table 12. Number of valid responses, average scores and standard deviations for each question by category of respondent.

Area	Pupils			Parents			Stakeholders		
	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.
Show signs of...									
Caring about other people	34	83	20.34	13	77.07	28.83	15	77.60	16.51
Caring about the environment	34	74.44	22.71	13	78	27.87	13	73.76	21.37
School values	34	72.29	24.83	12	63.83	29.21	15	72.66	14.70
Speaking out about things that are wrong	34	60.55	27.49	12	65.5	35.13	15	69.73	21.06
Helping people in the local community	32	59.62	25.95	13	58.77	31.55	15	65.06	22.92

- All three groups of respondents feel very connected to the school, with all average scores being higher than 70. However, all three categories also report a statistically significant lower sense of connection to their church than to their school ( $p < .01$ ).



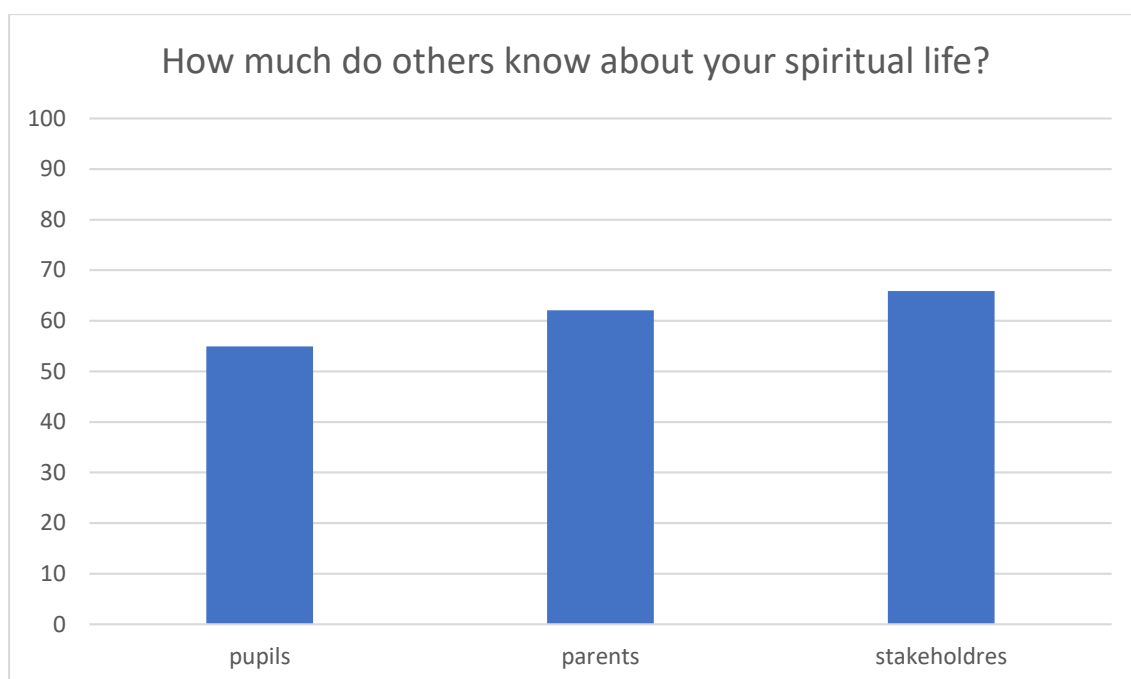
Figure 13. Bar chart representing how much on average the three categories of respondents feel connected to the school and to the local church.



Pupils and parents report the connection between the school and the local church to be “a bit strong” but not extremely strong, while stakeholders perceive this to be “extremely strong”.

Finally, children are not very convinced that other people (either at school or at home) know they have a spiritual life ( $M=54.94$  for pupils), while parents and stakeholders consider themselves slightly more aware of children’s spiritual life than the children seem to perceive ( $M=62.08$  for parents and  $M=65.87$  for stakeholders).

Figure 14. Bar chart representing how aware others are of children’s spiritual life.



## 2.3 Conclusion

An analysis of the findings from these two schools revealed many similarities, but also some interesting differences.

### **The similarities:**

- The pattern of answers with regard to the topics of talked about at home is very similar in both schools.
- Despite differences in religious affiliations, the same percentage of pupils in both schools describe their family as “church goers”, about 20%.
- However, in both schools, participants report less interest in talking about “Death” which is otherwise, in the overall sample one of the most talked and asked about topics. It seems possible that in these two schools, which consistently reported high scores in all aspects, death is not a taboo or controversial topic and maybe that is why children do not ask about it as much.

### **The differences:**

- The most striking difference is that in School-8, scores from parents are systematically lower than those provided by the children on the same questions. This is not only different from what happens in School-1 but also in all other schools in the sample, where parents always show higher scores than the children.
- Participants in School-8 (but especially pupils) report overall higher scores than those in School-1 throughout the survey.

There is a need for further research with a larger sample to investigate these differences. The quantitative data generated in this research project will provide a rich seam for future research, on how Catholic and Anglican Church school families engage with faith in the home.

## APPENDIX 3

# FAITH-BASED ADMISSION AND FAMILY FAITH AFFILIATION

This appendix brings together two interrelated aspects of the research data: the quantitative finding of the influence of church school faith-based admissions policies and secondly, parents' and pupils' descriptions of their faith affiliation.

An analysis of the quantitative data highlighted the influence of admissions policies on parents' and pupils' perceptions of connection to church, and engagement with faith-related aspects of school life. However, the data also highlighted the variety of interpretations of Christian identity by participants.

Part one looks at the influence of school admissions policies and Part two looks at how participants described their religious identity.

### 3.1 Faith-based admissions policies

The influence of admission strategies became apparent after the research team had looked for an explanation of the pattern of connection to school and church across a number of categories:

- Type of school (Catholic, Anglican VA, Anglican VC and Anglican Academy).
- Geographical location (South, Midlands, London, North West and North East).
- Geographical area (Rural vs. Urban).
- Size of the school (expressed in number of children).
- Socio-economic status (represented by the percentage of Free School Meals reported by the school).
- The size of the family (measured by the total number of children in the household).

Given the diversity of responses apparent between the schools, the researchers reflected on what could explain the types of schools where children reported higher levels of connection in a more systematic way. We decided to categorise all schools based on their admissions strategy, and we simply divided them between those where there is a clear admissions policy based on religious affiliation, and those where there are not such restrictions on admissions. The results are pretty striking!

- All outcome variables, that is all the attitudes, behaviours and additional information collected regarding spiritual activity, showed a marked difference between the two types of school. Those schools with a faith-based admissions policies admission stance reported systematically more positive outcomes.

The 261 children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies reported: higher levels of connection with the school than the 303 ones attending those without ( $N=261$ ,  $M=70.25$ ,  $s.d.=28.41$  vs.  $M=61.86$ ,  $s.d.=33.27$ ,  $t(567)=-3.24$ ,  $p<.001$ ); higher levels of connection with the local church than those attending schools without ( $M=50.71$ ,  $s.d.=36.37$  vs.  $M=26.17$ ,  $s.d.=31.51$  vs.,  $t(559)=-8.48$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as shown in Figure 1.

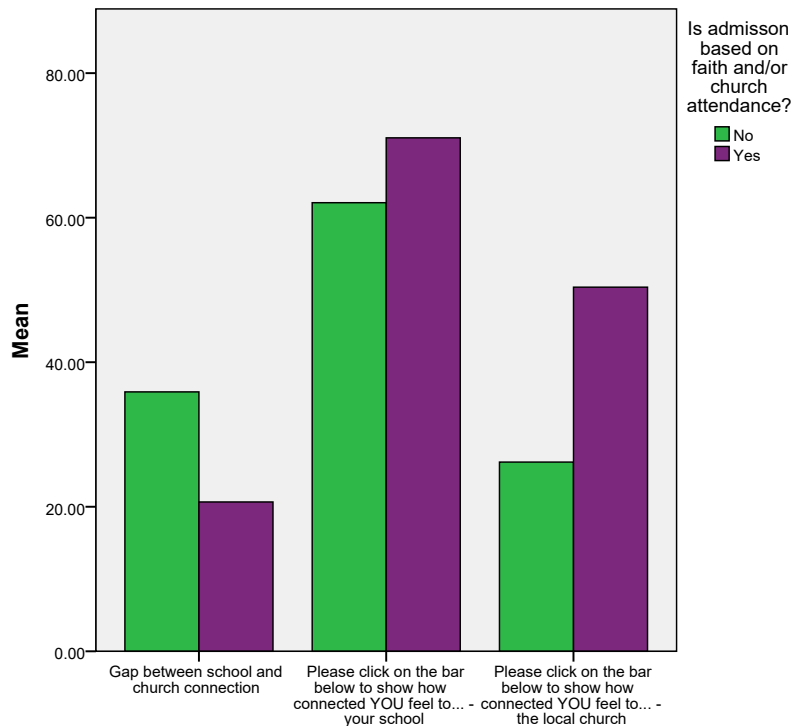
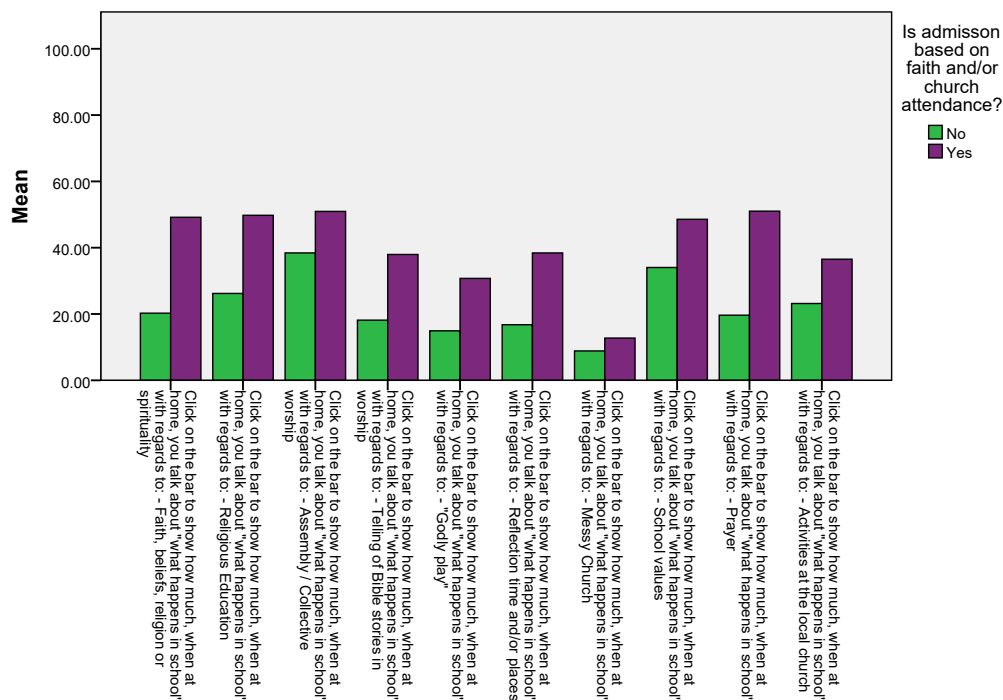


Figure 1. Bar chart representing the average feelings of connection to the school, the local church and the difference in children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies.

Children attending schools with faith-based admission policies reported talking more than those attending schools without, in about 9 of the 10 areas explored. All means are significantly different at the  $p < .001$  level except for Messy Church where no significant differences were detected, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Bar chart representing how much on average children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies report talking about 10 things that might happen in school



Children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies reported 'doing' the 10 faith-related activities more often than those attending other types of schools did. All means are significantly different at the  $p < .001$  level as shown in Figure 3.

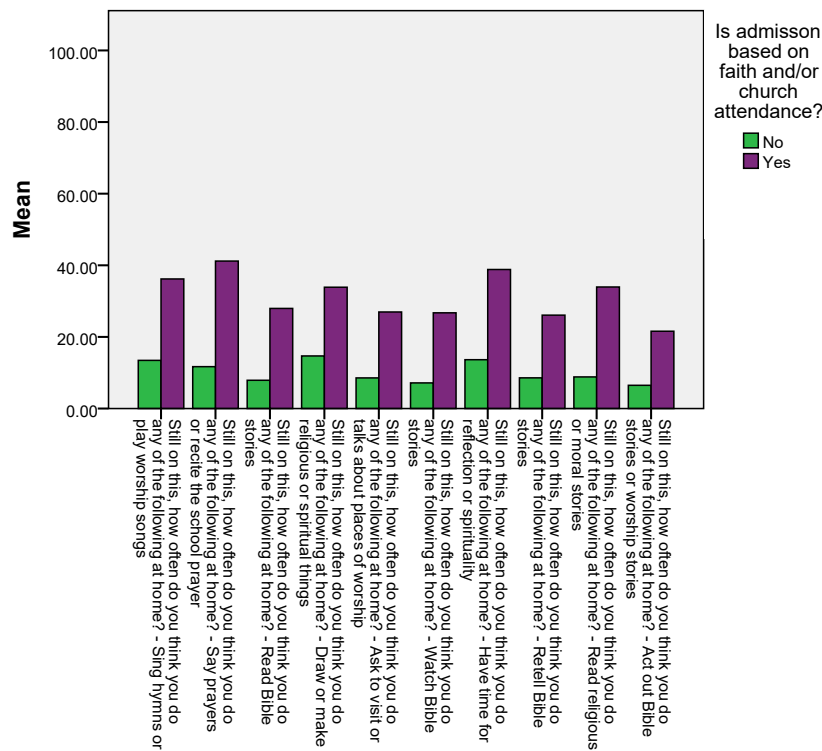


Figure 3. Bar chart representing how much on average children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies report doing 10 things related to spirituality.

Children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies reported asking more often than those attending schools without such policies in about 12 of the 13 areas explored. All means are significantly different at the  $p < .001$  level except for the question relating to death, where no significant differences were observed as shown in Figure 4.

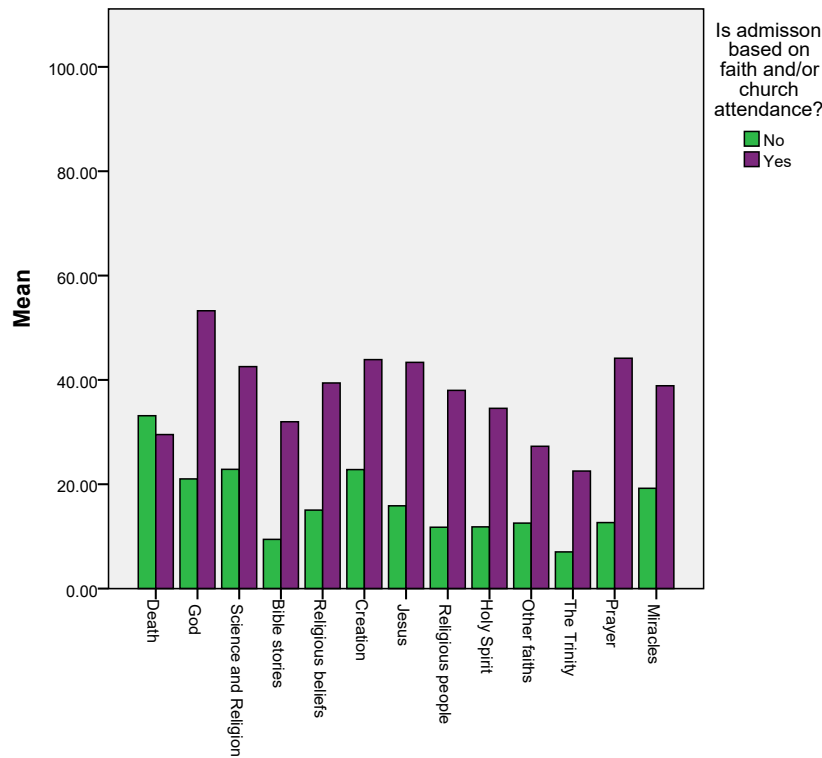


Figure 4. Bar chart representing how much on average children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies and those without report asking about 13 things related to spirituality.

Maybe surprisingly, children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies reported exactly the same scores as those attending other schools. When asked how often they showed signs of showing certain behaviours (apart from one), none of the means are significantly different at the  $p < .001$  level except for the question relating to “school values such as compassion, forgiveness, etc.” where the usual pattern of significance was detected (see Figure 5).

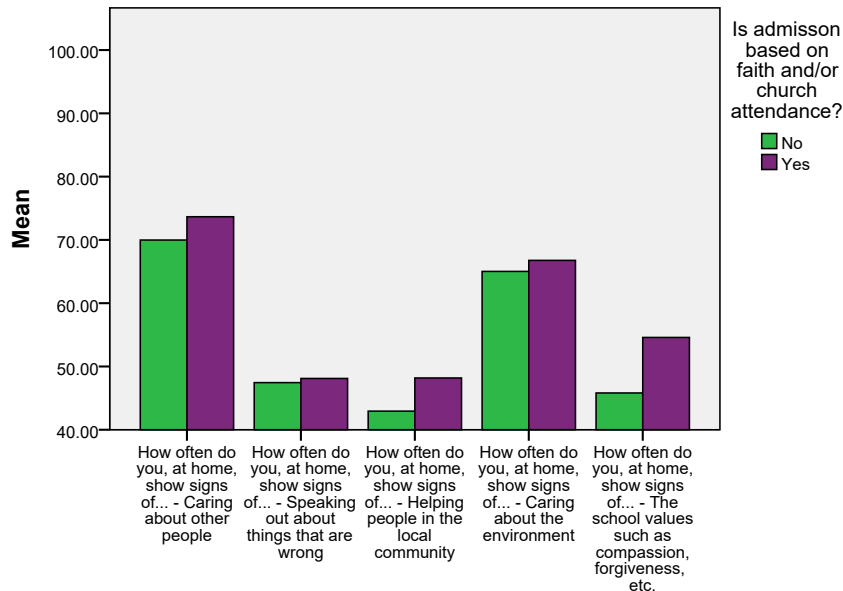


Figure 5. Bar chart representing how much on average children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies report showing signs of five different attitudes in their behaviours.

While there are no differences in the extent to which children report initiating activities or conversations about the spiritual matters we discussed so far, those in schools with faith-based admissions policies say that their parents or others initiate these activities and conversations more often (see Figure 6). Similarly, children in schools with faith-based admissions policies think that “other people know if they have a spiritual life” more than those in other schools.

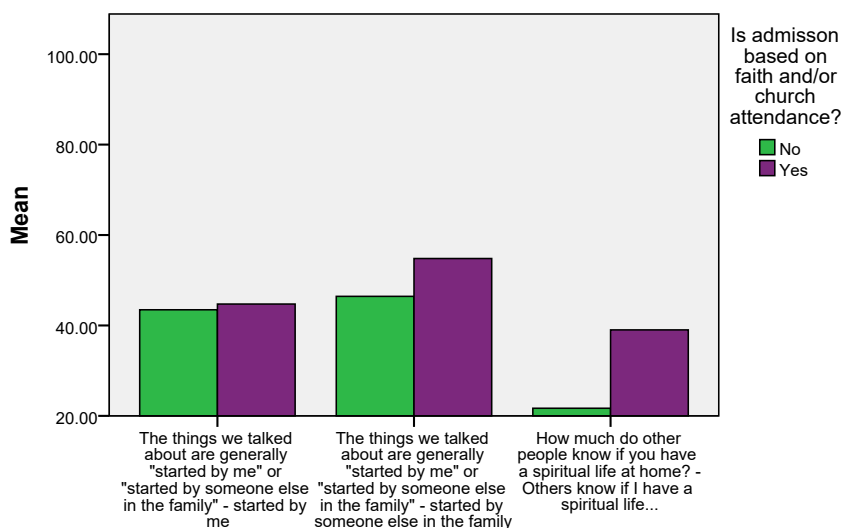


Figure 6. Bar chart representing how much on average children attending schools with faith-based admissions policies compared to those without such policies answer the above questions.

We conclude that the admissions criteria of the schools we studied have an interesting role in explaining many of the attitudes and behaviours we surveyed.

Many church primary schools have faith-based admissions policies. However, this does not mean

they only admit pupils who are baptised or from families who attend church. For example on average 68% of pupils in Catholic primary schools are baptised Catholic.<sup>26</sup> Within Anglican schools, the number of Anglican pupils will vary considerably, often depending on whether the school is over-subscribed. In many cases, faith-based criteria are only employed where the school is over-subscribed.

The findings do not suggest a causal link, but do raise more questions. The admissions criteria of the schools have an interesting role in explaining many of the attitudes and behaviours we surveyed.

However, this differentiation was not the focus of this study and we will leave it to future research to explore:

- The ways in which admissions criteria affect attitudes and behaviours of children as they progress through school.
- What is the psychological process through which admissions criteria influence attitudes and behaviours?
- To what extent admissions criteria simply reinforce or identify families which are simply more receptive of the Christian messages embedded in the school ethos.

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26 <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/images/CensusDigestEngland2019.pdf>

## 3.2 Faith affiliation analysis of church school families

An open text question in the survey revealed insights in relation to how the Nexus primary school families interpreted their religious affiliation. The question asked:

How would you describe your family's faith? You could say: "We are not religious" or "we are Christians, Catholic, or Muslim or Sikh" or "we have beliefs but we don't attend church".... or anything else that best describes your family.

363 participants answered this question. The responses fell into distinct categories:

1. 79% defined themselves as Christian, a quarter of these qualified this with reference to attending church.
2. 7% described themselves as being from Muslim, Hindu or Sikh backgrounds.
3. 2.5% identified as of a mixed faith background.
4. 10% identified as non-religious.

We look first at those from other faiths and no faith backgrounds, before considering in more detail the families that identified as Christian.

### Other faiths and mixed faith background

The majority of participants in these categories identified as Muslim and all but 2 of these were from the same school.

- *I am a Muslim and I go to the Mosque every day except the weekends, at home me and my family pray if we do not go to mosque.*
- *We are very religious Muslims.*

The small number of Muslim parents had also previously attended the same church primary school as their child now attended. A much smaller number identified as Hindu (6) or Sikh (4).

- *We are Indian Hindu. My daughter attend the church from school.*

There were a small number (10) who described their family as mixed faith.

- *I am Sikh and Muslim, I am a little bit religious.*
- *We are a mix of Catholic and agnostic.*
- *We have mixed faith Christian and Muslim.*

### Non-religious

10% of the respondents from across all the schools described their family as non-religious.

- *We are not religious.*
- *Irreligious.*
- *[We are] free thinking.*
- *Lapsed religion.*

A few defined their religious affiliation by how they lived their lives.

- *We're loving.*
- *We are not religious but we live by kindness to others and the world.*

While these three groups were in a minority in the church primary schools, their expectations of the church primary school were very similar to all parents, they expected the school to inculcate moral values.

- *Provide a solid spiritual foundation and strong sense of what is right.*
- *Create a kind and caring attitude.*
- *Help build my child into a beautiful caring person whilst teaching him academically.*
- *Instil a caring attitude towards others. Introduce the idea of faith and nurture it if it's there.*
- *Equip her with moral values and sense of good behaviour as well as providing strong foundations in key academic areas.*



Two parents did add an expectation that the church primary school would teach about other faiths.

- *Promote more on different faiths.*
- *Just continue to learn about and accept everyone's right to their beliefs.*

There were only two negative comments by parents who described themselves as non-religious with regard to the faith aspect of school.

- *Realise the hypocrisy and ignorance of organised religions.*
- *[I expect] nothing, I don't believe in making someone believe.*

### **Fragmented Christian identity**

The majority of participants described themselves as Christian, but there was some fluidity as to how they interpreted being Christian.

- *We are passionate Christians.*
- *We are Christian (Baptists).*
- *We are Christian and we pray twice a day. I like praying to God because it makes me feel happy.*

For others, regular attendance at church or Mass was the key marker of their faith affiliation.

- *We are Christians and we go to church.*
- *We are Catholic and we attend the church on Sunday.*
- *We are practising Catholic.*
- *We are Christian Catholic who tried to attend Mass every Sunday.*
- *We are Christians with weekly attendance at our local Church of England church.*
- *We attend a Christian church reasonably frequently (approx. once every 6 weeks) but vary considerably over time in strength of faith.*

The majority of participants who identified as Christian, qualified it with what they did not do, such as attend church or pray.

- *We have beliefs but don't go to church and don't pray.*
- *We believe in God but we don't attend church.*
- *We have beliefs and the children are christened but we do not attend church.*
- *We are pragmatic Catholics.*

There was little difference between pupils' and parents' descriptions. One pupil described their family in terms of what the school believes, and it was telling that in that pupil's response to the question who knows about your spiritual life, they responded 'my teacher'.

- *We belief in God and stuff, but we don't bother to pray or attend at church but we do believe in God and Jesus and what the school believes.*

For some the connection with Christianity or religion was more fluid and included other religions, and the idea of being spiritual.

- *We have Christian beliefs but don't attend church and I am also interested in spiritualism and elements of the Buddhist faith.*
- *We believe in God and aren't against Christianity faith but we also believe in other Religions. We are Spiritual.*
- *Dad doesn't believe in God, Mum is spiritual and I am religious.*
- *We're trying to be religious.*
- *Not religious but I believe in God.*

### **What do you expect THIS school to do for your children's future?**

The responses of parents who described themselves as Christians were similar to other parents. The main focus was on inculcating values.

- *Reinforce the values I hope he will hold which so far they certainly do.*
- *Give them a moral compass that transcends any particular religion but makes them caring. Less self-absorbed individuals. Help them to see the bigger picture in life.*
- *Encourage them to live as a nice person.*
- *Help her to be a well-rounded confident person.*
- *Help them to stay compassionate and empathetic while giving them a good education.*

The secondary focus was on education

- *Answer her questions that she wants to know about and help her to be confident.*
- *Basic learning, how to treat others, developing interests.*

For a few Christian parents the main emphasis was on the faith aspect of school

- *Interweave Christ's teachings in all subjects and how it all links together.*
- *I want my children to develop intellectually but to also grow in their ability to love and get on with those around them and for the school to be a place where our Christian belief is made a normal part of school life.*
- *Help explain aspects of the Christian life. Teach Bible truths. Teach worship songs and Bible verses.*
- *To nurture the Christian beliefs we have at home and allow a safe space for expressing it in school.*
- *To build a foundation for him to establish a relationship with God. As he grows up to build on it himself to make it his own. I expect the school to nurture his enthusiasm and curiosity and to give him a solid base in his education.*

The diversity of responses from participants suggests a fluid and flexible understanding of religious identity. However, there is a clear consensus of expectations of the role of the school, to inculcate children with moral values and provide a good academic foundation. These findings suggest there is a need within church schools, and with the national churches for an acknowledgement of this diversity of beliefs and a need to look for a way to work with this fluid understanding of Christian identity.

# APPENDIX 4

## PARACHURCH ORGANISATIONS IN THE NEXUS

**Parachurch organisations work alongside the local church, often focused on one particular aspect of Christian ministry.** Para- is a prefix with meanings “at or to one side of, beside, side by side” (Dictionary.com) and here the latter two of those definitions is preferred, as in ‘parallel’. While some groups considered may deserve the term ‘movement’ in terms of their shared mission, all had an element of organisation and centralisation about them, so the term “parachurch organisation” is preferred.

There were three main national and three local parachurch organisations encountered in this research. This appendix will report briefly on the national organisations. The local organisations are not described, as specific identification would compromise the anonymity of participating schools.

### 1. Open the Book

Open the Book [OtB] brings schools and churches into partnership. It has a dual purpose of bringing Bible stories into schools while also providing a volunteering opportunity for 15,000 Christians across a variety of churches. The activities of the volunteers are structured. Two particular books, purchased by volunteers, are used for the Bible stories. Open the Book teams provide an ongoing project rather than a one-off visit to the school.

Open the Book teams were found in three of the participating schools (2, 8, and 17), 2 other schools ran similar local based projects (14, and 20). Although clergy and staff mentioned Open the Book by name, pupils and parents did not. Parents in School-17 experienced the Bible stories when they were invited in for regular collective worships. Two teams of Open the Book volunteers were interviewed for this project, (see D.3).

Website for further information: [www.Biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/open-the-book](http://www.Biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/open-the-book)

### 2. Godly Play

Godly Play began in the 1970s. It aims to encourage children to move into larger dimensions of belief and faith; develop a deeper understanding of stories, symbols and rites; and is seen as a way of preparing children to join in the worship and life of their faith community. The website suggests the movement is based on Montessori principles, quoting “In most religious education children are told who God is. In Godly Play children discover who God is.”<sup>27</sup>

Godly Play experiences were mentioned by participants in four of the schools (6, 10, 11, and 18). The focus was on pupils in school. Parents were aware that Godly Play happened in school, but unclear as to what happened in the sessions. In some schools, Godly Play was offered as a popular after-school club.

Website for further information: [www.godlyplay.uk](http://www.godlyplay.uk)

### 3. Messy Church

Messy Church is part of ‘The Bible Reading Fellowship’. The website defines Messy Church as: *a way of being church for families involving fun; a church, not a craft club, that helps people encounter Jesus as Lord and Saviour; values are about being Christ-centred, for all ages, based on creativity, hospitality and celebration.* It is part of The Bible Reading Fellowship which believes, with the historic churches, in one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

27 <https://www.godlyplay.uk/>

There was some reference to Messy Church in ten out of the twenty schools in the research project, suggesting a popularity throughout the country (see Section B). There was, however, quite a difference between schools in terms of availability and organisation of Messy Church. For some, (Schools 2, 10, 14, 16, 18, 19, and 20) parents showed an awareness of Messy Church being available in the local area. The school had taken responsibility, through newsletters, to let families know about the opportunity for Messy Church. For others, (Schools 5, 6, and 17), Messy Church took place in the school and took on a variety of forms.

Website for further information: **[www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)**



**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH**

Canterbury Christ Church University  
[nicer@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:nicer@canterbury.ac.uk)  
[www.nicer.org.uk](http://www.nicer.org.uk)

