

PASSING ON FAITH IN THE HOME



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In this issue:

- Key findings of PhD
- How the PhD findings will be used
- Areas of future work
- Opportunities of how to be involved in ongoing research

The PhD Journey



Sarah's PhD journey began in 2008 during her time of working as a children and family pastor at Altrincham Baptist Church. She wanted to explore more fully how best to equip and empower Christian parents in passing on their faith to their children.

It's been a very long, often hard but always fascinating and exciting journey! The happy news arrived in early May from the University that the PhD was finally being awarded.

Sarah is now enjoying her role of Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow in Early Childhood at Liverpool Hope University.

What did the Research Involve?

The research involved home visits to carry out interviews with a range of Christian families across the North West. Sixty-seven children were interviewed during phase one. Then twenty-one of these children were interviewed again one year and two years later, to investigate how their faith may have altered over the three year period.

Each time the children were interviewed, their parents were also interviewed to provide an understanding of the family ethos, beliefs and faith practices. These interviews were all carefully documented and analysed to aid understanding of how family faith practices may impact upon a child's ongoing faith journey.

High Ethical Standards

The research project was scrutinized and overseen by the Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester. This ensured that the research was carried out in an ethical manner, which included confidentiality for participant families, anonymity of parents and children in the report writing and an appropriate approach to interviewing children and their parents.

Interviewing Children

The children were aged three to thirteen years old, so it was necessary to adopt an interview style that was appropriate to their age and stage. Rather than a traditional interview scenario, a range of play based activities were devised to aid discussion about God, faith, prayer, the Bible, church and other aspects. The children really enjoyed these activities and they enabled accurate and genuine responses to be given by the participants.

"It's amazing to hear my child talking about God and their faith journey. I had no idea that they thought these things or had an active faith like this..."

-the parent of a child who was interviewed as part of the research project.

Many thanks to Rev Dr Howard Worsley, Mr Ian White and Dr John Shortt for their advice, support, encouragement and insight throughout the process. Also this project is indebted to the following trusts for their financial support: St Luke's Educational Trust, St Christopher's Educational Trust, The Foundation of St Matthias and The Mylne Trust.

Key Findings:

- There was a significant openness from families and churches to talk about this.
- Many Christian parents felt ill-equipped/disempowered at fostering their child's faith.
- The early years as a key/formational time – both in terms of child's development but also family ethos.
- The majority of the 250 church leaders across NW who responded to the survey stated that faith in the home is important but they didn't really do much in the church context to encourage/equip families in that way.
- Families who were very active in faith activities in the home, displayed significantly 'stronger' faith in the children. (Looking at treasure and cultivate characteristics.)
- In many families and churches the faith of young children was overlooked or undervalued. This tended to result in the child losing interest in the Christian faith before they reached the "important years" of teens.

How will these findings be used?

These findings are being disseminated to Christian families and church leaders who took part in the study.

They are also being shared with a wide range of relevant networks, with a view to support churches in more effectively equipping and empowering parents in this role.

An e-booklet of helpful tips and guidance for Christian parents will be produced as an outcome of the PhD findings, with the hope of further equipping parents for passing on their faith in the home context.

There may even be the possibility of developing these findings and thoughts into a book—this is being investigated.

Areas of Future Work

Following on from this PhD research there are some exciting opportunities being developed to research more deeply specific areas of this—for example how parents of contrasting beliefs (ie only one parent is Christian) can most effectively support and nurture their child on their faith journey.

Also investigation into how to most effectively nurture faith of young children within the home context is occurring.

And finally, it is hoped that families may sign up to be part of a long-term research project—to monitor how the child's faith alters over the next 10+ years, based on the family faith practices when they were

Opportunities to be involved

Please contact Sarah Holmes (email holmess1@hope.ac.uk) if you would like to be part of these projects:

- For parents of young children (0-8 years old) to observe and document their child's responses and faith experiences over six months.
- To sign up for the long-term research project, whereby your family would be contacted once every three years and interviewed during a home visit, to discover how your child's faith is developing. (You would be free to opt out at any time.)