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Rethinking the place of the family in the post-Covid church in the UK: an exploration of families' engagement with church during and after Covid

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ABSTRACT

The family's role in nurturing children's faith became critical during the Covid-19 pandemic. The ways that churches addressed the needs of these families during the pandemic revealed much about church leaders' understanding of the place of the family in Church. This article looks at faith nurture in the family and role of the church in this task. Robust connections between church and family which are essential for the holistic nurturing of child's faith were disrupted by Covid-19 restrictions. The research involved an online survey of 175 church leaders and 209 parents, with the addition of focus group interviews of 36 children and 18 parents in the aftermath of this disruption. The findings provide insights into church leaders, parents and children's family ministry experience, and their hopes for future engagement. Data analysis revealed the severity of the disruption and a sense of disconnection between families and Church. The discussion argues this has had a lasting impact on family church relationships and considers parents' hopes for a welcoming listening church community. In conclusion, we argue that there is an opportunity to learn from the pandemic experience, listen to parents and children and re-imagine the family's place in Church.

Faith nurture in the family

The family was central to the religious life of Israel, children honouring their parents, and parents instructing children in the Law was a covenantal obligation (Deuteronomy 11:19; Stewart 2015). In the New Testament Church (Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 16; Colossians 4; Philemon 1) the family unit, was pivotal (Colijn 2004). In contrast to common understandings of family in twenty-first century Britain, families were extended household entities (Wright and Bird 2019), including grandparents, unmarried siblings, servants, and slaves and guests. The family were bound by kinship ties rather than land (Pothen 1992),

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expressed through shared beliefs and way of life (Wright and Bird 2019). Children's faith would be nurtured within this extended household.

The core of family relationships is unconditional love, creating responsiveness and accessibility to one another (Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick 2021). Relationality is intrinsic to human beings and reflects the imago Dei, namely being in covenant relationship with God (Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick 2021). Within this framework, the value of nurturing a child's faith in the family context is well documented (Mark and Cooling 2016; Roberto 2020; Thompson 1996; Westerhoff 1976). Research in the United States found that effective faith transmission was most prominent in families with elevated levels of family religious practices (Goodman and Dyer 2020) and in families holding a more conservative ideology with a daily focus on religious socialisation (Smith 2021). Research in the UK (Francis 2020; Francis and Casson 2019) revealed that Catholic and Anglican young people are more likely to express their Christian identity by attending church if their parents are churchgoers and talk about faith with their children. Developing this, Roberto (2020) stated that faith is most effectively rooted in children's lives through day-to-day family religious practices, parents modelling their faith in a collaborative manner than exposure to outside religious opportunities. Likewise, Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick (2021) argued that within an atmosphere of grace, family members can empower one another, similar to the notion of family as a 'forming centre' (Thompson 1996). Holmes (2021) observed that children's faith seemed to benefit from having the ability to observe their parents' faith activity, and children spoke very positively of times when faith activities occurred with their parent. Roberto (2015) highlighted the need for family faith practices to be actively nurtured. This notion of faith nurture occurring naturally as part of daily life, as instructed to the Israelite people in Deuteronomy 6, coincides with Wangerin (1986) perceiving the inherent nature of a child's relationship with God as a natural part of their continual growth and development.

The modern family unit is more individualistic and exclusive than either the Biblical models or that of previous generations. It has been impacted by an increase in social mobility, which has given rise to dispersed extended families. Traditional close-knit communities with strong family and neighbourhood ties have significantly reduced. Changes in the social and economic life in developed countries have resulted in increased urbanisation, contributing to the disintegration of community life, resulting in people living more isolated and lonely lives (DCMS, July 2021; Putnam 2000). More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has had immediate effects on family life. It placed a significant psychosocial toll on individuals and families alike (Chu et al. 2021) and resulted in a general decrease in family satisfaction over time (Möhring et al. 2021). Whilst some positive outcomes aided general wellbeing, such as reducing daily stress in families and improving family routines (Bruining et al. 2021), there have been many negative changes to family systems as a result (Weeland, Keijsers, and Branje 2021). These challenges impact how parents approach the nurturing of children's faith. There is a need and an opportunity for church communities to address these issues, mitigate 'relational poverty' (Charlesworth and Williams 2017) and contribute to family's wellbeing.

Parental approaches to faith nurture vary, influenced often subconsciously by the parent's upbringing (Holmes 2021). Boyatzis (2004) observed that reciprocal styles of communication and more active participation of the child align with a collaborative

approach to theological meaning-making (Csinos 2020). However, not all Christian parents are proactive in faith nurturing (Bunge 2008; Mark and Cooling 2016). Hence, many have called for the Church to equip and empower Christian parents in this role (Roberto 2015; Turner 2014; Westerhoff 1976). Indeed, Habtemariam (2022) highlighted the advantage of a broader community mindset and mutual responsibility of raising children in the faith. Such investment in the education and formation of parents is key to church strategies for ministry amongst children and young people (Francis and Casson 2019). It therefore seems of prime importance that the wider Christian community is aware of these variances and persuasions of Christian families to enable appropriate support of children's faith nurture within the family context.

Traditionally, the strength of the relationship between family and church has been of critical importance. The Faith in the Nexus research (Casson et al. 2020) revealed that parents who reported a strong connection with the local Church were more likely to report increased faith activity at home. The Growing Faith Foundation at the Church of England[1] has recognised the critical importance of collaboration between all spheres that influence, nurture a child's faith, and sought to actively invest in strengthening these connections. A sense of connection to Church, a sense of belonging is expressed in a multitude of ways by families. Many families have a connection with Church through a church school, engagement in Messy church activities, invitation to participate in key Christian festivals, through family heritage or local connections to the church building (Casson et al. 2020). However this connection is expressed, it is mutually beneficial for church and home to work in partnership to nurture a child's faith.

Faith nurture in the church community

Engagement of churches with families is critical as many contemporary families choose a church based on their experiences in children's ministry (Csinos and Beckwith 2013). The development of ministry to the child can be traced back to the Reformation, and a focus on Biblical reading for all. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Sunday School movement began for the poorest in society, with Raikes model for child evangelism being the most known (Griffiths 2009). Catechism and Bible instruction formed part of the teaching, alongside literacy, moral and social education. At the beginning of the twentieth century Sunday School attendance was over six million; this has dramatically declined in recent years (Griffiths 2009). In 1950s a change in Church of England policy resulted in moving Sunday schools from the afternoon to take place during the Sunday morning service. This exacerbated an existing decline in Sunday school attendance and had the unintended effect of excluding many non-church going children (Griffiths 2009). Griffiths (2009) points out by the end of the twentieth century there were less than half a million children in Sunday schools.

In the light of the decline in the 1950s, parachurch organisations (such as Youth for Christ and Scripture Union) were developed to focus on children and youth, often providing professional workers and age-specific ministries which operated separate to the adult congregation. The Church responded by introducing volunteer-led youth programmes, which developed into paid roles in many churches. This resulted in the siloed approach where children and youth ministries were run independently of the main Church, often with their own staff team and facilities.

In recent years churches have taken various approaches to children's ministry. Nelson and Jones (2010) highlighted four different models. Programmatic ministry focuses on the role of youth and children's leaders in faith development, while family-based and family-equipping models emphasise the role of parents. Integrational ministry which stresses the Church's role in faith formation (Jones 2009), aligns with an attractional ministry model, whereby people are drawn to faith by the nature of the church community (Edwards 2019). Csinos and Beckwith (2013) emphasised the need for churches to evaluate the model adopted to best meet the needs of those attending. The programmatic model, characterised by age segregated faith formational activities (Santos 2018b) has been criticised for not being sufficiently child-focussed. It is seen to prioritise parents desire to attend church uninterrupted (Csinos and Beckwith 2013) and often results in young people struggling to integrate into church when they are too old for their groups (Santos 2018a). Age-segregated children's ministries have not slowed the declining attendance (Drake and Drake 2021). Indeed, they may have accelerated the decrease. The decline in the number of children in church has accelerated in the twenty-first century, Church of England data (Statistics for Mission 2021) states that there were only on average 62,000 children in Sunday worship in 2021, under half of the attendance (134,000) of 2009.

It is important to note that this research involved families who are actively engaged with a local church; their experience of being in a church with young families in the congregation is not representative of all churches in England and Wales. Many churches in the UK now have no young families in their congregation. For example, in 2018 (General Synod 2019, GS2121) 38% of Church in England churches had no children (0–16-year-olds) and 68% had 5 or fewer, in fact 44% of all children were to be found in just 6.4% of the churches.

In response to this decline, innovative approaches to family ministry with an intergenerational focus are continually emerging, such as Messy Church, Forest Church, Lego Church (Given 2014; Williams 2019). The intergenerational model seeks to draw all ages to God and each other (Tolman 2018) as they experience all aspects of life and worship, to intentionally combine the generations in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the core activities of the Church (Allen and Ross 2012). This brings challenges, for example, misunderstandings of the nature of intergenerational worship persist (Van Leersum-Bekebrede et al. 2019) and the priorities of the ages differ (Allen and Ross 2012). However, it need not be either the intergenerational or age-segregated model, both models can co-exist, indeed prioritisation of one or another ignores the complexity of the nurture of children's faith (Van Leersum-Bekebrede et al. 2019). The benefits of faith being shared in a communal context comprising all ages have been emphasised often (Csinos and Beckwith 2013; Santos 2018a). Children can experience authentic faith modelled by a Christian community (Westerhoff 1976) and are recognised as active agents who both influence their surroundings, as well as being influenced by them (Kingston and MacDougall 2011). The intergenerational model strengthens children's sense of belonging to worshipping community (Roberto 2012) and provides opportunities for young people to explore faith with adults, (Root 2020, 176). There is a need for a fundamental rethink to begin with challenging problematic assumptions about children and faith, consider how to make the Church attractive to families and to reflect on whether they seek to meet merely the consumerist needs of children and their parents or their relational and spiritual needs to aid faith formation (Csinos and Beckwith 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought into focus the fragility of the church relationships with families. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 on churches in the UK is still on-going. The first lockdown declared on 23rd March 2020, resulted in the closure of churches and a ban on in-person worship (Village and Francis 2021). Pastoral ministry overwent a wholesale shift in the way that it functioned (Johnston et al. 2022). The response of the Church both nationally and locally was varied, but the move from in-person gatherings to online worship and other church activities became the norm. Unfortunately, in many churches there was little attention paid to family ministry, (Evangelical Alliance 2020; Heland-Kurzak and Holmes 2021); on-line worship services were aimed at adults. Many church leaders reported that the greatest challenge at this time was children's and youth ministry. The decline in church attendance across the denominations well documented pre-pandemic (Village 2018), has been exacerbated by these Covid disruptions. Many families are not returning to Church as before, and others are taking the time to reflect on their relationship with Church. As we emerge from the pandemic with the experience of a focus on faith at home, there is an opportunity not only to reflect on how families engage with Church but also an opportunity to change existing approaches.

Methodology

This research project was a joint venture[2] to investigate how churches were connecting with Christian families in the post-lockdown era. The data for this article draws upon the findings from an online survey (February 2022) completed by 175 church leaders and 209 parents of children aged 0-16, and in-depth interviews (between April and June 2022) with 36 children (aged 7–11 years old) and 18 Christian parents. The participants represented 12 different denominations from various locations across the UK. The sample was self-selecting responding to a research invitation shared through national churches and parachurch organisations. The participants are drawn from 12 different denominations, from different church sizes from various locations across the UK. The sample was self-selecting, responding to a research invitation shared through national churches and parachurch organisations' mailing lists and social media channels. The invitation was targeted at families already connected to a church, with recent church experience. It is important to note that the sample is not representative of the general population as respondents had an existing connection to a local church and were motivated to be involved in research about their faith and experience of church. All participants have been anonymised; and ethical approval was granted by Liverpool Hope University.

The survey was designed with the aim of gathering descriptive data from three distinct groups of people: parents of children aged under 11, parents of children aged 11–18 and church leaders. The survey instrument was programmed on a digital platform (Typeform) and two initial filtering questions were used to ensure respondents answered questions relevant to their experience. On average, respondents took approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey and were also offered the chance to become involved in the qualitative phase of the research project. This qualitative research comprised in-depth qualitative interviews with children and parents, conducted online and in-person. The semi-structured interview questions were developed from an initial analysis of the survey responses, with the objective of confirming or challenging the quantitative data. The data was analysed by a team of researchers, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). Due to Covid

restrictions parent focus group interviews took place online. Interviewing the children about the pandemic, the Church and faith posed challenges. Research with children differs from research with adults, but their capacity and capabilities should not be underestimated. However, for many of the young children, questions of comparison between church activities before, during and after the Covid restrictions were difficult to answer.

Findings

The sample consisted of families who had a strong connection to church pre-pandemic, a group who are much neglected in research studies. The main expression of that connection was through church activities, Sunday services or involvement in children's activities provided by the church. This section will consider first how families reported their engagement with the church during the changing restrictions of the pandemic. Secondly, three distinct themes which emerged from an analysis of quantitative and qualitative responses, a need for support and resources to help parents nurture faith, a desire to feel empowered, and a desire for community.

Family engagement with church in the pandemic

The findings highlighted the challenges churches faced when they could not engage with families in person during the pandemic lockdowns. When asked how the Church had supported or resourced families during Covid restrictions, those interviewed offered a mixture of responses. Some churches provided age related online sessions, some included delivering activity bags to families to accompany these sessions. Others did nothing specific for children or families. Where there was specific provision, the parents' response too was mixed. Initially families appreciated the online session or craft resources provided, but as time progressed and pressure from schools increased, families lost interest. What was appreciated most was the conversation on a doorstep when the craft bag was delivered. This valuing of the conversation highlighted a theme that emerged across the data, a desire for relationships with Church over (or above) resources.

The response to online services also differed. Some found it easier to watch online than getting a young family physically to church. Parents explained that children could watch in their pyjamas, were free to visit the toilet as necessary, while accessing various aspects of the service. Most families, however, found it difficult to retain the engagement of their children with an online service, especially if the children were young. Interviewees with younger children reported trying to watch the early parts of the service which included singing, so it was a little more interactive, then doing something separately as a family during the sermon. This indicates that there is no 'one size fits all' when seeking to resource and support families within the church.

> God got bigger; Church got smaller. (Parent- interview)

Many families reported that they increased their family devotional times in Covid as there were fewer demands on them as families. As daily walks were allowed this facilitated more opportunities for faith conversations as creation was experienced at a slower pace. There was greater emphasis on faith in the home, at detriment to engagement with church when the churches reopened. This was reflected by some of those interviewed who

reported that church congregations are now smaller than pre-Covid and those returning are tired and struggling. One family stated they 'attend less frequently because they got out of the habit due to Covid'. Another commented 'Sunday church now feels optional', another added they have 'stepped back from church', and further one stating their children now do sport on a Sunday.

The impact on the children was noted both by children and parents. Some older children noticed differences too, with one child saying, 'we don't go to church as much as we used to'. Others reported 'less people attend', 'the normal people stopped coming' and another said I 'would like more people' in the services. One child, however, stated, 'I am more appreciative of God'. Parents recognised that the pandemic was having long term effects on how their children related to other adults. Parents noted both that 'the fun has gone. Children are not as comfortable participating as they used to be'. 'Intergenerational relationships in church have stopped' and children were not mixing with other children at church as they did before.

Noting the importance of faith at home in contrast to church, one parent stated, 'we got used to doing spiritual life without church, so we need to invest in the unity side of church'. Commenting on church one parent said, 'we need to learn to love it again'. Some however reported they 'appreciate church more'. Respondents noted that church is smaller as there are fewer new people joining the church. There has been little contact with baptism families 'we lost connection with families especially those who have had babies in lockdown'. As toddler groups were unable to meet during restrictions, contacts with young families were reduced so new children are not attending Sunday school or mid-week groups.

A desire to be supported and empowered

The research study also investigated hopes for the future direction of family church relationships. There was much crossover in the responses to 'What would you like your local church to provide for your family in the year ahead, to support your family faith?' and 'How could the Christian community better support Christian families on their faith journeys?' In all age groups the overwhelming response was for support, and for greater connection, a sense of community. When asked how the church or Christian community could better support families in the coming year, 34% of parents responded that they would like support and/or resourcing to help them parent for faith; 28% stated they would like support or resources to assist with faith formation at home; they would like the Church to: 'provide resources so parents feel confident in doing faith at home'. 9% suggested the support could be in the form of mentoring and modelling the Christian life for families or preaching or teaching on how to better parent. 8% said praying for and with families to teach them how to do this. One parent concluded that church had a role.

> Support families at all stages of the journey of faith, signpost to resources, continue to develop resources that are scripture based, help us answer their questions and how to deal with issues of the world impacting on family.

For the parents of teenagers, the focus was strong emphasis on the need for support, suggesting perhaps many felt inadequate for the task of faith formation in their family, or that parents of this age group are less likely to feel supported by church.

Empowering families in church

> [The church should] see and treat parenting as a valid and vital vocation, not as another household chore or insignificant. (Parent- survey)

There was a desire for greater family involvement in services and more all-age or intergenerational services (19% respondents). (What is understood by those responding may be different to the definitions above, as all-age, intergenerational, and cross-generational are often used to describe the same thing, meaning all ages involved in the service or activity equally). During Covid-19 restrictions parents noted a benefit of online church services was that there were more opportunities for interaction in the services as whole families were involved in pre-recording items for online services. When Covid restriction eased a little, some families felt empowered in the faith formation of their children as they were involved in small group discussions and teaching. When children's groups were not permitted, some churches ran Café style services where families sat around tables. Often these were more interactive engaging the whole family with discussion or activities. Parents lamented this has not continued as pre-pandemic services styles and children's groups returned, leaving families feeling disconnected. In the interviews four parents specifically stated they would like to be listened to within the church and three said that they would like the church to be empowering them to raise their children in the faith, not just doing everything for them. One parent commented, 'Churches underestimate children and think they cannot cope with big things of life. Do not just teach big stories with fun activities'. The analysis revealed a resonance with a desire for change in family ministry, a desire for more time in worship with their families rather than children always in age-segregated groups.

Desire for community

A further research finding was the desire for community. 27% of respondents commented that they would like their family to have a greater connection with adults in the wider church community, not just other families, a further 19% of respondents expressed the desire for greater community, while 12% expressed the need for more social or family events in Church.

> It is about relationship and friendship so that when there is doubt you have a peer to support and bring you through. (Parent- online interview)

There was a desire for a more welcoming church with 'more relational connections'. One parent stated that they would like church to be a place of 'Sharing God's word in the community. Sharing and caring, spending time together'. Families wanted authenticity in these relationships, with one parent expressing the need for, 'genuine family relationships'. One parent noted that during Covid-19, church relationships broke down quicker than school relationships, indicating a lack of depth of these relationships. Another commented,

> church was noisy with activities for kids [when church had opened but there were no children's groups.] This has stopped now children go into groups in sermons. Children have lost their joy. The whole thing was fun, now they must sit through the grownups bit. Church has stopped being so familyish! (parent-online interview)

For the parents there was a desire for the church to be a more welcoming community for families. However, most of the children interviewed, spoke of liking the church adults who are 'kind', 'helpful', and 'nice', though one child added, 'Nice, but strict when they need to be strict'.

Discussion

The research has provided valuable insights into the needs of church-going families in the UK in this post-pandemic period. As we consider the place of family in the church post pandemic, three critical issues have become evident in this data. Firstly, a need to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on family and church relationships and how these impacts upon the place of families within the contemporary church. Secondly, a crucial requirement for the Church is to listen to the changing needs of church families and re-imagine family ministry as a collaborative endeavour. Thirdly, parents desire to belong to a welcoming, intergenerational church community.

The impact of the pandemic is still resonating within church communities. Church families experienced a dramatic disruption to their connection to church during the periods of lockdown. This resulted in changes in families' engagement with faith at home and in how churches approach family ministry. The enforced absence from church during the Covid lockdowns allowed many families to create space for faith at home. Many valued this time and have sought to continue the practices started during Covid. The survey responses revealed a disconnect between families' experience of Church during the pandemic and that of the church leaders. Church families felt their needs had not been understood or responded to, while many church leaders admitted that they did not know how their families had fared during the pandemic or thought provision by their church had been sufficient. One of the most striking findings from the research was that families were struggling to reintegrate into church community. The impact on children's social engagement at church was severely disrupted for a considerable time. Often when children returned to church, it was to a different place, with fewer adults, but also fewer of their peer group. This has led to some families seeing less 'need' for church and having a more critical eye on what the church provides for families. On the other side, churches have struggled to re-engage with families. There is, in part, a lack of awareness of the needs of church families, but this is exacerbated by less provision of family services and social events, because many churches are now operating at reduced capacity, with fewer volunteers returning to help post-Covid. Whilst this data was collected during pandemic times, which was a particularly stressful season for parents, their perceptions and feelings are worth noting for the seasons ahead as they reflect their underlying thoughts and experiences which were merely heightened due to Covid-19.

The parents surveyed wanted to be heard and viewed as important in their child's faith formation. An analysis of the families' responses revealed that many families were looking for support from church to empower them in their critical role of nurturing a child's faith. Others (Mark and Cooling 2016; Turner 2018) have highlighted parents' lack of confidence in nurturing children's faith. After the experiences of faith at home and the church during the pandemic, the research suggests that 99% of parents and church leaders stated that faith formation in the family was a partnership which involved church and family work together. The family has a critical role in the nurture of children's faith, churches need

to understand how they can support and complement this role; empowering parent's confidence and encouraging an integrating of faith into everyday family life (Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick 2021; Roberto 2020; Thompson 1996). There is a need for church leaders to listen intently to the needs of families. By regularly speaking and listening to parents, the church could assess how they could better serve the family's needs. By doing this, churches are expressing that families do have a place in the contemporary church, and they are wanted and included. The church could focus on supporting parents drawing on ideas learned during restrictions where families shared together in bubbles. This requires increasing the intentionality and ethos of partnership with family. A partnership approach is needed, developed in response to the local context, making faith relevant in the everyday and thus supporting parents as the most significant influence in faith formation. intimating that the spiritual needs of the families are central to the church, and that the church activity must orientate itself around these needs.

The research findings suggest that many parents are now looking for the church to provide a welcoming and supporting intergenerational community. This resonates with the notion of belonging and being valued as part of a loving community (Edwards 2019; Kingston and MacDougall 2011). Underpinning many of the church family responses was a desire for a relationship with a church community, rather than resources to be used with children. The research findings challenge the church to rethink the place of families in church in the modern day how they can nurture children's faith in partnership with parents, rethinking how parents are supported in such a way that meets parents relational and spiritual needs. There is a need for church to become a welcoming safe space for families, a community that meets the relational needs that are no longer met elsewhere in society.

Conclusion

This article has presented church families perceptions of family ministry during the pandemic, which was a crisis time for relationships between church and family. This called into question the place of families within the life of the contemporary church. However, the perceptions illuminate the feelings of disconnection many churches families experience. The findings support the view that children's faith formation must be undertaken in an effective partnership between church and home, one that recognises the primary role of parents but is characterised by a welcoming community of truly intergenerational church. A conclusion to be drawn from this research is that there is not one clear model/approach that 'works'. Instead, what is needed is a shift in the underlying ethos to be more child and family-focused, to truly welcome and integrate children into the church, to recognise them as full members of the Christian community This means making significant changes to accommodate young families in church. The research findings offered some pointers as to beneficial changes such as a prioritisation of relationships with existing church families, strengthening connections not just between families, but intergenerationally within the whole congregation. There is a need to pay deliberate attention to nurturing children's sense of belonging to church community, rather than to one activity or group. There is also a need to nurture the weak connections to church expressed by families who may only connect through the church school, the church toddler group or at times of festival or rites of passage. Intent listening to families and young people and developing a whole church child-

centred response offers an opportunity to address the sense of disconnection highlighted by the church families in this research.

Notes

1. https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation
2. Care for the Family, Evangelical Alliance, Hope Together, Liverpool Hope University, NICER – Canterbury Christchurch University, Parenting for Faith, Share Jesus International.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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