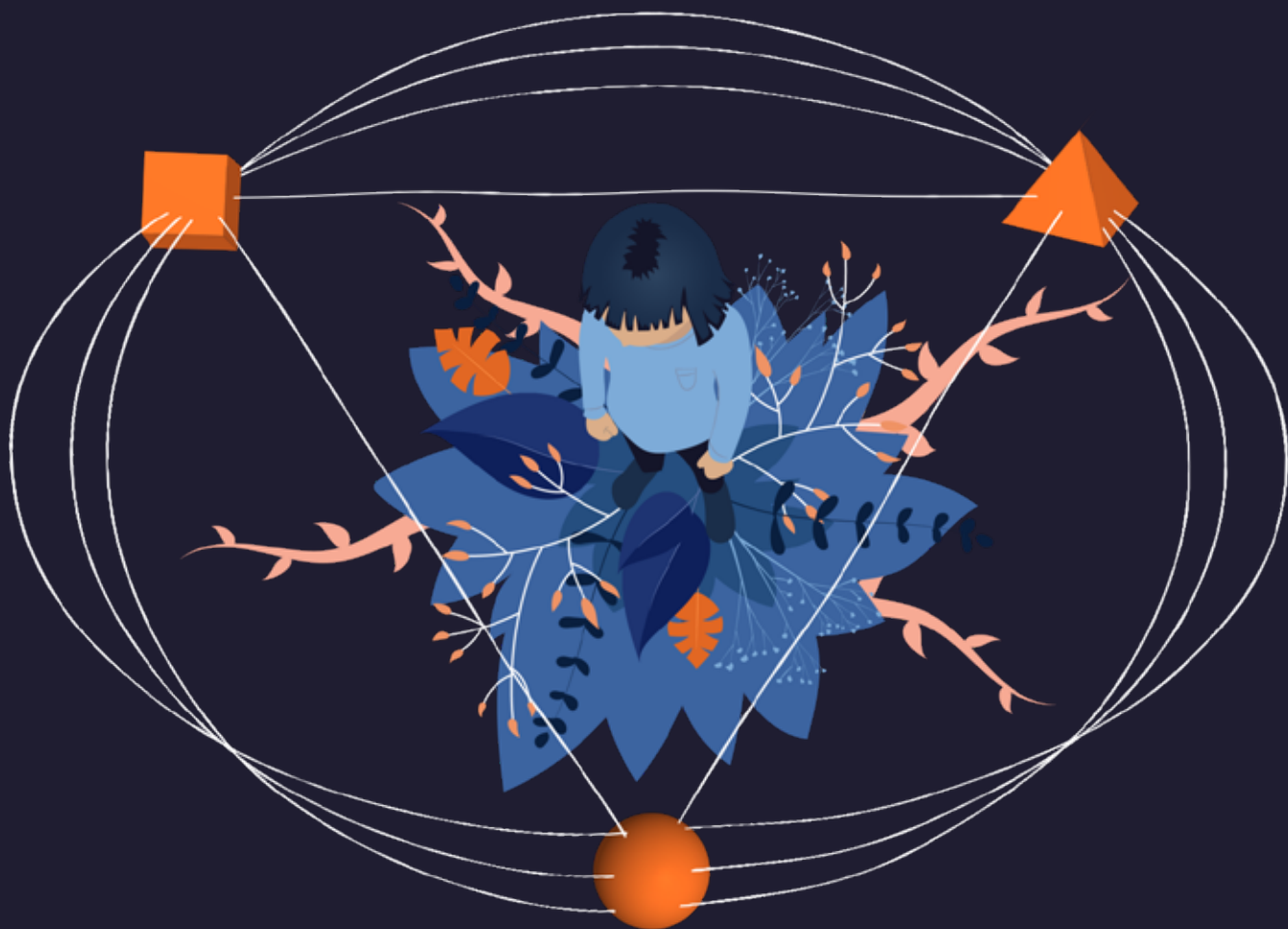


FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Spiritual flourishing in the words of the child A Faith in the Nexus Study 2023

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The National Institute for Christian Education Research

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Animating children's voices as they talk about faith and spirituality

To bring children's voices to the fore and ensure effective dissemination, we have, through the work of Ministry, developed a series of animations using children's voices that accompany this report.

These animations feature the children's sincere reflections on prayer; encounters with God and Jesus; collective worship and church; faith in the home, and spaces for reflection. They offer valuable insights into the spiritual world of children, encouraging families, schools, and church communities to actively listen to the voices of children.

Accompanying each animation are questions and reflections to stimulate further discussion with children, parents, school and church staff and leaders.

Pupils' Feedback

Following the development of the first animation, in which children talk about how prayer makes them feel, we shared this animation with groups of children from the schools who participated in this project. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The children suggested that these animations were invaluable as it was important for children to hear other children talking about faith and spirituality. They also suggested that listening to these animations could help children and adults de-stress, hearing children talk about the value of prayer might help others to pray.

It made me think about what it feels like to pray.

I liked that the voices are real, and I like hearing what other children say as we nearly always have to listen to what adults think.

I like that it was animated.

I liked the background as it looks nice and clean. It is not too cluttered, and this makes me calm.

New Nexus animations

Find links to the following animations at <https://nicer.org.uk/faith-in-the-nexus>



What does it feel like to pray?

This animation offers valuable insights and unique perspectives of children talking about prayer in their own words. Hear children speak of when and how they pray and why it holds importance for them.



When do you feel close to Jesus and God?

In this animation, children speak openly about their personal encounters with God and Jesus. They speak of God as a companion, a supportive friend, someone you could speak to at anytime, anywhere, who would always listen to you and be there for you.



What does it feel like to be in collective worship?

These two animations ask the same questions, although one reflects responses from children attending CofE schools and the other captures the reflections of children in RC schools. Listening to these animations reveals how much children value worshipping together. They express how communal worship brings them a sense of belonging to their school as well as their church or parish community.



What do you do about faith at home?

These two animations ask the same questions, although one reflects responses from children attending CofE schools and the other captures the reflections of children in RC schools. They provide a unique perspective on faith-related activities within the home. Listen to children sharing their honest thoughts about various aspects of their family's faith traditions, including faith talk, prayer time and moments of reflection with their parents, siblings, and grandparents.



Where do you go to reflect?

Listening to children speak about seeking out reflective spaces in this animation highlights how important the desire for peace, stillness, and time to be alone is for young people. These insights are in stark contrast to a culture of busyness, activity focussed practices and the idea that children should not be bored.

1. The headlines

1. The post-pandemic Faith in the Nexus research study (2023) has revealed unique insights into the richness and depth of the inner world of children's spirituality.
2. There was clear evidence that children are the initiators and drivers of their spiritual development, actively seeking out places of reflection, times to pray, and space to talk about faith and encounters with God.
3. Children's responses revealed how they navigate the diversity of religious beliefs within their homes and schools to craft their spiritual journey.
4. Children value the support of family, school and church and appreciate adult engagement in their spiritual questing.
5. Post-pandemic, the value of in-person activity and a sense of belonging to a vibrant community was apparent in both children's and adults' responses.

I feel like God's always there, even when I'm like outside just generally, outside playing with my friends I still know that God's watching over me.
(Year 5 Pupil)



I do think that praying kind of relaxes you. It's like if something happened in the playground that you didn't really like and you went and like sat on the steps or something and then you just like prayed and then went back to it, you'd feel kind of relaxed.

(Year 6 Pupil)



We all talk about what we feel because we've all got different religions because my mum, she's not sure, she's not sure whether she's Christian or not. She believes there is a God but she's not really a fan of Christianity, and my dad, he believes there is a God, but he just doesn't know what to think.

(Year 5 Pupil)



The best place for me, like where to pray, is when we have our collective worship at the end of the school day when we all gather together, and we all pray about the same thing.

(Year 6 Pupil)



2. Children's spiritual wellbeing

Since the pandemic, there has been widespread increased concern about children's spiritual well-being.

[The pandemic] is a once in a generation opportunity to transform the wider education system around the child so that wellbeing is truly at the heart of the learning environment in schools. (Barnardo's, 2020¹)

[A] challenge faced by the child Jesus set in our midst is one of health and safety and especially mental, emotional, and spiritual health...COVID has revealed a tidal wave of mental health pressures on the young which has been building for decades. (Bishop Steven, Oxford diocese²)

We know from previous NICER research³, conducted before the pandemic that there is a need to pay attention to and nurture the spirituality of children for them to flourish. We also know that many adults have limited awareness of the importance of this nurture and do not fully appreciate what children need to flourish spiritually. Research has shown that Faith communities have the potential to be a vital source of a sense of belonging and support for the spiritual nurture of children and adults. We identified a need to research children's understanding of what contributes to their spiritual well-being within the church school community context.

The significance of the voice of the child

This research project has given the child participants a safe space to be heard and valued to share their heartfelt beliefs. We developed animations using the children's voices to help other children hear about spirituality and faith from their peers.

By bringing children's voices to the fore in these animations we think sharing their experiences of spirituality will lead to new insights among adults as well; it is an opportunity for adults to hear and encounter the child's unfiltered expressions of spirituality.

Hearing the children's voices may enable adults to re-ignite the memory of their childhood spirituality and show them how children can speak about their own experiences. The research insights provide evidence to help 'adult world' communities (church schools, churches, and parents) understand and respond to the emergent spiritual lives of children post-COVID and more fully include children.

The research insights have the potential to empower and inform changemaker groups focussed on spiritual flourishing and will achieve a wider recognition of the common good of encouraging talk about spiritual flourishing for young people, creating spaces for that talk in school, home, and church life.

1 Barnardo's (2020) *Time for a Clean Slate: Children's Mental Health at the Heart of Education*. Accessed via [time-for-clean-slate-mental-health-at-heart-education-report.pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/time-for-clean-slate-mental-health-at-heart-education-report.pdf) (barnardos.org.uk) on 07/05/2021.

2 <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/he-set-a-child-in-the-midst-of-them/>

3 <https://nicer.org.uk/faith-in-the-nexus>

3. Faith in the Nexus

Faith in the Nexus Phase 1

Faith in the Nexus (2017–2020) was an extensive empirical mixed methods study undertaken by NICER at Canterbury Christ Church University, involving 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools in differing socio-economic areas spread widely across the country. The research was enhanced by an invaluable consultation process involving many professionals and experts, which grounded the research and sharpened the focus on improving and strengthening current policy and practice. The main insights regarding children’s spiritual flourishing were:

- The value of faith conversations in the home.
- The importance for children of space and time to reflect.
- The positive influence of relational belonging to church school and local church.

The insights from this project led the research team to develop a working definition of spiritual flourishing. It is a dynamic state of being:

- It is about living life to the full (John 10:10) and recognises that all humans are spiritual beings.
- It is relational and involves living an embodied and integrated life and living out one’s vocation (Messer, 2021⁴), reflected in the depth of I-Thou relationships (individuals) with self, others, nature and the transcendent (Buber, 1923⁵; Hay & Nye, 2006⁶; Church of England, 2021⁷).

Faith in the Nexus Phase 2

In 2023, the NICER research team undertook a further Nexus study, which aimed to:

- Investigate further children’s own understandings of what contributes to their spiritual flourishing.
- Amplify the children’s voices through the development of a series of animations.

The method

In the spring of 2023, 15 focus group interviews were conducted in school with 90 pupils, and 54 adults reached through church school communities. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by the two lead researchers with the aid of NVivo software. A thematic analysis was undertaken, cross-referencing with the themes that were identified in the 2020 research study.

4 Messer, N. (2021) Human Flourishing- a Christian theological perspective in Lee, M. T., Kubzansky, L. D., & VanderWeele, T. J. (Eds.). (2021). *Measuring Well-being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives From the Social Sciences and the Humanities*. Oxford University Press.

5 Buber, M. (2012). *I and Thou*. eBookIt. com. (Original work published 1923)

6 Hay, D. with Nye, R. (2006) *The Spirit of the Child*, Revised Edition. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

7 [churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/%23faithathome%20School%20resources%20-%20Week%2011%20FLOURISHING%20%28Secondary%29.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/%23faithathome%20School%20resources%20-%20Week%2011%20FLOURISHING%20%28Secondary%29.pdf)

School name pseudonym	Denomination	Size Actual/max	Rural/Urban	% of pupils on Free School Meals ⁸
St Elizabeth's	RC	197/210	Urban	50.3% FSM
St Catherine's	RC	212/210	Urban	11.8% FSM
St Mary's	RC	435/420	Urban	7.1% FSM
St Thomas'	CofE	243/242	Rural	13.7% FSM
St Gabriel's	CofE	172/210	Rural	9.3% FSM
St Winifred's	CofE	570/630	Urban	24.4% FSM
St Luke's	CofE	367/360	Urban	25.6% FSM

The sample (see table above) consisted of seven schools, two from the previous study (Nexus, 2020) and four who had actively engaged with the dissemination process of the Nexus findings. The three Catholic schools and four Anglican schools were from across England, in various geographical locations and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All schools have been anonymised, and pseudonyms have been given to each.

⁸ FSM is used as a proxy for individual level socio-economic deprivation. The average percentage for FSM in English schools is 23.8%.

4. The voice of the child

Prayer

Pupils shared with us descriptions of when and how they prayed in school, church, and home and what they had learned about prayer in religious education or collective worship. In our analysis, we focused on expressions of their active engagement with prayer. In such expressions, we could identify how prayer contributed to their spiritual flourishing.

- **Self-understanding:** for some, prayer was about being alone with their thoughts, an opportunity to reflect on past behaviour or share personal concerns.
- **Relationships with others:** alongside the sense of prayer as a solo activity, children appreciate the value of praying with others in communal spaces such as the church youth group or collective worship in school.
- **Being in nature:** many pupils spoke of praying outside, in their gardens, or the school's spiritual garden or when involved in physical activity such as swimming.
- **Connection to God:** interestingly, a few pupils spoke of prayer as a means of talking to God, expressing a relationship with God and or Jesus.

The pupils' responses suggest three areas that need to be explored further: the language used in prayer, reflecting religious or secular spirituality; their use of prayer as an expression of their worries, about themselves or others, and the nature of their relationship with God, and Jesus expressed in their prayers.

Childrens' voices on prayer

I kind of talk to God in my imagination, like in my thoughts

(Year 5 Pupil)

Well, we have collective worship, so in the hall and in class, and we're always talking about like God and how much he helps people. So, it makes me think about how much people appreciate him for all he's done.

(Year 6 Pupil)

If you wanted to go outside you could in your head pray while you're doing an activity like swimming.

(Year 6 Pupil)

I feel closest to God everywhere because he's always in our body and our hearts and we know that he's always going to be there for us.

(Year 6 Pupil)



Sacred space

An analysis of pupils' responses about spiritual space, revealed the importance of the environment, and of being in the space. While some spaces, such as spiritual gardens, were constructed by the schools for the children, many children found their reflection space in unexpected places. Many pupils described seeking out places that were hidden, where they could be alone and undisturbed, for example, under the stairs or up a tree. Interestingly, in this study, some children mentioned the church as a holy place where they could reflect; one child described the church as their 'happy space'. Others explained how you could even find reflection spaces within busy environments, such as a church family activity, one pupil spoke of finding peace sitting on the steps in a noisy school playground. Children spoke of the need for a lack of distractions, a desire for peace, and to be alone.

Several pupils valued the importance of being in the space. For example, one pupil explained how after the pandemic and watching everything on screens, they valued being in church at a celebration of Mass in person. Interestingly, many pupils described the importance of experience through the senses. They spoke of lying like a starfish on the bed, watching and smelling the candles or hearing the birds. There are two themes here that need further research, the value of being in person, rather than spectating, and children's unfiltered expressions of spiritual experience through all the senses.

These insights are in stark contrast to a culture of busyness, activity focussed practices and the idea that children should not be bored.

Childrens' voices on sacred space

Being alone helps because sometimes when I'm alone ..., I don't have to talk to other people about how I feel. I kind of talk to God in my imagination, like in my thoughts.

(Year 6 Pupil)

I feel like, I know that God would still be there if I was watching it live stream but I like the space that, almost like the priest is closer to me and I don't know, I just, even like the bread and the holy bread and stuff like that. You're receiving God if that makes sense.

(Year 6 Pupil)

Not really in my home but in the garden it's just a bit more peaceful. You can hear the birds and stuff.

(Year 6 Pupil)

I would just lie on my bed like a starfish, just lie on top of everything and the covers.

(Year 5 Pupil)



Spiritual questing

The conversations with the pupil focus groups revealed evidence of the pupils' spiritual questing. As in the previous Nexus research project, children's curiosity about issues of faith, spirituality and existential questions was apparent. However, this time, we also detected evidence of competent navigation of the diversity and dynamics of religious beliefs they encountered within home and school. Children were aware of the differences in belief of their peers, but also within their families. They spoke of respect and acceptance of others' beliefs and of a sense of working out their own beliefs within this mix.

What was critical to enabling children's spiritual questing was the space for asking questions, and space to explore alongside adults. Children found these spaces within Religious Education, at home with family and friends, and within church for example in youth groups or Messy Church like activities.

Childrens' voices on spiritual questing

My sister and my father read the Bible. My father reads an online Bible as well. My sister and my dad share the same like mini Bible. My mum doesn't really believe in any faith, but she will still read the Bible with my dad and my sister.

(Year 6 Pupil)

My family doesn't have a Bible at home but whenever I go to school on Friday in RE we always use the Bible to read. So, whenever I read like a chapter, I go home to tell my parents about it.

(Year 5 Pupil)

And some people they go to church, but they don't all believe in God, they don't all believe in the same things, but they still come to respect others and still have time to reflect.

(Year 6 Pupil)

If they have different beliefs, you can still listen to their opinions, they can listen to yours.

(Year 6 Pupil)



A sense of belonging to a church school community

One strand that emerged from the analysis of pupils' responses was how much they valued worshipping together. As much as they spoke of prayer and reflection as a solitary activity, they appreciated being together for worship and in community with each other.

Pupils were aware that not everyone in the school community shared the same beliefs. However, all were seen as part of the one school community. In one school, the pupils described how they actively engaged in collective worship by sharing an interactive Amen.

Children expressed a sense of belonging to church communities as well. The children of Catholic schools expressed a sense of belonging to the church community through engagement with the priest and through the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. In one school, children also spoke of a sense of belonging to a church community from involvement in a Messy Church activity⁹. This monthly activity brought families into church on a Saturday afternoon, for as the children described it, it was a time of crafts, Bible stories, sermons, and food. For the children who attended this with their family, this was a church, being in church and being part of church.

Childrens' Voices on community and a sense of belonging



On classroom worship we learnt about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And that really like helps me to know who Jesus is and what he's like.

(Year 5 Pupil)

Church is one of my happy spaces other than my bedroom like Peter said. But I always feel really comfortable at church, and I can express myself.

(Year 6 Pupil)

So, we started a new thing during assembly that when we say our school prayer, we put our hands out and the people next to you put their hand on top and it shows that we are all praying together.

(Year 6 Pupil)

I feel closest to God at church because there's always candles that are lit and it just makes me feel like Jesus is present.

(Year 5 Pupil)

⁹ Messy Church began in 2004 by a group at St Wilfrid's in Cowplain near Portsmouth, UK. Founded by Lucy Moore it aims to involve creativity, celebration and hospitality and is now present in over 30 countries.

Encounters with God and Jesus

Children's expression of a relationship with Jesus & God – underpins and is a culminating fulfilment of children's experience of prayer, sacred space, spiritual questing, and Christian community. The connection between religion and spirituality is often confusing; the terms are frequently conflated. Nevertheless, both can be held in balance if we view children as spiritual beings first, who are then socialised into a religious tradition with their expressions of spirituality (Boyatzis, 2012¹⁰).

Some children described a significant and personal relationship with God and Jesus. The children spoke of God as a companion, a supportive friend, someone you could speak to at anytime, anywhere, who would always listen to you and be there for you. Several children discussed asking God for forgiveness, and a sense of a weight being lifted from them. Children described the relationship with God and Jesus as safe, comfortable, at ease and peaceful.

A few children spoke of feeling the presence of God or Jesus, for example, when in church, or when the lighting of candles. Some children spoke of feeling the presence inside themselves or of hearing the voice of Jesus, speaking of an inner connection that transcends head-knowledge. One child described a religious experience, an encounter with Jesus and God expressed through the senses. The children's descriptions of these religious and spiritual experiences are areas that requires further research and further analysis is needed into children's understanding of their connection to God and to Jesus.

Childrens' voices on encounters with God and Jesus

A few terms ago we went in the hall, and we put music on, and we laid down and we prayed to Jesus. And when I did that, I felt like I could actually hear Jesus talking to me.

(Year 6 Pupil)

We have to say sorry. We have to hug it out. But with God, we can't hug it out so we have to say a special prayer.

(Year 5 Pupil)

Sometimes when I pray with my sister, I feel God next to me and her as well.

(Year 6 Pupil)

You follow Jesus and you go to church to be present with him.

(Year 6 Pupil)



¹⁰ Boyatzis, C. J. (2012). The nature and functions of religion and spirituality in children. In *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol 1): Context, theory, and research*.

5. Supporting children's spiritual flourishing

Children as co-creators and initiators

A common feature of the children's responses was that they often spoke of taking the initiative at home. Children were instigating prayer, seeking out reflection spaces, or reading the Bible. For some, these activities were undertaken independently, alone, and often deliberately without their families.

However, children could also be seen as co-creators of faith traditions within the family. Some children spoke of what could be seen as a shoulder-shoulder exploration of faith in the home. In some instances, they spoke of praying together with parents, often mum and siblings and with grandparents. Some of the children shared conversations they had about faith in the home. For example, they questioned other members of the family about what they believed.

The children were often aware that members of their family had different beliefs about God and Jesus and that many parents had limited knowledge of Bible stories. Some children spoke about teaching members of their family, their siblings, or parents, about faith or Bible stories.

The children's competent navigation of different beliefs in the family was characterised by a confidence in expressing their own faith and shaping their beliefs alongside those of their family and school. Further research is needed to explore children's confidence in expressing faith within a primary church school as often older children do not have this confidence.

Faith activity in the home

Parental engagement with faith is often seen as the primary means of transmission of faith to children. There was some evidence of this within this research project. Some pupils spoke of growing up in a Christian family. Others spoke of faith activity happening in the family, led by their parents or grandparents. Grandparents' influence on children's encounters with and attitudes to the Christian faith was mentioned by a few children. Indeed, a few children spoke of sharing faith with their grandmother, but not their parents.

Some parents spoke of praying with their children and talking about faith. Several parents specifically mentioned engagement with children's questions about faith and as found in the previous research (Nexus, 2020), some expressed a lack of confidence in addressing their questions. However, what we did find this time was that a greater number of parents were happy to explore the difficult questions with their child. One reason for this could be the experience of home schooling during the pandemic. This area needs further analysis and research to establish what has given some parents greater confidence in talking about faith at home.

The research team had the opportunity to spend a day with leaders and families at the Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham (UK) who were attending a residential family pilgrimage. The children attending ranged from babies to 14years old and adults included grandparents as well as parents. Hence, there was a significant intergenerational presence in the group of approximately 50 families.

Throughout the day, the balance between prayer, planned activities and free time was excellent so that families could spend time together and make connections with others. It also gave them time to reflect together upon the prayerful encounters and opportunities experienced during the day. Facilitators of the pilgrimage were present but were mindful not to intrude on family time. From their feedback, it was clear that families valued their time at Walsingham.

The shrine is very welcoming and makes families feel at home and at ease. We came to the family pilgrimage last year and it's so good my Grandson who is now 6 years old wants to come every year. It is a very special place to share with your family. (Grandparent).

The local churches and parishes could learn from this pilgrimage how to communicate with families, we need a space to call our own, one where we feel welcome and not tutted at when our children are not quiet. Church should be fun for children, one where they can question and explore their faith and parents feel free to do this with them. Most churches I have experienced do not offer this, but Walsingham does. (Parent).

Family pilgrimages such as Walsingham offer opportunities for families to be accompanied in their faith and continue to deepen their faith within the home.

I came here as a child, and I now bring my own child here. It supports us as a family and re-energises our faith so that we feel able to continue with our faith practice at home (Parent).

The church school community

All children expressed a strong sense of belonging to their school community; they recognised and valued the Christian ethos of their school. The attention given to sustaining an explicit Christian ethos was apparent in all seven schools visited. This was visible in the schools in the environment, the displays around school, the development of spaces for prayer and reflection, the activities provided within the curriculum and extracurricular and the attention given to the Christian ethos in communication with families - the newsletter, website, and social media. The parents in all schools commented on the importance of Christian values in school.

The ethos. It's a lovely, caring, nurturing school. When your children are small you want extra parents in school, not just teaching. And that's what you feel you get here.

It can even be simple things like how if they've been really a good friend to another child for that week or they've been really helpful around the school or been respectful to an adult. And I think they're so important, those values.

I think that brings that nice sense of community and caring as such. I think that's the main thing. I love the fact that they're cared for. I know the education is important, but they're nurtured.

Kind words and the Fruits of the Spirit. It's lived out. They live it out every day in the school.

You go home and you think “Well I don’t really do anything religious” but actually you are doing things all the time because you’re trying to bring them up to be civilised respectful human beings really.

The influence of Religious Education in school was apparent in the provision of space for discussions of the Big Questions. Children spoke of learning about Christianity, gaining knowledge and understanding of other faiths. Children were also exploring their faith and beliefs, several mentioned discussions about belief, atheism and agnosticism and shared how they identified themselves.

Engagement with a church community

Interestingly in all schools a few children mentioned their engagement with the local church. In two of the Anglican schools several pupils’ spoke of specific initiatives. For example, in one small rural Anglican village school, the vicar and paid children’s worker regularly visited the school and delivered collective worship and workshop activities. Once a month, the whole school was involved in preparation for and invited to the family service in the village church.

In a larger school in a small rural market town, the children spoke of going to church, where they found a space for discussion but also importantly, space to reflect and pray. When the research probed this further, it was found that they were referring to a Messy Church-type activity run by the local church on a Saturday afternoon. The minister had set this up intentionally to support the parents and insisted that the primary role of the volunteers was ‘to talk to people’ and focus on ‘table fellowship’. The activities usually included a craft activity, Bible story, and music, but also a space set aside for a prayer activity, prayers from which were incorporated into the final worship.

Two factors could be seen to underpin children’s positive views of active engagement with the church: a pro-active minister who had a meaningful presence in the school and was actively engaged with the spiritual flourishing of children. The second factor was that the two examples mentioned above were situated in dioceses that had engaged with Faith in the Nexus research and with the Anglican Growing Faith Foundation¹¹ Further research is needed into the influence of these factors. Nevertheless, we could conclude that active engagement in a church community as described by the children could be seen to contribute to their spiritual flourishing.

11 <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation>

6. Post-pandemic adult reflections

The impact of the pandemic and government restrictions on children's mental health and spiritual well-being is well-documented. The adults in the study often reflected on how things were different now. They spoke of increased anxiety of children, challenging behaviour management in school, and the loss of critical times in the children's lives.

I do think, the pandemic certainly increased anxiety and worry in my child and I could tell that from school report, parents' evening, pre the pandemic and then one post the pandemic. I think what the religion and the spirituality that is embedded gives them is that space to be quiet and that space to work through it, if something isn't feeling quite right, which is invaluable really. (Parent)

The parents spoke of the challenge of online learning, but how it had also motivated them to learn and engage with faith.

If anything [the pandemic] made us have to learn ourselves...because we struggled with [that]...there's a difference having a faith but actually bringing it to a level that kids would understand and relate to is quite hard. So, I think for us it was actually a good thing for us. (Parent)

The headteachers spoke of how they had maintained collective worship engagement through the pandemic and the positive response from the families, the children's joy in worshipping again in person.

During Covid when I was doing remote collective worship and parents, ..., we did get some positive feedback.

For the first 12 months afterwards, the children had a much stronger appreciation of the togetherness, they missed it.

However, they also highlighted the challenges of providing extra-curricular activities that could contribute to children's spiritual flourishing, with limited staff and a prioritising of academic recovery.

The clergy noted the impact on church congregations as many have not returned to regular worship.

I think churches have come back weaker from the pandemic and there's a lot less young people and children in the churches and a lot less people because they'd stopped attending. That has had a big impact on a lot of churches and the ministry amongst young people, certainly from my point of view and including my own experience and all our family. So, whilst there was good provision in the pandemic it's interesting how that's transitioned into people coming back or not.

The researchers recognised the challenges that schools, church and home are facing as we emerge from the impact of the pandemic. However, we also identified some positive aspects, parents and children were more open to and aware of what is needed to nurture spiritual wellbeing.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- Children have a voice and express their spiritual lives when given the opportunity, in universal terms and the language of faith traditions.
- Spiritual talk is normal for children.
- Children speak of a connection to ‘the ultimate’ through nature and in relational terms to the person of Jesus.
- Children’s spiritual lives matter to them in deep and complex ways.

The Faith in the Nexus research study (2023) set out to investigate children’s understandings of what contributes to their spiritual flourishing. It revealed unique insights into the richness and depth of the inner world of children’s spirituality. The analysis re-emphasised that children are the initiators and drivers of their spiritual development. The importance of belonging to a vibrant community and the significance of the contribution of adults within the family, school and church to children’s spiritual flourishing should not be underestimated.

The two main factors that can be identified in the pupils’ responses as to what they see as contributing to their spiritual flourishing in the home were:

- Family (parents and grandparents’) engagement in explicit faith activity, for example prayer and church attendance.
- Children’s view of themselves as active agents, instigating faith activity, for example choosing to pray alone, or read the Bible.

Recommendations

Our recommendations flow from our experience and intuitions and go further than evidence found in the project itself.

From this project we recommend that policymakers, school leaders, and church leaders:

1. Establish a clear working understanding of the terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ within a church context. We think that this could be done by understanding spirituality to be broad, innate, and something that can generally be shaped, while religion in a church context is more specific with explicit religious and tradition associations of language and culture.
2. Provide educationalists with a better understanding of the significance of spiritual nurturing for children for their wellbeing. This could be thought of as developing a competency around a broad spiritual literacy.
3. Listen attentively to the voices of children. This basic disposition or orientation should be at the centre of policy ambition and frameworks, acknowledging a prophetic capacity in children.

4. Provide opportunities for children to be co-creators and leaders in spiritual and faith nurturing. This follows from recommendation 3 and appreciates that there is a personal developmental dimension here, a need to build pathways for children to develop their capabilities themselves and also at this time it is crucial for young leadership to be nurtured for other young people to look to.
5. Make space for the older generation in the church communities to invest in the spiritual nurturing of young people. Whilst this report has been focussed on young people, it is also clear to the researchers that there is a great inter-generational potency, especially at a time where the parental generation may themselves feel to a degree estranged from spirituality and tradition.

Recommendations for practitioners

There is so much that practitioners can do and many examples of experts who provide leading examples for others, but we are also aware of a reduction in confidence among some who work with young people and so to help them we recommend practitioners:

1. are supported to engage with evidenced-based resources to enhance practice around children's spiritual flourishing such as those we have produced, so that they can develop their practice and their own spiritual literacy in this area (for example: Faith in the Nexus resources <https://nicer.org.uk/faith-in-the-nexus>)
2. in their work provide opportunities for children to ask big questions. We believe there is great importance in nurturing an invitational space, for deeper reflective conversations, for questions to be explored together, without concern about necessarily knowing the right answers, in a spirit of shared exploration.
3. encourage time and space for reflection and stillness. We feel it is important to create opportunities for moments of pause in what can be a busy life, whether at school or in the busyness of the home. 'Taking a moment' could become a way of opening a pathway for recognising the spiritual value of pause and reflect, and perhaps onward to contemplation, meditation, and prayer.
4. create environments that engender awe and wonder and create a culture that explicitly recognises moments of awe and wonder through focussed attending to nature, to mysteries, to creations, to feelings, thoughts and to experiences.

Recommendations for further research

Further research is needed to explore children's use of religious language, the understanding of prayer as a connection to God or a sign of secular spirituality. It would be beneficial to examine further children's encounters with the transcendent through their personal religious and spiritual experiences. On a practical level the influence of a pro-active church and diocese needs to be investigated further.

Acknowledgements

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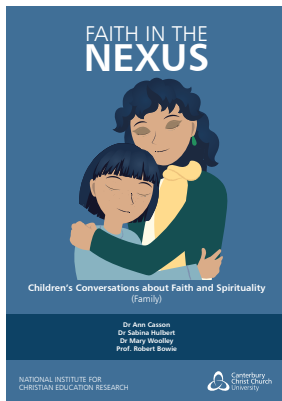
The Advisory Group members

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Claire Fernandes	CELEBRATE Children and Family Lead
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Faith in the Nexus resources

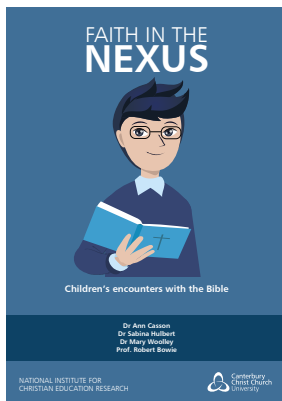
In addition to our range of animations, we have created some detailed booklets and posters to help you explore some of the themes raised through our research.

These resources are all free to download and consist of an A5 booklet and an A3 poster. These are all available via our main website.



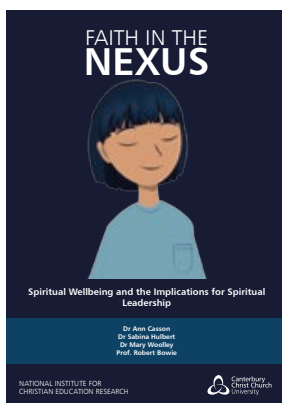
Children's Conversations about Faith and Spirituality **Where do we find the opportunities for children to talk about faith and spirituality?**

Children seek to explore faith and the big existential issues by asking questions. They may be seeking to confirm or to challenge ideas encountered in school. While adults were often looking to provide a definitive answer or solution, children may be simply seeking to explore these issues with parents, teachers, and others.



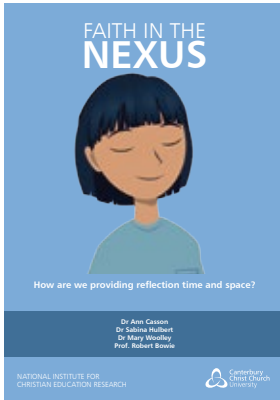
Children's encounters with the Bible **How can we encourage children's encounters with the Bible, at home and in school?**

The major challenges are a lack of resources in the home environment – whether Bible or family knowledge and understanding of Bible stories. Opportunities which did appear have a positive impact on children's encounters with the Bible included gifts of Bibles, a variety of Bibles in the school library and experiences of Open the Book, particularly when parents were invited in.



Spiritual wellbeing and the implications for spiritual leadership **Addressing Children's Spiritual Wellbeing Needs**

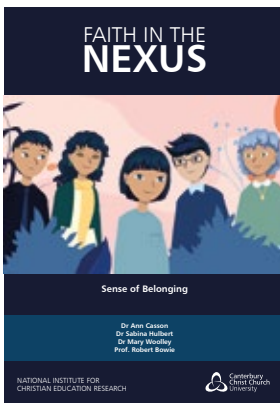
What is clear from our research is that no one way is sufficient. A variety of approaches, from different people and different spheres of life are needed to create an environment in which spiritual wellbeing can flourish.



How are we providing reflection time and space?

Creating space for spiritual flourishing

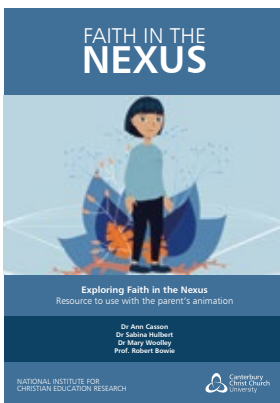
What emerges through analysis of children's responses to the research questions, is a need for space to reflect, think and pray. In the church primary schools, these spaces were in classrooms and in the playground; at home, the children made their own times and spaces. Few children mentioned church as 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.



Sense of belonging

How are we sustaining a strong connection between local church and church school?

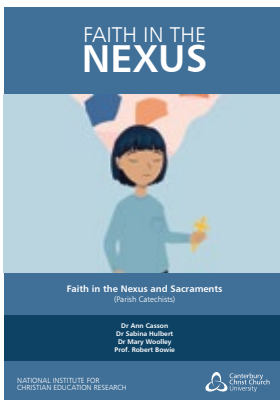
Where a strong, active relationship between church and school was perceived, then there was more evidence of faith-related activities at home. Flourishing connections between school, home and church nurtures relationships between individuals and these institutions. Positive relationships between church 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. What does it mean 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.



Exploring faith in the Nexus

What is the research behind the animation?

This booklet sits alongside the animation for parents as a supportive resource. The animation recognises that all children have a spiritual life that drives them to seek meaning and purpose in life. Often in this search, children turn to their parents with big questions about things such as the origin of life, the existence of God, and life after death. We acknowledge that being confronted with such questions can be daunting for parents and can leave them feeling inadequate to offer a response. Our main message is to reassure and encourage.



Faith in the Nexus and Sacraments (Parish Catechists)

How does the Faith in the Nexus research inform sacramental preparation?

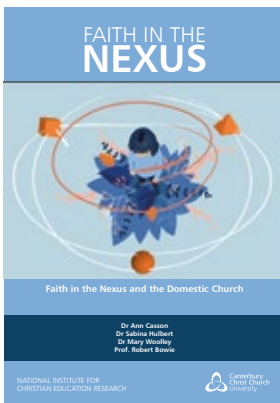
Ideally, faith formation should be part of the natural rhythm of daily family life, spoken of, lived, and modelled. Findings from our Nexus report showed that many parents struggled with how to respond, often due to lack of confidence. However, with clear support and accompaniment parents were better equipped to embrace the journey of faith formation with their child seeing it as a precious and sacred time to be treasured.



Let's talk about death

Responding to questions about death

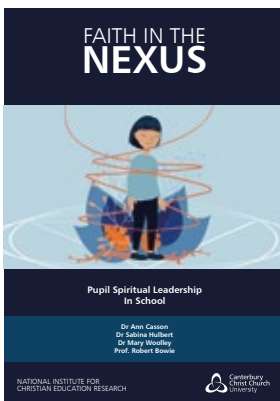
We underestimate children's understanding of death. Reluctance to engage with children's questions is problematic. Looking to others to answer these questions is not best for the children. When adults fail to answer, children were likely to persist with their questions.



Faith in the Nexus and the Domestic Church

The family as a domestic church

Findings from our Nexus report revealed that families talked about faith-related matters in the home more than they participated in faith related activities in the home. However, our research also found that families engaged 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. The cycle of celebrations influenced the families' perception of the rhythm of the liturgical year and offered opportunities to facilitate exploration of faith in the home.



Pupil spiritual leadership in school

Recognising children as spiritual leaders in school

A theme that emerges across all aspects of our 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. The findings from our research reveal that pupils relished these opportunities for independence and autonomy, using their ideas and vision.

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