

Diocese of Guildford Growing Faith Research Project Final Report

What makes for an effective church/school partnership in the role of supporting the spiritual development of children?

(May 23)

Introduction

Growing Faith is about **schools, churches and homes** working together to give young people and children the best possible chance to have life in all its fullness - to enjoy safe spaces to explore their spirituality and to grow in faith. The Growing Faith Foundation has been created to support dioceses and parishes to do this even more effectively than they do at present. It's part of the Church of England.

In order to ensure this work is rooted in good theology and good practice in the fast-changing world of the 21st century, to raise the quality and profile of ministry in the intersections between home, school and church, and to ensure as many children and young people as possible benefit from the Growing Faith movement, **the Foundation has commissioned research into aspects of the intersections between churches, households and schools.**

The diocese of Guildford applied in July 2022 and received £3500 funding to conduct this research into what an effective church/school partnership looks like and the role the church has to play in supporting the spiritual development of children in school.

Headline Findings from the Surveys

- The greater the involvement from the church in the school, both in terms of the number of people involved and in terms of frequency of contact, the greater the contribution to the spiritual development of the children.
- Engaging with staff helps the spiritual development of the children.
- Being in church buildings seems to be important to the spiritual development of children.
- Providing children with time, space and encouragement to be quiet, to reflect and to pray helps them feel close to God.
- Collective worship, and in particular Open the Book, seem to be effective in encouraging the spiritual development of children.
- Effective collective worship is welcoming and inclusive, creates safe spaces where children can explore big thoughts and questions and enables children to be involved.
- Collective Worship helps children's spiritual development because it encourages the children to think differently and do something new rather than change the way they behave or act
- Involvement in leadership is helpful for the spiritual development of children

Additional Headline Findings from Focus Groups

An excellent church/school partnership starts with an excellent relationship of trust between the church and school leaders.

“takes commitment on both sides”

Having lots of points of contact helps build a strong church/school partnership with the church leader being seen as a familiar and trusted face within the school community.

“(The incumbent) is part of our school family”

“(The incumbent) is a real presence in the school”

“Here I am what can we do?”

Church and school as “interwoven communities”

Incumbent has lunch in the school with children and/or staff each Monday.

Pastoral support for staff is highly valued.

Incumbent “being there”, “approachable and available”

“The incumbent’s pastoral support to staff has been significant. They are part of the staff WhatsApp group”

There is an opportunity to support school staff around the language and understanding of spirituality and to help them be confident in their own spiritual journeys. This enables them to bring a spiritual dimension into all areas of the curriculum and to engage with the children on big questions.

The positive effect of a close church/school partnership is further amplified if the incumbent of the church to which the school is linked is generous in encouraging and enabling lots of different Christian denominations and organisations to engage with the school.

It is powerful for the children to see different members of the community leading from different churches but the messages and values are coherent.

The church, both the building and the people can be a resource to help the school and the children within the parish to flourish.

Children find being in the church building very meaningful. The building itself communicates a sense of awe and wonder. Those hosting visits to the church have a role to play in helping children to feel comfortable and at home in the space. Hospitality is an important part of this.

Church is like Granny’s front room ... you look after it but you feel at home.

Children place a high value on prayers that they have crafted or written. Finding ways to bring their words into the church and to God is very powerful.

Examples:

Children invited to attend prayer group and talk about what they would like prayed for.

Children write in a prayer book at school which is taken to church and used in services.

Both school and church have similar prayer trees and prayers are moved between the two.

Children take the prayers from the school prayer tree to a church service once a term

Children write prayers onto 'prayer flags' which are displayed in church.

Acts of service (helping others, raising money for charity, caring for the environment etc.) can be framed for children as spiritual acts. There is an opportunity for churches and schools to work together on such projects

Children leading other children in worship has a significant impact but this can be difficult for a school to consistently organise. The church might be able to offer support.

Where school and church work in close partnership there is opportunity to draw in parents and engage households.

Examples:

Parents drop into church to see children's art.

Drop-in café at church after school drop-off or pick up.

After school service for children and their families with contributions from children prepared at school.

School newsletter used to advertise church services and events.

Children appreciate those spaces within school where they can be quiet, pray and reflect. The church can have a role in helping the school establish these spaces on either a permanent or temporary basis (e.g. running a prayer space). These opportunities for reflection and prayer can be extended to the staff and the staff room too.

Examples:

Reflection spaces in classrooms, changed weekly and linked to collective worship themes

A reflective prayer area in the staff room

Incumbent leading prayers in every room in the school and inviting staff to join them.

Some recommendations for churches to consider

1. The relationship between a church and a school begins with a good relationship between the church and school leaders. Churches should value this relationship and release the incumbent to invest the time this requires.
2. Churches should be encouraged to safely recruit teams to engage with their local school(s) rather than it only being the incumbent or employed worker who is involved.
3. Churches should be encouraged to be as involved as possible in the life of their local school. This will involve talking with the school leadership and asking where the church can help and thinking creatively around what can be offered. However, if resources are limited it would be good to concentrate efforts on the types of engagement that contribute most to the spiritual development of the children.
4. Churches should be encouraged to be generous in enabling and inviting other churches, denominations and Christian organisations to be involved with the school. An attitude that says 'this is my patch' is counter-productive.
5. School services held in church seem to be a particularly effective way of encouraging the spiritual development of the children. Churches should consider offering these to schools on at least a termly basis, alongside offering the building for curriculum and other use.
6. Churches should be encouraged to engage with staff as well as the children as this is an effective way to help the spiritual development of the children.
7. People from the church coming in to run a lunch or after school clubs is also a highly effective way of encouraging the spiritual development of the children.
8. Churches can look for ways to use the relationships they build with the school community to engage with parents and households.
9. When running activities for children churches should note that children appreciate having time, space and encouragement to be quiet, to reflect and to pray. Saying prayers seems to be particularly popular with younger children when they want to feel close to God. Writing prayers also seems to be very meaningful for children. We should not be afraid to build more of this into our activities for children and families.
10. Churches can be encouraged to find creative ways of bringing prayers from the children at the school into church.
11. Churches should note that effective collective worship does not focus on behaviour or moral lessons but rather encourages the children to deep thinking, to explore their own thoughts and questions about God and inspires them to grow and challenge themselves in new directions. It should be welcoming and inclusive and enable and encourage all children to be involved.
12. Consider using Open the Book as this seems to be a particularly effective way of leading Collective Worship.

Some recommendations for schools to consider

1. The relationship between a church and a school begins with a good relationship between the church and the school leader. School governors should value this relationship and encourage/ (release)the Headteacher to invest the time this requires.
2. Following conversation with the incumbent schools could invite a wider group of members of the local Christian community of all denominations into the school.
3. Schools should make use of the church building and church members to support the living out of the school vision. This will encompass the spiritual life of the school, the curriculum and possibly joint courageous advocacy projects.
4. Schools could think more widely about where the local church community and the school could work together to support the children and families in the local area.
5. Schools should look for opportunities for the pupils to experience worship and reflection in the church building.
6. Schools should give consideration to how best to facilitate pastoral support for the school staff from the church.
7. Those leading school worship should ensure that it does not focus on behaviour or moral lessons but rather encourages the children to deep thinking, to explore their own thoughts and questions about God and inspires them to grow and challenge themselves in new directions.
8. Schools should consider how they can involve pupils in planning, leading and evaluating worship in an age appropriate way. They may find the church is able to help them with

Some questions to be considered at the diocesan and national level

1. What training on engaging with schools is included in IME? Might this include a school placement?
2. What training and support is there for existing clergy to help them recognise the importance of engaging with their local school?
3. How are senior diocesan clergy encouraged to value engagement with schools, and support incumbents and congregations to engage with their local schools, recognising it as an important part of the mission and ministry of the church?
4. Are there diocesan structures through which strong relationships between school and church leaders are fostered and encouraged?
5. How do the recruitment and selection processes for both school and church leaders reflect the importance of working with each other?
6. What diocesan resources, support and training are available for churches wanting to develop their relationship with their local school?
7. What diocesan resources, support and training are available for school staff around the area of children's spiritual development in order to greater increase the confidence of staff to bring the spiritual into the everyday?

Survey Findings in Detail

The greater the involvement from the church in the school, both in terms of the number of people involved and in terms of frequency of contact, the greater the contribution to the spiritual development of the children.

There is evidence from the staff survey that schools who reported a greater number of people visiting from the church described a greater impact on the spiritual development of the children. 87.5% of schools having more than 5 people from the church engaging with the school gave a score of 8/10 or more when asked whether this engagement helped the children develop spiritually compared to 40% of schools having 5 or fewer engaged.

There is evidence from the staff survey that schools who reported a greater frequency of engagement also reported that this involvement had a greater impact on the spiritual development of the children. Schools with highest number of engagements from their church gave an average 'helpful to the children's spiritual development' score of 7.7/10 compared to 5.6/10 for those schools with the lowest number of engagements. However, it is worth noting that even the lowest level of engagement has some impact.

Popular ways of engaging with schools included: Collective Worship and Assemblies, visits from Open the Book teams, school services held in church, visits to the church to fulfil the curriculum, general help with school life (reading, lunchtime supervision, trips etc.) lunch or after school clubs, children being supported by people from the church to lead Collective Worship, school community participating in Sunday or other services, mentoring schemes.

There is evidence from the children's survey that visitors from the church help them feel close to God. In 80% of the schools all of the children said that when people from the local church visit the school they sometimes or always feel closer to God. In 48% of the schools most of the children said that when people from the local church visit the school it always helps them feel closer to God. Where schools had a smaller number of visitors (0-5) from the church regularly engaging, in 50% of them all or most of the children said the visitors always helped them feel closer to God and in these schools 40% of groups of children reported feeling close to God at school most days, this rose to 60% in both cases in schools that had a greater number of visitors (6-10).

When asked how people from the local church help them feel closer to God most talked about being taught about God and hearing Bible stories. There was also a significant number of comments around visitors praying, representing and modelling faith in real life "They tell stories from their own life which helps you make connections", "it's like you're right next to God, because God is what he's talking about", "Their commitment to their faith helps us understand more", "they are close to God, as they pray in church." The children also appreciated collective worship that was enjoyable and they appreciated being involved.

Engaging with staff helps the spiritual development of the children.

58% of the schools where the church engaged with the staff as well as the children scored 8/10 or more on the helpfulness of church engagements to the spiritual development of the children, compared to 33% of the schools where churches never or rarely engaged with staff.

Popular ways to engage with staff included: acting in an advisory capacity, offering pastoral support to staff, offering spiritual support to staff, providing gifts and treats for staff, running a prayer group for the school and the school contributing to the church magazine and vice versa.

On the children's survey where churches had frequent engagement with staff most of the children reported feeling close to God at school every day or most days. This was not the case in schools where engagement with staff was less frequent.

Being in church buildings seems to be important to the spiritual development of children.

And

Collective worship, and in particular Open the Book, seem effective in encouraging the spiritual development of children.

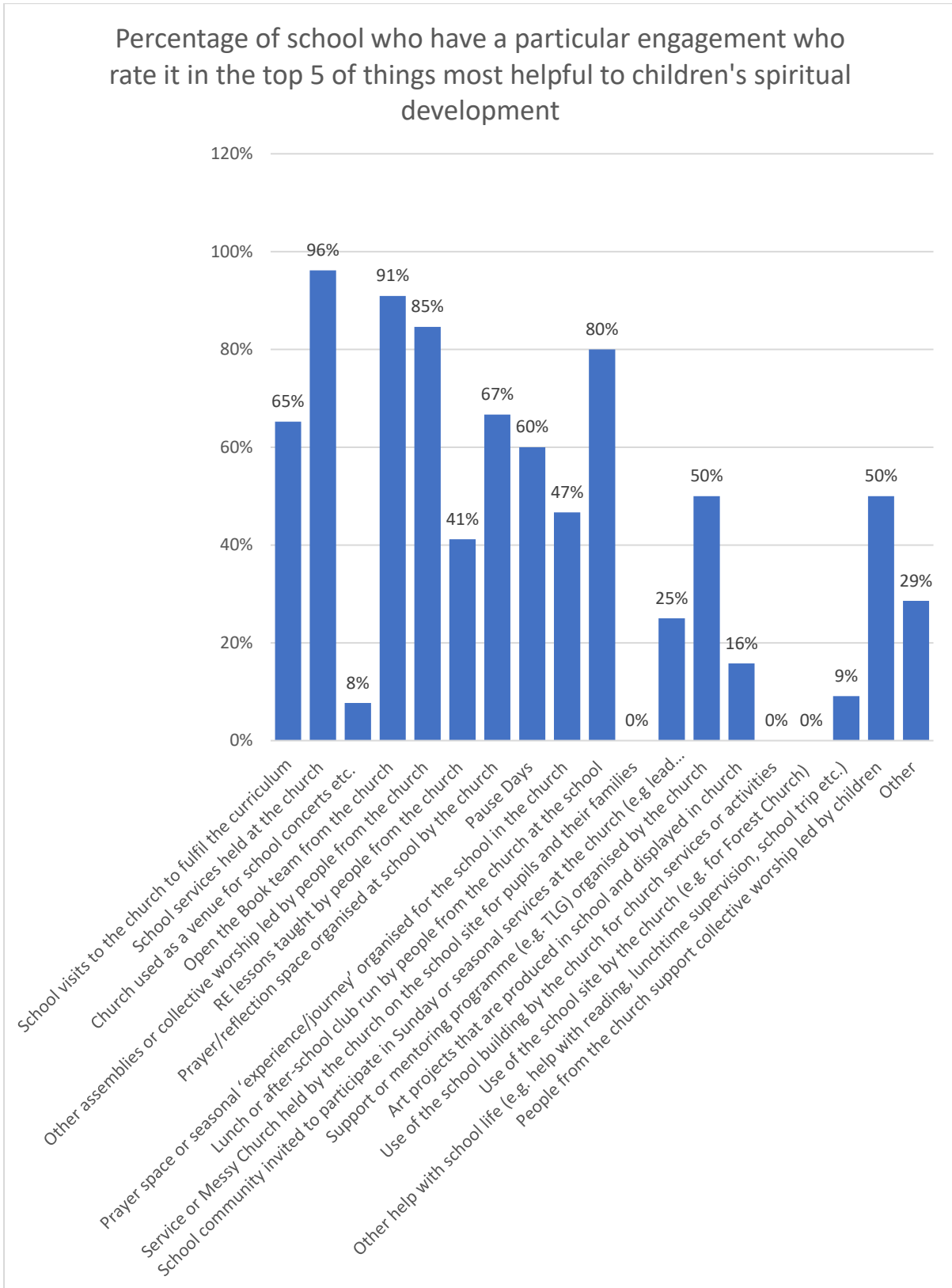
On the staff survey of those that had a particular type of engagement, those activities that were rated as contributing most to the spiritual development of children were:

School services held at the church	96%
Open the Book	91%
Other assemblies or collective worship	85%
Lunch or after school clubs	80%
Prayer or reflection spaces	67%
School visits to the church to fulfil the curriculum	65%
Pause days	60%
Mentoring programmes	50%
People from the church supporting children to lead collective worship	50%

"Open the Book worships are really inclusive." "Open the Book lets us join in (taking part in the acting), we can answer questions, use our 'thinking hats' and reflect." "Open the Book, 'makes it our own'."

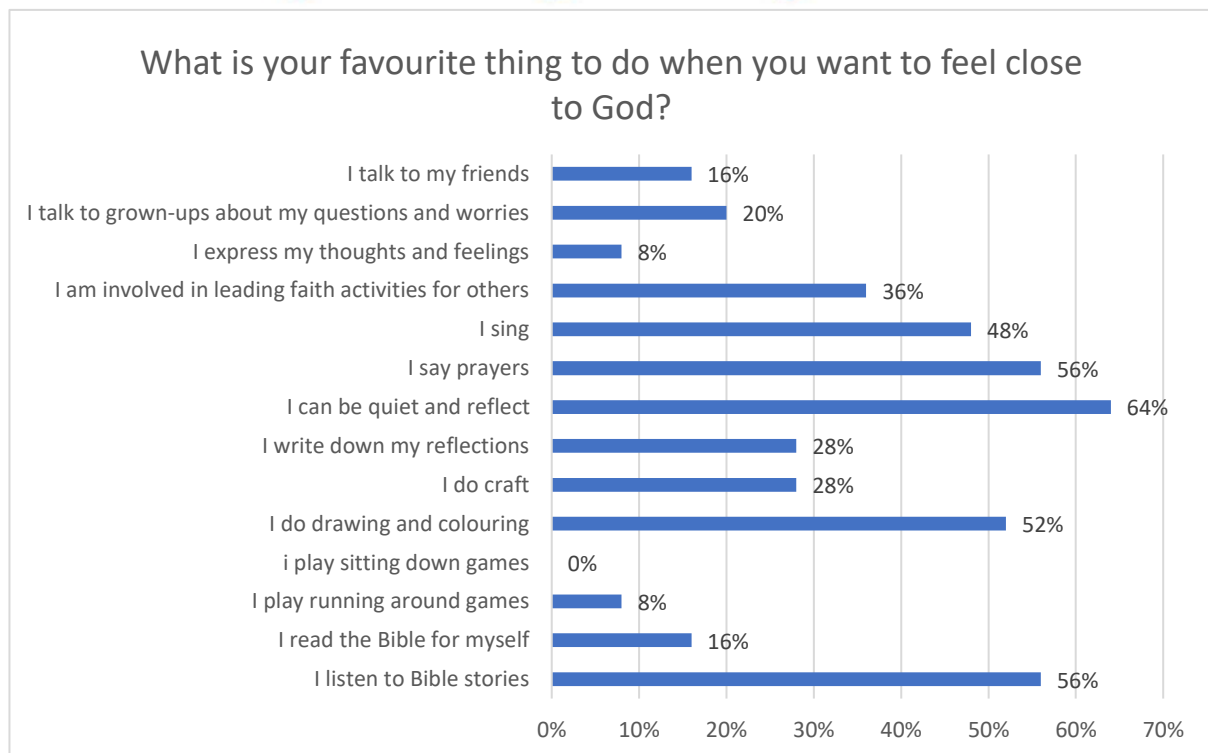
On the children's survey in 96% of the schools more than half of the children stated visiting the church as something that helps them feel closer to God, this was also the top answer when we asked them what helps them most. The second most popular answer was collective worship or assembly and in 92% of the schools more than half of the children said that this helped them feel close to God. Third was RE lessons and in 60% of schools more than half of the children said that these helped them feel close to God. Also scoring highly were prayer and reflective spaces and in 52% of the schools more than half of the children said that these spaces helped them feel close to God.

The results from both the staff and the children's surveys highlight the importance of being inside the church building and collective worship in the spiritual development of children.



Providing children with time, space and encouragement to be quiet, to reflect and to pray helps them feel close to God.

When asked a more open ended question around what helps them feel closer to God is school the most popular answers were around saying prayers, accessing prayer spaces and corners and having quiet places and times. *“People are quiet because they have peace in their body”* Less popular but still significant answers included Bible stories, hymns and songs, other people being kind, being outside or in nature, RE and school values.



When asked about their favourite activities that help them to feel closer to God, the top answers the children gave were: being quiet and reflective, listening to Bible stories, saying prayers, doing drawing and colouring and singing. It is worth noting that out of these top favourite activities most of them are quiet activities, with the exception of singing.

Interestingly, of these top rated activities being quiet and reflective, drawing and colouring were far more popular with junior aged children than with infants. The under7s preferred listening to Bible stories, saying prayers and singing when they wanted to feel close to God.

When asked in what ways their friends helped them feel close to God most of the answers were around showing kindness but there were a few interesting answers around talking about God and praying with and for each other as well as some that talked about God given connections “Because they love running and I love running and I am happy that God made them really the same as me.” “When we pray in assembly, it makes me feel like God is sitting right next to me”, “spending time in the prayer space together.”

Effective collective worship is welcoming and inclusive, creates safe spaces where children can explore big thoughts and questions and enables children to be involved

In 92% of schools all or most of the children reported that they were made to feel welcome and included in Collective Worship.

“Lighting the candle in collective worship feels inviting.”

In 96% of schools all or most of the children said that everyone was treated as equally during Collective Worship.

“Because then, if someone doesn't be kind to you, you might not feel close to God anymore, but when they are respecting you, you feel you are closer to God.”

In 72% of schools all or most of the children said that they were given opportunities to lead and help during Collective Worship.

“I feel important when I do my prayer at the front, it makes my prayer important.”

In 84% of schools all or most of the children reported that during Collective Worship they were helped to feel safe to explore their thoughts and questions about God.

“It feels closer to God, because you are exploring your own imagination because you don't know what it's like being inside it.”

Collective worship helps children's spiritual development because it encourages the children to think differently or do something new rather than changing the way they behave or act.

In 60% of the schools all or most of the children had thought differently about something following collective worship.

"When I was feeling sad at the start of the day but after collective worship I felt better as I knew God was with me."

In 60% of the schools all or most of the children had tried something new following collective worship.

"I tried something new that felt scary but collective worship helped me feel brave enough to do this." "Giving something new a go because that's what 'living life in all its fullness' means sometimes"

In 44% of the schools all or most of the children had changed the way they behave or act as a result of collective worship.

"If you are being silly and then you think about God you then feel calm." "If you're having a bad day, it helps you feel settled." "Sometimes if I've been sad before collective worship I've felt happy afterwards. If I've been mad beforehand I've come out feeling sad as I knew I'd made the wrong choice."

This would imply that effective collective worship encourages children to think deeply and inspires them to try new things rather than focussing on behaviour or moral lessons.

Leadership experiences are helpful for the spiritual development of children.

On the adults survey 93% of the schools said that involving children in leadership was fairly or very helpful for their spiritual development with 50% saying it was very helpful. Running a Christian Club and planning and leading collective worship for their class or the whole school were seen as the things that contributed most to their spiritual development.

On the children's survey it seems that the leadership experience that contributes most to children's spiritual development is planning and leading Collective Worship for their class or year group Children commented on this: "Because it makes us all work in unity, which makes me feel closer to God." "I like saying prayers to everybody because it's like you are talking to God and He's right next to you." "Whenever I get called to lead the prayer, I feel nervous, but God whispers in my ear to tell me what say and I feel happy", "Sharing your experiences can make you feel closer to God."

Conclusions

There is a role for both the school and the church in encouraging the spiritual development of the children.

Schools have a role in the spiritual development of the children because ...

Churches have a role in the spiritual development of children because children who are nurtured spiritually are open to God and are more likely to be willing to explore and embrace the Christian faith. Nurturing children's spirituality in school contributes to the flourishing of all children and will help grow the number of active young disciples engaged with the church.

Children's spiritual development is best supported by a strong partnership between church and school.

This research has confirmed that children's spiritual development flourishes where both school and church work together in partnership, both recognising the unique roles that they and the other play and finding where the overlaps are. It takes commitment from both, along with mutual trust and understanding to make this work.

Strong church/school partnerships start with a strong, positive relationship of mutual trust between the church leader and school leader but go beyond that.

There must be a willingness and an openness from both the school leader and the church leader to invest the time needed for such a partnership to develop. Each needs to see the other as a partner in leadership within the community and be committed to developing a relationship of mutual trust, care and respect for the benefit of all within the community.

However, an effective church/school partnership must extend beyond this key relationship, others within both communities need to be drawn in and lots of contact points identified.

Activities that support the spiritual development of children through these strong church/school partnerships include: support for staff (both pastoral and professional), hosting services and activities at the church, leading collective worship (especially Open the Book), running lunchtime and afterschool clubs (especially if these provide a link to households), supporting children to lead collective worship and helping provide spaces for prayer and reflection in school (and linking these to church).

Support for staff, both pastoral support and professional support around spirituality is an area worth investing time in for the knock on effect this has on the children. When engaging directly with children, offering access to the church building, particularly for services, and leading collective worship, particularly Open the Book, are effective in helping the children develop spiritually. As is helping the school provide spaces for quiet and reflection, particularly if these are linked to opportunities for the children's prayers to be brought to the church.

Background

In 2020 Emma Coy (Mission Enabler – Children and Families) was commissioned by the diocesan senior leadership team to conduct a piece of research into the extent and nature of the work that is going on with children and young people across the diocese. The aim was to listen to what is happening in all of our parishes and identify examples of good practice and successful models which are leading to growth in Sunday attendance. This research consisted of a survey followed by focus groups.

The findings of this research have been hugely valuable to us, when thinking about our strategy for children and young people, to our parishes, as I engage with them through the PNP and to many others outside the diocese who are asking similar questions.

The original research proposal was intended to include a school's survey but due to the tight timescales of the research and the impact COVID was having on schools at that time we decided, at that point in time, not to include schools. I am often asked questions about this missing piece when I present my research. The 2023 research includes the important school element.

Methodology

The research consisted of 3 main elements:

1. A survey for school leadership

This was originally written in 2020 by Jane Whittington (Schools Officer) and Emma Coy (Mission Enabler – Children and Families) with input from a group of Headteachers in the diocese. It asked questions around the relationship between the school and their local church or churches and other Christian organisations and the impact that has on the spiritual development of the children. We adapted it for a post-pandemic context. Completing this survey also helped the school as it provided positive evidence for their SIAMs inspection.

We received 28 responses to this survey (34% of church primary schools in our diocese)

2. A survey for a group of children within each school

This was originally written in 2020 by Jane Whittington (Schools Officer) and Emma Coy (Mission Enabler – Children and Families) with input from a group of Headteachers in the diocese. We then adapted it for a post-pandemic context. It was filled out by a group of children from the school (e.g. a school council or a collective worship group) with the help of an adult. It asked questions around events and activities that the children felt helped them 'feel close to God'. We felt this was the best language to use with the children but getting this wording correct was tricky.

We received 25 responses to this survey (30% of church primary schools in our diocese)

3. A series of focus groups involving church and school leaders

Through the results of the survey we identified 11 parishes where the church/school relationship was working particularly well. We invited a representative from these schools along with a representative from the associated church to attend a focus group discussions to dig into what makes a great church/school partnership and what the benefits of that are, particularly thinking about the benefits to the spiritual development of the children. 9 of them accepted our invitation and attended a focus group.

Text for Application

Title: “What are the characteristics of a church/school partnership which is effective in nurturing the spiritual growth of children”

Following on from my previous research into what is causing growth in U16 Sunday attendance we would like to complete the piece that focusses on church school partnerships.

1. **A survey for school leadership** asking questions around the relationship between the school and their local church or churches and other Christian organisations and the impact that has on the spiritual development of the children.
2. **A survey for a group of children within each school** (e.g. a school council or worship group) asking questions around what they feel helps them grow spiritually.
3. **A series of focus groups involving church and school leaders** identified from the survey as having or desiring a particularly effective partnership.