8 Believing and belonging

Church in crisis

At the start of this book, we saw how dire the situation has become for the churches in Britain as they seek to refashion their ministry to children and young people. In 1989, only 14% of the nation's children had anything to do with church-related Sunday activities. The other 86% were anywhere but in church.[1] That was then. Now the deregulation of Sundays has made the situation even worse. To take but one example: the Church of England alone saw 19,000 fewer under-sixteens attending on Sundays between 1992 and 1994 than before. Research suggests other denominations have fared no better.

The reasons for this are historically and sociologically complex. Certainly, the policies of the churches may not have helped; but by far and away the greatest factor has been the enormous social changes that have taken place over the last half-century. All western societies – even the supposedly religious United States – have become increasingly secularised to the point where the church and the gospel are at the fringes of people's lives at best. Belonging to a congregation is as foreign to most as is the thought of belonging to a sky-diving club. Both are seen as minority hobbies taken up by enthusiasts but not for the majority of ordinary, commonsense folk.

So what has happened to Sundays? The short answer is that they have become merely another leisure day in which church activities compete with everything else. We have only to reflect on the growth of retail shopping to realise this. The opening of huge out-of-town malls as leisure complexes in themselves has meant that shopping has become a typical Sunday leisure activity: sleep in, get up late, eat brunch, spend the majority of the day at the mall, come home, eat an evening meal in front

of the TV – this is the pattern for millions of people on the average Sunday. What's more, in a world where adults find themselves more and more stretched during the working week, the use of Sunday as a day to catch up with the regular chores of life or to find precious time for family life has become the norm. In the words of a Church of England report of 1991, '*Responsible parents will regard weekends as quality time for the family and for such good reasons are hardly likely to warm towards local church children's activities on a Sunday*.'[2]

The bottom line is that the churches are reaching no more than a tiny minority of children and young people on the day that is dedicated to God. Those who *are* reached are more or less already part of the church family. For the average (non-churchgoing) family, the thought of going to church doesn't even begin to enter their minds either on Sundays or any other day. Zygmunt Bauman puts it like this:

> …taxes [must] be paid, dinners cooked, roofs repaired; or the brief must be written or studied, letters mailed, applications filed, appointments kept, videos repaired, tickets bought … Before one has the time to think of eternity, bedtime is coming, and then another day filled to the brim with things to be done or undone.[3]

The trend toward decline is not confined to children. When we turn more specifically to teenagers, the picture is no more encouraging. Research published in 1999[4] revealed that in that year:

- The proportion of 15-19 year olds attending church on Sundays continues to decline.
- In England alone, only 6% of this age group worship regularly on Sundays (down from 8% in 1989).
- The 20-29 age group has also dropped by 3% in the same period.
- The total number of churchgoers across the age range has fallen from 5,441,000 in 1979 to 3,714,700 in 1999.

Whichever way we look, the churches are in crisis. However, before we despair absolutely, we need to bear in mind one further social fact: the problem faced by the churches is paralleled by secular youth organisations. Scouts and Guides connected with churches, for example, also

dropped by almost 16% for 14–17 year olds and 20% for 18–21 year olds between 1987 and 1993. The habit of joining and sticking with organisations whether religious or secular has been in decline for some years.[5]

Increasing estrangement

When we turn from impersonal statistics to how children and young people actually feel about the church, the picture is no less disturbing. There is an overwhelming sense of estrangement. Responses to surveys include comments such as:

- 'I looked round the church today – why does everyone look so sad? Why can't we have time to get to know each other?'[6]
- 'To make church more interesting for me I would like to watch 5 cartoons on a television hanging on the ceiling.'[7]
- 'What I like about church is when it is finished and it's time to chat to everyone.'[8]

These are comments from children who were habitually attending Sunday worship! When we consider how children perceive matters who hardly, if ever, set foot inside a church, we find ourselves torn between laughter and tears. Here are two sets of comments from youngsters whose lack of experience of church life is typical of the majority. The first is a conversation with an adult who has invited a nine-year old boy, Peter, to a forthcoming service:

> *Peter:* I wouldn't come next week, anyway. I don't like going to church.
> *Adult:* What don't you like about it?
> *Peter:* Well… they sing funny songs.
> *Adult:* Yes, I suppose hymns are a bit funny sometimes! What do you think is funny about them?
> *Peter:* Well, they've got bad language in them.
> *Adult:* (*Pause.*) Bad language?
> *Peter:* Yes. Things like 'God almighty' and 'Jesus Christ'.[9]

This conversation hovers between comedy and tragedy. Peter, brought up in a thoroughly non-churchgoing home, has encountered the names 'God' and 'Jesus' only as swear-words. He knows nothing else about

them. And solely on this basis he rejects the idea of attending worship.

Less dramatic – though perhaps more common – is the reaction of two brothers who have been to a church mid-week club but who, despite strong motivation, refuse to follow it up with a visit to church: 'We enjoyed making those Christian Aid posters to go in church for Harvest. But we won't come to the service; our Dad will say we're soft.'[10]

What both conversations bring out is how great a gap exists between the average child and the church. For most purposes, they could be on different planets or inhabit completely different dimensions in time and space. The experience of most children simply doesn't encompass churchgoing except perhaps at Christmas or other special occasions and then usually with Mums, Grandmas and sisters rather than with Dads and Granddads. Or to put it differently, the church – and along with it, the Christian faith – is largely irrelevant as far as most children's real-life worlds are concerned.

This is a drastic conclusion but the evidence supports it. The notion of belonging to a regular worshipping Christian community is as distant from the thoughts of most children as Earth is from the Milky Way.

But if *belonging* is a non-starter, what about *believing*?

Increasing scepticism

Here the evidence is harder to interpret. The 1994 Teenage Religion and Values Survey found that by the age of thirteen, 39% of young people said they believed in God, 26% said they didn't, while 35% were uncertain.[11] When we turn to younger age groups, there is little reliable data.

However, the educationalist David Hay has suggested that whereas even only a few years ago the usual age at which young people overtly began to disown religious belief was typically twelve or thirteen (the onset of puberty in which they were also seriously confronted with scientific reasoning for the first time), this has now dropped to as young as nine or ten. Scepticism is being shown at an ever-earlier age. Speaking of western societies, he notes that: 'It is around the age of 12 that children … typically have their first serious induction into the scientific tradition of the Enlightenment, with its associated religious scepticism. That children are now often receiving instruction from a much younger age may have the effect of inhibiting early spirituality at an even more sensitive, vulnerable stage.'[12]

What are we to make of this? Superficially, it's tempting to conclude

that children simply cease to believe in God at a younger and younger age. But surely this is too simple. Can belief evaporate just like that?

Buried belief

David Hay thinks not. In his view, children don't stop believing; but they do find it increasingly difficult to express belief once they enter a stage where to do so is regarded as unacceptable, sissy or unscientific. In other words, when they feel their peer group, or significant adults around them (eg parents or teachers) prefer them to avoid religion altogether. Remember the words of the brothers quoted above: 'Dad will say we're soft.' They could just as easily have said, with their peers in mind: 'It's not cool.'

The notion of belonging to a regular worshipping Christian community is as distant from the thoughts of most children as Earth is from the Milky Way.

How has such a situation arisen? To be sure, the general process of secularisation we noted in chapter one has played a large part. But, specifically, for nearly 300 years, western culture has systematically made it more and more difficult to express any kind of beliefs in other than scientific or quasi-scientific language. To gain 'street cred', it becomes necessary to use the language of science (or at least appear to do so). Anything else will either be regarded as inferior or disregarded altogther. Reference to religion or the spiritual will automatically be thought of as cranky or misguided. At best it will be seen as a purely personal matter. Thus, 'The adult world into which our children are inducted is more often than not destructive to their spirituality.'[13]

What has been shut out by the front door, however, has a habit of sneaking in by the back. The researches conducted by Hay and others into the spiritual lives of children demonstrate that the process described above has not destroyed belief – it has merely suppressed it. When questioned sensitively and appropriately, children from all backgrounds and in various settings speak freely of their awareness of God or spiritual experience. The publication by Hay and Rebecca Nye of their careful research into children's attitudes is full of conversations with children

which illustrate this. One in particular stands out: John, a six year old, attended church only twice a year yet had firm Christian beliefs. Asked how he came to hold them, he replied,

> I worked about it and I received… one day… I was with my mum and I begged her… um… for me to go to um… some church. And we did it and… I prayed… and after that praying… I knew that good was on my side. And I heard him in my mind say this: 'I am with you. Every step you go. The Lord is with you. May sins be forgiven.'[14]

What John experienced seems on any reckoning to have been an encounter with God. True, it may not have been a standard evangelical conversion but nonetheless for a six year old, the story he recounts is amazing. Even more astonishing – given his lack of church background – is the next bit:

> Well once I went um… in the night and I saw this bishopy kind of alien. I said, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'I am the Holy Spirit.' I did think he was the Holy Spirit.[15]

John's mother subsequently told him he could not have spoken to the Holy Spirit since the latter looks like a ball of fire (she was not a church-goer but had some residual Bible imagery in mind). Nonetheless, John still commented that afterwards 'I often felt the Holy Spirit in me.'

At one level, it's difficult to know exactly what did happen. Did John undergo a genuine religious experience of God's Spirit or not, and what does John's story tell us about the openness and capacity of children towards God? Also, what does John's story tell us about the reality of God's grace being already present and active ahead of any human intervention?

John, though, was six – well below the age at which Hay argues that a scientific worldview begins to suppress openness towards religious ideas. What about older children?

Here we find evidence both of a willingness to describe spiritual experiences but also of a growing struggle. Ten year old Jenny, for example, could speak of the time 'that I stop and think, "How did I get here?" Well, that's when I switch onto God. That's when I start thinking about

him.'[16] Yet asked why she had found a particular hymn meaningful, she found it difficult to talk freely in religious language: 'You think it's quite easy [when singing it], but when you try to explain it ... you don't know which words to use.'[17] Rebecca Nye goes on to describe her research conversations with Jenny's contemporaries as follows:

> For others it was apparent that embarrassment was at the root of their reluctance. They were cautious of straying for too long beyond the acceptable confines of secular discourse. Some children admitted they were afraid of being laughed at or thought stupid or even mad … if they talked about their personal sense of the religious in their lives.[18]

What all this points to is a highly complex situation. On one hand, we have the vast majority of children estranged from the church. Yet on the other, there is clear evidence of an underlying capacity for spiritual awareness and even commitment despite the pressures of peers and adults to suppress or ridicule them. This poses a unique challenge for children's evangelism. It is to the strategies required by such a challenge we now turn.

A new approach

In its most simplistic form, the conventional logic of evangelism – whether directed towards adults or children – has run something like this: first, find your audience (usually through some kind of special event); second, preach the gospel; third, invite commitment; fourth, encourage those who have indicated commitment to join a church and become disciples. This is what might be termed the *believe and belong* model: belonging to a community of faith is the outcome of believing in Christ. First believe, then belong.

This is the approach in which I (and many like me) was schooled. It was adopted by children's workers for decades from the earliest beach and caravan missions to today's modern approaches. Where would we be without it?

But, given the complex situation described in the first half of this chapter, I want to suggest that rather than abandoning or abolishing it we

also need to look at the alternative strategies which exist.

If the traditional model was based on believe-then-belong, the alternative approach could be thought of as belong-then-believe.

Put simply, the belong-then-believe approach starts from the view that individuals, whether they are five, fifteen or fifty years old, are not isolated beings who come to faith in Christ by a process of hearing the gospel and thinking individualistically about it. Rather, they are already social beings who come to the gospel with a cluster of views, beliefs and feelings pre-formed by their participation in family, community, society and culture. This is the point we have noted in chapter one. In other words, individual *belief* cannot be separated from social *belonging*.

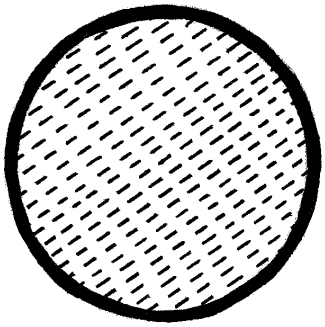
Now in the traditional evangelism model, this is recognised but only *after* the individual has come to personal faith in Christ. What it says, in effect, is something like this: 'Believe as an individual then you can belong to the group': believe-belong.

But turn things around. We invite children (or adults for that matter) to belong to the group first, then to believe: belong-believe. They become members of the faith-seeking group first, then they discover the reality of Jesus for themselves by virtue of being part of that group. Belonging to the group precedes personal faith, not the other way round as the conventional approach assumes. Individuals do not come to Christ first as a precondition of becoming members of the faith-group: they are members prior to discovering Christ.

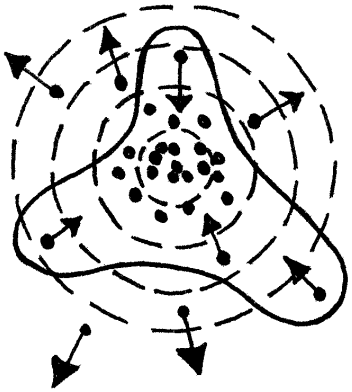
This may seem like hair-splitting but the implications are considerable. Consider the diagram on the opposite page.

In the first drawing, the hard circle represents the fixed boundary of belief that defines whether or not someone is a member of the community of faith. They can belong inside the circle only by believing certain things such as that Jesus is the Son of God and that he has died for our sins. (Different faith groups would draw up different lists of what constitutes an adequate set of beliefs to qualify for getting inside the circle.) The crucial thing is that there is a clearly defined boundary that decides whether an individual is in or out. Once inside, they belong to the faith-community which undertakes to nurture them. In this diagram, *belonging is the outcome of believing*.

In the second drawing, there is no hard and fast boundary. Instead, the focus is the centre which represents the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith and life. The key issue, then, is not whether individuals have



Model A: believe – belong



Model B: belong – believe[19]

crossed a boundary defined by certain beliefs but *in which direction they are moving*. Are they looking towards Christ or not? Are they moving towards him or away from him? Do they belong to those whose line-of-sight is towards Jesus or do they belong to those whose line-of-sight points elsewhere? On this model, it is direction not boundary that is important. Belonging is defined by whether someone is moving towards the centre which is Christ rather than by whether they believe certain doctrinal propositions. As Monica Hill puts it, 'The concern is not with uniformity but with movement towards the centre. Some are far away, coming from another direction. Nearness is the dimension of biblical knowledge, spiritual growth and commitment to Jesus Christ who is the Centre.'[20]

It is important to realise in this second model, however, that beliefs are not irrelevant. Knowing and following Jesus is a matter of believing certain truths as well as emotional gravitation. As we have seen in our earlier discussion of faith, the believing component is essential; for how could we know we were moving towards the centre unless we had some idea of who Jesus is and what he has done?

Hill makes this clear. But unlike the first model, belonging to the faith-group does not first require crossing a fixed boundary. It requires us to be looking in the same direction as fellow believer-seekers and moving with them. Believing does not *precede* belonging but is part and parcel of the same directional movement. Indeed, it may be the fact of belonging to the faith-group that produces and reinforces belief so that belonging leads to believing.

We can perhaps illustrate the difference between the two models by imagining two churches. The first, West Hill Independent Church decides to hold a series of five evangelistic evenings for children and invites an outside evangelist to speak at them. The programme is designed to preach the gospel and to challenge those who attend to give their lives to Christ. Each evening concludes with a Bible message and invitation for the children to come to Jesus with the help of counsellors. Once they have done so, they will be invited to attend Sunday activities so as to help them grow in their new-found faith. The aim is clear: believe so that you may belong. You cannot be inside the circle of faith until you have consciously believed in Christ. Once this has happened, you're in.

The second church, Trinity Community Church, has a different approach. It too wants to share the gospel with children but has decided to organise a series of kids club evenings every Wednesday for six weeks. Along with lots of fun activities, each evening will contain Bible-based teaching aimed at encouraging children to understand more about Christ. Only at the end of six weeks will an evangelistic invitation be issued. In the meantime, attenders will be invited to join Sunday activities if they wish but this is not a requirement. The organisers make it clear that attendance on Wednesdays is their primary aim.

What's the difference between the approaches adopted by the two churches? At first, it may seem very little: simply the postponement of an evangelistic invitation till the end of the sixth evening.

In fact, the difference is far greater than that. It is a matter of two distinct views of the relationship between believing and belonging. At West Hill, the view is that a short, sharp mission will bring children to a point of decision quickly so that they can then join the church. Not until they have made a commitment can they be counted as belonging.

Trinity views the matter differently. They have deliberately delayed any evangelistic invitation until the children have had time to form rela-

tionships in the context of weekly activities designed not to pressurise them but to enable them to build a sense of belonging. During this period, they will be introduced to teaching about Jesus in such a way that he is presented as a character they want to know more about. The picture they will build up over six weeks will give them a chance to make up their own minds as to whether they want to move in his direction or not. Moreover, the invitation (when it comes) will be as much to continue as members of the Kids Club who enjoy weekly activities together as it will be to come to individually-professed faith in him. The two are seen as going hand in hand. The organisers reckon that professions of faith in Christ will happen in due course as children make up their minds about which direction they want to travel. Being individuals, of course, they will do so at their own pace, though they will always be with fellow-travellers who are heading in the same direction.

In these two examples, as the reader will already have guessed, West Hill represents the 'fixed boundary' approach to evangelism. Belonging is defined by believing: evangelism is designed to produce belief first and belonging second. By contrast, Trinity embodies the 'directional' approach. Believing is encouraged by belonging. Being a member of the faith-group is the way into belief rather than the outcome of it.

There is a place for both approaches provided that they are seen as complementary rather than rivals and provided that each is suited to its context. However, it may be that in today's world, the majority of unchurched children will best be reached by an approach which aims first and foremost at developing a sense of group belonging before it invites individual commitment to Christ. My own view is that this fits well with the processes of faith development I have outlined in earlier chapters.

So what about traditional beach missions and holiday weeks? These are necessarily compressed into a few days which alters the dynamic and 'feel' of activities, particularly if they take place in a residential setting. Historically, many operated on the traditional believe-belong model and experience shows that many children came to faith in Christ in this way over the years. However, increasingly the belong-believe model can make great use of the strong sense of community (albeit temporary) created by mission and holiday weeks, which can be a great backdrop to sharing faith.

But what about the objection that it is impossible to belong to the community of faith without first having demonstrated belief? To this, I

find myself replying that if the insights of faith development theory are in any way true or if the theological argument I have put forward in the previous chapters has any validity, children should be counted inside the kingdom of God until they explicitly renounce it. Moreover, if the model of belonging and believing is allowed, the need to show adherence to a set of beliefs before being counted inside the circle of faith is removed. Belonging is a matter of being with others on the same faith journey rather than being judged by profession of certain articles of faith.

Given the situation described earlier by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, children who are discouraged from talking about spiritual experiences or issues at home or school or among their peers may need a long period of time in which to build up relationships and confidence. Only when they see it is okay to speak about such experiences and questions will they be able to open their hearts deeply in such a way as to discover the love of Christ for themselves. They need to belong before they can believe, or express belief. In short, belonging first, believing second.

Conclusions

What kind of evangelistic strategies might be appropriate in the light of all I have said? It is important to grasp that I am not arguing for one model alone. Churches must think carefully about which will best fit the needs of those it is seeking to reach. It will be important to choose an approach that fits the immediate context and people rather than one that happens to suit the predilections or experience of the church's leaders.

But whichever approach is chosen, the need to create a sense of belonging will be paramount. This is as true of the conventional mission as of the mid-week club. Only when they feel able to engage with spiritual questions without being ridiculed or sidelined will children from non-Christian homes open themselves to the gospel in all its fullness. Whether this is in the context of a five-day evangelistic campaign or whether in a longer-term environment, the point remains the same: belonging will facilitate believing. This is the radical message we need to hear and practise.

Notes to chapter 8

1 For details see the Church of England report *All God's Children?* London, National Society/Church House Publishing 1991, p3.
2 Above, p22.
3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents,* Cambridge, Polity Press 1997, p169.
4 Peter Brierley (ed), *The Tide is Running Out,* Bromley, Christian Research 2000.
5 *Youth a Part: Young People and the Church*, London, National Society/Church House Publishing, 1996, p13.
6 General Synod Board of Education, *Children in the Way,* London, National Society/Church House Publishing, 1988, p 26. Extracts are copyright © The National Society and are reproduced by permission.
7 *Children in the Way,* p8.
8 *Children in the Way,* p26.
9 *Children in the Way,* p18.
10 *Children in the Way,* p19.
11 Leslie J. Francis, William K. Kay, Alan Kerby and Olaf Fogwill, *Fast-moving Currents in Youth Culture,* Oxford/Sutherland, Lynx 1995, p166.
12 David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child,* London: HarperCollins 1998, p50.
13 Hay/Nye, p21.
14 Hay/Nye, p102.
15 Hay/Nye, p102.
16 Hay/Nye, p106.
17 Hay/Nye, p105.
18 Hay/Nye, p105.
19 Illustration from *Youth A Part*, as above, p14. Illustration copyright © Central Board of Finance, 1996, and is reproduced by permission.
20 Quoted in *Youth a Part,* as above, p15.