Church Families and Young People Page 1

amilies are crucially important for the Kingdom of God! Perhaps that's one reason why there are so many in churches, and one reason why the Church is depicted in Scripture as the Bride of Christ. The word "family" has, however, different meanings today. It traditionally has meant a man and his wife and one or more children. When teenagers were asked to define a family, three-fifths (56%) said those "who love or care about you deeply." Having a blood relationship was only suggested by two-fifths (37%).

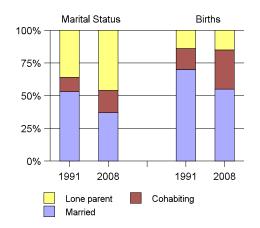
Households in Great Britain - and church households

Table 17.1.1 gives the official percentages of the different types of household in Britain. There have been an estimated 55,000 civil partnerships since they were officially allowed in December 2005 (to the end of 2011), but even if none of these had divorced, and a few have, their total in terms of households in 2011 would be just 0.2%. Married couples includes those not yet with children, those with children and "empty nester" families where the children have grown up and left home. Lone parent households are mostly because one partner (invariably the man) has left.

Table 17.1.1:Types of Households, GB, 2001-2016

Fig 17.1.1: Marital status and Births

Type of household	2001 %	2006 %	2011 %	2016 %	Church 2011%
One person	29	29	33	35	20
Married couple	46	45	41	38	74
Cohabiting couple	11	12	12	13	2
Lone parent	10	1 0	9	8	1
Other	4	4	5	6	3
Base, mns (=100%)	24	25	26	28	2



"Cohabiting" households are 12% of the total, but are much higher among those in their 20s and early 30s (36%). They are increasingly likely to have children and thus form a family, as can be seen in Figure 17.1.1. One person households in the general population (which include the divorced and widowed unless cohabiting) are almost equally split between those under 30 and those 60 or over.

The proportion of these different types of family among churchgoers is very different from the general population as may be seen from the last column in Table 17.1.1. Married couples comprise three-quarters (74%) of church people. Only 2% of churchgoers cohabit, and only 1% are lone parents. Single people over 60 are likely to be much more than half the 20% shown for all singles (13% to 7% of those under 40). Many older women are now widows, so have been married. These differences from the general population are huge, and very significant in showing which groups of people are, and which are not, coming to church. In general terms, we miss out on many of those single people under 30, cohabiting people and lone parents who together make up about two-fifths (37%) of the population!

Transmission of the faith: does it work?

Families are hugely vital for the transmission of the faith. It is in a family context very often that children first learn to say grace before meals, or learn about Jesus in a story before bedtime. "Tell me about Jesus walking on the water," asked one 7-year grand-daughter recently, so granddad obliged. If the parents are regular churchgoers, their children will usually be part of a creche, Sunday School or similar, Brigade or other youth group from birth even into their teenage years.

The big question of course is, "Does it work?" Are children growing up in Christian homes more likely to become Christians when they are old enough to decide for themselves? A survey for the newly formed Richard Dawkins Foundation found that 72% of British people would call themselves Christian if they had been christened or baptised, but such a statement will not satisfy most church leaders.2

A large 1967 survey asking about the age that people experienced their conversion and whether or not they came from a Christian home showed the following results,3 to which is attached the latest study although based on a much smaller sample4:

Table 17.1.2: Age of conversion

Age of Conversion, 1967		From a Christian Home	"Know I am Christian" 2010	
Under 12	17%	81%	35%	
12 to 19	59%	45%	40%	
20 or over	24%	37%	25%	
Base (=100%)	4,083	2,094	350	

Thus while one-sixth of those Christians surveyed (who, in this survey, were all from evangelical churches), 17%, were converted under the age of 12, four-fifths (81%) of these came from a Christian home, and one-fifth (19%) did not. Of the three-fifths of Christians (59%) who were converted in their teenage years, just under half (45%) came from a Christian home, and just over half (55%) did not. Of the quarter (24%) of Christians who were converted when adult, twofifths (37%) came from a Christian home and just over three-fifths (63%) did not.

Thus the influence of a Christian home in conversion diminishes the older a person becomes, but it is especially strong for the relative few who find Christ as a child. If asked if their home was an influence, 34% of those converted as children said it was, as did 51% of those converted as teenagers and 15% of those converted as adults 20 or over; but actual and felt influence are not identical.

Two-thirds (69%) of Christians surveyed had a definite conversion in the 1960s (that is, one in which the person knew a specific date when it happened), the same percentage whether a person came from a Christian home or not. This percentage has fallen considerably over the years – it was closer to 35% in the 1990s⁵ and is probably nearer 25% now. This is not to denigrate in any way those who do not have a specific date for their coming to faith and have either "grown up" believing or have gradually come to faith over a period of time.

Other features of having a Christian home

- 1) You generally stay in the same denomination. The most recent British Social Attitudes' Survey⁶ (BSA) showed that about half of adults stay in the same denomination as that in which they grew up, and about 60% if the denomination is other than the Church of England. Very few change denomination – the greatest change is moving from having a notional allegiance to some denomination to having no religion. The BSA survey also showed that the proportion of adults in 2010 who grew up in a recognised "religious" home remains quite high – over two-fifths (44%).
- 2) You may still go to church. Some people go to church for some while before they are converted for those coming from a Christian home this was an important influence upon them (so they said). However, for irregular churchgoers, the influence of friends and peers becomes more important than their family.
- 3) Your sibling order may be important. An interesting study in the year 2000⁷ of children brought up in a Baptist Manse found that the second child was less likely to find faith than the first, third or subsequent children. The child's gender is not important.8
- 4) Your church attendance will probably be regular. One big difference, however, in churchgoing between those who grew up in a Christian home and those who didn't, is that the former are much more likely to attend church regularly – 90% v 51%. Since many current churchgoers were converted in their teens, those from non-Christian homes would presumably be more likely to attend church irregularly after their conversion, which is an increasing pattern of modern church attendance.
- 5) The faith is demonstrated, not just taught. A Christian home isn't just one which teaches (and transmits) the faith, but also demonstrates the practice (as in church attendance, and to a greater or lesser extent, presumably in Christian character and lifestyle).

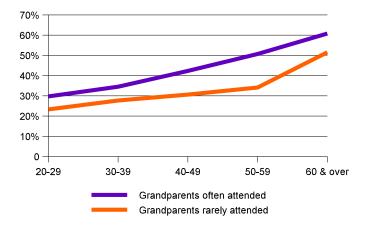
Generations are also important

It is possible to go one stage further. Having churchgoing grandparents is also likely to influence a person's church attendance. The "Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers" study in 2002 (where a "tweenager" was someone aged between 10 and 14) showed that 60% of tweenagers attended church if their grandparents did.9

Another study of families found, from parents, that 38% of their children, now adult churchgoers, had grandparents who attended church often, whereas only 28% of their children were churchgoers if their grandparents had not been frequent attenders. These two percentages are averages across all adults aged 20 or over, but they varied by age of adult, as shown in Figure 17.1.2.¹⁰ A parallel study in Australia found similar results.

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Figure 17.1.2: Grandchildren attending church by age by frequency of grandparental attendance

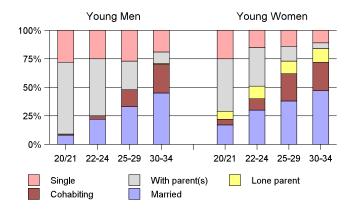


The authors of this study (Professor David Voas and Dr Ingrid Storm) suggest either that there could be a direct influence of grandparents on their grandchildren, or that the influence is indirect since these results are mediated through the response of the religiosity of the parents, the in-between generation reporting on the church going of both their parents and their children.

Other factors relevant for church leaders focussing on church families

- 1) <u>Size of family</u>. The average size of household that Christians have is slightly smaller than in the general UK population, some 2.3 people to 2.4 on average.¹¹ (The largest households are Muslim, with 3.8 in each). Two-fifths of UK families (41%) have no dependent children (under 16). One-sixth (18%) have one dependent child, another sixth (18%) have two, and 8% have 3 or more. 15% have non-dependent children only (that is, are "empty nesters"). When measured in evangelical churches, these percentages were similar, but with slightly fewer families having no children, and slightly more 3 or more children.¹²
- 2) <u>Male attendance</u>. The Voas and Storm study found UK men more likely to attend church than women if their parents had *not* attended church, and wondered if this was because men were more likely to marry churchgoing women than vice versa, and thus get drawn into churchgoing.
- 3) <u>Family important but not the only influence</u>. Young people today relate across a wide fabric of social contacts. In a large study of 11 to 18 year olds on line (10,500 respondents) looking at intergenerational patterns of religious beliefs, one question asked about the key reference areas for their beliefs. A quarter (27%) answered "family," and another quarter (25%) "religious teaching." Others said, "religious teachers" (18%), "science" (11%), and "friends" (7%).¹³
- 4) <u>Leadership of youth activities</u> in churches is crucial, which is why many churches employ Youth Workers. Having young people engaged in determining their own actual programme is important: 87% of teenagers leave church because they think it is boring.¹⁴
- 5) <u>The wider world impacts hugely</u>. Youth (under 25) unemployment is a critical worry. In January 2012 it was 22% in the UK against an overall unemployment rate of 8%.¹⁵ As a consequence many young people have to continue living at home, unable to afford to go elsewhere, as Figure 17.1.3 indicates.¹⁶

Figure 17.1.3: Living arrangements, by age and gender, 2008



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Conclusion

All this confirms the fact that Christian homes are more likely to nurture Christian children, though this is by no means predictable or universal. As David Kinnaman says, "Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time." The impact of pressures today – Sunday football, the greater incidence of Christian divorce, extra school activities, easier media availability, the greater pull of friends and peers – makes Christian parenting more difficult. We need to support those parents we have in our church, and perhaps follow what some churches undertake – form parental groups where parental issues can be discussed and shared. It is not just that children are vital for the next generation of churchgoers – their parents are as well!

NOTES

- 1) Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers, Peter Brierley, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2002, Page 31.
- 2) Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science quoted in Plain Truth, Spring 2012, Page 11.
- 3) Background to the Task, Scripture Union, 1968.
- 4) Faith Journeys, research by Christian Research, Bible Society, article in Christianity, 2010.
- 5) Finding Faith in the 1990s, Christian Research, results given in Quadrant, March, 1998.
- 6) British Social Attitudes 28, edited by Alison Park et al, NatCen and Sage, 2012.
- 7) Manse Children: Some indicators towards their Adult Faith, Ken Sykes, 11/00
- 8) Op cit., Item 3.
- 9) Op cit., Item 1.
- 10) The Intergenerational Transmission of Churchgoing in England and Australia, David Voas and Ingrid Storm, Review of Religious Research, Volume 53, No 4, January 2012, Page 388.
- 11) Focus on Ethnicity and Religion, 2006 edition, Office of National Statistics, ed. Joy Dobbs et al, Palgrave Macmillan.
- 12) Living the Christian Life series of surveys, Brierley Consultancy, forthcoming in 2012.
- 13) Presentation on "Young People's Perspective on Religion" by Nicola Madge of Brunel University at Young People and Religion Conference, May 2011, at King's College, London.
- 14) Article "It takes a whole church to raise a child", Krish Kandiah, Christianity magazine, March 2012, Page 39.
- 15) Time magazine, 16th April, 2012, Page 25.
- 16) Population Trends, No 138, Winter 2009, Office of National Statistics, Palgrave Macmillan.
- 17) You Lost Me, David Kinnaman, Baker Books, 2011, Page 13.

28th April 2012