



Reconnecting with a Missing Generation

November 2000

Reconnecting with a Missing Generation

**A Report commissioned by the
Presbytery of North Belfast
and the Board of Mission in Ireland**

Rev Norman Hamilton and Danielle Welch

November 2000

CONTENTS

	Foreword	3
1.0	Introduction	4
2.0	Looking at the statistics	6
3.0	Looking at the bigger picture	9
4.0	Reasons for decline	11
5.0	Two case studies	13
6.0	A basis for effective ministry	18
7.0	Summary of conclusions	29
	Postscript	31

Further copies of this report are available from the Communications Office, Church House, Belfast BT1 6DW. Tel: (028) 9032 2284. Email: info@presbyterianireland.org.

The report can be downloaded at www.presbyterianireland.org/statements.

A limited number of copies of the full research document of which 'Reconnecting with a Missing Generation' is a summary are available from the Communications Office, Church House.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors.

FOREWORD

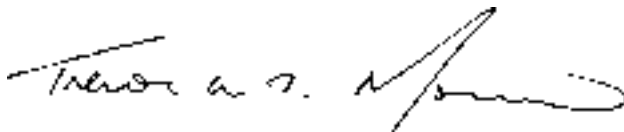
by Right Rev Dr Trevor Morrow, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

I am delighted to commend this paper to you as Moderator.

Our General Assembly has been concerned over the past few years to track the changes in membership of our church, and to try to understand better the reasons behind the apparent decline. This research paper was jointly sponsored by the Board of Mission in Ireland and the Presbytery of North Belfast, and makes challenging and at times very disturbing reading.

It's strength lies not only in the rigour of the statistical analysis and comment, but in the detailed suggestions of a possible way forward with a generation whose connections with the church and the gospel are rapidly disappearing.

My heart's desire is that we will be able to make Jesus and his message relevant and exciting at the start of this new century. Facing up to the realities on the ground, making difficult choices and setting new priorities in a changing world are tasks that many church leaders, elders and ministers are now ready to do. I sincerely hope that this paper will help to sharpen our thinking and encourage us to radical, yet Biblically faithful and God honouring action.



Trevor WJ Morrow
November 2000

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

Churches are well aware of the ongoing and pressing need to reach young people – teenagers and children alike. Much time and resources are currently invested in ministry aimed at this generation. All this work is necessary, and vital. Yet it is our concern that, even in the midst of excellent provision for young people, there is a generation of adults who are “slipping away” from our churches. Our contention is that in many of our churches, there is a crisis in young adult attendance and involvement.

A number of factors have combined to focus our thinking on this age group. In particular, at the 1999 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the continuing decline in adults in membership and the need to purposefully address this decline was recognised in a Resolution from the Board of Finance and Administration, which asked that:

“Boards and Presbyteries consider all the available statistics on the continuing decline in families and persons in membership, especially among younger people.”

This paper may be considered a direct response to this request.

1.2 Research Title

The research project was given the following remit:

To explore the reasons behind the decline of those in the 20-45 age group who claim connection to a local congregation AND who are actively involved in its core activity. In particular, to better understand and engage with those who encourage their children to be involved in the local church, without any obvious involvement themselves.

The first aim of the paper is to

- (a) Establish the extent of decline in church involvement among the 20-45 age group.

Here we are interested both in the numbers of adults who claim a connection with a local congregation, AND the extent to which this “connection” is carried through into church involvement. The title refers to involvement in the “core activity” of a church. This may be taken to refer to Sunday services of worship, as well as mid-week meetings (whose content is based on worship, teaching, or prayer). For the purposes of this paper other activity of the church can be described as “fringe” activity. We are primarily concerned with the measure of involvement in “core activity”.

The second aim of the paper is to:

- (b) Attempt to identify the key reasons for the decline of church involvement among the 20-45 age group.

Presuming that there is evidence of such decline, a key aim of this paper is to investigate the reasons behind this. This in turn will help us to achieve the third aim of this paper, which is to:

- (c) Identify patterns and principles of ministry that will help local churches to engage properly with the 20-45 age group.

Within this context we have a particular, though by no means exclusive, concern to reach those who send their children to church activities, but have no “core” involvement themselves.

It is perhaps important to state that this paper takes as given the central theological and Biblical principles undergirding all evangelical enterprise. The analyses offered and conclusions reached are not intended to supplant or modify in any way full confessional evangelicalism, but rather to help shape the practical framework within which effective ministry can and we believe must take place.

Finally, we readily acknowledge that our research does not directly address the issue of the relationship between local churches and the local communities in which they work. This area has already been the subject of a good deal of other research and publication, most of which is available through the Belfast Churches’ Urban Development Committee at 48 Elmwood Avenue, Belfast BT9 6AZ and which will be of real interest to many readers of this paper.

2.0 LOOKING AT THE STATISTICS

2.1 Collection of Data

Ten Presbyterian congregations (nine from the North Belfast Presbytery and one from South Belfast) were selected for statistical study to provide a good picture of the involvement of 20-45s. Eliminating any extraordinary circumstances, these figures could be taken as a general indicator of trends in church attendance among this age group in the area, at least among Presbyterian congregations in the Belfast area. Comparison to more general data available, and to the English situation, would help us to see how the trends in this sample fit any wider picture.

Our statistical analysis was based upon the results of the 1997 and 2000 PCI Census, which recorded attendance during one specific week. Attendance at a Sunday morning service (a central core activity) is the primary measure of attendance on which our analysis is based. Comparisons are made across the 3-year period to establish whether or not there is a pattern of decline in Sunday morning attendance among the 20-45 age group. Owing to the age-banding used in the Census, results are given in two categories: 25-34, and 35-44. The following analysis is based on complete figures available from the 10 congregations, along with figures for *either* 1997 *or* 2000 from a further 12 congregations.

2.2 Analysis of Census Results

The following is a summary of the main findings of our analysis.

(a) In the majority of congregations studied, the proportion of the congregation attending on a Sunday morning who are aged 25-44 has DECLINED both in relative and absolute terms between 1997 and 2000.

(b) Decline in attendance at Sunday morning services is most apparent in the 25-34 age group.

Only one congregation has seen any increase in attendance among 25-34s. ALL other congregations show a decline amongst this age group. The range of decline is 1.5% to 8.6%. In each case where the proportion of the congregation who are aged 25-34 has declined, so has the actual number of people attending in this age group.

By contrast, seven of the ten congregations have actually seen an increase in the proportion of their congregation aged 35-44, over the last 3 years. In five of the seven, a percentage increase is coupled with an increase in the actual number of those attending.

We need to interpret these results carefully. It is difficult to tell at exactly what point these churches are “gaining” or “losing” members. Clearly, any increases in the numbers attending aged 35-44, when coupled with a decrease in the numbers aged 25-34, could point simply to the fact that in the 3 year period some church attendees had “aged” into the older category. However, the same effect should be at work in the younger category: some of those aged 15-24 should be expected to have “aged” into the 25-34 age group. In each age group we could expect to see small net increases or decreases where the numbers of those “ageing into” and “ageing out of” the age group are not absolutely identical.

What is critical about the figures for the 25-34 age group is the magnitude of the decline in some cases. In the most extreme example, the decline in this age group is 8.6%. Arguably, therefore, taking the age group (25-44) as a whole masks the real nature of decline in these congregations. It tends to exaggerate the decline in the 35-44 age group, and tends to hide the extent of decline in the 25-34 age group.

(c) The percentage of those aged 25-44 in the ten congregations studied is much lower than in the population at large.

In general terms, figures show that in the whole of Northern Ireland the proportion of the population aged 20-44 is actually rising. Estimates for 2001 show the figure for the general population rising marginally to 35.8%. The average figure for those in the ten congregations aged 25-44 was 16.6%. Even allowing for the difference in age banding, the discrepancy between the two sets of figures is apparent.

To make the comparison more precise, we also compared the figures (from 2000) from four of the congregations studied, with the 1991 census results for the specific electoral ward in which the church was situated. Even allowing for differences in the ‘base years’, the discrepancy between the two sets of figures was again obvious – the church population in the age group being at least a half to a third lower. The church is clearly failing to connect with many in this age group.

(d) The discrepancy between the proportion of those in the general population and the proportion of those in church among the same age group is much more marked in the 25-34 age group, than in the 35-44 age group. Those in the 25-34 age group are alarmingly under represented.

Once again, when the 25-44 age group is divided into two groups, the picture changes. In all cases, the proportion of those in the congregation aged 35-44 is almost the same as, or higher than, the proportion of the local population in the same age group.

By contrast, the results for the 25-34 age group show a marked difference between the figures for church population and local population. If we take the average figures over the four electoral wards, the percentage of the population in this age group is 14.6%, while the percentage of the church population aged 25-34 is just 4.2%. This age group is hugely under represented in these congregations.

2.3 Summary Conclusions

Conclusion 1. Taking the results of the survey in these ten Presbyterian congregations in Belfast, there is evidence of major decline in the number of those aged 25-44 involved in any core activity of the church, between 1997 and 2000. In this instance “core activity” refers primarily to Sunday morning attendance.

Conclusion 2. The most significant decline has taken place in the 25-34 age group, where none of the ten congregations has seen significant growth, and nine have seen decline.

Conclusion 3. This decline is not in line with general population trends, either across Northern Ireland as a whole, or in the specific areas in which the congregations are situated. The number involved in any core activity of the church aged 25-34 is markedly low when compared to the number of the local population in the same age group. The church appears to be failing to sufficiently reach or involve this age group.

3.0 LOOKING AT THE BIGGER PICTURE

3.1 English Church Attendance Survey 2000

The results of the English Church Attendance Survey (known as ECAS) allow us to put the statistics that we have gathered so far into a wider national perspective. How does the picture of attendance in Presbyterian congregations we studied in Belfast compare or contrast with English Church Attendance? Are there any trends in English church going that may serve as indicators or warnings for our own situation?

ECAS recorded attendance on one Sunday within a particular month in 1998, with previous surveys having been taken in both 1989 and 1979. All the ECAS figures used can be found in Dr. Peter Brierley's book, "The Tide is Running Out", published in Spring 2000 by Christian Research.

3.2 ECAS results: Decline in Sunday Attendance

Brierley makes a comparison between the percentage of the church population attending Sunday services in each age group over a period of twenty years, using results from 1979, 1989 and 1998. In real terms, the number of those in both the 20-29 and 30-44 age groups has declined drastically in the last two decades. The number of those attending in their 20s has fallen by 45%. The number attending in their 30s and 40s fell by 7% during the 1980s, but by 15% in the 1990s.

Comparison with our Belfast figures again highlights the crisis of attendance among the 25-34 age group. In the ECAS results, those aged 20-29 make up 9% of the church population. Overall, the 25-34 age group in our survey make up 8.5% of the population. However, in many individual congregations, the figure is much lower than this. In 5 congregations the figure is less than 4%, in a further four it is less than 6%. By any standard, and certainly in comparison to the English Church figures, the churches studied in North Belfast have a very low number of 25-34s attending on a Sunday morning.

Further analysis brings us to the most alarming finding yet. While the ECAS results showed that the percentage of the English church population aged 20-29 fell by 2% in two decades, our results showed a decline of 2.7% in the 25-34 age group over just 3 years. In real terms, the number of those attending on a Sunday morning aged 25-34 fell by a staggering 34.5% over just 3 years. The decline in the 25-34 age group is disproportionately, and alarmingly high.

3.3 Summary conclusions from the comparison with ECAS

Conclusion 4. Comparison serves to further highlight the crisis in attendance among the 25-34 age group in the congregations studied. There are proportionally fewer 25-34 year olds in the church population in this study, than in the ECAS results. Decline is slightly higher than in the ECAS results. Alarming, the actual numbers of those attending in this age group in the Belfast results has fallen by 34.5% over just 3 years.

Conclusion 5. Comparison shows that the 35-44 age group in our study is NOT declining at the same rate as in the ECAS results.

3.4 Implications of the comparison with ECAS results

The need, in the Belfast situation, to address the decline of involvement in core church activity among 25-34 year olds seems evident. Some comments from Brierley's own conclusions are worth noting. The accelerating decline in attendance among 30s and 40s in the English churches leads Brierley to comment that:

"The Church is missing out in those of parental age with young children".

He attributes *some* of the massive decline in under-19s to the decline in the number of *parents* now attending church. While the churches in our study have a greater number of those in the 35-44 age group, it is worth considering what the position will be in ten years time. Given the low numbers in the 25-34 age group, we may expect to see numbers in the 35-44 age group decline as the younger group ages. It would take significant change in current trends for these churches to retain the current numbers of 35-44 year olds over the next decade. The implication, if Brierley's reasoning is to be followed, is that we should expect to see decline in the number of children and young people attending.

Already there is prima facie evidence of a rapid fall off in church connection amongst children and young people - many of whose parents are in the 20 - 34 age range. In June 2000 the Presbyterian Church in Ireland recorded a 3.5% drop from the previous year in the numbers on the rolls of Sunday Schools and Bible Classes. The year before that saw a 3.8% drop. Perhaps the alarm bells are ringing already.

4.0 REASONS FOR DECLINE

Having firmly established that involvement in a core activity HAS declined among this age group, we now turn to explore possible reasons for this decline. Our initial intention was to survey work that had already been done with the age group, draw out the main themes, and then test them out at a local level. However, contact with several organisations and a range of churches from different denominations and locations showed that in fact very little well-documented work has in fact been done with this age group. We therefore focused on the necessarily small number of sources able to provide relevant comment and/or data.

In drawing upon all these various sources, we were seeking to address the basic question - What are the main factors that explain the decline in the number of people aged 20-45 who are actively involved in church life? First, we begin with a “generational profile”, suggesting some key characteristics that influence and explain the attitudes of this age group toward church, and that should inform and shape any basis for adult ministry.

4.1 Generational Profile

Much has been made in the media, as well as in academic literature, of the phenomenon that is known as “Generation X” or “GenXers”. The term refers roughly to those aged 20 to 35 in the year 2000. Arguably, any church that wishes to “hold on” to those adults in their 20s and 30s needs to address issues of how people in this generation communicate, interact, learn, worship, and relate both to one another and to God. It is mistaken to simply assume that they do all of these things in exactly the same way that those in past and older generations have done. As churches, we tend to be adapted (or at least recognise the need to adapt) to “youth culture”, and order our activities, presentation, church structure etc. to fit the needs of young people. It is becoming apparent that a similar level of thought and concern needs to be given to the “culture” of younger adults.

4.2 “GenXers” – those aged 20-35

Obviously not everyone aged 20-35 will display all the characteristics listed. Yet they are important generational trends. We need to pay attention to such trends, if we are attempting to tackle the acute difficulties already identified within our churches. In order to see the relevance of this profiling to church life, we have grouped these characteristics together, along with comments on what sort of response we need to make as churches:

- Best educated, most travelled generation ever.
- Grew up with AIDS and environmental disaster.
- Affirming of diversity and able to live with ambiguity.
- Rejection of absolute truths: highest virtue is tolerance of the views of others.
- High level of (and emphasis on) “spiritual awareness”. Coupled with a widespread ignorance of biblical teachings. (“They know less about the Bible than any other previous generation in the past 1000 years”).

Presents a significant challenge in terms of teaching: Against this culture of pluralism, diversity of belief, and loss of absolutes, how can we convincingly reassert the uniqueness of the Gospel, and its absolute claims?

- The first “electronic generation”: implies tremendous ability to process lots of information at once (parallel thinking) which allows “multi-tasking”.
- Insatiable appetite for junk/instant food, films, ideas, and culture. Described as the “soundbite” generation.
- First generation to be raised by TV –everything is image.
- Music culture strong, and expressive. Music an important form of communication, and expression of ideas. (“Music is our lifeblood”).

Presents a significant challenge in terms of approach to (and style of) teaching and learning, presentation (both of teaching and worship), and communication.

- A pervasive longing for reality – in all areas of life and relationship
- Anti-materialistic: likely to have a succession of jobs, rather than a career. Put relationships before work.
- Rejecting institutions: a collaborative generation –hierarchies and authority are “out”.
- First “latch-key” generation: many come from two-job families.
- Fewer than half has lived with both natural parents throughout their childhood.

Presents a significant challenge in terms of relationships and teaching. Arguably, this generation places an enormous emphasis on authenticity in relationships. Family life is increasingly complex, and increasingly fragmented. How can churches provide guidance, and convincingly teach absolute standards? How can we respond to the need for satisfying relationships? How does the way church is organised reflect the emphasis on collaboration, ownership, and involvement?

5.0 TWO CASE STUDIES

In this chapter, we look briefly at two Presbyterian congregations in Belfast, to examine the nature of their “appeal” to the 20-45 age group. Are any of the factors outlined in the previous chapter important in explaining attendance in these two congregations?

5.1 Crumlin Road Presbyterian Church

5.1.1 Background / Church Profile

Crumlin Road Presbyterian is a congregation in a “working-class” area of North Belfast. Typical housing in the immediate area is generally Housing Executive owned. The following comments provide a summary of the work that has been done with younger adults in Crumlin Road over the past two years.

5.1.2 Ministry Approach

Over the past two years the church has focused ministry on two targeted groups: (1) young adults previously connected to the church (as teenagers) but no longer attending; and (2) adults on the “fringe” of the congregation (often the spouse or partner of a church member) who attend only on an occasional basis. In line with our earlier generational profiling, ministry has centred on **building relationships** with individuals from both these groups - enabling the church to express a genuine interest in their needs and concerns, and offering opportunities for individuals to find out more about the Christian faith. There have been three main strategies for relationship-building:

(a) Social events and family activities:

These have been held at least every 6 weeks, and have ranged from quiz nights, barbecues and barn dances, to a musical presentation of the Christmas story and a fund-raising “Promise Auction” for charity. Occasionally the events have included some gospel presentation, though most have not. The purpose of these events is two-fold: they are designed as “ice-breakers” or access points for those who have little experience of church, and are hesitant to come into a strange environment on a Sunday morning. The more familiar social setting allows these individuals to relax, and also to meet (and establish friendship with) Christians from the congregation. The experience of Crumlin Road has been that a significant number of people who are not yet church attendees (including several parents who send their children to organisations) regularly attend these social events.

Secondly, these social events are seen as an opportunity for Christians within the congregation to spend more time with, and get to know individuals from the "fringe" of the congregation. In Crumlin Road, this has been the most obvious source of growth (or "success") in the past two years.

(b) Visiting programme:

Another aspect of "relationship-building" at Crumlin Road has been a programme of regular visits to the homes of those who have a loose connection with the church. Using contacts from Church organisations (visiting the parents of children who attend) and previous youth activities (re-establishing contact with those now in their twenties and thirties), a small team has spent time visiting families and individuals. The purpose of these visits has been to let people know what is happening in the church, and to invite them along to social events and, for example, enquiry groups. More importantly however, the main aim of the visits has been to establish (or re-establish) contact and friendship, and to demonstrate to these individuals that the church is interested in them, and their needs. As with all "relationship-building" activities, this is a long process, requiring genuine concern for the individuals involved, as well as a long-term commitment to maintaining relationships.

(c) Small groups:

Finally, a number of small-group settings have been used. These have tended to be more explicitly "spiritual" in their content. The church has developed its own material for "enquiry" groups, which have run for four series, each time over an eight-week period. Both church members and non-church members have taken part. In the context of our earlier comments in the GenXer profile, these groups provide an opportunity for adults to "learn" rather than be "taught". The material was designed particularly to target those who had attended church as children or teenagers, but who had never considered the Christian faith from an adult perspective. In these small groups adults were encouraged to question, explore, and experiment with faith for themselves, and to take an active part in their own learning.

A more informal discussion group has also met on a monthly basis, aimed at men only, and seems to have been able to establish friendship with individuals and to nurture spiritual interest.

"Relationship-building" is not the only tool to be used in ministry with adults. Evidently, the church needs to offer teaching, worship, and activities that are attractive to adults (and to entire families), alongside a genuine expression of friendship and concern. The strategies employed by Crumlin Road in relationship-building are included (in detail) here for two reasons: Firstly, the need to establish meaningful relationships with this age-group outside of the church is a factor that has already been heavily emphasised

in the previous chapter. The validity of this approach appears to be borne out in the experience of Crumlin Road Church.

Secondly, the example of the work at Crumlin Road over the last two years demonstrates the need for churches to dedicate time, people, and resources to work with adults. A “relationship-building” approach to reaching adults is severely limited if carried out by only a handful of people within a congregation. Building and maintaining relationships requires time and emotional investment. For such an approach to work, it is important that adult ministry is recognised as one of the church’s priorities, and that individuals are given time and freedom to be involved.

5.2 Orangefield Presbyterian Church

Orangefield Presbyterian is included because it has a very high number of people attending from the 20-45 age group. It also provides us with a good contrast to the comments about adult ministry in Crumlin Road. Many of the same themes are evident in the ministry of Orangefield among young adults, but the structure and style of ministry is quite different. Crucially, the approach of Orangefield to “adult ministry” has been much more centralised, flowing from a “whole-church” strategy and ethos.

5.2.1 Background / Church Profile

Orangefield is in an area that is relatively “middle-class”. Typical housing in the immediate “parish” is 3-bedroom semi-detached (£85k–100k). The majority of the congregation is university-educated, with the typical occupation being “Professional” (e.g. Schoolteacher). Local schools have a good reputation, meaning that parents (young families) are attracted to the area.

There appear to be demographic “advantages” that may account for some of the age-profile of the congregation. However, there are clear indications that the number of young adults in the congregation is not purely a matter of local population trends. Significantly, the congregation has grown over the past 15 years, (both by transfer and conversion) and the mean age of the congregation has *fallen* as growth has taken place. Arguably, the church *is* attractive to young adults.

5.2.2 Reasons for young adult attendance

The following observations are from an interview with the minister. He was asked to outline what he saw, after 15 years of leadership of the church, as the main reasons for growth in attendance among young adults.

(a) Ministerial Style and theological stance.

Mr McBride described both the ministerial style and theological stance of the church as “open” –with a key emphasis on openness to change. In terms of teaching, the church leadership was particularly concerned that there should be good practical application of any message. In other words, there is a key emphasis on relevance in teaching. Equally important under this heading, Orangefield places a high value on delegation and participation. Leadership is by team, rather than by one individual.

(b) Every Member Ministry.

The team ethos that begins with the minister also extends beyond the paid staff (of which there were five as at August 2000) to the congregation as a whole. Leadership is keen to delegate tasks, ministries, and responsibilities to congregational members, according to their gifts. The practice of “every member ministry”, the theological stance, and the team ethos of the leadership create what the minister labels a “Participative Ethos”, which he considers one of the key factors explaining the numbers of young adults attending Orangefield.

(c) Worship Style.

The “worship ethos” of the church is an important factor that “attracts” young adults to the congregation. While the worship style is “a blend of modern and traditional”, there is an emphasis on contemporary worship, and on the pursuit of excellence in music and presentation. There is also a growing concept of “all-age” worship, with families worshipping together, and children and adults following the same teaching series.

(d) Family environment.

Orangefield has a significant number of young families, and has good provision for children and teenagers. This is another factor that clearly encourages families to join the church. The church also employs a “family worker” on its staff.

In explaining the “attraction” of the congregation to young adults therefore, the minister identified these four key factors: Relevance in teaching, a participative ethos, an “all-inclusive” style of worship, and good provision for families. Each of these can be seen as addressing the reasons for *decline* in young adult attendance emerging in this paper.

5.2.3 Sources of growth

Mr McBride was also invited to outline what had been the key sources of growth among this age group, particularly among the “unchurched”. He listed 3 main “ministries”:

(a) Alpha Groups.

“Alpha” is an 8-week course that explores the basics of the Christian faith. Christians are encouraged to invite non-Christian friends and relatives, and even to attend along with them, as they explore faith.

(b) Church-run playgroup / Mothers and Toddlers Group.

Of the 90+ members of the Mothers and Toddlers group, 60 have no other (or no pre-existing) church connection. This group therefore provides an important introduction to the church.

(c) Relationships.

Rather than being described as a “ministry”, this is what underpins the whole work of reaching the unchurched. Arguably a relationship with a Christian friend, family member, or congregational member is what accounts for most of the “success” that Orangefield has evidently seen in reaching young adults, and “attracting” them in to the church. Again, this echoes very strongly our earlier assertion that “meaningful relationships” within and around the church are essential to understanding attendance among this age group.

6.0 A BASIS FOR EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

The aim of this final chapter is to provide a basis for realistic engagement with the 20-45 age group.

6.1 The Importance Of Belonging

6.1.1 Background

Conclusion 6. We are tentatively suggesting that a key reason for the decline in church involvement among those aged 20-45 is that they are looking for, but not finding, meaningful relationships or community within our churches.

Conclusion 7. Essential to understanding the importance of relationships in explaining involvement in church, is the fact that for many “belonging” may take place *before* believing.

Many of us may want to assert that “providing a sense of belonging” is not the primary function of the church. Rather, the church exists first and foremost to preach the Word of God, and to enable people to find salvation. Obviously the most important relationship that the Church must offer is a relationship, not with other people, but with God himself. Nonetheless, we need to recognise that relationship with other Christians may well be the crucial factor in coming into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Indeed, in a recent survey carried out by Evangelical Ministries here in Northern Ireland, over 80% of respondents listed a relationship with Christian family or friend(s) as the single most important factor leading to their own conversion.

Similarly, during a recent seminar in the West Midlands), “relationships” were listed by all participants as one of the most important factors in church attendance among those aged 20-45. All participants were church leaders, from a range of congregations and denominations. Many emphasised the importance of “small group life” within their own congregations in “reaching and keeping” this age group. These groups were seen as providing important opportunity for individuals to “get to know” others in the church. To quote Brierley: “*We need to let them belong so they can believe*”.

6.1.2 Sample group results: Offering a warm welcome

We now turn to how these issues of “belonging” and relationships were reflected in the results of our “on the ground sampling” in North Belfast. While people were prepared to attend a church where they did not already

have well-established relationships with other congregational members, the way in which relationships were established once they *did* attend was crucial. Overwhelmingly, the opinion of those surveyed was that being made to feel welcome and at home in a church is a *very important* factor in continued attendance.

Too often the issue of “welcome” is seen as being confined to shaking hands and handing out hymnbooks as people come into church. While this may be what those *inside* the church see as adequate to ensure that people feel welcomed, it does not appear to be adequate for those on the fringes, or outside of a congregation. The issue of how we welcome adults into the church is crucial to the process of relationship building. Providing a genuine welcome certainly *includes* a friendly greeting at the door, but it also involves much more. The initial impression and a friendly and warm atmosphere are important, but offering a genuine welcome needs to be seen as the beginning of a caring relationship. This means that the “welcomer” has a responsibility that extends beyond the church door. Many of those that we interviewed commented on the importance of things such as: someone sitting with them in the service; time taken to show a real interest and engage in conversation; someone of their own age (and particularly if they had children, someone of their children’s age) making the effort to introduce themselves.

Sometimes the “small” things can make a big difference to how comfortable or uncomfortable a newcomer (or occasional visitor) feels when coming into church. One respondent, for example, commented that even finding a seat could be a difficult process! She worried that she might be “sitting in someone else’s seat”, and tended to end up choosing a seat in an empty pew. This meant she often ended up sitting alone, and spent the service feeling isolated and uncomfortable. Very little about this experience would encourage her to attend church on a more regular basis! Offering to sit with someone who is on their own, moving from your “usual seat” to sit next to them, or introducing them to other people that they may sit with may be a small gesture, but it could make a big difference.

Conclusion 8. It is clear we need a mind-set that recognises the importance of providing a sense of belonging, and a strategy to make this into a practical reality.

Building relationships with those on the fringe of a congregation is crucial if we are to truly convey and extend God’s grace and love. Failure to offer friendship and a place to belong may certainly explain why adults may not be motivated to attend church.

6.2 Conveying Acceptance

6.2.1 Background

Very much connected to the issue of “belonging”, is the issue of acceptance. This could be considered particularly (though not exclusively) relevant to the Northern Irish context. Many in the 20-45 age group who claim a connection to a local congregation but are not involved in its core activity, will have previously attended, “dropping-out” often in their teens, or early adulthood. Many who *have* “opted out” at some point in the past feel they cannot “opt back in”.

6.2.2 Sample group results: “Not good enough to go”

This issue featured as a prominent theme in the interviews and questionnaires that we carried out. This was particularly true of those who had grown up in the church, and had then “dropped” out. Many commented that their lifestyle choices, or the fact that they were not Christians, meant that they felt they could not regularly attend church, even though some said that they thought they would like to attend more often. Others felt that when they *did* go, other congregational members were quietly judging them for not having attended for a long period of time, and were disapproving of them. Interestingly, in many cases these people encouraged their children to attend church and Sunday School, feeling it was “good for them”, and important that they had some Christian teaching and foundation.

Conclusion 9. The most important issue surrounding “acceptance” is the perception among this age group that church is for “good” people. If the indications from our sample group are true, and if the problem of acceptance is widespread among this age group, then it is one of the most important issues that we must tackle if we are to see a reversal in declining attendance.

Time and time again in the course of interviewing, we came across the self-belief that individuals were “not good enough” to come to church. Arguably this stems from teaching (perhaps remembered from childhood) on “good living” – that emphasises a strict regime of minimum standards of lifestyle and behaviour ranging from levels of church involvement and regularity of attendance, to lifestyle issues, and even family connection. This “good living” mindset renders ministry such as relationship building ineffective – or at least seriously undermines its impact. However involved a person may become in friendship with Christians in the church and in “fringe” activities, they remain uninterested in any faith involvement, and they certainly will not choose to attend church, as they see Christianity as not for “people like them”.

Is there a theological bias in our churches that teaches of the awfulness of sin, but *underemphasises* grace, mercy, and forgiveness? Instead of preaching *at* non-Christians, and reinforcing their view that there is a necessary minimum standard even for church attendance (let alone for conversion!), church leaders need to put great effort and emphasis on the church as a place of restoration for broken and hurting people, to God and to one another. This needs to be expressed explicitly (in words), but also in action, and in tone and emphasis.

6.3 Involvement And Collaboration

6.3.1 Background

Whether at work, at home, or in organisations that they belong to, most adults are “involved”. That is, they contribute time, resources, abilities and skills, and accept responsibilities. Arguably this is rarely true of adults coming into the church. Ministry may often be centred on one individual (the minister) or on a small group of leaders. This may leave many adults playing only a very passive role.

Our research suggests that this approach may be very alien to younger adults, particularly GenXers. Adults exist in a culture that emphasises the importance and ability of the individual. Do we need to pay greater attention to this in our churches? Do we need to provide an environment where adults feel able to learn for themselves, rather than just be taught? Is it possible that this generation wants to feel the church has something worthwhile and appropriate to ask of them, as well as to offer them? Arguably, allowing people to take on appropriate responsibilities shows that they are valued members of a community, rather than just passengers. Collaboration, taking part, and involvement are important ingredients in “belonging”. Our example from Orangefield Presbyterian demonstrates the way in which a “participative” ethos may be attractive to adults in the 20-45 age group.

6.3.2 Sample group results: An appropriate kind of involvement

The responses concerning “involvement” were mixed. The majority of those we interviewed saw “taking part” or involvement as important. One respondent (for example) answered that, in order to allow people to feel valued...

Conclusion 10. A church should *“do its utmost to ensure that you are involved, even if in only a small way”*.

The responses also indicate, however, that we need to be very careful about exactly what *kind* of involvement we offer to or expect of adults in the congregation. Interestingly, the most ambivalent (or even negative) responses concerning involvement came from those *within* the church. This group appeared to see themselves as *already* “over-worked” in the church, and seemed to equate “involvement” with being asked to lead in or help in church organisations. Others from *outside* the church also commented that the thought of being asked to join or help in an organisation, or even to attend a lot of meetings as soon as they showed an initial interest in church attendance, would be very off-putting.

Instead, the positive comments centred on the idea of “appropriate” involvement. Those who felt that collaboration and involvement was important, or very important (in terms of their own church attendance), emphasised that this should centre on an individual’s own skills and interests. Rather than being asked simply to “fill an empty slot” in an organisation, churches should be showing how they value individuals by finding out about their interests, and allowing them to use their skills and resources. Essentially this involves a shift from a “needs-led” to a “resources-driven” model of church life.

As a final point, allowing an individual to take part in church life (in whatever way) may also be a way of demonstrating acceptance: the individual, and their contribution is valued. One respondent who struggled very much with the issue of being “good enough” to attend church, commented that while he felt there were many “jobs” in the church he could *not* do (as he is not a Christian), he *would* like to do something for the church if he could. He suggested that he would be willing to do any manual work or repairs that were needed. It may well be that this points the way to the kind of involvement that would help such people to feel both valued, and a part of, the church.

6.4 Cultural Relevance

6.4.1 Background

Other research seems to suggest that “cultural relevance” does not necessarily dictate a particular (lively or informal) style of worship. Of those respondents who left church after the age of 20, almost as many did so complaining that the worship was “too informal” as did so complaining that the worship was too formal. Of more significance in terms of worship was the *authenticity* of worship experience – that is the sense of reality and meeting with God. One in four respondents over the age of 20 attributed their church leaving to the experience that there was “too little sense of God in the worship”.

A striking finding in some other research suggested that cultural relevance was not related to worship, but to teaching. 40% of respondents replied that they left because “the church failed to connect with the rest of my life”. 35% complained that sermons were irrelevant. Similarly, 41% claimed that church activities were “undesirable” or irrelevant. This is a huge challenge to us as churches.

Conclusion 11. We may well be seeing a decline in involvement among this age group because they increasingly view church, and the Christian message, as irrelevant – having “nothing to say” to them in their situations.

Finally under this heading, we need to consider the importance of the “consumer culture” in which these generations have grown up. It is an integral part of “consumerism” that individuals, having a great diversity of choice, expect things to be done well. This age group is used to standards of excellence in all areas of life. Once more, this standard is not necessarily carried through into church life. Again, it is arguably not the church’s first priority to satisfy the demands of its “consumers”. Yet we need to pay attention to the *value* system that underlies consumerism. Doing things well actually conveys value and meaning to this age group (as with others). What we put real effort into shows very clearly what we consider to be important. This principle of excellence is already evident in some church thinking, especially in relation to those who are “seekers” or casual church attendees – ie. those who are on the “fringe” of the church. Such emphasis on excellence is Biblically underlined – as for example in the opening chapter of Genesis, where God’s creation was “very good”.

6.4.2 Sample group results: The Sermon!

Again, the comments from our sample group largely confirmed this emphasis on relevance in teaching, life in worship, and “excellence” in presentation and practice. Unsurprisingly, the actual quality and content of church services was identified as one of the most important factors explaining church attendance. Again, while the establishing of relationships with those on the fringes of the church is essential, in order for this to translate to *church attendance*, worship services need to be attractive and relevant to this age group. One of the strongest themes in the results was the importance of “the sermon” as a factor in church attendance.

On an encouraging note, a large number of respondents ranked “teaching” as one of the most important reasons for church attendance. In terms of explaining church attendance (or the attraction of one church over another), only welcome / relationships ranked as *more* important. Clearly, Christian teaching is one of the strongest factors that may motivate this age group to attend church.

However, “the sermon” also attracted the highest number of *negative* responses from our sample group. The sermon was clearly identified by most respondents as the most “difficult” part of the service. The most frequent complaints were that the sermon was either too long, hard to understand, boring, or “irrelevant”. One respondent was candid enough to admit that he found it “difficult to stay awake” during the sermon. These comments were from the *same* people who had earlier identified teaching as one of the key reasons for their (even occasional) church attendance. This serves to reinforce the need to ensure that teaching is accessible, well presented, and relevant to this age group.

Conclusion 12. Both the ECAS results, and the results from our own sample group agree that sermon content, style, and length are crucial factors.

The responses from our own sample group also show a gap in views about teaching between those who are an existing part of a congregation, and those who are “unchurched”. What those already in the church see as “norms” (particularly in terms of length and style of sermon) are strange and largely off-putting to those outside of the church. Taking all this into account, we suggest that we need a clearer answer to the question: who is the sermon for? Or, to widen the issue: Who are Sundays for? Are we prepared to make changes to our worship, to the format of our services, to the length and nature of the sermon, in order that our services are more attractive to adults in this age group –particularly those who attend only occasionally? Are we prepared to do this even if it means changing things that those of us *in* the church are comfortable with –for the sake of those outside the church who are not?

Crucially, the “unchurched” (and their views in our own sample) represent a serious challenge to the view that sermons should be geared to systematic bible exposition. Few (if any) respondents showed any interest in this. Instead many people (particularly those who are “unchurched”) are motivated by biblical teaching that is directly relevant to everyday life. Some examples of the issues that respondents identified as those they felt should be included in teaching content are: moral issues –such as abortion and homosexuality; guidance; coping with loneliness and bereavement; suffering.

Seasonal services (e.g.: Christmas, Easter, Remembrance Sunday, Guide Thinking Day, Children’s Day) are occasions when those on the fringes (or even outside of) the church are most likely to attend. Given the results discussed above, these services need to be innovative, creative, teaching and evangelistic opportunities, where the service is clearly designed to cater for and meet the needs of non-Christians, and those who only infrequently attend church. Criticism of the Sunday service was not confined purely to

the sermon. Many respondents also commented on the poor quality (and lack of authenticity) of worship. Frequent reference was also made to the monotony of the structure of services that remained the same week after week, making the course of the service predictable and giving the feeling of operating on “auto pilot”. We need to consider carefully the tone and content of our worship (do we need fewer or more contemporary songs?); the quality of music and worship leadership; the length and content of the sermon; the use of different presentation methods; as well as all the issues already mentioned surrounding welcome, acceptance, and belonging. This sort of careful thought and willingness to innovate on seasonal occasions should be seen as an absolute minimum standard and response to the issues raised in this section.

Being willing to “innovate” on seasonal occasions will however raise questions about the standard and content of *all* our services. There needs to be some degree of consistency (of “excellence”) from one Sunday to another. If this is not the case, then there is a danger that “good” services on special occasions may be misleading to those who attend on an infrequent basis. “Special” services may raise these people’s expectations of what church offers week by week. In other words, putting special effort into “seasonal” services should also cause us to reflect on our weekly services, in order to ensure that we always structure worship and teaching to “do the very best with the resources that we have”.

6.5 Parents And Children

6.5.1 Background

We finish this chapter with one of the most debated factors explaining attendance among adults. How important is youth and children’s work in explaining numbers of young adults in a congregation? How can we best approach the issue of parent and child attendance? Crucially, what is the key dynamic at work? Do parents attend *because* their children attend, or vice versa? Will we reach more *adults* by having more effective children’s and youth ministry?

Conclusion 13. The key emphasis on reaching young adults with children needs to be on parental attendance, rather than on reaching them “through” their children.

A recent Church of Scotland Report (1995) concluded:

“A major cause of the loss of children to the Church and its organisations is in the withdrawal of parents from church... Parents give the lead as to what is and is not important. The evident decline in attendance of adults at public worship, and particularly among younger

adults of parenting years, indicates the kind of model being provided in many homes.”

In other words, the key factor in attendance among families is *parental* involvement. We need to seek to reach parents *in their own right*, rather than hoping that attracting children to organisations (be they Sunday or weekday) will provide an increase in whole family attendance. Clearly the quality of provision for children and teenagers is a factor in adult attendance, and parents may be more attracted to a church where there is good provision for their children’s needs *as well as their own*. Good “all-age” worship may also encourage families to attend church together.

There is a further issue concerning adults and young people. Is the cause of the present decline in numbers of those in their 20s, that our work with older teens is ineffective? If this is the case, is the solution simply to concentrate on “improving” youth work? Certainly one explanation for the current decline in 20-35 year olds attending church is that many people leave church in their late teens or early twenties. One survey in Scotland showed that the churches surveyed were *not* losing people *in* their twenties and thirties – they had *already* lost them before the age of twenty, and this accounted for the low numbers of those attending aged 20-30.

Conclusion 14. Models of faith development also pinpoint “late teens / early twenties” as a crucial point when many leave church *for faith reasons*.

The model suggested here is produced by James Fowler, of Emory University (USA), and summarised by Jeff Astley for the Church of England Report – “How Faith Grows”). Fowler concluded that an individual’s faith journey could be broadly divided into seven stages, none of which can be “skipped”. There is usually some correlation between age and the stage an individual may be expected to have reached. Stage 3 is associated with adolescence when faith is highly influenced by teachers, parents, and leaders, and when individuals have not really begun to analyse their faith for themselves. Stage 4 is associated with age 18 plus, and involves a critical reflection on faith, and a decreasing willingness to have a “second-hand faith” borrowed from others.

According to this model, the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is particularly traumatic, and is a point at which some individuals may either entirely reject faith, or may leave church and pursue faith and spirituality through other means. This suggests that we may expect to see fewer people attending in their twenties and thirties, than in other age groups across the church –and that this is a *natural reflection of individual’s faith journeys*. It is suggested that some of those who leave church in their late teens *may* return as they progress through Stage 4 –returning to church in their 30s and beyond.

Presuming that this helps explain why people leave church in their late teens / early twenties, what response should we make? Clearly, we need to consider how we could “aid” individuals through this transition to adult faith. How can we ensure that people have the freedom to work out their faith *within* the church community –rather than feel they have to leave? How do we deal with those who *do* leave during their early 20s for faith reasons? How do we maintain links and relationship with them, that “leaves the way open” for them to return to the church community if and when they want to?

Turning to our second question however (the declining numbers of 20s and 30s attending church), is the solution to simply focus our efforts on “improving” our work with older teens? Clearly, past failure to help older teens make the transition from “youth” to “adult” within the church, may be a key reason in explaining the current decline in numbers among those in their 20s. If this is the case, we may assume that more effective ministry to *current* older teens will ensure that in the future attendance among the 20-30 age group may improve. However, we do need to be careful with this response. The evidence suggests very clearly that this cannot and must not form our only response to the current “crisis” in involvement among young adults.

Two caveats are obvious: Firstly, assuming that *future* numbers of those attending in their 20s will improve, this will still leave many congregations that we have studied with a “generation gap”. In ten years time (by 2010), we may have more people aged 20 to 30 attending, but the crisis may only have shifted to the 30 to 40 age group instead. Secondly, the *current* lack of people in the 20-35 age group will have a huge impact on the next generation of adults. If a church currently has very few 20-35 year olds attending, then arguably there is no healthy adult role model for teenagers. The message is given that once people reach their 20s, the norm is to leave church. Working with teenagers will not necessarily ensure that we have churches with 20-35 year olds in them in 10-15 years time, *unless* we are working to successfully engage with 20-35 year olds *now!*

6.5.2 Sample group results: A whole family approach

As perhaps would have been expected, our sample group results showed the importance of good provision within the church for activities for children and young people. Even those without children of their own identified this as an important feature of an attractive church. However, there was more support for activities *outside* of Sunday services, than during the services themselves. Respondents (particularly parents) were *more* in favour of provision for all-age worship on a Sunday, than for separate activities for children and young people. This was, again, one of the strongest themes in

the responses. Even those whose children attended church activities, but did not attend themselves, expressed a desire for a church environment where the whole family were welcomed and could worship together. This suggests there is a lot of scope for more effectively reaching the parents of children who attend, than present structures allow.

This does not necessarily require that the entire Sunday service must be “all-age”, but certainly an emphasis on families attending and worshipping together may have a significant impact on adult attendance. Again, this may require changes to the current format and structure of our Sunday services. (It may also require a greater degree of activity and participation on the part of the whole congregation!) Often even our “altogether” time is actually divided into “adult” activities (complicated hymns, longer prayer times) and “children’s” activities (a “children’s hymn” and a “children’s address”). The concept of all ages worshipping *together* requires that songs, activities, prayer times, and even sometimes the teaching, must be accessible to the whole congregation. This is an enormous challenge, and requires creativity and imagination in planning the service. Even if we choose to maintain a pattern where the children “go out” for a large part of the service, we still need to ensure that the “altogether” time *genuinely* involves and appeals to *all* ages!

Conclusion 15. Of all the “entry-points” (activities outside of the Sunday services) that we tested, social events catering for the whole family received the most positive response.

Our earlier assertion that we should not rely on children’s attendance at mid-week organisations to attract adults (parents) to church is supported by these sample group results. Evidently we need to engage more effectively with those who send their children along to activities, but do not attend themselves. In order to do this, we need to look at strategies and activities that will appeal to all ages *simultaneously*, so that parents are encouraged to attend *along with* their children –whether on a Sunday, or at other “social events” and activities.

7.0 SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- 1 From the survey of ten Presbyterian congregations in Belfast, there is evidence of major decline between 1997 and 2000 in the number of those aged 25 - 44 involved in any core activity of the church. In this instance 'core activity' refers primarily to Sunday morning attendance.
- 2 The most significant decline has taken place in the 25-34 age group, where none of the 10 congregations surveyed has seen significant growth, and nine have seen decline.
- 3 The decline is not in line with general population trends, either across Northern Ireland as a whole, or in the specific areas in which the congregations are situated. The number involved in any core activity of the church aged 25-34 is markedly low when compared to the number of the local population in the same age group. The church appears to be failing to sufficiently reach or involve this age group.
- 4 Comparison serves to further highlight the crisis in attendance among the 25-34 age group in the congregations studied in North Belfast. There are proportionally fewer 25-34 year olds in the church population in this study than in the English Church Attendance Survey (ECAS) results. Decline is slightly higher than in the ECAS results. Alarming, the actual numbers of those attending in this age group in the Belfast results has fallen by 34.5% over just 3 years.
- 5 Comparison shows that the 35-44 age group in our study is NOT declining at the same rate as in the ECAS results. Overall growth is higher, and while actual numbers in this age group have declined by 15% in the 1990s in the English Churches, they have grown by 5% over the past 3 years in the Belfast churches studied.
- 6 We are tentatively suggesting that a key reason for the decline in church involvement among those aged 20-45 is that they are looking for, but not finding, meaningful relationships or community within our churches.
- 7 Essential to understanding the importance of relationships in explaining involvement in church, is the fact that for many 'belonging' may take place *before* believing.
- 8 It is clear we need a mind-set that recognises the importance of providing a sense of belonging, and a strategy to make this into a practical reality.

- 9 The most important issue surrounding 'acceptance' is the perception among this age group that church is for 'good people'. If the indications from our sample group are true, and if the problem of acceptance is widespread among this age group, then it is one of the most important issues that we must tackle if we are to see a reversal in declining attendance.
- 10 A church should *'do its utmost to ensure that you are involved, even if in only a small way'*.
- 11 We may well be seeing a decline in involvement among this age group because they increasingly view church, and the Christian message, as irrelevant - having 'nothing to say' to them in their situations.
- 12 Both the ECAS results, and the results from our own sample group agree that sermon content, style and length are crucial factors.
- 13 The key emphasis on reaching young adults with children needs to be on parental attendance, rather than on reaching them 'through' their children.
- 14 Models of faith development also pinpoint 'late teens/early twenties' as a crucial point when many leave church for *faith* reasons.
- 15 Of all the 'entry-points' (activities outside of the Sunday services) that we tested, social events catering for the whole family received the most positive response.

POSTSCRIPT

Our thanks are due to very many people for giving so generously of their time, their wisdom and for being so honest. In particular we wish to thank the Home Board of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (now part of the Board of Mission in Ireland) and its Secretary, the Rev Derek Poots, for both the resources and encouragement to do the research in the first place. Thanks are due to the minister and Kirk Session of Crumlin Road Presbyterian for releasing Danielle for the time required to do so much of the work; to all who allowed themselves to be interviewed, often at length, and to those who filled in questionnaires or responded to requests for information and data with such enthusiasm, care and integrity. To Prof David Livingstone of the Queen's University, Belfast we say a special word of thanks for his encouragement, guidance and patience.

The responsibility not only for the paper itself, but for its weaknesses, gaps and unanswered questions is, of course, ours alone. It is perhaps worth saying that since this is a summary of a much longer paper, some of the unexplored territory of this version is addressed in the full research document which can be obtained from the Communications Office in Church House, Belfast.

The issues raised and explored are close to our hearts as we engage in ministry. It is our fervent hope and prayer that this piece of work will bear fruit for the honour of Christ and the glory of God in the foreseeable future, and in eternity.

Danielle Welch (Researcher)
(Rev) Norman Hamilton (Supervisor)
November 2000

Comments and questions relating to this paper should be addressed in the first instance to Norman Hamilton, 564 Crumlin Road, Belfast BT14 7GL.
Tel: 028 9071 4091 Email: nhamilton@presbyterianireland.org



Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Church House

Fisherwick Place

Belfast BT1 6DW

Tel: +44 (0)28 9032 2284

Fax: +44 (0)28 9024 8377

Email: Info@PresbyterianIreland.org

<http://www.PresbyterianIreland.org>