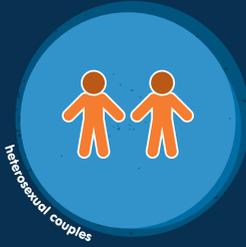


UPDATED



# We are Family

The Changing Face of Family Ministry



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# Introduction

Our family ministry research project is now complete and we are able to report its findings.

Exploring the way churches work with families has been an important project for us as we try to identify the range of practices occurring in the field across Great Britain.

Our aim has been to better understand:

- who engages in family ministry
- the type of activity this involves
- the availability of training and resources.

In this updated edition we've included 2016 statistics and reflected on developments since the project findings were originally published. We seek to highlight the key features of church-based family work and pose questions in response to what has been discovered. It's a tool that can be used to reflect on this field of work and help those working with families to develop in their practice.

The booklet continues to raise some vital questions for the Church to ponder, as we continue to create community and welcome families of many kinds.

A summary of key findings and outcomes can be found on pages 24 to 31.

**Gail Adcock**  
Family Ministry Development Officer

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# Background to the project

Research for the family ministries project was commissioned by Childrens Ministry Network (CMN) in partnership with The Methodist Church in Britain. It was conducted as part of a wider research initiative on the nature of family ministry in the twenty-first century in Great Britain.

A detailed study of family ministry within the Methodist Church was carried out separately and findings from that study were incorporated into the full report which is available at: <http://childrensministrynetwork.org.uk>

The report provides a fuller picture of what family ministry looks like currently and is presented within the context of other studies in the field in recent years. These include:

- *From Anecdote to Evidence*, a study in church growth published by the Church of England in 2014
- *The Impact of Church-Based Parent and Toddler Groups* published by Jubilee+ in 2015.



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According to the Office of National Statistics data from 2016, there were 18.9 million families in the UK, with 12.7 million married or civil partner couple families, the most common type. Cohabiting couple families doubled from 1.5m to 3.3m between 1996 and 2016, they are the fastest growing family type.



In 2016 there were 2.9m lone parent families, the majority being headed by female lone parents. Of the 7.7m one person households in the UK, 54.2% of them in 2016 contained a woman and 45.8% a man.

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Percentages of young adults living with their parents have been growing. Currently, 6.5 million live with parents, a rise from 36% in 1996 to 39% in 2016.

Multi family households have increased by 66% in the decade to 2016 from 194,000 households in 2006 to 323,000 in 2016.

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2016](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2016)

# Overall aims of the project

- To carry out a qualitative study of family ministry work and practice, gathering illustrative examples and stories.
- To establish a comprehensive picture of current family ministry practice across Great Britain from a variety of perspectives beyond the work of the Methodist Church, to include other denominations, organisations and agencies.
- To identify current trends in publishing related to family ministry, the range of resources and training available to practitioners and any gaps in provision.
- To gather data from a variety of sources about organisations that are seeking to support families within a church context.

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# How we carried out the study

A number of resources were employed to gather information for our study, helping us to build up a fuller picture of family ministry practice. Methods used included:

- a range of surveys to gather data from church-based workers, training providers, denominational representatives and others with a specific interest in family ministry
- desk-based research, exploring provision of resources and publications
- telephone interviews with participants representing particular organisations or denominations
- consultations with Methodist Church family ministry workers to learn more about their role and remit
- visits to specific projects and churches to view family ministry in action
- a small sample study of job descriptions of family ministry workers in the Methodist Church.

Through a combination of the above an immense amount of information was gathered that creates a comprehensive picture of our current work with families. It was coordinated and carried out in partnership with Merida Associates and the Family Ministry Development Officer of the Methodist Church.

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# What is family?

What does the word 'family' mean in the twenty-first century? This is challenging, as what constitutes 'being a family' eludes being clearly defined.

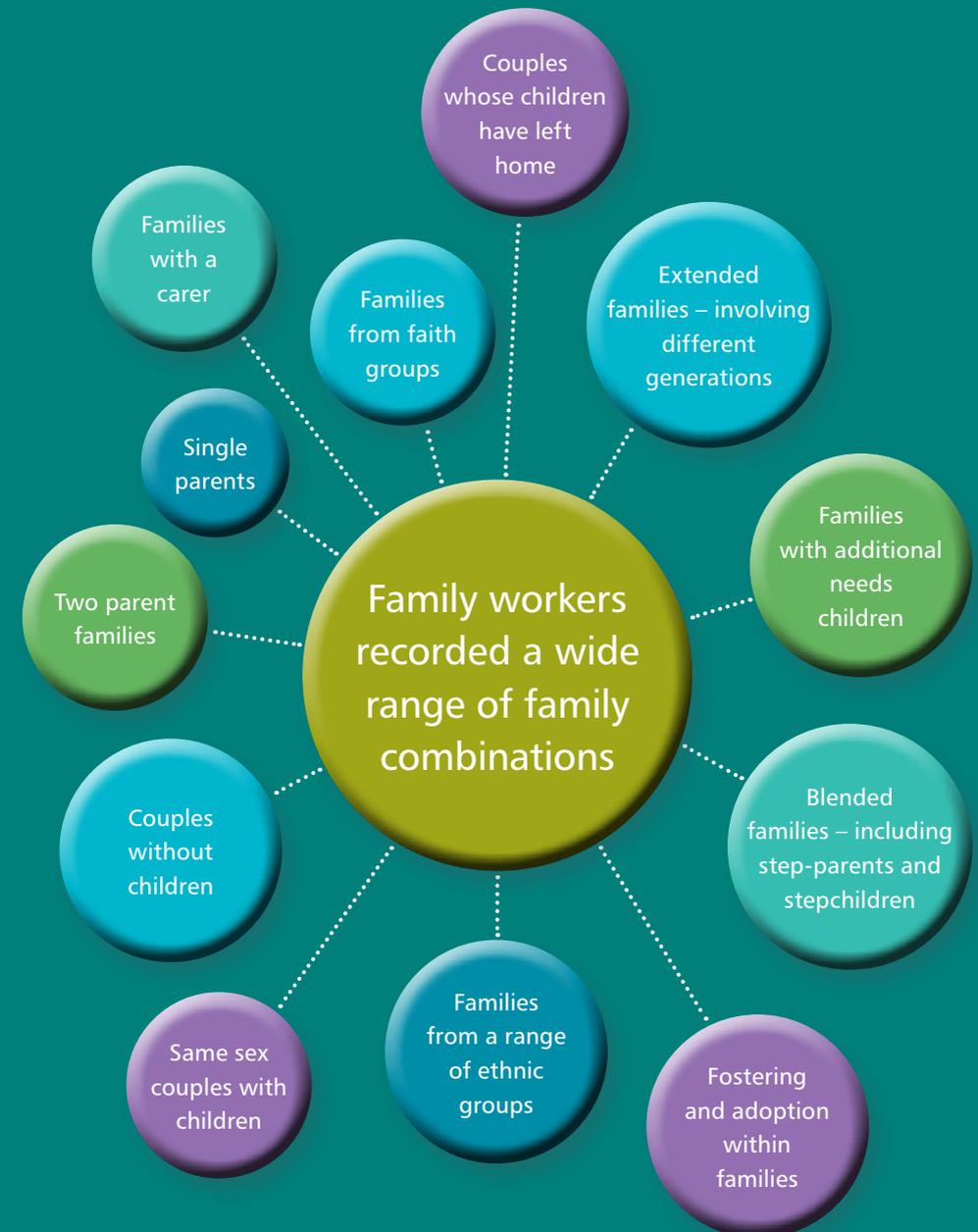
In contemporary society family is found in a variety of places and takes a number of different forms that go beyond blood relationships and relationships established by law. It is vital therefore for us to develop a clear understanding of the kinds of families taking part in family activities and the support offered to them by churches.

This formed a significant area of discussion during the Methodist consultations where information was gathered on the range of families met in the course of family ministry. Church-based workers considered what family means in the context of their day-to-day work, highlighting the broad range of households they encounter (see figure 1 *opposite*).

Primarily these are families with children under 11 and rarely those with teenagers, possibly reflecting the way family ministry has evolved from its roots in children's work. Two-thirds of the family workers we spoke to indicated meeting between 11-30 families on a weekly basis, through a range of different activities and groups.



Figure 1  
What is family?



Specific reference was made to 'families' formed with grandparents and grandchildren, where parents were identified as a 'missing generation' not engaged with church. A variety of views were expressed on the increased diversity of family make-up, but the consensus was that churches must recognise in practice, as well as intellectually, that the nuclear family is just one of a range of family types found in most communities and church cultures. This means that our structures and services must adapt to reflect people's lived experience.

It is interesting to note, and perhaps as an area for concern, that while many churches have been accepting of a wider interpretation of family, the language of the church has not changed to reflect this, but has remained more traditional.

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The nuclear family is just one of a range of family types found in most communities and church cultures. Our structures and services must adapt to reflect people's lived experience.

”



## What is family ministry?

Family ministry is a difficult concept to define and there are varied perceptions around the role of family work in the Church as a whole. In recent years family ministry has risen up the agenda at a strategic level. This has taken place across denominations and there are a number of drivers behind it.

Our research has identified that the term 'family ministry' itself is not commonly understood or consistently applied within or between denominations. When asked how family ministry could be defined, one interviewee replied: "There are hundreds of definitions out there. People call it different things and mean different things by it. They call it all-age ministry, intergenerational ministry, family ministry, household ministry, households of faith ... "

There is a general recognition that working with children or young people in isolation is not the most effective way of enabling a lifelong relationship with God to develop. Nurturing spirituality needs to involve parents and the wider 'family', leading us increasingly towards an all-age approach to church.

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Three drivers for family work have emerged from the research:

- Equipping children and young people to have a lifelong relationship with Jesus. This involves creating spaces within families, households and church communities to nurture faith and enable spirituality to grow and flourish across all ages.
- Responding to needs in the local community and especially to those most in need, as a core expression of lived Christianity. This includes practical aspects such as food banks, feeding the homeless or supporting children's charities.
- Recognising that membership numbers are falling in some churches so family ministry is a potential strategy to attract new parents and children into the life of the church. This also recognises that some church congregations have a 'missing generation' of those aged 25-40, the age group often with young children who are taking part in other provision offered by churches.

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“  
There is a general recognition that working with children or young people in isolation is not the most effective way of enabling a lifelong relationship with God to develop.  
”



## Two strands

We have identified two strands of work around families:

- **Ministry** – concerned with matters relating to faith and spirituality: prayer, worship, knowledge and understanding of Christian life and practice, as well as evangelistic activities.
- **Support** – designed to offer activities and programmes that are practical, emotional, mental, and generally related to well-being.

These dual strands of ministry and support were reflected in many comments, with both regarded as developing a sense of community.

Figure 2 (*overleaf*) presents the broad strands of family ministry and family support that have emerged from the research findings. Some were more intentionally focused on congregations whereas others were made available to families more widely across the community.

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Figure 2  
Two strands of family work

# Family ministry



# Family support

Within the 'Ministry' strand, activities fell under broad headings of:

- MISSION • DISCIPLESHIP •
- INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY •
- FAITH IN FAMILIES / HOUSEHOLDS •

### MISSION

- Building on existing links eg toddler groups, schools, holiday clubs to bring wider family into church
- eg Messy Church

### DISCIPLESHIP

- Deepening and developing faith and understanding of different groups
- Individually and collectively

### INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

- New ways of doing church
- Cultural and structural change
- Church community worshipping together
- Worship leaders of all ages

### FAITH IN FAMILIES / HOUSEHOLDS

- Lifelong relationship with Jesus
- Enhance parental role in nurturing spirituality in the home
- Engage extended family ministering to each other

Within the 'Support' strand, activities were grouped around being:

- COMMUNITY FOCUSED • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS •
- SOCIAL ACTION • PARTNERSHIP WORKING •

### COMMUNITY FOCUS

- Toddler groups
- Parent support groups
- Hosting local clubs and groups
- Youth and children's groups
- Parenting courses

### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS / PASTORAL CARE

- Social support
- Relationship support
- Bereavement support
- Family transitions support
- Life events

### PARTNERSHIP WORKING

- Local authority services eg children's centres, health services
- Local agencies, charities or organisations eg Action for Children

### SOCIAL ACTION

- Food banks
- Debt advice
- Homeless support
- Dementia Friends

# Working with families: the challenges

Those interviewed and participating in consultations reflected a number of challenges when working in family ministry. These fall broadly into four areas:

- **Perceptions of church** – the notion of church is quite alien or daunting for some families who may have little experience of what a faith community is, how it functions or what is or isn't expected. This can serve as a barrier between the church and families.
- **Pace of family life** – the majority of families are very busy, leading lives that are fast paced, participating in activities, clubs and groups throughout the week. Attending church or church activities is one of a range of 'social' options that families choose to participate in or not.
- **Evaluating success** – family work can be hard to assess and outcomes are often difficult to measure. There were expectations from the wider church that community-facing missional work would result in more people attending Sunday morning services. Indeed, this was often the basis on which workers were employed: to bring families to church. Yet this rarely happened. People were often willing to explore faith and Christianity in other ways besides church services.
- **Time constraints** – family workers often face tough choices about how they manage their time. Many are part time which limits how much work they can take on. There are often challenges in prioritising various aspects of their role and responding to a family's needs as they arise.

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# How roles are changing

Evidence suggests that the role of the children's worker is increasingly changing to that of a family worker. Some interviewees noted that trained children specialists or youth workers are being asked to take on family work as an addition to their existing job.

When asked how they understand their role, those involved in church-based family work responded in a variety of ways, highlighting the complexity of this kind of activity.

Their responses suggest that their roles fall into three main categories:

- Developing family faith, nurturing relationships between God, the church and families, and teaching children about Jesus.
- Being more facilitative, acting as a link between the church, families, the wider community and other organisations – either through outreach or church-based community events.
- Supporting, resourcing, training, coordinating, running and managing activities for children and young people, such as services and events, almost in isolation from other church activities – in other words, having more of an operational focus.

Some descriptions cover a number or all of these facets, but most can be categorised within a family ministry or family support narrative.

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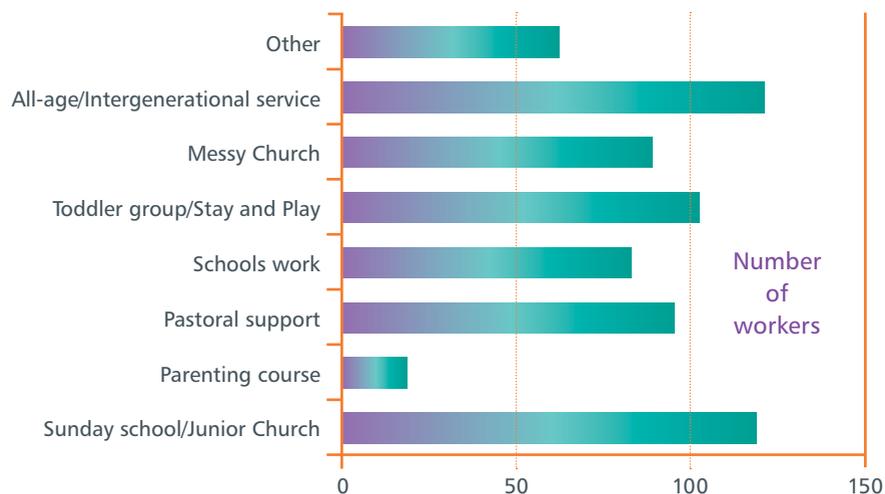


Figure 3 (below) presents data from 152 responses to the ecumenical survey asking about the types of activities workers engage in. It shows them primarily taking part in work involving all ages, with Sunday school providing the focus for their regular work.

There is a tension expressed that exists between having a congregation or a community focus to a role. This is also described as either a discipleship or mission focus. Yet the separation between the two can be unclear, as ‘fuzzy edges’ may exist between them. This is difficult to navigate for practitioners, whose roles are often very broad in nature.

Our study of job descriptions supported this, demonstrating the range of tasks and responsibilities included in a role, from child-focused groups, to family-oriented work, to leading groups of young people. It was evident that the family worker role encompasses a vast range of ages, specialist work and tasks, alongside administrative duties such as writing reports and newsletters, as well as keeping records and creating rotas for volunteers.

Figure 3 Worker involvement with families: types of activities



## Being trained and equipped for family work

- What kinds of training and equipping exist for those working with families?
- What opportunities are there for practitioners to extend their learning and knowledge in this field?

These questions were explored via online research, telephone interviews with training providers, conference organisers and publishers.

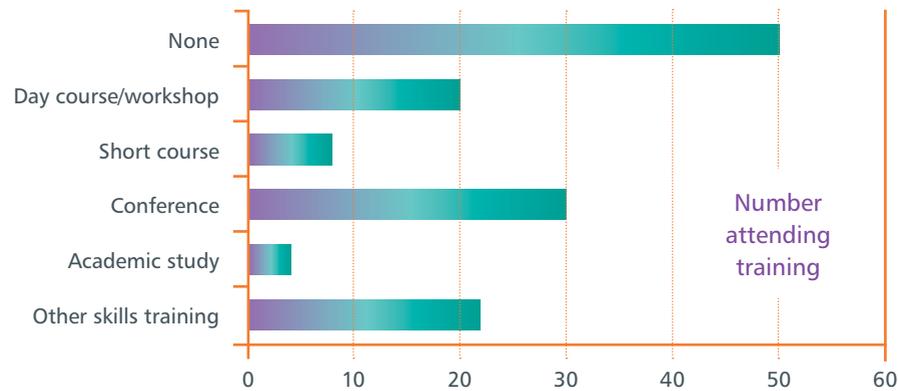
Training providers included people in both academic and non-academic settings who provide accredited and non-accredited training, including conference workshops. In addition, an online survey was completed by 12 training providers to gather quantitative information. Practitioner views were also sought via the online Methodist and ecumenical surveys.

According to the ecumenical survey **the majority of those working with families have not taken part in any associated training or study** to be equipped for their role in this field (see figure 4 overleaf). For many practitioners, conferences, such as the *Hand in Hand Conference*, and day courses or workshops were the places to take part in and receive relevant training.

“ Learning from others and being able to reflect on one’s own practice is identified as valuable in developing family ministry and family support activities. ”



Figure 4 Training for family work and ministry



Training in these areas had been valued by family workers for a number of reasons and the benefits acknowledged across various aspects of their role. These included:

- Theological insight and exploration of scriptural understandings of family and ministry.
- Opportunities for discussion and networking with other practitioners, learning with others and sharing practice and experience.
- Receiving recommendations of good ideas and available resources.
- Being encouraged and inspired by speakers or through stories shared by other practitioners.

Some of the barriers to participating in training included a lack of awareness of what is available, the geographical location of training and the cost. These often hindered workers from taking part in further study in the field.

Learning from others and being able to reflect on one's own practice is identified as valuable in developing family ministry and family support activities.

## Future training needs

Responses to the ecumenical survey indicated a strong conviction that more opportunities to train in this field should be made available. Of those taking part, 87% affirmed the need to be further equipped in their work with families.

Training and conference providers reported that they try to respond to needs for family-related training expressed by family workers on the ground, or picked up in feedback from conferences and events. They engage in national debate around family ministry and discuss emerging trends in training and skills needs within their own networks with a view to developing new courses and materials in different formats.

Providers of training and conferences agree that working with families is an emerging theme for training provision. This reflects a national trend towards supporting people who work with children and young people within the context of their families, rather than in isolation. There is also a recognised move towards encouraging workers to develop as reflective theological practitioners, viewing and considering their work in the light of Scripture and Christian belief.

# TRAINING



“

Of those taking part, 87% affirmed the need to be further equipped in their work with families.

”

The following were identified as emerging training areas:

- **Exploring the definitions of 'family'** – within the context of church. Understanding the changing nature and more fluid structure of families, supporting families at times of change and transition.
- **Developing a theology of family ministry** – providing the context for reflective thought and practice.
- **Developing approaches to family ministry** – increasing awareness of models of family ministry, developing a strategy and plan for family ministry and building and sharing a vision with others for family ministry. Training and equipping leaders within the church to support and facilitate working with families.
- **Encouraging family ministry with a focus on discipleship** – equipping families to talk about faith at home and to develop faith within their children, with specific reference to how churches can encourage, support and enable families to nurture faith.



- **Offering family support and dealing with issues** – providing guidance on undertaking practical outreach with families, particularly around supporting families experiencing stress or crisis, such as drug or alcohol use or domestic abuse.
- **Building a church for all generations** – exploring models for all-age worship and understanding how to implement them and how to sustain all-age congregations that are family friendly.
- **Working with volunteers** – training and supporting volunteers and giving them the skills to be effective in their roles. Workers also want to learn how to manage volunteers well and how to deal with strong individuals effectively.

# Looking ahead

The outcomes of the research project can be summarised in **four key findings**: Use the questions they pose on pages 28-29 to explore the findings further.

## Finding 1: Understanding family ministry

There is a broad consensus that our understanding of family has changed. We need to recognise that the nuclear family no longer represents the only lived experience of many people. Families today are more diverse and fluid.

Churches are struggling to find words that effectively describe the contemporary nature of family, with terms such as 'household' being increasingly used. Our understanding of family needs to go beyond the concept of the nuclear family to encompass multifarious relationships. We must adopt more inclusive language. At the same time our research has identified the church congregation or community as an important focus of family work.

Recognising the changing experience of being family in today's society, while embracing the wider context of ministry with families, presents challenges for the Church. Finding ways to increase knowledge and understanding, appreciating the needs of different families and adapting language are all vital in this new landscape, so that everyone receives an authentic welcome.

The appointment of 'family' workers illustrates a general trend away from working with children or young people in isolation. It recognises that a more holistic approach of working with children or young people alongside their family or extended 'household' is likely to achieve better outcomes for all. This is the case for both family ministry and family support.

## Finding 2: The spectrum of family ministry

Through the course of the research it has become clear that activity considered to be 'family ministry' is varied and has its place on the wide spectrum of work that churches engage in with families. From this two main strands of church-based family work have been identified:

- **Family ministry** – nurturing faith in households, bringing together the church family, to include all generations and 'all as one body', as well as growing the church community.
- **Family support** – providing services to meet the needs of local families, churched and unchurched. It includes pastoral care in the form of support during life events and social action such as food banks and homelessness shelters.

Both family ministry and family support have elements that are inward-facing to the church community and outward-facing to the wider community. Outward-facing family support usually includes non-congregational families, often without expectations of bringing them into the church community. It is likely that many churches do elements of both.

Family workers are delivering a wide range of services and activities, mostly based around groups, such as toddler groups, parent support groups, holiday activities, Messy Church and church social activities. Some are involved in food banks, providing practical care and advice, as well as supporting family work led by professional agencies on church premises.

Our reflection is that family ministry and support should be defined in the context of each church community.



### Finding 3: Issues in family ministry and support

Some key questions are raised by the research, in particular about how the Church can:

- work with the 'missing generation' – the 25-40 age group
- bring together all generations to nurture relationships across differing age groups
- form effective partnerships with other organisations that work with families.

During the research it emerged that parents are often the 'missing generation' in churches. Where children are attending with grandparents, and even where parents are attending as well, they are not expecting to meet with God in church, whereas children do have that expectation. There is a general feeling that if parents do not attend, children and young people will not develop a sustainable relationship with God.

There is concern that traditional church models have become too differentiated. In a bid to appeal to more people, our church family has become segregated, with a lack of meaningful relationships between different groups of members. This can make it seem like a dysfunctional family.

In some areas there is a sense that the church is the 'last man standing', able to offer support for families with complex or rising levels of need. It may also be able to help families affected by cuts in local authority services and other austerity measures, such as welfare reform. This is only likely to become more common.

A third of family workers who responded to the survey reported that they were not working in partnership with local agencies. As a result they were unable to refer people on to professional family support services or seek advice and support for themselves.

### Finding 4: Equipping for family ministry

Some family workers feel under-qualified to deal with some of the issues they encounter when working with families in need. To respond more effectively they may need more training and support. It was also noted that families with complex structures often require more support and flexibility.

Many workers experience isolation and believe that children and family work is sidelined within the church. The view was expressed that some church leaders may feel that they have delegated family work to a paid professional with the necessary expertise and place confidence in the judgement of the family worker.

Alongside delivering core services, some workers are actively involved in encouraging integration within the broader mission and ministry of the church. They do this by encouraging people to change attitudes, planning and organising new approaches, recruiting, training and equipping volunteers and reporting to management, as well as engaging in debate in the wider church through conferences and events.

Identifying effective training courses and pathways for study is a significant question relevant for all those working with families. This research suggests that more opportunities for training to encourage the development of knowledge and practice at a greater depth are much sought after by family workers. Enabling them to become reflective theological practitioners is a vital area to explore. It has the potential to embed current good practice as well as cultivate valuable understanding for the future.

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# Challenges for the Church

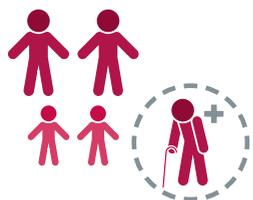
Our findings from this comprehensive research raise 15 significant questions for churches, leaders, workers and congregations. These are outlined below and provided as a path to encouraging wider conversations about family ministry and support, with the aim of developing thought, practice and approaches in the field.



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## Finding 1: Understanding family ministry

- Q. What are the various types of family found in your local context or community?
- Q. How could family work and ministry in your context become more inclusive of different kinds of family?
- Q. How does your context impact on your priorities for family work? What is the profile of the local population?



## Finding 2: The spectrum of family ministry

- Q. Which elements of family work are a priority in your church? Are they the right ones?
- Q. Which of the drivers identified on page 12 sit behind the work that is done with families in your church? Is it a combination of them, or something else that makes family work a priority?
- Q. How do churches achieve a balance between responding to need and missional activity?
- Q. What opportunities exist in the church and local context for family workers to engage in wider, more strategic discussions about ministry with families?

## Finding 3: Issues in family ministry and support

- Q. How are leaders in your church being trained and equipped to support ministry for all generations?
- Q. How does your whole church community come together for shared worship and conversation? What would need to change to make this happen?
- Q. What impact are funding cuts having on services in your area?
- Q. How well connected are your workers and volunteers with local agencies that support families?
- Q. Who are your key local partners in family ministry and support?



## Finding 4: Equipping for family ministry

- Q. What structures does your church have to enable it to manage, support and train volunteers?
- Q. What training can be offered to more fully equip those working with families, including study to develop theological approaches to family work?
- Q. What does effective supervision look like that provides both accountability and support for family workers?



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# Family Ministry into the future

Since these findings were first published in 2015 there has been an incredible reaction. Significant amounts of discussion have been generated by the 'We Are Family' research project, reflecting on how the Church is engaging with and supporting families today. This dynamic response continues to challenge and stimulate new approaches in the field of family ministry. Below are some noteworthy developments and current issues worthy of greater consideration as we shape practice into the future.

## Transforming the narrative of family

There has been a prevailing narrative in recent decades that tells a story of decline in family life. From a variety of places we hear that family life is diminishing, that the family in many households is troubled or broken. The headline seems to be that 'true family' has been lost and the values that underpin it are disappearing. Yet it remains the case that for many families it is those relationships that matter the most, that family belonging is precious and members strive to do and be the very best they can. Rather than family being something no longer cherished, it is still deeply treasured. Creating happy, safe home environments matters a great deal to parents, children and extended families. The Church has a crucial role to play here in supporting families as they seek to nurture their sense of well-being.

## Contemporary family life

Family life has always presented challenges but there are new demands experienced by today's households that are changing and ever increasing. Pressures from a range of sources including employment, financial security, social media and

childcare arrangements are commonly presenting difficulties for families. Managing these various demands often strain relationships, with home life becoming a toxic environment for some. Exploring ways to support families, helping them to manage these pressures, learning to communicate more effectively, be caring for each other and create a sense of well-being is a key priority for churches as they develop family ministry strategy.

## Relationship matters

Ministry with families has at its heart a desire to build good relationships with parents, children, grandparents as well as members of the extended family. These form the foundation for developing ministry and support that has the potential to profoundly impact the lives of families in our churches and communities. Investing in those we meet and work with, getting to know people beyond the superficial details of daily life, ensures that ministry remains a distinctly human endeavour. Finding opportunities to nurture relationships between families is also a vital activity as we seek to shape mutually supportive congregations and communities.

## Being strategic

There has been a tendency to embark upon family ministry as soon as an exciting new opportunity presents itself. In many contexts the desire to 'bring families in' has led to haste at the expense of spending time initially reflecting on aims and priorities. Resources can be more effectively allocated and assigned if consideration is given to which aspects of ministry to families a church intends to focus on. An intentionality in choosing to pursue certain activities or programmes can prevent time and energy being spread too thinly. Carefully considering these decisions at the outset gives clear purpose, which enables everyone to share in the future development of family ministry across church life.

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# We are Family

## The Changing Face of Family Ministry

**We are Family** – presenting the findings of the joint research project from Children’s Ministry Network (CMN) and The Methodist Church with Merida Associates.



## The Methodist Church

**For further information and to read the full report:**

<http://childrensministrynetwork.org.uk>

[www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk)

[www.merida.co.uk](http://www.merida.co.uk)

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