



Excluded or Part of the Team? Investigating of the Role of Grandparents in Christian Faith Nurture, Using Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Background Existing literature emphasised the spiritual value of grandparents in a child’s faith nurture, but this was not reflected in contemporary understandings or practices of the Christian community.

Purpose The discourses surrounding the perceptions and practices of grandparents themselves, the local church and wider Christian society were investigated; uncovering the dynamics of cross-generational relationships and interactions with a child’s spiritual journey.

Methods Data was gathered from Christian media, resourcing organisations, denominational websites and focus group interviews with grandparents and church representatives, to reveal the discourses conveyed by individuals, institutions and the wider Christian community. Critical discourse analysis was used to investigate perceptions and implications.

Results Grandparents unanimously reported collective worth and purpose in their grandparent-grandchild relations. However, church representatives observed barriers and tensions regarding their involvement in faith nurture, citing a culture of privacy surrounding faith. Denominational websites and Christian media indicated that grandparents were not integral to church strategies, being rarely mentioned, resourced or empowered. The dominant discourses were of grandparents being passive agents with background involvement. Resourcing primarily conveyed romanticism and nostalgia rather than addressing contemporary family life. For some, these relationships facilitated discussions about faith, whilst others said their family’s faith identity was unspoken. The grandparents were primarily motivated personally and independently of external bodies, often adopting a ‘trial and error’ mentality, suggesting a highly individual rather than collective approach to faith nurture of grandchildren. The local church rarely championed grandparents in this role, leading to grandparents being passive and feeling excluded. Many lacked confidence and were disengaged with faith nurture.

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Conclusions and Implications The value of grandparents needs better communicating, moving them from being minor contributors at the periphery of the team to being more actively and intentionally involved. This requires enhanced understanding at institutional and societal levels of grandparents' role, and improvement in the functionality and efficacy of interactions between grandparents and their grandchildren. Redressing of the power dynamics at play within congregations and society is required to bring grandparents more equally into the equation. A paradigm shift is required at all levels to equip, empower and include grandparents more fully. This would lead to improved Christian faith transmission.

Keywords Grandparents · Christian faith · Discourse analysis · Child · Family · Spiritual heritage

Introduction

Grandparents are widely viewed as beneficial, due in part to the particularly special nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Rempel, 2012; Mulvihill, 2016; Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019). Previous work such as Allen (2007), Littler (2008) and Deprez (2017) has highlighted the spiritual value of grandparents, but anecdotal observations indicate that these findings have not filtrated through to the operational level of contemporary Christian communities. These prior pieces of research and societal perspectives highlight disparities between best practice and contemporary practice, which could have implications on the effectiveness of children's Christian nurture. Hence, this paper employs critical discourse analysis to firstly examine the present-day role and function of grandparents in a child's faith nurture – both in the family and church context; and secondly to investigate the extent to which the spiritual value of grandparents has permeated Christian communities and culture. The aim is to then explore the implications of these findings for the present-day Christian community.

In this paper, the term 'grandparent' is used to signify both biological and informal 'substitute' grandparents, who are closely involved with children and replicate the traditional role of grandparents. The prevalence of increased care-giving responsibilities of grandparents for grandchildren and incidences of grandparents as surrogate parents is not of fundamental interest here. Neither is the notion of intergenerational church (Powell, 2018; Allen and Barnett 2018; Conway 2018). Rather, the prime areas of investigation are what the perceptions and practices of grandparents themselves, the local Church and wider Christian society reveal about an awareness of the spiritual value of these cross-generational relationships, and whether there are ways in which this could be more effectively embedded at all levels. To date, there is minimal research and reflection on the role and impact of Christian grandparents (Gutierrez, et al., 2014; Allana, 2017). Whilst this paper does not examine the result of grandparent's spiritual input, it provides insights from their perspective, alongside examination of prevalent discourses in local churches and Christian society more broadly. The Covid-19 circumstances at the time of empirical research had the effect of accentuating pre-existing grandparental interactions and hence emphasised any

associated challenges and inconsistencies. Within this context, the research question is therefore: Do grandparents, churches and the wider Christian community sufficiently grasp and utilise the spiritual value of grandparents in the faith nurture of children?

Background

Grandparent Relationships

Increased life expectancy and improved health have resulted in grandparents being increasingly involved in contemporary families (King & Elder, 1997; Bengtson, 2001). The unique and natural connection that grandparents and grandchildren have with one another is valued and highly beneficial (Kimmel & Kimmel, 2007), with the relationship often being close and satisfying for both generations (Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019). The distinctiveness of each relationship is due to individuals encompassing into the role their unique set of historical and experiential events that shape the way that their role is enacted (Hagestad, 1985). The grandparent-grandchild relationship frequently demonstrates mutual satisfaction and a meaningful attachment bond (Condon et al. 2020). Important aspects of this seem to be the grandchild's emotional closeness to their grandparents, shared family identity, and the perceived availability of social support (Mansson, Floyd & Soliz, 2017).

These cross-generation relationships provide a source of wellbeing and support (Condon et al. 2020; Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019), and influence an individual's relationships later in life (Mansson, Floyd & Soliz, 2017). Indeed, greater grandparent involvement is associated with fewer emotional difficulties, more prosocial behaviour and less adjustment difficulties among adolescents (Sciplino and Kinshott, 2019). These emotional benefits most likely derive from the innate desire of grandchildren to love and to be loved by grandparents (Kimmel & Kimmel, 2007). Grandparents also serve as 'family guardians', providing a safety net for their grandchildren at difficult times, such as marital breakdown (Littler, 2008), connecting with their frequently reported desire to pass on a legacy through their children and grandchildren (King & Elder, 1997). Shared family leisure experiences seem to strengthen this sense of family identity (Hebblethwaite & Norris, 2011), and are mutually beneficial (Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019). Hence, Rempel (2012) called for present-day relationships to respond to present day circumstances, rather than being dictated by past experiences. However, establishing an appropriate level of interaction, without perceived interference can be challenging (Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019). Indeed, some grandparents report feeling self-conscious and lack confidence in their role (Forghani and Neustaedter 2014). These publications highlight immense value in grandparenting relationships but also capture significant variety of lived experience.

Christian Grandparents

Intergenerational relationships have the capacity to nurture spiritual growth and development in both adults and children (Clark, 2013). Grandparenting may be seen

as the opportunity to mentor a new generation of parents and to collaborate towards the spiritual wellbeing of their grandchildren (Kimmel and Kimmel, 2007). Whilst it has been claimed that the children of church-going grandparents are more likely to be religious and instil religious practices in their own children (Littler, 2008), Taylor (2006) asserted that a partnership is required between parents, extended family and the community to awaken a child's spirituality effectively. Indeed, there are limitations to the influence of a grandparent, such as their attitude, resources, and time availability (Deprez, 2017). For example, grandparents who are more 'friendship-focused' often lack intentionality and display low levels of responsibility for their grandchild's faith (Mulvihill, 2016).

Grandparents often desire to impart wisdom and pass on their own faith for their grandchild (Allen, 2008), concurring with the notion of grandparents as keepers of wisdom (Rempel, 2012). Such passing on of faith may occur through participation, reflection, rituals and storytelling (Allana, 2017). King et al. (2008) observed that such faith transmission could occur through religious instruction, religious modeling, intercessory prayer, and promoting religious values in family relationships, whilst Simmons (1997) identified a grandparent's role in family religious life as companionship, spiritual authority, and the need to pass on faith. These notions are all encompassed in the transactional process described by Gutierrez (2014), which involves the transmission of values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices from one person to another, emphasising that the transmission is more than simply religious socialization, since it facilitates the instilling of beliefs and values into younger generations and incorporates intentionality into the process. Gutierrez (2014) highlighted that the process typically begins in the private sphere of the family in the early years and continues throughout the life span. Different perspectives of the role which grandparents play in this process will be examined within this paper.

Methodology

Since the research question sought to explore the extent to which the spiritual value of grandparents is realised by contemporary grandparents themselves, churches and the wider Christian community, a multi-perspective and poly-methodical model of critical discourse analysis was adopted, as developed by Wijzen (2013). Hence, the project had two phases (Table. 1). In phase one, a corpus of data was gathered from online Christian media sources (n=7), denominational websites (n=11) and resource providers (n=6) to provide insights into the perspectives of the wider Christian community and church context. In phase two, data was collected from focus group interviews (n=39) to enable insights from grandparents and church representatives. Gathering insights from this broad range of sources enabled investigation of the three dimensions of individual, institutional and societal to be considered, increasing the validity of the findings. A weakness is that children's voices have not been included in the data, which Allen (2008) emphasised as valuable. However, this paper focuses specifically on the role of grandparents in families, churches and the Christian community rather than the impact that they have. Consequently, although the voice of the

Table 1 Data sources for discourse analysis

PHASE ONE	
Denominational websites (accessed July 2021)	Baptist Union, Catholic, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church of Wales, Elim, Methodist, Presbyterian Church of Ireland, Salvation Army, United Reformed Church, Vineyard
Resource Mapping (accessed July 2021)	Eden Books, Care for the Family, Catholic Grandparents Association, Parenting for Faith, Re-Vived, The Good Book Company
Christian online media (2015–2021)	Christianity Today, Church Times, Evangelicals Now, Evangelical Times, Inspire, Keep the Faith, Premier Christianity
PHASE TWO	
Focus group participants (<i>Christian grandparents</i>)	22 participants, from a range of UK geographical locations, and church denominations
Focus groups (<i>church and para-church representatives</i>)	17 participants, from a range of UK geographical locations, and church denominations

Table 2 Analysis of content for parents and grandparents on denominational websites

Denomination	Use of 'parent'	Use of 'grandparent'
Baptist Union ¹⁶	594 mentions of 'parent'	39 occasions. None about role in children's faith nurture.
Church of England ¹⁷	257 mentions of 'parent'	24 times, all fleeting and unconnected with children's Christian nurture.
Church of Scotland ¹⁸	'parent' used 309 times	26 times, mainly in news items and obituaries.
Elim ¹⁹	'Parent' used 150 times	Six uses, all news items.
Methodist Church ²⁰	20 mentions of 'parent'	'grandparent' briefly used four times.
The Presbyterian Church of Ireland ²¹	'Parent' used on 40 occasions	'Grandparent' featured once, unconnected with Christian nurture.
Salvation Army ²²	453 mentions of 'parent'	'Grandparent' used 13 times, all being news stories, unrelated to faith nurture.
Church of Wales ²³	'Parent' used 13 times	No mention of grandparents.
United Reformed Church ²⁴	'Parent' used 68 times	No mention of grandparents.

¹⁶ <https://baptist.org.uk/>.¹⁷ <https://www.churchofengland.org/>.¹⁸ <https://cos.churchofscotland.org.uk/>.¹⁹ <https://www.elim.org.uk/>.²⁰ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/>.²¹ <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/>.²² <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/>.²³ <https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/>.²⁴ <https://urc.org.uk/>.

child would augment these investigations, it is not considered an essential component of this paper but is an area for possible future work.

In phase one, representative UK Christian media outlets were selected using google searches (utilising search terms such as ‘UK Christian magazine’) to include those of most significant readership and reach. The websites of the most prevalent UK church denominations were selected also. Google searches for ‘Christian books’ and ‘Christian resources’ enabled the selection of the higher-ranking research providers to be included. Within each source, the textual data was accessed by carrying out webpage searches using the terms “grandparent,” and “grandchild,” with the results being refined to be UK only, and the past five years.

Participants for the focus groups were accessed using snowball sampling, which was effective at recruiting participants although this did not provide representative or a probability-based sample. The self-selecting focus group participants were organised into small groups which took part in online semi-structured group interviews, with participants being asked about their perceptions and experiences of the role and value of grandparents in their grandchild’s faith nurture. Sensitivity was given to any emotional issues which arose during the interviews. To ensure high ethical standards, participants were assured of their involvement being confidential, free of choice and reported anonymously. Participants were asked to maintain confidentiality of what they heard within the focus group context. Power relations were reduced by the focus group participants being reminded of their freedom of choice to participate and right to withdraw before and during the discussion. A weakness was that the sample was undoubtedly skewed to contain grandparents and church representatives who were enthusiastic about the spiritual role of grandparents, since those who were less conscious of this would have been more likely to disregard the research invitation.

Critical analysis of the discourses in the dataset collected in both phases one and two scrutinised the role and perceived value of grandparents in the Christian nurture of children, examining the aspects which may be accepted as norms within Christian culture but are perhaps ideological and highly impactful on practice (Machin and Mayr, 2012). This approach permitted the tracing of explanatory connections between discourses and social reality (Fairclough, 1992), enabling the perspectives of participants’ positions to be understood in context (Fairclough, 2001) and denaturalising of the language to reveal the ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the data (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Analysis included consideration of personalisation versus impersonalisation and individualism versus collectivisation (Van Leeuwen, 1996; Wisjen, 2013), and implicit meaning was analysed, in addition to the text itself, to enable revelations of underlying beliefs (Van Dirck, 2001). This occurred by exploring three dimensions: the individual (micro perspective), the institutional dimension (meso perspective), and the societal dimension (macro perspective), in line with Fairclough’s approach (1992) and echoing Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model; emphasising the multiple levels of influences on a child (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This paper therefore examines the dominant discourses in each dimension, what they convey about the role and perceived value of grandparents in a child’s faith nurture, and what the implications of this may be.

Findings

Each of the data sources revealed insights into family dynamics, challenges and issues which had been encountered, ensuing emotions and differences in the role of parents and grandparents. However, these are outside of the specific remit of this paper, so only the content specifically about grandparent's role in Christian faith nurture is included here. For each sub-set of the data, the discourses will be described, interpreted, explained, and compared through the three lenses of individual, institutional and societal dimensions.

Focus Group Interviews – Grandparents

Underlying assumptions were evident regarding the collective worth and value of grandparent-grandchild relationships, shown by descriptions such as grandparenting is: 'special,' 'a real blessing,' 'precious gift,' such joy' and what a privilege!' Many conveyed that these close relationships facilitated in-depth discussions with their grandchildren about faith, such as: 'I am able to answer questions honestly for my grandchildren, even when they are questions that they don't feel they can ask their parents,' 'grandparents are safe for grandchildren to talk to,' 'it's easier for them to ask their grandparent questions because we have a lot more time,' 'I find that if they have tricky questions, they ask to phone Grandma'. These comments reveal the place which grandparents feel they have within the family unit: as an adviser to be called upon when needed, to some degree reinforcing stereotypes of grandparents being the keepers of wisdom. It also indicates a feeling by grandparents that they can have a purpose and can be of benefit in this way. Many conveyed these comments with a wry smile or slightly hushed tone, as if it was something that wasn't necessarily explicit or verbalised within the family. However, in many of the focus group sessions when one participant raised it the others all agreed, as if this was an intrinsic and tacit understanding of the role of grandparents within families. This illuminates opposite poles of the same discourse, whereby all seem to comprehend the value of grandparents and express it strongly in the research setting but conversely seemed to operate it covertly in the practical setting of their family. This interplay of how the underlying discourses connect with the social reality indicates a potential power imbalance, so that on the one hand grandparents are seen as valuable, highly experienced and in some cases, there were connotations of hierarchy of grandparents in this role, rather than an equal partnership with the parents. However, in other cases, participants viewed themselves as being available to serve their family if required, hence inverse hierarchy. Indeed, the elements of covert operations suggested an implicit inferiority of position held by the grandparents within the wider family context. The implications of this are complex and demonstrate a lack of clarity regarding spiritual input of family members.

Flowing from this, there was a strong sense of the importance of family faith identity, shown by comments such as: 'she loves to hear stories of our family and our family faith heritage,' 'they know our faith background, and that we are always thinking and praying for them,' 'it's important that they have a background understanding and know that their grandparents are people of faith, even if it's not talked

about regularly.’ These comments all support the notion of an inherent and implicit underlying understanding amongst the family of the grandparents being people of faith. One participant proudly reported that their son had recently shared a desire to ‘raise our children the way you raised us’, yet the grandparent had been very surprised and thought ‘wow, I didn’t know that you had noticed our faith when you were growing up’, further underlining the notion of family faith identity often being unspoken. Hence, there was an apparent dichotomy that the grandparents underlying faith was often not spoken about, yet the wider family were very aware of it, and on the other hand the grandchildren repeatedly bypassed their parents to ask their grandparents ‘difficult’ or ‘faith-based’ questions. It therefore seemed that the grandchildren were more willing to verbalise faith than their parents and grandparents. The complexity demonstrated here of minimal spiritual interaction or conversation between parents and grandparents, but more prevalent conversation between grandparents and grandchildren conveys an assumption that faith should be private and unspoken amongst the family context, and hence when it is spoken about it needs to be done in somewhat secrecy from other family members. The grandparents who explained this type of scenario seemed to relish the secrecy of this and apparently treasured the interactions more because the parents seemed unaware or because it had been instigated naturally by the child. This highlights tensions and difficult dynamics which may exist amongst different family members as they navigate roles of nurturing their child’s faith.

The participants enthusiastically and emphatically explained their desire for their grandchildren to have their own Christian faith, shown through comments such as wanting to: ‘give them the message of God’s love,’ and ‘teach them about God’s love and how they can practice faith.’ None of the participants indicated that they accessed information from elsewhere for this purpose (for example the Bible, statistics or church or para-church organisations). Instead, their aims for Christian nurture of grandchildren seemed to be motivated personally and independently of external bodies, indicating a highly individual rather than collective approach. Three participants reported taking their grandchildren to church, but the majority did not mention church at all when asked how they support their grandchild’s faith, indicating an underlying culture of disconnection between grandparent’s involvement in Christian nurture and the local church. The implication of this is that the church is viewed by grandparents as a passive voice or input as they seek to nurture their grandchild’s faith. It seems that they perceive the quality of their relationship as having higher value in this interaction than any input or influence of the church. This devaluing and dismissing of the church did not seem to be intentional or conscious. Rather it seemed that family and church rarely inhabited the same conversations.

Whilst there were sporadic mentions of Bible reading and praying together, the dominant theme regarding Christian nurture was about modelling faith in daily life, and the extent to which this was possible given the confines of geographical location and other limitations. For example four commented about being a ‘good role model of faith,’ but others expressed barriers such as ‘we live so far away it’s very difficult for them to see our faith in normal life...they don’t see us praying except formally before a meal’, ‘if she stays with me overnight, we get to pray with her at bedtime, so that is good,’ ‘if they come for a sleepover we get to pray and read the Bible together

but it's hard at other times to have an influence on their faith.' It is clear through these comments that modelling faith in the everyday was the preferred mode of Christian nurture amongst this sample, and many explained that this often led to faith discussions, although the majority reported that they allow their grandchild to instigate and lead these conversations, for example: 'I encourage my grandchildren to talk with me. Sometimes I probe them a bit but I also respect where they are at,' 'I wait for them to bring up subjects about faith or any questions, rather than me saying something first,' although one participant reported: 'if I raise the conversation, they will happily chat and ask questions'. This ambiguity about verbalising faith coincides with the point above, since again it seems that it was the grandchildren prompting these discussions. Again, these observations suggest individualised attitudes and approaches rather than collective. It may be that this is historically situated and ingrained as patterns passed on throughout generations.

None of the participants mentioned their local church or wider Christian community as part of their grandparenting experience. When raised by the researcher, there was often a pause as participants pondered their answer. It was evident that grandparents often did not immediately equate their grandparent role with their church community. At the institutional level, one participant reported that 'it is difficult to talk about our family strains and struggles with people at church because it is assumed that everyone is coping. You feel that you can't talk about struggles that the grandchildren are having because you know that people will be shocked, or judge, or perhaps they can't relate to it.' One remarked that 'as a new convert without my own heritage and faith upbringing, it's hard to find my way as a Christian grandparent.' Another observed that 'some grandparents may have been involved in running Sunday School in the past, so are a bit more comfortable about talking to children about faith. But many haven't so I would like church to equip me about how a Grandad can talk to his grandchild about faith.' These statements all communicated a general lack of confidence in many of the participants about involvement in faith nurture of their grandchildren, with the implication frequently being to disengage. In five cases, participants reported that they hadn't considered that they had a role in this until they had joined the focus group and heard other participants talking. This indicates that the spiritual role of grandparents has a low profile within contemporary Christian society. Further to this, participants were very quick to provide suggestions of how local churches could be more supportive: 'for grandparents to support each other more in prayer', 'to produce things for us to use with our grandchildren, to start off conversations about faith,' 'to affirm and encourage the role of grandparents', 'events for us to take our grandchildren to,' and 'enable conversations with grandparents in similar situations to ourselves (contrasting beliefs with our grandchild's parents).' Within wider Christian culture there were calls for 'support for how to pray for our grandchildren,' 'recommendations of books and resources that we can give to our grandchildren because we are out of date now and don't know what is relevant for each age group,' 'testimonies of spiritual grandparents to inspire us and give us ideas.' The participants were keen that churches and Christian society consider developing these areas more fully. It was notable that amongst this sample no-one referred to their spiritual role for non-biological grandchildren within their local church or wider Christian community, suggesting that this was not a commonly discussed endeavour

within their church settings. Indeed, there was an underlying negativity about older generations in churches, for example when asked what faith role models their grandchild had in church, most referenced youth workers or other young adults and others said: ‘most of their church is only older people, so that really limits the role models they have there.’ This conveys a negativity about their generational role and function within the Church, again with the implication being a lack confidence and engagement in this way.

There was a clear sense of reliance on the divine to assist their endeavours, shown by one comment: ‘we need to realise that it’s not our responsibility but ultimately God’s.’ Nine reported that they pray for their grandchildren and indicated that this was the primary way that they supported their grandchild’s faith. Other responses were: ‘I pray for her, and sometimes with her,’ ‘I pray that the Holy Spirit will use what I say,’ ‘I’ve seen them go through quite a few issues and struggles. And I’ve prayed for them,’ ‘all you can do is pray when you feel powerless,’ ‘at times I’ve felt that I can’t do anything but pray’. One described praying collectively for one another’s grandchildren in a small church prayer group, although primarily the prayer occurred individually. The ability to pray seemed to give reassurance to the participants and was conveyed in a very natural and instinctive manner. Indeed, in many cases they conveyed greater ease at talking with God in prayer than with their grandchildren about God. This again indicates that they viewed faith as primarily a private affair and hence did not strive for direct expression of it amongst their family, but instead preferred to direct their interactions with God, with the hope that this interaction with God would impact their family directly.

Despite openness to prayer as part of their grandparenting expression, it was notable that none of the participants cited the Bible, local church, para-church organisations, statistical evidence, or Christian media as contributing to their approach as a grandparent. The underlying narrative was of trial and error, as one explained they were ‘making it up as they were going along,’ and tailoring to the needs and requirements arising within their family. Their approach to their grandchild’s faith nurture seemed to be subconsciously formed, since it was evident that the interviews were one of the first times many had consciously evaluated it. Some reported that they had ‘copied’ and ‘pinched ideas’ which they had heard about from their peers, but otherwise this venture seemed to be highly individualistic in nature, despite participants often speaking collectively about their general experiences of being a grandparent. This inconsistency of individual versus collective approaches highlights the ambiguity and confusion in the underlying discourses, which then connect with social reality.

A frequent topic of conversation was the ethos and approach adopted for Christian nurture, particularly where there were differences of religious beliefs such as: ‘my husband isn’t a believer, which limits my influence’ and ‘my son and his wife are worried about us indoctrinating our grandchildren.’ A dominant feeling expressed within the discussion was timidity in involvement with faith nurture, for example: ‘I try not to interfere,’ ‘I don’t press my faith on them,’ ‘I try to be open rather than force my beliefs,’ ‘I have to tread a careful path about what I can talk about,’ ‘I constantly feel like I am treading on egg shells,’ ‘I’d rather be a bit slow on the uptake than force it,’ ‘I don’t approach the subject of faith with them unless they do.’ These comments convey a sense in some cases of religious input being dismissed and

viewed as less valuable than maintaining harmony amongst the wider family. Most of the sample expressed this mindset, even when there were not religious differences within the family. The consequent response was that many participants held back and limited their involvement in faith nurture as a result of the often-unspoken barriers and unclear boundaries. The implications of this for nurturing faith of children are significant since it will greatly reduce any spiritual input or influence amongst the family. In two cases, there was a more conscious response, although it still did not express collaboration, but viewed the grandparent as limited input into the faith nurture ‘team’: ‘you need to make sure that you have the agreement of their parent,’ ‘the parents trust me more because they see that my grandchild is leading the conversations rather than me forcing them.’ This indicated that grandparents have the least authority in this interplay and are not active voices, but more commonly passive or even excluded voices. Only in two cases was there a sense of partnership and desire to actively work together: ‘I listen to what the parents say, and we work together,’ ‘I tell the parents what we have been talking about and check that they are happy with my answers to my grandchild’s questions,’ ‘it’s great to be able to reinforce the parents’ Christian upbringing. This indicates that there is an unspoken assumption that parents are the dominant players in faith nurture, and must not be entered into dialogue with, as this will result in conflict. Yet within the focus groups, this deeply held assumption appeared to be subconscious as many nonchalantly described the dynamics without critique, although they were often sombre and mournful about the consequent outworking. There seemed to be a deep-seated fear of conflict underpinning this approach.

Denominational Websites

The websites of church denominations were examined to gain insight into their denomination’s perceptions and practices regarding the role of grandparents in Christian nurture. Predominately, grandparents do not appear to be a significant part of the strategies of churches; either through church activities, or in supporting faith in the home context, since they were rarely mentioned, never mind resourced and empowered (see Table 2). These statistics all reveal underlying discourses of parents bring the primary, and often sole focus of support from the church as they seek to support their child’s faith. The implications of these underlying discourses on the websites are that grandparents will not feel valued and indeed feel that they have a role to play within the denomination’s strategy for nurturing the faith of children. Conversely, parents were mentioned considerably more times, with the majority of those items referring to faith in the family and how churches can work with parents to nurture their child’s faith, although the Salvation Army focussed more on connecting with parents about social action rather than faith nurture. It is hence understandable that grandparents did not cite the church as contributing to their approach as a Christian grandparent, because the underlying message of the church, according to these websites is that there is no connection between the two and hence no provision of support or equipping available.

The website of the Catholic Church (England & Wales)¹ conveyed a different discourse, with the web search producing 40 results (compared with 264 for parents), and these articles connected specifically with grandparent's spiritual role and function within the church, including significant appreciation for them and some theological basis. For example, content such as: 'Family Bishop praises grandparents,' 'Pope Francis has a terrific sense of importance of the connection between generations,' 'our society needs continuity between the generations,' 'reflecting on Jesus' grandparents', and the recently launched annual World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, to 'express gratitude'. The underlying narratives of this website communicated positivity, inclusivity and affirmation of grandparents, and very much valued them as part of the process. There is also a statement that they seek to support 'parents and grandparents in passing on faith in God,' conveying an inclusivity and sense of partnering with the wider family. Hence, the underlying narratives at play on this website convey affirmation and encouragement of grandparents. There are images and videos depicting different generations together, modelling inclusivity and a desire to enhance and develop intergenerational working. This all expresses that grandparents are integral to the process and an important and valued part of the team to nurture a child's faith. Similarly, the Vineyard Church² had a prominent video interview entitled 'it takes a village to raise a child,' and grandparents were mentioned frequently as a very integral part of faith nurture in families, in addition to their role as spiritual role models to younger generations within the church. Again, this projected affirmation and valuing of grandparents within their church. There was also a strong sense of worth being conveyed, negating the notion of older generations being redundant. However, there was no evidence of equipping grandparents in this role, with the connotation that such guidance was either not required, was obtained individually rather than collectively, or that it must be accessed externally.

Focus Group Interviews – Church and Para-church Representatives

Participants overwhelmingly expressed that they deemed the spiritual role of the grandparents to be highly beneficial in a child's faith nurture, with comments such as: 'they have a wealth of life experiences to share,' 'a depth of treasure to share with the church,' 'wonderful role models of faith' and 'walking history.' These comments primarily related to the role that grandparents could play in their family context, although there was also significant dialogue about their potential to contribute to Christian nurture in the church context. There was an underlying narrative of desiring to increase awareness of this worth and potential more widely within local churches and Christian culture. Examples of including grandparents in volunteer teams at church activities were reported very positively, with comments such as: 'the families loved them,' 'there is a fondness for the grandparents age range' and 'there is often an assumption that children want young high energy leaders, but I think they actually really appreciate a quiet, stable, secure person who makes them feel wanted and needed.' There was a degree of surprise voiced in these reports, alongside passionate

¹ <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/>.

² <https://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/>.

enthusiasm to see a greater occurrence of these scenarios, conveying that they were rare in contemporary church settings. Whilst established programmes such as *Messy Church* and *Open the Book* were reported to provide opportunities for grandparents to serve as part of the team, most participants stated that there were few possibilities within local church life for grandparents to get involved. One proposed the need for providing a plethora of opportunities, and empowering grandparents to serve within one of the many options. More informally, there was perception that grandparents had a role to play in the church as well as family context, with comments such as: ‘church can be a great provider of grandparent substitutes,’ ‘pseudo grandparents can have incredible impacts’ and ‘they can provide constancy and security to children.’ Whilst this value was evident to the participants, there is an underlying and dominant disconnect present between the notion that grandparents have incredible worth and value within the family and church context, yet prevalence of them being intentionally included and involved is very low. One stated that ‘there has been a shift in society, so that grandparents are now much more involved in childcare. It therefore follows that there needs to be a shift in church and Christian circles towards involving grandparents more in family ministry.’ This call was very dominant within the participant sample, indicating that a need for this paradigm shift has been detected amongst some specialist teams and para-church organisations, but has not yet permeated through to the local church or wider Christian society.

Alongside positive reports of grandparent’s involvement, there were also obstacles cited, which primarily were felt by the grandparents themselves, and consequently hindered their participation. These included: ‘safeguarding puts them off,’ ‘I think they are a generation who feel that they are not permitted or allowed to,’ ‘there is often a lot of fear and worry about causing offence,’ ‘they seem to lack confidence in informal scenarios,’ ‘they are happy to answer and discuss faith when asked direct questions but won’t necessarily instigate it themselves.’ These comments indicate hesitancy and fear about involvement in children’s faith nurture, echoing observations in the grandparents focus group data. The underlying discourse is a perception amongst grandparents that they are peripheral to the process and lack clarity regarding the terms and conditions by which they are permitted to be involved. This mindset is perhaps historically derived, given the insights revealed above about a paradigm shift being required. Further to this, there is an underlying culture about privacy of faith matters, revealed by comments: ‘many in the older generations don’t like to share personal stuff. For them faith is also a private issue,’ ‘some older people don’t always know how to talk appropriately about faith,’ ‘their knowledge of the Bible is extensive but their language of spirituality and engaging with God is often limited.’ These comments convey a culture of privacy surrounding faith, but also reveal requirements to equip grandparents with the framework and language to constructively discuss faith with younger generations. Indeed, the lack of resourcing for grandparents highlighted elsewhere in this paper reinforces the notion and implicit directive that grandparents are not being appropriately resourced. One participant remarked that ‘if the resources are not specifically for grandparents, I think it will create barriers and they will think it’s not for them.’ This indicates that it is imperative to provide resources specifically targeted to Christian grandparents. Another idea from the grandparents was to ‘be alongside and help them as get more involved in conver-

sations with children about faith, similar to a mentoring relationship,' suggesting that the notion of mentorship and peer support is missing within local church and Christian culture, but seems to be something which could be highly effective at equipping and empowering grandparents. This again is reinforcing the notion of grandparents being passive rather than active agents in church life and wider Christian culture.

Another dominant viewpoint was that older congregation members often believe that 'their use has gone,' that they are 'redundant,' 'they sometimes feel less significant than younger generations.' A slight variation of this theme was that many perceived that older members of the congregation feel that they can now 'retire,' and that they 'used to be involved in the mission of the church,' 'they did their bit when they were younger, implying a sense that it is now their turn to rest and be served. However, one participant stated that 'many feel that they have things to offer but no-one is asking them,' conveying that local churches are not actively seeking to include them as part of teams. This sense of grandparents being devalued or dismissed as a sector within Christian society indicates a historically held bias and stereotype, again confirming the underlying paradigm outlined above that grandparents are seen as peripheral and not integral to the process of Christian nurture. One participant asserted a need for 'stereotypes of older people in the life of the church to be challenged.' Indeed, other comments supported this: 'I've not seen any other specific attempt to incorporate grandparents into church mission and ministry, other than serving tea and toast at toddler group,' 'they can do so much more than just serve the tea,' and 'because of the ethos in our churches and the labels that we give, such as 'elderly', they often feel that their role is simply to sit in church and drink tea.' This prevailing perception of grandparents being redundant in church life due to not having appropriate skills is resulting in them not being asked, included and involved in formal children's faith nurture. It is evident that this underlying ethos is disempowering contemporary grandparents, who subsequently retreat and are consequently less intentionally involved informally within church life, and also feel less confident in their family situation as a result.

Looking to the future, there were calls for both formal and informal opportunities to explicitly occur within the local church, such as: 'to celebrate alongside them when they have a new addition to the family,' 'fun discipleship events for grandparents and grandchildren to attend together,' 'invitations to share their stories,' 'prayer groups to pray for one another's grandchildren,' 'children and older members writing letters to one another,' 'opportunities for generations to share their testimonies with one another,' and 'prioritise space to grow relationships.' These depictions exude a desire for greater prevalence and visibility of grandparent involvement as a fundamental part of church life. They also connect with an underlying narrative regarding the 'accepted norms' and ethos of wider Christian society which seem to discount grandparent's involvement in church ministry. To combat this, many called for a significant shift in thinking within Christian culture, for example: 'they need messages from the front which empower them,' 'grandparents need equipping to have conversations with their grandchildren,' and 'we need to give them the confidence and language to work within the Great Commission'. These comments all convey the notion that grandparents are valuable partners within faith nurture, and hence worth investing resources to facilitate and embolden their ongoing spiritual role and influ-

ence amongst children. They also call be a redressing of the power dynamics at play within congregations and societal levels, to bring grandparents more equally into the equation. There was also a dominant theme about this ethos permeating through to communicate that faith nurture can occur during daily life, within family relationships, such as ‘we need to encourage more visibility of faith in the family,’ ‘often the goal is seen as Sunday church attendance, so grandparents think that there is no other option. But they can make use of everyday moments,’ ‘use what memories grandparents can create,’ and ‘prompt faith discussions in normal and basic things.’ These comments emphasise that the need for paradigm shift is necessary across all spheres: the family setting, local church, and wider Christian culture.

Resource Mapping

The Eden books website³ had ‘grandparents’ and ‘grandparenting’ listed as a category in their menus, conveying a sense of inclusion and provision for the sector. However, in terms of provision, there were 1808 resources (books or DVDs) for parents, but only 54 for grandparents. They were all very practical, containing themes of praying for grandchildren, legacy, faith nurture and general ethos and approach (such as ‘faithful grandparents,’ ‘grandparenting with grace, and ‘loving our children’s children’), all of which do convey a sense of valuing and inclusion of grandparents. However, the front cover images conveyed nostalgia, idealism and sentimentality, such as rocking chairs, photo albums, children and older adults smiling together, which would reinforce historical stereotypes and convey a more passive and accepting role, rather than being active and dynamically involved in the faith of their grandchild. Only one book was of a contrasting approach, depicting a sense of adventure with a mountain bike mid-air, entitled ‘extreme grandparenting’, with the content attempting to be more radical. Another book depicted something other than romanticism on the cover, with a colourful scribble instead, intimating that grandparenting was perhaps less ‘neat and tidy,’ demonstrating a more realistic observation and discourse of family life. Two of the books specifically targeted challenging or topical issues: ‘grandparenting screen kids’ and ‘long distance grandparenting,’ aiming to equip in a very targeted way, which sought to challenge existing conceptualisations of grandparents and instead raise their value and involvement as part of these family scenarios. The *Good Book Company*⁴ had no books for grandparents, despite having 76 aimed at parents, intimating that they perceive there is not a marketplace need. Nevertheless, the Re-Vived website⁵ included 28 resources for grandparents (alongside 1400 resources for parents), which were largely similar to Eden’s offering, with two additions that both conveyed a more contemporary and realistic notion of grandparenting: ‘rockstar grandparent’ and ‘overcoming grandparent barriers.’ These offerings do indicate that there is some targeted resource provision for grandparents, albeit limited. The implication of this for Christian society is that resources are available if there is awareness of their availability.

³ <https://www.eden.co.uk>.

⁴ <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/>.

⁵ <https://www.re-vived.com/>.

On the *Care for the Family* website,⁶ of the 18 menu buttons which signposted their resources and training, none referred to grandparents, conveying an underlying message that grandparents were not viewed as key members of the family. The page of resources for churches to support families again did not mention grandparents at all, carrying the connotation that grandparents do not need support, and perhaps are not recognised as a valuable sector within church life. Indeed, one statement: ‘mums and dads need all the support they can get’ indicates that parents are the essence of the faith nurturing team, and the church needs to support them alone. There was no suggestion of supporting or involving grandparents, indicating a devaluing and indeed exclusion of them from faith nurture. The term ‘grandparent’ is frequently visible within articles, although it appears to be a fleeting mentions or token gestures since it is rarely the core substance or purpose of an article. The articles which mention grandparents tend to be about practical issues such as childcare, helping with a new addition or ‘grandchildren visiting in the holidays,’ inferring that the primary function of grandparents is practical support rather than spiritual input. Hence, the discourse is that grandparents are viewed as being of subsidiary importance rather than at the forefront of their work, again confirming the notion of grandparents being passive agents with background involvement.

The *Parenting for Faith* website⁷ mentioned grandparents twenty times, although only four of these were comments related to discussing faith with others, including grandparents, and one comment advising parents to suggest grandparents give Bible stories as gifts to their grandchildren. However, there are no specific articles aimed at grandparents and no advice or resourcing provided. Furthermore, of the images provided on this page, there is only one image which contains an older person, with the other 58 images of younger generations. The connotation of this exclusion is that grandparents do not have a role to play as part of the Christian nurture process. Whilst their ‘parenting for faith’ course is described as ‘including foster carers, grandparents, godparents, church leaders and family friends,’ the name of the course implies that it is primarily for parents, indicating that the other parties are not considered integral, which could deter grandparents from accessing this course. Overall, this website in no way includes, equips or empowers Christian grandparents to nurture children’s faith in the family or church context, with the implication at all levels that grandparents are not considered integral elements.

In contrast to these other resourcing websites, the *Catholic Grandparents Association*⁸ website contained a plethora of news, resources, prayers and encouragements for grandparents. Their mission was reported: ‘to help grandparents pass on the faith and keep prayer in the heart of family life,’ specifically communicating the role of grandparents within faith nurture. The website explicitly details strategies to include and affirm grandparents in children’s faith nurture, for example: ‘pope’s universal prayer for grandparents,’ ‘grandparent pilgrimages’ and ‘world grandparents day,’ and the website included resourcing for grandparents to nurture children’s faith in the school and home context, such as: ‘grandparents day in school,’ ‘adopt-a-prayer-

⁶<https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/>.

⁷<https://parentingforfaith.org/>.

⁸<http://www.catholicgrandparentsassociation.org/>.

child,’ ‘children’s eucharistic prayer card,’ ‘fun and faith-filled grandparents masses and walks of faith’. The references all convey their support of grandparents playing an active role in faith nurture. Local parishes were encouraged to set up meetings to ‘affirm and support,’ ‘compare experiences of grandparenting,’ and ‘pray and reflect,’ conveying a keen desire for ongoing and active inclusion and involvement of grandparents within the local church but also the culture of the wider church. The implications of this are that at every level there are several components which could be possible to include and involve grandparents, conveying a strong sense of placing them in higher positions of power dynamics than the other organisations.

Christian Online Media

Evangelical Times,⁹ *Inspire*,¹⁰ and *Premier Christianity*¹¹ contained minimal content on this topic, with only briefly mentioned grandparents, despite there being copious content regarding Christian parenting. *Christianity Today*,¹² *Church Times*,¹³ *Evangelicals Now*¹⁴ and *Keep the Faith*¹⁵ included numerous mentions of grandparents, although these references were incidental, adding detail to life stories or news articles, projecting a sense of valuing them as part of an individual’s life story and identity, although there was no content about their role in spiritual nurture. However, one article in *Keep the Faith* entitled: ‘shining the spiritual light on grandparents’ argued that there was a ‘desperate need for Christian grandparents to stand up to be counted and hold up the light of God’s Word,’ and called grandparents to stand against the notion of retirement and pass their faith onto the next generation, conveying a sense of this practice being counter-cultural. Whilst this article was written in a very authoritative and highly persuasive manner, it was notable that it was a solitary voice on this website, with no other content on this topic. This conveys that there some individuals have grasped the value of grandparents, but this mindset is not held more broadly and collectively as part of Christian culture. Some book reviews in *Evangelicals Now* indicated that ‘this would make a good gift for a grandparent to give to a child.’ Whilst this was an attempt to support grandparents in gift-giving, the overall discourse of this website is that the extent and limit of the grandparent’s spiritual role is being observed as a role model of faith and giving appropriate books, with the implication being to reinforce the stereotypical attitude of grandparents having passive and background roles in the faith nurture of their grandchild. A *Church Times* book review entitled: *The Faithful Grandparents* stated that that the book is ‘intended to help grandparents who wish to hand on the baton of faith to a younger generation,’ carrying the implication that this is not the norm of a grandparent’s role but instead for those who intentionally opt to pick up this role. Similarly, a *Church Times* article

⁹ <https://www.evangelical-times.org/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.inspiremagazine.org.uk/>.

¹¹ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/>.

¹² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/>.

¹³ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.e-n.org.uk/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.keepthefait.co.uk/>.

entitled ‘influencing the generations’ stated that ‘grandparents can play a pivotal part in the faith formation of their grandchildren.’ It described a variety of family relationships, and the consequent possibilities and tensions that may arise, supporting the notion that grandparents do indeed have a role in the spiritual formation of their grandchildren on a day-to-day basis. It also asserted that ‘the Church of England has few resources specifically designed to help grandparents speak about their faith,’ confirming discourses conveyed through other data analysed above, and reinforcing the wider discourse that grandparents are under-valued and ill-empowered within the Christian community.

Discussion

Having analysed this corpus of data, there are many complexities and tensions surrounding the issues of whether grandparents, churches and the wider Christian community have effectively grasped and made use of the spiritual value of grandparents in the faith nurture of children. At an individual level, participant grandparents in this study unanimously reported feeling collective worth and purpose in their grandparent-grandchild relationship, expressing that their role held significant value amongst the extended family, reinforcing and supporting the child’s parents in raising the child. However, there was minimal evidence of collaboration between parents and grandparents regarding faith nurture of children. Granted, there were families of conflicting religious beliefs which led to tensions. But even in families who shared similar beliefs, whilst there was often an underlying awareness of the wider family’s faith identity (Hebblethwaite & Norris, 2011; Mansson, Floyd & Soliz, 2017), frequently this was not spoken about across the generations. In either case: whether conflicting or similar beliefs, it was clear through the grandparent interviews that lack of clarity regarding the role and expectations resulted in timidity and limited involvement in faith nurture, resonating with Mulvihill (2016) that many did not want to interfere, overstep or intrude. This seemed to connect with a historically situated discourse of faith being private, resulting in faith conversations often occurring covertly. Equally, this seemed to reflect a taken for granted assumption that grandparents were passive supporters and advisers within the family and must not interfere. This was despite all participant grandparents desiring for their grandchild to have faith, concurring with Weber and Absher (2003), that grandparents want to influence their grandchildren morally, religiously and spiritually.

The grandparent interviews indicated that there was minimal connection between their spiritual grandparenting role and their church life. Indeed, the notional assumption conveyed in the interviews was that the younger generations in churches were best placed to nurture children’s faith. once again this reflects an impression that the value of grandparents in children’s faith nurture is limited. Denominational websites reinforced this attitude, since grandparents and older generations were not displayed as integral to church strategies and activities regarding nurturing children’s faith. Whilst there were occasional references to grandparents by denominational websites, this was more acknowledgement of their presence than extolling their role and value in spiritual nurture. However, the Vineyard and Catholic church websites were excep-

tions to this, clearly stating their desire for all generations to be involved in passing faith on to younger generations. Unanimously the grandparent participants reported minimal formal support from the local or national church to equip or empower them in nurturing their grandchild's faith. The implication of this appears to be that Christian culture and individual grandparents are less empowered and hence less active in faith nurture. Whilst a small number did report informal support from their peers, many expressed that even this was seldom present. Such support and advice could move approaches into the collective domain rather than private and individual.

There was a desire and need expressed to provide resourcing and encouragement for them in this role, particularly for those who had not been significantly involved in nurturing their own child's faith – this seemed to be particularly common amongst males, for whom some had not considered that they had any part to play in nurturing the faith of their grandchild until the time of the interview. Indeed, Deprez (2017) observed that good grandparenting isn't implicit but requires intentional and deliberate efforts, and Mulvihill (2016) reported that grandparents who lacked clarity of role often operated on the periphery of their family and viewed themselves as minor contributors to the life of grandchildren. These observations both highlight the need for the church to bridge the gap, locally and nationally, and to strongly convey at all levels the value of grandparents in children's faith nurture. Likewise, analysis of Christian media revealed minimal and incidental references to grandparents, certainly regarding their potential spiritual influence. Occasional articles loudly extolled the importance of grandparents being involved in faith nurture, but they seemed to be lone voices, indicating that contemporary Christian culture does not generally grasp the spiritual value of grandparents. This absence of inclusion in general Christian culture, alongside examination of Christian resource production revealed a discourse of grandparents not being valued as integral to the team nurturing a child's faith. Indeed, the extent to which grandparents were equipped seemed to be limited to recommending Biblical books which they could gift to their grandchild.

This resulted in the majority of grandparents approaching their spiritual grandparenting in a highly individualistic and personalised manner, without consultation of church or other institutions or wider Christian culture. This seemed to be directly connected with the analysis of denominational websites and resource providers revealing that they usually address parents in isolation, and not grandparents or wider family. This conveyed the discourse that grandparents were subsidiary, and indeed that their worth was so minimal that they did not warrant mentioning or resourcing as part of the topic of children's faith nurture. It is therefore not at all surprising that grandparents do not view a collective approach or attitude with regard to their role of nurturing children's faith.

Similarly, the church and para-church representatives stated that whilst they greatly recognised the worth and potential of grandparents being involved in children's faith nurture, they observed it to be incredibly limited in terms of scope and depth within contemporary Christian churches and culture. This concurs with Kimmel and Kimmel's (2007) observation that the average grandparent has little concept of the assets they bring to the role. Interviewees witnessed the hesitancy of many grandparents to converse with their grandchildren about faith matters, although many noted that older generations tended to be more private regarding their faith which

compounded further the lack of clarity of boundaries and expectations of spiritual roles amongst the extended family. Yet many interviewees agreed with Sciplino and Kinshott (2019) that there is positive value of relationships with grandchildren without crossing boundaries into interference. Furthermore, some deemed that the notion of retirement sometimes communicated the message that older generations were redundant, bolstering the discourse of faith nurture primarily being carried out by younger generations. A further barrier was described as resources which were not designed specifically for grandparents. In fact, resources for Christian grandparents were found to be minimal, indicating that there was limited awareness of the value of grandparents amongst resource generators. Furthermore, analysis of the available resources revealed that many presented images of nostalgia and sentimentality, leading to the notion that they were not relevant to contemporary day to day family life but were perhaps pleasant memories or background legacies. The implication of this is that Christian families are not encouraged to see the worth of intentionally involving grandparents in a child's faith nurture. The exception to this was the Catholic Grandparents Association who expressly and overtly sought to empower and equip grandparents to spiritually support their grandchildren. Hence, the limited resourcing of this sector is perpetuating the discourse of their negligible role and worth within the church and Christian society.

Within contemporary Christian culture therefore, there is a dominant discourse of grandparents and older generations having minimal value or role as part of children's faith nurture, leading to a lack of collaboration and communication amongst wider families and local churches regarding this. Where there are differences in beliefs and practices across generations, there are often unspoken tensions which result in great uncertainty about expectations and boundaries which lead to both sadness for grandparents and in practice a timidity and withdrawal of nurturing of the child's faith. However, this timidity and reticence is also present often where there is no obvious conflict in religious beliefs and practices. The lack of communication within families and churches regarding this subject appears to directly result in reduced proactivity and functionality by grandparents. Alongside this, at both local and national level, the resourcing of Christian grandparents is minimal, and does not seem to meet the needs of contemporary Christian grandparents. Allana (2017) reflected that at the mesosystem level there are often facilitative arrangements to support parents in their role as nurturers of their child's faith, but this rarely occurs for grandparents. This limited resourcing perpetuates the underlying discourse of grandparents having a nominal role and value, both within local churches and individual families. Yet utilising the broad and complex familial relational landscape as part of faith transmission is said to have powerful implications (Gutierrez, 2014) and visible and consistent modelling of faith by grandparents has been shown to be highly effective in strengthening faith nurture (Deprez, 2012). Indeed, improved valuing and collaboration across the generations has been shown to have a very positive impact on the spiritual wellbeing of all parties (Allen and Barnett 2018). It is therefore recommended that the Christian community recognises the valuable assets which grandparents can bring alongside parents to support them in raising their children in an open and inclusive manner (Kimmel & Kimmel, 2007), and take active steps to more fully convey this value at all levels.

Limitations of this Project

It is acknowledged that this paper primarily captured the views of grandparents who were positive about faith involvement, resulting in the focus group data being potentially slightly skewed. However, the representative textual data has sought to offset this limitation. As stated within the methodology, it could be beneficial to incorporate the child's voice into future research on this topic.

Future developments of this research could include a more detailed comparison of grandparent experiences in different church denominations or investigation of any difference in experiences in different cultures globally. In addition, a longitudinal survey would be fascinating to uncover how the narrative of the Christian community regarding grandparents changes over time. More work also needs to be done to reveal insights of how best the Christian community can support families in which there are contrasting faith beliefs.

Conclusion and Implications

Analysis of these data strands indicates that there is minimal awareness and utilisation by grandparents, churches and the wider Christian community of the spiritual value of grandparents in the faith nurture of children. It is therefore recommended that action is taken at individual, institutional and Christian societal levels to improve awareness of this, and to enhance resourcing and encouragement of Christian grandparents in faith nurture of younger generations. This requires a paradigm shift to be embedded throughout the three spheres of the Christian community: extended families, local churches and wider Christian culture. The implication of challenging these underlying discourses and embedding change could bring about a greater confidence and proactiveness within Christian grandparents, more opportunities for spiritual encounters to take place across the generations and ultimately improve the functionality and efficacy of Christian faith transmission and spiritual wellbeing throughout the Christian community.

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