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Reimagining *ecclesia domestica* following a time of pandemic:

The John Hull Memorial Lecture, 2023

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Abstract

The Second Vatican Council helpfully reaffirmed the partnership among three primary agencies in the Christian education and the Christian formation of the young: school, church, and home. The primacy among these three agencies may emerge differently in different social contexts. The argument of the present paper is two-fold. First, it is argued that John Hull was the key influence during the 1970s in trying to shift the primary focus for the Church of England from the school to the local congregation. Second, it is argued that post-pandemic, the primary focus now needs shifting from the local congregation to the home, to the *ecclesia domestica*.

Keywords: Christian nurture, school, congregation, home

Introduction

Born in Corryong, Victoria, Australia, the son of a Methodist minister, at the age of 24 in 1959, John Hull moved to study theology in Cambridge. Having already trained as a teacher in Australia, Hull brought with him a critical interest in theology, education, and faith transmission among the young. The educational climate in England into which he arrived had been shaped by the remarkable arrangement between Church and state forged by the Education Act 1944 (Dent, 1947). The four key relevant components of this Act secured greater state control over some church schools (those that opted for ‘controlled status’), embedded a statutory act of collective worship beginning each day in state-maintained schools, consolidated the role of the Churches in defining the provision of locally determined religious education in schools without a church foundation, and enshrined the right of parents to withdraw their children from collective worship and from religious education. The Education Act 1944 left the Free Churches and much of the Church of England confident that the future for Christian education was secure in the hands of the state-maintained sector of schools.

After Cambridge, Hull served as head of religious education in a London grammar school and then moved to Westhill College, Birmingham, to train religious education teachers. The 1960s and early 1970s were heady years in reframing the intellectual debate concerning the role of the Churches and the place for the Bible within the classroom. Piagetian psychology was brought into play by Goldman (1964, 1965) and educational philosophy by Hirst (1972) as significant players standing on the sidelines, but it was John Hull who stepped across the sidelines and became the active player speaking from *within* the Churches. Hull’s advantage, as a newcomer to English soil, was that he stood as a churchman unafraid of unsettling the deceptively fragile claim that the future for Christian education was really secure in the hands of the state-maintained sector of school.

During the second half of the 1970s, Hull's intellectually sharp and prophetic contribution was positioned in three books that focused on the nature of Christian nurture (as a carefully positioned construct differentiated from Christian education) and the distinctive contribution of the three agencies potentially engaged with this process, namely schools, churches, and homes. In their order of publication these three books are: *School worship: An obituary* (Hull, 1975), *The child in the Church* (British Council of Churches, 1976), and *Understanding Christian nurture* (British Council of Churches, 1981). Alongside these three books stand two key papers, both first published in *Scottish Journal of Theology*: 'What is theology of education?' (Hull, 1977) and 'Christian nurture and critical openness' (Hull, 1981). Both papers were made more widely available in *Studies in religion and education* (Hull, 1984) and again in *Christian perspectives for education* (Francis & Thatcher, 1990).

School worship: An obituary

School worship: An obituary was, for the churches, a controversial and provocative book because it struck at the very roots of the potentially fragile partnership between Church and state forged by the 1944 Education Act. Hull's (1975) conclusion was unequivocal and uncompromising: 'Corporate, compulsory worship should be abandoned, and assembly then left free to relate in new ways to the curriculum' (p. 118). Hull's case for abandoning 'corporate compulsory worship' was well considered, cogently argued, and thoroughly documented. My aim here, is to state clearly Hull's case, not to evaluate it.

Hull's main argument rests on an analysis of the concept of education, the view that schools are concerned primarily about education, and the desirability of distinguishing education from related concepts, like training, instruction, indoctrination, evangelisation, nurture, and catechesis. Education, Hull argued, is essentially a critical process: education into a subject implies knowledge of the principles of knowledge, knowing why what is alleged to be known is known, and knowing how to know more. Worship, on the other hand,

Hull argues, logically entails certain beliefs and the acceptance of those beliefs as true. As processes, worship and education are, therefore, fundamentally different and logically incompatible. Hull wrote:

Nurture prepares for belief, evangelisation summons belief, instruction implies belief, catechesis strengthens belief, and worship assumes belief. But education scrutinises belief. It is clear, then, that worship and education cannot take place concurrently.

Alongside this main argument, Hull developed five subsidiary arguments. First, he analysed the implications for school worship of the then recent changes in religious education. While the 1944 Education Act assumed that school worship and religious education went hand in hand, the changing face of religious education had caused a sharp separation between the two activities. Worship entails the acceptance of beliefs, while the new religious education is not concerned with what students believe to be true but with their understanding of the grounds for belief and disbelief. Thus, school worship and religious education have not only drifted apart, they have also become incompatible.

Second, Hull reviewed the way in which schools have tried to respond to changes in educational theory and in religious education by secularising school worship. In this case worship is removed from its theological beliefs and we are left with the psychological affinities, such as ‘reverence, trustfulness, joy or a meditative attitude towards life’. Hull argued that this approach only serves to ‘disguise the nature of the changes that are taking place’ and in fact concedes the demise of real worship within the school.

Third, Hull speculated about the implications of trends in the psychology of religious development for school worship. He argued that, if worship logically entails certain beliefs, it is important for those who are involved in worship to be able to grasp and understand these underlying beliefs. Thus, ‘if children cannot grasp the underlying doctrine’ it is inappropriate for that doctrine to be affirmed in worship.

Fourth, Hull argued that cultural and religious pluralism in county schools placed the whole question of school worship in a sharper focus. The application of the withdrawal clauses to accommodate those of other faiths is ‘odious and divisive’. The idea of holding separate assemblies for different faith groups within the one school is ‘contrary to the role of assembly and indeed of the county school itself as a cohesive agent in a mixed society’. The solution of devising eclectic acts of worship drawing on a range of religious traditions contradicts the idea of real worship ‘which presupposes loyalty’.

Fifth, Hull argued that trends in secularisation had now thoroughly undermined any assumption that schools can claim to be Christian communities. Real school worship, he argued, only makes sense on the assumption that schools remain faith communities. Here then came the crux of Hull’s challenge to the Churches: if schools within the state-maintained sector are no longer equipped for the role of faith transmission, where was that role now to be located?

The child in the Church

The report published by the British Council of Churches (1976) was the outcome of a working party established by the Consultative Group on Ministry among Children in 1973 ‘to take note of current thinking in the Churches concerning the Christian education of children in the context of the local church and community and to assess the means whereby children are nurtured in the Christian faith’ (pp. iv). In his preface to this report, John Gibbs (then serving as Bishop of Bradwell), noted that ‘in the end it is due entirely to the immense efforts of Dr John Hull that our work was completed at all and we are most grateful to him’ (p. iv). John Hull’s vocabulary, incisive analysis, and prophetic clarity are stamped across this work, although at that stage in his career he was never invited to stand up and take ownership of the report.

The child in the Church opens with pertinent analyses of changes in society (pp. 5-7), changes in understanding of childhood (pp. 7-9), changes in educational methods and practices (pp. 9-10), and changes in understanding of the Christian faith (pp. 10-11). This analysis convinced John Hull that, not only were schools within the state-maintained sector of education now illegitimate locations for the activity of Christian nurture, but Sunday schools as conventionally conceived were unfit for purpose too.

The child in the Church then proceeds with developing ‘a Christian understanding of childhood’ (pp. 13-18). For John Hull this means a ‘quest for a theology of childhood’, and while such a quest necessarily involves an interrogation of scripture, it involves more than that. A theology of childhood involves deeper theological investigation. For John Hull this deeper investigation is rooted in Christology and in the notion of incarnation. Hull argues that ‘a child of any age may be wholly human and wholly God’s. Because Christ was a child, a child can be a Christian’ (p. 16). It is this theological analysis rooted in Christology, that leads Hull to locate the place of the child, not in the Sunday school, but in the congregation.

The Church that does not accept children unconditionally into its fellowship is depriving those children of what is rightfully theirs, but the deprivation such a Church itself will suffer is far more grave. (p. 18)

In his foreword John Gibbs makes the same point in a different way: ‘Jesus set a child in the midst not as one to be taught but as a teacher’ (p. iv).

By this point, the report, *The child in the Church* had moved the primary agency for Christian nurture away from the school (both the day school *and* the Sunday school) and placed that agency in the hands of the local congregation. The challenge then was to explore precisely how the local congregation could be equipped to fulfil that responsibility. The subsequent chapters of the report proceeded to examine how this responsibility needed to be shaped by a clearer analysis of ‘an understanding of Christian nurture’ (pp. 19-26), by an

examination of the role of ‘the Bible in Christian nurture’ (pp. 27-32) and by reflection on ways in which local churches may be re-conceptualised. While conceptually challenging, the working group itself did not emerge as equipped to translate developing theory into practical recommendations. The penultimate paragraph left on the cliff-hanging and tantalising note, ‘If Christian nurture is taken seriously, the whole life of the Church must be reappraised’ (p. 43).

Understanding Christian nurture

Like all good working parties, a major recommendation concluding *The child in the Church* was for a further working party to be established, this time with the agenda ‘for a deeper examination of the theology of nurture’ and of the concept of ‘critical openness’. John Hull once again provided the intellectual energy that drove the second report, *Understanding Christian nurture* (British Council of Churches, 1981). The intellectual weight of this report forty years on can still provide a benchmark against which effective Christian nurture that embeds critical openness can be assessed. The aspiration is well reported in paragraph 73 of the report.

Although Christian nurture shares critical openness with secular education, there is still much that is distinctive about Christian nurture. Its setting within a worshipping community of faith and its deliberate intention to promote faith enable the Christian child to find in Christian nurture what he cannot find from his religious education in a county school. (p. 29)

Shaping a practical response

It was these heady aspirations regarding the responsibility of local congregations to serve as the primary agency for Christian nurture of the young (largely shaped by John Hull) that set me off on my post-doctoral adventure working as a self-supporting house-for-duty priest in a rural parish in Suffolk (alongside my post-doctoral research fellowship in London) to test the

extent to which the vision of locating responsibility within the local congregation could be viable. Together with my two trusty companions, Teddy Horsley and Betsy Bear (see, for example, Francis & Slee, 1983a, 1983b, 1985a, 1985b; see also Slee, Francis, & Pedley, 1999), I set about designing a curriculum for Christian nurture rooted in the local congregation of a eucharistically-centred village church. I also set about equipping members of the congregation to deliver this curriculum. I published this approach in 1981 in my book *His Spirit is with us: A project approach for Christian nurture* (Francis, 1981). Today that project approach could be reconceptualised as Messy Church, the only difference being in the way that the project approach was coherently rooted in liturgical, theological, and pedagogical theory.

Five years later in my book *Making contact* (Francis, 1986a), I documented how my project approach to Christian nurture had taken hold elsewhere, and I invited John Hull to offer a preface. John found that my practice was implementing his theory. This is what he wrote.

A very lively and readable book, bubbling with ideas, presented with enthusiasm and common sense, in a way which is both spiritually enriching and practically helpful...

Perhaps the finest feature is its integration of life. The church, the school and the home, sacred and secular time, old and young (and middle-aged!), the various subjects of the curriculum, the senses, thinking and feeling, church and world, the seriousness and the frivolity of sacred play are all brought together in these pages to form one whole environment of Christian living. I am grateful for this opportunity to recommend this book and I believe that it will do much good in all the churches.

So for personal and professional reasons, it is my privilege to have been invited to deliver the John Hull Memorial Lecture.

Adding an empirical perspective

While John Hull was framing his conceptual response regarding the role of schools in the Christian nurture of the young, I had been involved in exploring from an empirical perspective the distinctive contribution of Church of England primary schools to the religious development of their students from an affective or attitudinal perspective. In my first study in 1974, I administered a scale of attitude toward Christianity to all year-five and year-six students attending 10 Church of England primary schools and 15 schools without a religious foundation in East Anglia (Francis, 1979). The results puzzled me, so I replicated the study through the same schools in 1978 and 1982. After using multiple regression analysis to control for the influence of sex, age, parental church attendance, social class, and IQ on students' attitudes toward Christianity, these data indicated that the Church of England schools exercised a small negative influence on their students' attitudes toward Christianity. The direction of the school influence on students' attitude was consistent for all three samples taken in 1974, 1978, and 1982 (Francis, 1986b).

Still being puzzled by this finding, I decided to replicate and extend my original study in a different geographical area, this time among year-six students attending all Church of England voluntary aided, Church of England voluntary controlled, and community schools in Gloucestershire. These data attributed neither positive nor negative influence to Church of England voluntary aided schools, but demonstrated a significant negative influence exercised by Church of England voluntary controlled schools. Taking a positive interpretation of these data, I concluded that there was no evidence on which to accuse Church of England primary schools of indoctrinating their students.

Following these initial studies, my research group has kept an eye on the comparative effect of Church of England primary and secondary schools on student attitudes and values, including studies reported by Francis and Jewell (1992), Lankshear (2005), Swindells, Francis, and Robbins (2010), Francis and Penny (2013), Francis, Lankshear, Robbins,

Village, and ap Siôn (2014), and Francis and Lankshear (2021). None of these studies seriously challenged our initial conclusions. For example, in the most recent of these studies, Francis and Lankshear (2021) reported on the responses of 1,153 young people between the ages of 11 and 16 years who attended an Anglican church in the Diocese of Southwark to a scale measuring ‘attitude toward my church and Christian living’. The key finding from this study was that, after controlling for individual differences in sex, ethnicity, deprivation, and frequency of church attendance, attendance at a church school neither enhanced nor depressed attitude score.

Reimagining *ecclesia domestica*

Hull’s pioneering work with the British Council of Churches in the 1970s suggested that the Anglican Church and the Free Churches in England may have been misled by the Education Act 1944 into imagining that primacy among the three agencies concerned with religious nurture rested with the school. Hull’s analysis exploded that illusion, and in its place offered primacy to the local congregation. Now I want to argue that this illusion too needs exploding, and for primacy to pass to the household.

Even while I was striving to make my project approach to Christian nurture flourish within two rural parishes in Suffolk, my thorough scoping of provision throughout the whole of that diocese, published in my book *Rural Anglicanism: A future for young Christians?* (Francis, 1985) had clearly demonstrated that already resources were too thinly spread to rise to the challenge. The subsequent research that I undertook with David Lankshear, in association with the report *Children in the way* (Church of England, 1988) simply confirmed that the experience of the one diocese reported in *Rural Anglicanism* was much more widespread. In this study we collected data from 7,157 churches representing a response rate of 72.2% from the 24 participating dioceses and the Archdeaconry of the Isle of Wight (Francis & Lankshear, 1992, 1995a, 1995b). Now three decades later for me the jury is no

longer out. Now it is time for primacy to move from the local congregation to the household.

I have two grounds on which to root this suggestion: the first is the wisdom of the Catholic Church, and the second is the evidence of empirical research.

The Catholic Church has consistently spoken of the partnership among three primary agencies in the Christian education and the Christian formation of the young. In this partnership, home, church and school stand side-by-side. The case is clearly made in primary documents from the Second Vatican Council (Tanner, 2012), including *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic constitution on the Church) and *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian education). The priority among these three primary agencies may emerge differently in different social and educational contexts. Evaluating the situation within modern plural and secular societies, John Paul the Second (1981), in *Familiaris Consortia* (The role of the Christian family in the modern world), was clear in prioritising the family and drew on the terminology of *Lumen Gentium* that spoke of the family as ‘the domestic church’.

In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centres of living, radiant faith. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica*. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are ‘by word and example ... the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children’. (*Familiaris Consortia* 1656)

Between 2016 and 2019 the Church of England also gave attention individually to those three primary agencies in the Christian education and Christian formation of the young, affirming the importance of each in turn. The first of these reports, *Rooted in the Church*, was concerned to promote the characteristics of local churches that sustain the engagement of young people (Church of England Education Office, 2016a). Here confidence remained high in Hull’s vision for the capacity of the local church to take an effective lead in Christian

nurture. The second report, *Church of England vision for education: Deeply Christian, serving the common good*, was concerned to promote the evangelistic capacity of church schools among their students: ‘we are committed to offering them an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice in a way which enhances their lives’ (Church of England Education Office, 2016b, p. 13). Here confidence remained in the missional capacity of church schools. The third and most recent statement, *Growing faith: Churches, schools and households*, placed the emphasis on the third of the three agencies, the home. Without detracting from the role of the school or from the role of the congregation, this report stated that ‘research shows that parents have the largest influence on their children in matters of faith’ (General Synod, 2019, paragraph 11). In response to this evidence, this report to General Synod wanted to see:

Every parish creating experiences of church where children, young people and households are actively involved, growing spiritually and have their voices heard (General Synod, 2019, paragraph 13).

Examining the research evidence on *ecclesia domestica*

One strand of research that has systematically drawn attention to the centrality of the home in sustaining the faith of young churchgoers was initiated by the Australian National Church Life Survey, in which young churchgoers have been invited to complete a survey alongside the surveys completed by adult attenders. For example, in their report from the 2001 Australian National Church Life Survey, on data provided by 10,101 10- to 14-year-old attenders, Bellamy, Mou, and Castle (2005) found that parents have a central role in the development of faith. They concluded that the practice of family prayer times, the encouragement of a personal devotional life for children, and parents simply being prepared to talk with their children about faith are all aspects that are positively related to higher levels of belief and a more positive attitude toward and involvement in church life.

In their report from the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey, on data provided by 6,252 8- to 14-year-old attenders, Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018) found that these data confirmed the power of parental example on frequency of church attendance. Frequent attendance among young churchgoers occurred when *both* parents attended as well. The most positive attitude toward their church was found among young churchgoers who had the opportunity to talk about God with their parents and who did not feel that their parents made them go to church. Young churchgoers responded to parental encouragement better than to parental pressure. Although peer influence within the church did not make much contribution to frequency of attendance, it made a contribution to shaping positive attitude toward church.

In their report from the 2016 Australian National Life Survey, Francis, McKenna, and Powell (2020) concentrated on data from 2,131 8- to 14-year-old attenders who completed surveys while attending Catholic churches. This study employed multiple regression modelling to examine the effects of parental church attendance (treating mother and fathers separately) and home environment (in terms of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home) on frequency of child church attendance. The data demonstrated that parental church attendance is the strongest predictor. Young Catholics in Australia are more likely to attend church frequently if both mother *and* father attend church a lot. Moreover, after taking parental church attendance into account the home environment adds additional predictive power. Young Catholics are most likely to attend church frequently if both parents attend church *and* support faith within the home environment through both family encouragement and religious engagement within the home. When parental churchgoing and home environment have been taken into account, the external factors of engaging with online religious resources and of attending a Catholic school add no further positive predictive power in sustaining churchgoing among young Catholics.

The Australian National Church Life Survey gave rise to the 2001 Church Life Survey designed primarily for use in England (Churches Information for Mission, 2001). In their report on the survey conducted among 10,153 8- to 14-year-old attenders, Francis and Craig (2006) found that parents play a crucial role through what they do and what they model outside their pattern of church attendance. The maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during the tweenage years is associated with having parents who support the faith in conversation and example at home.

Building on this research tradition established by the Australian Church Life Survey, Francis and colleagues have reported on three studies exploring the place of the home specifically in sustaining young Anglicans in England and Wales. In the first of these studies, Francis (2020) drew on data collected within schools in England and Wales (half of the schools were church schools within the state-maintained sector and half were schools without a religious character within the state-maintained sector) to identify 13- to 15-year-old students who identified as Anglicans. This method allowed research to be undertaken among non-churchgoing Anglicans as well as churchgoing Anglicans. From a total sample of 7,059 students, 645 identified themselves as Anglican (Church of England or Church in Wales). This study employed multiple regression to take into account the effects of personal factors (sex and age) and psychological factors (extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism) before testing for the effects of peer-related factors and parental factors. These data demonstrated that young Anglicans who practise their Anglican identity by attending church did so primarily because their parents were Anglican churchgoers. Moreover, young Anglican churchgoers were most likely to keep going if their churchgoing parents also talked with them about their faith. Among this age group of Anglicans peer support seemed insignificant in comparison with parental support.

In the second of these studies, Francis, Lankshear, Eccles, and McKenna (2020) drew on data provided by 2,019 9- to 11-year-old students attending 88 Church in Wales primary schools who self-identified as Anglican. These data demonstrated that the single most important factor in sustaining churchgoing among these young Anglicans was the church attendance patterns of mothers. The effect of maternal example is, however, augmented when mothers take the opportunity to talk with their children about God, Jesus, prayer, and church, and when fathers are also seen to support mothers' pattern of church attendance.

In the third of these studies, Francis, Lankshear, Eccles, and McKenna (2020) drew on data provided by 2,323 11- to 16-year-old students attending eight Church of England secondary schools, one joint Anglican-Catholic secondary school, and one secondary school operated by a Christian foundation. These data confirmed that parental church attendance provides the strongest prediction of church attendance among young Anglicans. More frequent attendance is associated with mother attending church and with father attending church. These two factors operate cumulatively with the stronger influence being when both parents attend church.

Also building on this research tradition established by the Australian Church Life Survey, Francis and colleagues have reported on two studies exploring the place of the home in sustaining young Catholics in England, Scotland and Wales, and in the Republic of Ireland. The first of the two studies, reported by Francis and Casson (2019), employed data from 2,146 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 9,810 participants to a survey conducted in England, Scotland, and Wales. The second of these two studies, reported by Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, and McKenna (2019), employed data from 1,942 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 3,000 participants to a survey conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Using multiple regression analyses, the data from both studies suggested that young Catholics who practise their Catholic identity by attending church do so largely

because their parents are Catholic churchgoers. Moreover, young Catholics are most likely to keep going if both mother *and* father are Catholic churchgoers, and if they discuss faith with their mother. Peer-related factors and psychological factors added little additional predictive power to the model.

Working within the same research tradition in Canada, Fawcett, Francis, and McKenna (2021) explored the impact of parental religious practice on sustaining positive religious affect among churchgoing young Baptists. A total of 299 participants between the ages of 12 and 18 years attending a summer youth programme sponsored by the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, completed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, 2009) as a measure of positive religious affect, together with measures of frequency of church attendance for themselves, their mother and their father. These data identified fathers' religious attendance as a statistically significant factor augmenting the effect of mothers' religious attendance for sustaining young Canadian Baptists in the faith.

Cumulatively, the evidence is clearly focussing attention onto the household. The pressing question, nonetheless, remains: how can households be equipped to rise to the challenge of stepping into the vacuum left by schools and by congregations. It is precisely here that the experience of the pandemic comes into play.

Responding to the pandemic: engaging with research

During the opening days of 2020, Covid-19 took the world by surprise. It became clear that decisive action was needed and decisive action was implemented at short notice. In England, the government imposed a lockdown on the nation on 23 March 2020. Going beyond the immediate requirements of the government, on the following day the Church of England imposed a total lock-up on all its churches. Churches were closed completely for religious and liturgical provisions, even for private prayer and even for the clergy. According to the guidance for churches offered by the Church of England:

Our church buildings are therefore now closed for public worship, private prayer, and all other meetings and activities except for vital community services until further notice. (McGowan, 2020, p. 4)

Churches that pre-Covid were known primarily for offering vital religious services (like holy communion) could now only remain open to offer vital community services (like food banks).

The sudden closure of churches and other opportunities for offline services prompted clergy and church leaders to grapple with establishing overnight an online presence and to provide services on a variety of digital platforms. Since church buildings were now closed, this online presence had to be implemented from the domestic space occupied by church leaders. This significant change was exemplified when the Archbishop of Canterbury live-streamed the Easter morning eucharist for the nation from his kitchen table, and when the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral began to broadcast the daily offices from the deanery garden.

The closure of churches and the move to an online future was not met with total enthusiasm by Church of England clergy and churchgoers. In his editorial to *Journal of Anglican Studies*, McGowan (2020) documented some of the disagreement voiced in the church press and on individual websites. He concluded that:

Many worshippers, not just clergy, wanted to be connected with the spaces and places that meant so much to them. Members of the Church were now being offered alternative forms of prayer and worship, via technologies not always familiar or welcome, centred on clergy whose faces have become personal avatars of worship. Without the context of stone and wood that spoke of a larger reality than personality or family, and reminded them of a past and future beyond the challenging present, this personalised corporate worship as never before. (McGowan, 2020, p. 31)

For me personally and professionally the pandemic provided a dual set of challenges and opportunities. From an academic perspective, working in York St John University as empirical theologians, Andrew Village and I spotted the need to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the ministry and mission of the Church. Collaborating with the *Church Times* we designed an online survey that was live between 8 May and 23 July 2020 and attracted around 6,000 responses. In designing this survey we tried to anticipate the longer-term impact of Covid-19 on church leaders (clergy), on church members (churchgoers), and on the visible public future for churches. We began, therefore by examining current research on the health and wellbeing of churches in England and Wales, and by developing theories about how such research may give insights into the future direction after the pandemic. In particular, the study on church-leavers by Richter and Francis (1998) and Francis and Richter (2007) had found that the most common reason given for people leaving was simply that they had got out of the habit. Something had intervened to break the habit formed over years (or even over their lifetime). We hypothesised that little could be more successful in breaking the habit of churchgoing in comparison with locking up the churches.

Further examination of recent research identified six specific themes that we considered could be relevant, and we began to develop theories arising from each of these themes. Our six hypotheses were as follows:

- already fragile churches will grow more fragile;
- older people who had kept churches open before the pandemic will not return;
- men who are already a minority in church congregations may represent a particular causality from the lock-up of their churches;
- Anglo-Catholics will fare less well than Anglican Evangelicals during lockdown;
- Anglo-Catholics and Anglican Evangelicals will take different views on online communion services;

- the pandemic will impact negatively the psychological wellbeing of both clergy and laity.

These themes were then addressed in a series of 20 or so papers, including papers dealing with: the trajectory of fragile churches (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021); the effect of the pandemic on older people (Francis & Village, 2021a); the impact on male churchgoers (Francis & Village, 2022a); the different responses of Catholic and Evangelical Anglicans (Francis & Village, 2022b); diverging views on online worship (McKenna, 2022) and online communion services (Francis & Village, 2021b); and assessing the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing among clergy and laity (Francis & Village, 2021c; Village & Francis, 2021a, 2021b; Francis, Village, & Lewis, 2022). Taken together, this emerging body of research convinced us that there was a growing urgency in reconceptualising pathways for faith transmission among both adults and young people within the post-pandemic Church. Moreover, the enforced migration to online worship refocused for us the central place of the *ecclesia domestica* during the pandemic and into the post-pandemic world.

Responding to the pandemic: nurturing *ecclesia domestica*

From a pastoral perspective working as Canon Theologian alongside the Dean in Liverpool Cathedral, we spotted the need to develop online strategies to deliver worship services into people's homes and to support wider pastoral ministry. From a combination of practical experience and research data we began to build up a picture of the newly emerging prominence of the *ecclesia domestica*. How were people engaging with online worship delivered within their homes? How could the journey be made from being spectators gazing at a screen to participants engaged in worship? How could households be more actively engaged in a learning and nurturing community? It was from this experience that Liverpool Cathedral has now developed and is beginning to refine a programme of all-age discipleship learning, *Exploring the Sunday Gospel*, that locates the household at the centre of faith

transmission, and does so with firm links to the characteristic liturgical life of the Cathedral itself.

Alongside prioritising the centrality of the household in faith transmission, the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme has its roots in three key principles: the identity of cathedrals within the Anglican tradition as episcopal theological resource churches (see Francis, in press); the distinctiveness of discipleship learning as positioned by Astley (2015) and Francis (2022); and the view that discipleship learning begins with engaging the ordinary theology of the engaged participants (see Astley, 2002; Astley & Francis, 2013).

Exploring the Sunday Gospel is offered as a resource that argues that households can function best as effective transmitters of faith among young people when the whole household itself fully engages in discipleship learning across the full age range. The household is then better equipped to empower and to motivate both schools and congregations. The core assumptions underpinning the programme are that:

- the eucharist is at the centre of the cathedral, at the centre of parish churches, and at the centre of the diocese;
- in the Anglican tradition weight is given to both word and sacrament;
- the ministry of the word is resourced by the Revised Common Lectionary;
- households, congregations, and schools engaging in preparation for the Sunday eucharist will participate more intentionally offline and online.

The *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* initiative focuses on households who are in contact with cathedrals and with parish churches. In this sense, households include people of all ages, living alone, or living in multi-generational units. It is fully recognised that not all households will wish to engage with this venture. But those who do may journey together in growing closer to and more engaged in the Sunday liturgy. Alongside this primary focus, cathedrals and local churches may become better equipped to retain families and young people who are

in active or semi-active membership and by so doing develop a stronger platform from which to engage less committed and more transient members. Inspired by the model of discipleship learning exemplified within Mark's Gospel, the number one priority is to nurture the twelve that, in turn, they may be equipped to feed the five thousand (and the four thousand).

The pedagogical principles underpinning the programme include:

- focusing throughout the week on the Gospel reading for the following Sunday;
- focusing on a concrete image at the heart of the Gospel reading;
- using a short Gospel prayer shaped on the Gospel reading;
- engaging in activities that can explore the Gospel reading and the concrete image;
- preparing material that can be a focus for online worship at home or can be brought to share or to display at the offline service.

Now that the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme has been available online for three years, we are beginning to evaluate how this is impacting the discipleship trajectory of those engaging with the programme (see McKenna & Francis, in press).

Concluding remark

So here my reflections must rest, some 50 years on from the time when John Hull put down his pen from drafting *School worship: An obituary*. Now, as then, the pen is both picked up and put down *in media res*. I am grateful to John Hull for academic stimulus and for personal friendship. My first hope is that I have built on his foundational work in ways that he would recognise and welcome. My second hope is that the way in which I have redirected his focus from the mid-1970s into the mid-2020s may stimulate a new generation of scholars concerned with faith transmission to continue to build on the sound foundations that John Hull has bequeathed to us.

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