

Editorial: The challenge of Christian grandparenting

Ministry Today 69 (Spring 2017) 3-7

Paul Beasley-Murray

This paper had its origins in an invitation to contribute to a Lenten series on 'Evangelism and the Third Age', in which the emphasis was not on evangelising older people, but on older people evangelising younger people!

Grandchildren are special – as one wit put it, 'The idea that no one is perfect is a view most commonly held by people with no grandchildren!' On the other hand, there is truth in the observation that while 'an hour with your grandchildren can make you feel young again, anything longer than that, and you start to age quickly!'

Let me set the scene as far as Caroline and I are concerned. We are the proud grand-parents of five if not seven grand-children. If that sounds strange, then let me explain.

- Our eldest son, Jonathan, lives in Vancouver with his wife Fiona and they have a four year old son, David Aneurin. In addition, living with them are two children from Fiona's previous marriage, Sophie aged 14 and Theo aged 12. Sophie and Theo have two other sets of grandparents – but they like to be included along with our other grandchildren
- Our second son, Timothy, lives in Stepney Green, East London, with his wife Charlotte, and they have two children, Felix (aged nine) and Clara (aged six)
- Our daughter, Susannah, lives in Forest Gate, East London, with her husband Rob, and they have two children, Jemima (aged eleven) and Raphael (aged eight).
- We also have a third son, Benjamin, who lives in Islington, East London: he is not married and has no children, but is a super uncle to all the grandchildren

As a family we are very close. We see a lot of our children and grandchildren who live in East London. We 'face-time' the family in Vancouver. For a week in the summer of 2014 we took over a large manor house just outside Southwold and all the family came, including the Vancouver family, as also Benjamin's girlfriend, Kathryn. This summer, at the request of the family, we shall do the same again.

So we get together – but none of our children live locally. Furthermore, unlike some, we are not able to look after our grandchildren on any regular basis. Caroline is still at work – and although I am retired, I am still heavily involved in ministry. We are there for emergencies and for holidays, but not on a daily or weekly basis.

There is a further fact you need to know. Without exception all our children have had a bad experience of church, and as a result our grandchildren do not normally go to church. As one of my sons put it following a disastrous experience of church: 'If this is institutional Christianity, then you can stuff it'. This fills us with great sadness, and all the more so that at one stage our children were keen Christians. It also underlines the important challenge we have in seeking to share our faith with our grandchildren.

So how do we rise to the challenge before us? Let me give you some very ordinary examples of how we try to bless our grandchildren:

- It goes without saying that we pray for them. Indeed, it has been said that the greatest gift we can give to our grandchildren is our time and our prayers.

- When they come to visit us, we always say grace at meals; and we try and begin the day with a prayer and a reading; we pray with them before they go to sleep.
- In the spirit of the Shema (Deut 6.4-7), we make opportunities to talk to them about God and his love
- If they are with us over a Sunday, we try to take them to church – but changing churches has made things a little difficult in that respect.
- With our encouragement they all come to church on Christmas Day
- We buy them Christian books: for instance, recently I gave Jemima a copy of Corrie ten Boom's *No Hiding Place*, which she thoroughly enjoyed.
- We ensure that they are given Christian Advent calendars – and normally give them Fairtrade Christian Easter eggs which tell the story of Easter.
- Before the grandchildren open their Christmas presents around the tree, we have developed a tradition that first I read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.1-7) and then we have a prayer together

We try to be creative in how we share our faith

- One year (2012) in the run-up to Easter I emailed my grandchildren every day for 28 days – each email contained a picture, a few verses of Scripture, and a prayer – they featured the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Another year (2014) when for a period of 7 weeks I was engaged in ministry in Australia and NZ I sent them a weekly instalment of 'Grandpa's Adventures' – each instalment always included a reflection on some aspect of God at work in his world.
- In January the family all came together to celebrate Caroline's birthday. Instead of going to church, we held a family service at home. With the help of a printed order of service, we sang 'All things bright and beautiful', 'Jesus loves me this I know', and 'The wise man built his house upon the rock'. I read to the children the tale of two sons as contained in the Scripture Union book, *The Ten Must Know Stories*, a copy of which I then gave to each family – it was amazing to see how intently the children listened. And of course we prayed together.
- This Easter we gave activity booklets to our grandchildren: we gave the four eldest copies of the *Bible Codecrackers Easter Puzzle Book* (Scripture Union), and to the youngest the *10 Minute Easter Activity Book* (Bible Reading Fellowship). In a letter to the two oldest grandchildren I apologised if they felt the *Bible Codecrackers Easter Puzzles Book* was beneath them, but explained that I wanted them to understand the real meaning of Easter – and so I also sent them a copy of a ten minute sermon I had just preached to Felsted Senior School, in which I said that the resurrection was the key reason for my being a Christian.
- With my grandchildren specifically in mind I have written an autobiography. Entitled *This is my story*, it tells not just the story of my life, but also the story of my faith-journey. Indeed, some of you will recognise the source of inspiration for the title – 'This is my story, this is my son, praising my Saviour all the day long'. In due course I intend to give each of them a hard copy, but will wait until they are old enough to appreciate it.

It is a real challenge to be a Christian grand-parent. I once read of an American Presbyterian minister working in one of the more deprived areas of New York who said: "We never tell the kids to say 'Our Father' in the Lord's Prayer, because most of their fathers are alcoholic or absent. The person who represents God to them most of all was their grandmother".

Gosh, that is a sobering thought. And yet, the truth is that grandmothers and grandfathers for

that matter can have a real influence on their grandchildren's understanding of God. As the Apostle Paul once reminded his young friend Timothy: his faith had in the first place been shaped by not just by his mother Eunice but also by his grandmother, Lois (2 Tim 1.5: see also 3.14).¹

When Jemima, our first grandchild was born, I read a book entitled *Grand-parenting – the Agony and the Ecstasy* by an American author called Jay Kessler. I later wrote an article in which I reflected on five nuggets of wisdom I discovered there:.

1. “We cannot stop the passage of time.... We can merely learn to accept our new roles graciously”. Yes, I said, there is wisdom in that. In one sense few of us want to become a grandparent – it’s a sign we are getting old. And yet none of us can turn the clock back. Far better to accept graciously the challenge of our new calling.
2. “We’ve had our shot at parenting. Now, as grandparents, we become a support to our children as they attempt the confusing and demanding task of parenting”. That’s so true. I guess I’ll find that there are times when I am tempted to interfere in.... upbringing. But my new role is to affirm and cheer on ...parents.
3. “We need to restore the values, loyalties and security of family life to provide an environment in which children can grow up safe and healthy to become what God intended them to be”. Yes, indeed. Sadly we live in a world where many families break-down, where many grandchildren are confused and hurt and often filled with anger, resentment, and perhaps even guilt as a result of their parents’ divorce. In such situations grandparents have a special stabilizing role to play.
4. “We can’t change society. But what we can do, as grandparents, is to provide for them a solid moral framework, based on biblical principles, to help them established their own moral standards”. True again. We can’t control what our grandchildren see and hear and experience. We can, however, listen. We can empathize with their struggles, we can offer them guidelines.
5. “We cannot spare them most of the struggles and failures of life. We can, however, demonstrate that after a long life filled with battles and victories, we can come out on the other side and do so with grace”. Even more true. At the end of the day grandchildren aren’t impressed with grandparents who are forever moralising – what really counts is to see and hear how they have coped in the tough times, how their faith in God has enabled them to come through with a thankful and loving spirit.

More recently I read a collection of essays entitled *Ageing, Death and the Quest for Immortality*. One of the essays was by a man called Vernon Grounds. He noted that whereas in early retirement people can be incredibly active, not least in the service of God and his church, there comes a point when energy is gone and physical limitations appear. Old age for those who are becoming frail can sometimes seem to be nothing more than a waiting-room for death. The reality, however, is that we can still be useful for God. Older people have time

¹ Thomas C. Oden in his Interpretation Commentary on *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (John Knox, Louisville 1989) 28-30 suggested that families having a special role in the transmission of the apostolic faith, and in this context wrote that “In Timothy we have a young man from a transitional cross-cultural family charged with transmitting the Christian faith intergenerationally”,

to pray: perhaps one of the tasks of a pastoral carer is to share names of people who need particular prayer. Older people too can continue to witness to those who look after them, as also to family members. Vernon Grounds went on to say: “Without becoming a loquacious bore, an older person can testify of God’s faithfulness through the years of life. That is the message of Psalm 71. The older generation can pass on to the next generation.... Perhaps a grandparent’s congregation is one small grandchild, but how important it is that the upcoming generations hear about the spiritual experience of the older generations. The good news is that older people, if they look, can find opportunities for ongoing usefulness.”²

Often when preachers talk about evangelism, they urge their hearers to share their faith with their neighbours and colleagues. But, evangelism begins with the family – indeed, we might argue that the family is our ‘Jerusalem’ in the call of Jesus for us to be witnesses found in Acts 1.8. Vernon Grounds referred to Psalm 71.18: “Even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come”; but he could also have referred to Psalms 48.13,14; 73.5,6; and 145.4. Yes, those of us who are grandparents have special responsibilities – and opportunities - to share our faith.

² Vernon Grounds, ‘A Personal Perspective’, 23-13 in *Ageing, Death and the Quest for Immortality* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2004) edited by C. Ben Mitchell, Robert D. Orr & Susan A. Salladay.