The Knowledge Gap

God’s concern for young runaways

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Using this resource with your church

This resource explores why, as Christians, we might be concerned about young people who are at risk of going missing. The biblical stories of two young teenagers, Mary and Hagar, provide an opportunity to reflect upon the importance of early intervention. Looking to these examples, and understanding how these stories might be relevant today, highlights that vulnerable young people require support and safeguarding in order that they might flourish.

This material may be used as the basis for a sermon, or as a reflection for small groups. The discussion questions below will help lead and guide your conversations around the topic of missing children.

Research summary: The Knowledge Gap

During 2015/16, almost 4,500 children in Wales went missing from home or care. Some of these children will have gone missing only once, while others will have experienced multiple missing episodes. In total, there were 11,279 incidents when a child went missing from home or their care placement in 2015/16, meaning that on average each child who went missing did so more than twice.

A child may go missing to escape difficulties faced at home or in care, or be enticed to go missing by an external source. In both cases, children who go missing can face a number of dangers such as sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, or trafficking.

The Children’s Society opened its first service for missing children over 30 years ago. At that time there was very little provision across the country to support young people who were running away from home or care, and as an issue it received little public or professional attention.

Since then, The Children’s Society has been at the forefront of shaping policy and practice. Most recently, we have achieved two significant changes in policy that should improve the safeguarding response to children in Wales and England who go missing. The first involves the removal of the ‘absent’ category from police forces’ response to missing children. Children recorded as ‘absent’ did not receive the same level of response as children recorded as ‘missing’, which could prolong the risks they face during a missing episode. Following our extended influencing, the College of Policing have removed the ‘absent’ category from the guidance it issues to police forces across Wales and England regarding children and young people who go missing from home or care. Instead, the guidance will require police forces to use the ‘missing’ category for all children. Police forces will also assess the level of risk a child may face whilst missing – ranging from ‘no apparent risk’ to ‘high risk’ – and respond to the missing episode accordingly.

We have also worked to secure a commitment from the UK Government to develop a National Missing Persons Register. For children who have been reported missing in one part of the country and are then
To do this, we have examined five key areas:

- The number of children who have been missing and the number of missing episodes they experienced.
- The initial response undertaken by key agencies when a child is reported as missing.
- The provision of debriefs when a child is found or returns from a missing episode.
- The information gathered from conducting debriefs and how this is shared with partner agencies.
- Safeguarding practice for looked-after children who have been placed out of their local authority area and who go missing.

Our research showed that practice across Wales for safeguarding children who have gone missing is inconsistent. We found that information-sharing with partner agencies like the police is not practised by most local authorities in Wales. A lack of information-sharing arrangements between local authorities and the police can compromise the ability to build a holistic profile of a child who has been missing and ensure they do not go missing again. Return interviews or debriefs are undertaken after a child is found or returns home. They are used to gather information about what happened to the child during the missing episode, and what caused them to go missing in the first place. Unlike in England, return interviews or debriefs are not statutory in Wales.

Information gathered from debriefs is not regularly shared with partner agencies; complex commissioning arrangements often mean that information needs to be shared between local authorities and police forces – both of whom may commission such interviews. Debriefs are an important tool for enabling
greater understanding of a child's experience while he or she was missing and the reasons why the child went missing. By not providing debriefs and subsequently not sharing the information with partner agencies, opportunities to prevent further missing episodes – and the associated dangers young people could face whilst missing – are lost.

Looked-after children placed out of their home area are more likely to go missing and more likely to face particular vulnerabilities. Yet while it is the placing local authority’s responsibility to provide the receiving local authority with a proactive risk assessment on the young person, our findings indicate this rarely happens.

Looked-after children may be placed in another local authority area to remove them from the risks they faced in their home local authority area. However, this safeguarding procedure may be jeopardised if information is not shared effectively, and if these children are not given the opportunity to talk about their experiences while they were missing.
The stories of two runaways

The stories of Hagar, Sarai’s slave, Abram’s concubine, and mother of Ishmael, and of Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, offer us two contrasting ways in which runaway children were treated; and the contrasting outcomes that ensued.

Two frightened, pregnant teenagers. Two runaways.

One girl is taken away from her own family, her religion, and her native land at a young age. As the ‘property’ of a rich, influential, but childless woman, she is obliged to become a surrogate mother, enabling the couple to produce the son and heir they are desperate to have.

The other girl is young, but already engaged to be married to a young man who shares her faith and culture. Suddenly she finds herself pregnant, and in a way that leaves no doubt in her or her fiancé’s mind that he cannot possibly be the father.

The reasons children run away are many. They may be obvious, or they may be symptoms of problems that are completely hidden. The Knowledge Gap isn’t just a catchy title for The Children’s Society’s report on ‘missing children’: it shines a spotlight on the fact that in many cases, when children go missing from home or care, those who are responsible for them really don’t know what is going on. The stories of Hagar and Mary give us a window into that gap, showing us what can happen when a vulnerable young woman disappears from the sight of those who should be caring for her. Will she be persuaded to return to an abusive situation, perhaps through lack of choice, only for the pattern to be repeated and to run away (or be thrown out) again? Or will she meet a sympathetic friend who understands and gives her, and those around her, the courage to acknowledge what is good, valuable and has potential to help her to thrive in her situation, provided that those involved stand together and support one another?

Alone in the wilderness, Hagar is befriended by an angel. The angel assures her that God knows, understands and loves both her and her unborn child, whom God promises will be the ancestor of a great people. The revelation is so extraordinary that Hagar goes down in history as the first recorded human being to see God face to face. Temporarily encouraged, Hagar goes back – and her son is named Ishmael, or ‘God listens’.

Mary, meanwhile, arrives at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. As the wife of the village priest, Elizabeth had some experience of finding hysterical pregnant teenagers on her doorstep, sobbing that they daren’t tell their mothers, their boyfriends didn’t believe
them, and their fathers would kill them if they found out. Elizabeth would doubtless have a quiet word with Zechariah; Zechariah would speak to the embarrassed young man; next there would be a wedding and if a few short months later, a bouncing baby was delivered – well, who was counting? Mary finds sanctuary with Elizabeth until she can face going back to Joseph, who by then will have been persuaded (by an angel?) to stick with the marriage plan. Surrounded by love and support, Mary rejoices at the promise of her baby.

Mary’s child became the Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace, reconciler of our fallen world to God: the One in whom all peoples can be united, find their true selves and their home.

Because Hagar was let down by those who should have protected her, she ran away again and never went back. Strengthened by her encounter with God, she went on to make a new life for herself and her child; but she did not return to the community she had come from. Whilst Mary was loved and supported, the same was not true for Hagar.

The repercussions of her treatment affected not only Hagar and her child, but their descendants too. Filling in the crucial ‘knowledge gap’ when Hagar and Mary were missing, the Bible brings before our eyes the truth that lonely, friendless and troubled young people, in the midst of confusing and dangerous situations, are of limitless value to God.

God speaks to both girls, either directly or through a messenger. We know that the response of God is to watch over those who are far from home, but what these stories also reveal is how crucial our human response is. Love, support and encouragement produce reconciliation and fulfilled potential. The two texts demonstrate the importance of intervention for a teenager’s well-being.

Will our missing children meet with the courageous love that listens to their stories, advocates on their behalf, and safeguards their care and protection? How can we, in our institutions and individual lives, be God’s agents – angels? – and demonstrate God’s love and care to runaway children?
GWEDDIAU PRAYERS

Dros blant anghenus

Trown bawb ohonom atat ti, wreiddyn a rhuddin ein bod,
Ti- greawdwr ac achubwr, ti- gariad di-amod;
Gweddiwn dros blant heb deulu cariadus -
plant mewn dryswch, dychryn a dicter, plant mewn perygl.
Cyfeiria hwy at y rhai all eu helpu,
a rho iddyn nhw’r hyder i ddatgan eu stori,
a dweud eu cwyn mewn gwironedd.
Rho ddoethineb i’r rhai sydd â chyfrifoldeb amdanyn nhw
I ymateb mewn haelioni a thynerwch,
eu maethu â chariad, a’u galluogi i dyfu i aeddfedrwydd;
yn enw lesu a ddywedodd wrth ei ddisgyblion
i roi’r lle blaen i’r plant.

Amen.
We all of us turn to you,
root and heartwood of our being.
You – creator and saviour, you –
unconditional love;
we pray for children without loving families,
children in confusion, fear, anger –
children in danger.
Direct them to those who can help.
Give them the confidence to know
and to tell their story,
to utter their complaint in truth,
so that those responsible for them
may respond wisely.
Give adults generosity and tenderness,
to nurture the young with love
and enable them to grow into maturity;
we ask in the name of Jesus who told
his adult disciples
to give priority to the children.

Amen.
Dros weithwyr yng Nghymdeithas y Plant, y Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol a’r awdurdodau lleol

Gweddiwn dros y rhai sy’n gweithio gyda phlant a phobl ifanc;
 rho iddyn nhw’r egni a’r dewrder
i sefyll a dadlau dros yr anghenus a’r unig,
rho iddyn nhw’r nerth i ddygymod a phwysau gwaith
a diffyg adnoddau;
rho allu i ddadlau’u hachos ac argyhoeddi gwleidyddion
ac arweinwyr yn y bywyd cyhoeddus,
i roi’r flaenoriaeth i blant
na chawsant ddiogelwch, na gofal, na chariad.
Rho iddyn nhw ddyfalbarhad a doniau perswâd
er mwyn lesu a agorodd le i blant ddyfod ato ef.

Amen.
For workers in The Children’s Society, social services and in local government

We pray for social workers involved with children and young people;
Give them the energy and courage
to be advocates for the needy and lonely;
give them strength to cope with pressure of work and lack of resources.
Give them the skill to argue their case,
to persuade politicians and leaders in public life,
to give priority to children who lack security, care, and love.
Give them persistence and powers of persuasion for the sake of Jesus who opened up a space for children to come to him.

Amen.
Dros gefnogwyr yn yr eglwysi-
For supporters in the churches

O Dduw ynot ti, yn ddi-ffaen ofal mam a thad
sy’n disgwyl amdanom ac yn brysio tuag atom â breichiau agored.
Tyrd â’th blant o fewn cyrraedd dy gariad

Deffro ni i sylweddoli maint y dasg
In You, O God, we unfailingly find a mother and father’s care waiting for
us, eager to meet us with open arms;

Bring your children within reach of your love:

**Wake us up to realise the measure of the task.**

Rho asgwrn cefn ac argyhoeddiad i bawb sy’n gweithio yn y maes.

**Deffro ni i argyhoeddiad.**
Give backbone and conviction to all who work in this area:

**Wake us up to a sense of conviction.**

Nertha weithwyr gymdeithasol sy’ dan bwysau gwaith a phryder yn eu
cyfrifoldebau

**Deffro ni i’n cyfrifoldeb**
Strengthen social workers under the stress of work and anxiety in
their responsibility:

**Wake us up to our responsibility.**
Bydded i ddilynwyr Iesu fod yn ddyfal mewn gweddi, gwaith ac argyhoeddiad:

**Deffro ni i haelioni.**

May the followers of Jesus be energetic in prayer in work and in persuasion:

**Wake us up to generosity.**

Rhag colli cenhedlaeth arall i dlodi, anwybodaeth a dryswch:

**Arglwydd trugarha wrthym.**

Lest we lose another generation to poverty, ignorance and confusion:

**Lord have mercy upon us.**

Rho i ni ras i ofalu am blant pobl eraill fel y carem ofalu am ein plant a’n hw rion ein hunain:

**Arglwydd trugarha wrthym.**

Give us grace to care for other people’s children as we would care for our own children and grandchildren:

**Lord have mercy upon us.**

Erfyniwn dy fendith ar waith Cymdeithas y Plant yng Nghymru a’n cymdeithasau esgobaethol:

**Arglwydd trugarha wrthym.**

We ask your blessing on the work of The Children’s Society and all who support the vulnerable:

**Lord have mercy upon us.**

Cynysgaedd da à hiraeth chwyrn am gyfiawnder ac à gweledigaeth i’r dyfodol:

**A rho dy fendith ar bawb ohonom.**

Give us the gift of a fierce longing for justice and a vision for the future:

**And bestow your blessing on all of us.**
Prayer for a child’s journey

The prayer journey below provides an opportunity to pray for young people who have experienced running away from home. It takes you through the journey young people go on, and enables you to pray for them from the moment they begin to consider leaving their home and family environment to their return and future support. The prayer points below can be used as a prayer diary and to pray for vulnerable young people each day for a week.

Please pray for:

1. Young people to feel supported and protected by their families or guardians. May they be surrounded by caring communities.

2. Young people to have a place that they can call home, where they feel valued, included and loved.

3. Young people when they go missing, that they will be safe and not be at risk of further harm.

4. Those who hold positions of influence and can make changes to help young people who run away. Pray that they make good decisions and take the experiences of young people into consideration.

5. Young people to have a safe place to return to, that they feel supported and welcomed back.

6. For those who provide ongoing and consistent care to children who have run away, including The Children’s Society, who work to make sure that these young people are supported, and protected by the law.

7. Yourself and your church, as well as for others who take action on behalf of these vulnerable young people, for boldness and courage in making a difference in the lives of vulnerable young people.
Taking action

The Christian response should be one of action. Remaining in a place of prayer, we invite you to think about how you might make a difference to the lives of young people running away from home.

1. You can take action to help us influence the Welsh Government to make debriefs a statutory requirement across Wales. You can do this by signing and submitting a petition to the National Assembly for Wales. Together with our public affairs work, your support could help us bring the issue to the attention of all Members at the Welsh Assembly, and show how debriefs can provide children who have been missing with an opportunity to talk about their experiences and prevent them from going missing again.

You can find more information on the petitions process here: www.assembly.wales/en/gethome/e-petitions/Pages/e-petitions.aspx Please let us know if you would like any assistance in preparing a petition – you can get in touch by emailing us at: church@childrenssociety.org.uk

2. Continue to pray with us for young runaways. Sign up to receive our monthly prayers: childrenssociety.org.uk/pray

Thank you for considering how you will support these young people; for your time, your voice, and your prayers. Together we can make a difference to the lives of young people running from home, so that no child feels alone.

Discussion questions for small groups

In the stories of Hagar and Mary, God intervenes, speaking to both Hagar and Mary in a very similar way. An angel speaks to Hagar, encouraging her to return, whilst the support of a family member, Elizabeth, encourages Mary to return home.

- Mary stays with her cousin Elizabeth for three months (Luke 1.56), where she is safe with family who provide comfort and encouragement.
- Why do you think there is value in consistency for young people?
- How can we in our institutions and individual lives be God’s agents – angels? – and demonstrate God’s love and care to runaway children?
- How can you raise awareness about these issues in your local community?
It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect. Too often their problems are ignored and their voices unheard. Now it is time to listen and to act.

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn.

We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.