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# Youth Work

## Are we confused in our goals?

*For many years, the barometer of a healthy church has been a strong and growing youth group. If the 1950s was the age of the Sunday School, the 70s and 80s have been the era of the Youth Fellowship. Coffee shops and youth outreaches have sprung up everywhere. Many churches, failing to make progress in adult evangelism and ministry, see their youth ministry as the key to a bright future. But what is the point of youth work? Is it worth the time and resources we pour into it? The Briefing examines the issues.*

**I**n a recent report presented to the Church of England (in England) the aims of Christian youth work were defined:

- a) *To support the personal development of young people so that they will:*
  - 1 *Realise their full potentials*
  - 2 *Learn to identify their own, and other people's, talents*
  - 3 *Accept that environment, background etc. will alter the growth of each individual*
  - 4 *Identify, and learn from, situations that might otherwise be seen as 'failures'*
  - 5 *Be supported in their questioning of the accepted values of society*
  - 6 *Be encouraged to identify and welcome the spiritual, social, political and cultural development of their personalities*
- b) *To work within a partnership of mutual respect with other agencies concerned with the development of young people.*

As an expression of what youth work should be about the report has good things to say. As a definition of *Christian* youth work it is abysmal. Jesus or God do not rate a mention. This is the kind of youth work that could be readily accepted by Buddhists, Muslims, Atheists or even the local branch of the Teacher's Federation.

Unfortunately, this loss of direction in Christian youth work is not confined to written reports, or even to England. Many Australian churches run youth programmes that seem more to fit the brief of the Department of Youth and Community Services than the brief of the gospel.

This is a result of placing the emphasis on *youth* rather than *work*. Christian youth work is doing Christian work among youth. If the focus shifts from the 'Christian work' to the 'youth', the point of the exercise (as a gospel exercise) is lost. ▸

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This shift does not happen overnight. It begins with the quest for 'relevance'. Most people involved in youth ministry place great importance on being up-to-date, youthful, 'with it'. To reach young people, it is said, we must absorb their culture, address their concerns, talk their language, and walk a mile in their shoes (or should that be ride a kilometre on their skateboard?). Slowly, but inexorably, the gospel is squeezed out. We are good at 'reaching' youth. It's just that when we reach them, we've forgotten what it was we wanted to say.

This leaching of the gospel from youth ministry happens in a hundred small ways:

- We make bad leadership choices. We choose youthful, vibrant leaders with buckets of charisma—the kind of person who has 'drawing power'—rather than godly, reliable, Christian teachers.
- We are scared of 'turning the kids off' by having too much Christian content and so run programmes that are attractive to the outsider. We put so much time and effort into simply maintaining these programmes that little gospel work actually gets done.
- The content we do inject into proceedings is strongly weighted towards 'youth issues'—those things that we adults perceive as being high on the youth agenda: drugs, unemployment, sex, relationships, peer pressure and so on. In discussing what the Bible has to say in these complex ethical areas, the simple and supremely important message of repentance and forgiveness is left behind.

The essence of Christian youth work is the work of teaching the gospel of Jesus both in word and life. It is directed towards one particular segment of the community,

namely youth, but the motivation and content and goals are the same as for any other Christian ministry. Young people have some special needs and also provide some special opportunities, but the agenda must still be set by the gospel.

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Our commitment to that gospel must be enthusiastic and unreserved if we are to commend it to the next generation. If, instead, we are apologetic, defensive and feel the need to apply liberal quantities of pagan sugar-coating, we have little hope of convincing anyone. When the evening newspaper resorts to giving away lottery tickets you know that it contains nothing worth reading.

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## THE BIBLE ON YOUTH WORK

The Bible doesn't seem to say much about young people. At least, it doesn't say much about their youth. It does, however, say a great deal about them as *people*, for the word of God is for all people regardless of their age. Like all people, young people fit into the Biblical category of 'sinner'. They can be saved through the grace of God and be challenged to stand firm against temptation—like all people. The distinctives of young people are few compared with the characteristics and needs they share with everyone.

Where it does talk about youth (as such) the Bible recognises young people's needs to grow and learn. Far from extolling the ▷

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strength or beauty of youth, the Bible emphasises the importance of children obeying and honouring their parents. If they are to mature and survive in a sinful world, the young must listen and submit to the experience and teaching of their elders—this is often expounded in the book of Proverbs. In the New Testament, Paul gives Titus and Timothy teachings intended for 'young men and women'.

But where does the child finish and the adult start? In our culture, the line between youth and adulthood is blurred, and this makes it difficult at times to work out to whom the Bible is speaking. In any case, God is aware that humans grow and develop and that his word needs to be taught to them in a way that is appropriate to their stage in life.

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### OPPORTUNITIES

Youth work has been a popular investment for many churches because of the opportunities it provides. With most churches based on a local area, young people are one of the few groups who can be *found* with relative ease. While the adult population are away at work (which is rarely related to suburban living), the young people are at school in the local area. Their days are considerably shorter than working days and so they hang around the suburb with time on their hands. They are available, and churches have been keen to tap that availability.

Added to this is the relative freedom and flexibility of young people. They have more energy and fewer responsibilities than the rest of us. They not only have time to sit and talk and learn but the freedom to go places, do things and become involved. They are a fluid group of people, finding

out more about life, free from the burden of commitments and unencumbered by the consequences of past decisions and mistakes.

Furthermore, young people move in social structures that encourage group activity and relationships. At school they meet people. As they join clubs, play sport, change classes, they meet more people.

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Their social network expands and changes constantly. And in all this, they are encouraged to find group activity and social relationships satisfying and invigorating. It is not so hard, then, for a church to gather a group of young people together in the hope of somehow influencing them with the gospel.

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### NEEDS

Life isn't all chips and softdrink for the teenager. With all their freedom and flexibility, young people face problems, both personally and as Christians, and these give further impetus to Christian youth work. With the onset of puberty and the struggle towards independence of personality, young people tend to be unstable and insecure. Add to this the discovery of romantic relationships and the increasing incidence of divorce and family breakdown, and the mixture becomes quite volatile.

The *Christian* young person has the hostility of the peer group to contend with as well. They face considerable pressure to turn away from Christ, or at the very least to

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compromise their loyalty to him. On top of this they face the same pressure as others to join clubs, play sport, and achieve at school—their lives can quite easily become just too busy for Christianity. The media doesn't help either by targeting young people as a market segment and constantly tempting them to a life of modish hedonism.

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It's not hard to see why Christians have been spurred to work among young people. The needs are obvious and immediate.

However, these factors also make running a youth group a draining and frustrating experience. As your youthful charges lurch from one emotional upheaval to the next, your feeling about how the group is going can vary just as much.

One week the meeting is great fun, the kids are interested and on-side, and everything is going from strength to strength. The next week it's all a disaster: no-one is interested (in you or the gospel) and your voice is hoarse from trying to assert your will over 30 distracted and chaotic teenagers. You wonder what you've done wrong. Usually, nothing at all.

Their emotional volatility needs to be matched by our stability and understanding. The personal and family traumas they are going through can easily spill over into the group and, as the herd instinct takes over, the whole group is affected.

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## WHY YOUTH WORK?

Given what we've already said, the answer to this question would seem obvious. Young people, like all people, need the gospel of Jesus Christ and there are unique opportunities for sharing it with them. They also have particular problems and needs that the gospel can address and heal. And they are the church of tomorrow.

However, we need to look at this question from another angle. Why are we doing youth work in our own particular situation? Is it to care for and nurture the children of the congregation, or is it to reach out to the non-Christian youth of the community? This vital difference in motivation and purpose affects the whole work.

If our primary purpose is to minister to the children of congregation members, we need to provide a programme that upholds the teachings and values of the parents. We would want the young people to grow in their knowledge of God, especially as they struggle with being Christian in a pagan society and subculture. As well, we would want to help them develop as personalities through the difficult years of adolescence. To do this we would need to include a strong 'social' component in our youth programme to provide an environment in which they could develop a healthy, normal, godly social life. There are few opportunities elsewhere in society for our young people to do this.

This represents a change in the way many of us have been accustomed to thinking of youth work. The social side of the programme is usually regarded as a carrot to get the kids along, especially those who are otherwise disinterested in Christianity. If the children of the congregation are our primary concern, the social programme is

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not a carrot—it is a valuable service to them as they grow to Christian maturity.

If, however, our purpose is to reach out to the young people of our suburb with the gospel, a strong social component may not be helpful. Socialising won't teach them the gospel and we have neither the time nor the ability to compete with the pagan social calendar. We would do better to spend our time forming individual relationships with them and sharing the great truths of the gospel, commending to them belief in Jesus

Christ.

Most youth programmes try to cater for both these groups simultaneously. This is not wrong in itself but very often falls between the two stools. We find ourselves providing neither a satisfactory social programme for the Christian youth (because of the rowdy presence of the local street gang) nor a clearly evangelistic focus for the non-Christian youth. Perhaps we can attempt both, but we need to be very clear in our motivations and methods.

## The Way Forward

Loving relationship—that is the way forward in most of our ministries and especially so in youth work. We don't need to be Peter Pan to reach the next generation. What we *do* need is the love that cares for individuals, regardless of their age.

The freedom and flexibility of young people affords marvellous opportunities for befriending them and teaching them the Scriptures. This one-to-one ministry is more time consuming and less 'efficient' than a group meeting, but has tremendous effect over time. Meeting with ones and twos to personally encourage and help them is the basis upon which the group should be built.

These individual Christians that we are encouraging are an ideal vehicle for evangelism. As we build them up they will grow in concern for their lost friends. It may be easy to gather the non-Christian youth of the community to some social programme or event, but the slow and persistent witness of their Christian schoolmates is far more powerful in winning them to Christ.

Through our youth, we can build a web of evangelistic contacts throughout the highly mobile social teenage network. Gradually, we can teach our young Christians how to share the gospel by doing it alongside them, with their own friends. Winning teenagers to Christ one by one is slow, unexciting, every-day work, but it can steadily build into an enormous ministry.

Large groups do have a place in youth work, both at school (ISCF and Crusaders) and in the local church. Also helpful are the very large meetings like Ka-toomba Youth Convention, where thousands of young people gather to encourage each other and learn from the Bible. To see thousands of others who believe in the same God and have the same struggles can have great effect.

However, we almost inevitably focus on larger groups. They are more exciting and more visible. But youth work *is* work. Behind the fun and glamour of a successful, thriving youth ministry are hours of hard, heart-breaking one-to-one work.