

A COMMON LIFE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE



'Old men are not the only wise people.
Old people are not the only people that understand what is right'. (Job 32:9)

Youth work is a process of social education which enables young people to progress through adolescence to adulthood; enabling them to acquire the knowledge, skills and confidence to begin to take control of their lives; to move towards autonomy in community.

Two main criteria of **mission** are to cross boundaries and to attempt to bring about change, so it is clear that youth work is **missionary** in nature. Five "marks of mission" are identified as:

- to proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- to respond to human need by loving service
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society
- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth

"Youth work needs to be understood as a dimension of the Church's mission."

Youth A Part

The Churches' work with young people takes a huge variety of shapes and forms, and it is easy to see that much of this work is related to these elements of mission. Creative, innovative youth work is being developed which is rooted in Gospel values and is Christ-centred.

Youth work is also **incarnational**: "entering into the young person's world, treating it with discerning respect rather than suspicion; sharing their joys and sorrows; genuinely engaging with their questions while bringing the challenge of Christian discipleship to them." (*Youth A Part*). Those with youth work skills (and training) can make this seem easy; but for many others it can seem threatening. It is helpful to consider that "the primary frontier which needs to be crossed in mission to young people is not so much a generation gap as a profound change in the overall culture". (*Youth a Part*)

In engaging with the world of young people we are engaging in a changing world, a modern culture.

Because it is incarnational it is also **relational**. When we begin to engage with young people, share their experiences, engage in their questions, challenges and experiences, we bring something of ourselves and so a relationship develops. Relationships take time, honesty and effort, and so where we see good examples of relational youth work we see Churches committing time, energy and open hearts to meet the needs of young people.

When we work ecumenically we engage not only with young people, but with other traditions and Church families too. We need to recognise the complexity; for the same language, the same set of labels may be used, but for totally different things. In working together with shared aims it is vital that we become "**multi-lingual**".

a Common Life among young people a Common Life among young people a Common Life among young people

Working together for Young People

Where young people meet ecumenically, the assumptions about one another's traditions and experiences are challenged; there is **scope for learning**, not only about others, but also about oneself. There are many valuable opportunities for young people to discuss issues of faith and tradition, and to learn from one another about the diversity of the Christian community.

Often such work is identified and planned by existing Ecumenical Youth Officers' groups. There are particular strengths to this way of working. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the **support of colleagues**, and the lessening of pressure when roles can be shared among colleagues. Also important is to recognise that a project initiated from a group of youth officers is more likely to address the needs of a range of young people from different denominations.

Another strength in the planning of such projects has been the **involvement** of young people from an early stage of planning. This ensures that the project meets the needs of the young people themselves, and offers a good model of working.

A challenge facing all projects, is the **recruitment** of young people. The key, it would appear, is to work on ensuring some commitment to the event from every denomination; this is ideally done through the Youth Officer or Training Officer for the denominations, but there are other, creative ways to ensure support. At the pilot meeting of the Ecumenical Youth Forum, Church leaders were asked to send a letter of support to be passed on to a participant at the meeting.

The **timing** of an event for young adults is always an issue, where many young people have jobs at weekends, and where denominational diaries vary so much that it is hard to find a time which is not a key time for a particular denomination. Planning ahead is therefore vital, and at times it may be necessary to be creative in the timing of the event.

"We opted for a Friday evening - Saturday afternoon in the hope that those who work in shops could negotiate about hours without needing to take a full day or weekend."

Youth Work is often a major commitment for the Church; Youth Work projects can be extremely rewarding, but they also take a great deal of time, and often sizeable budgets. The complexity and the time consuming aspects can be compounded by carrying out the work in an ecumenical context. Yet the effects have proved to be very beneficial.

It is vital that **local needs** are clearly identified. Sometimes we hear of a successful project elsewhere and seek to replicate it in our area. But finding the most appropriate way to meet local needs often requires some form of research; and though time-consuming and cumbersome at times, this has proved to be a key ingredient in the most successful projects.

A related issue is the need for key **local involvement**. A strong management group representing the local churches ensures the project stays grounded in the needs of local people. The essential thing is that the Church is responding to need, and it is the agenda of the local young people which is to be addressed.

Training together

In addition to working together directly with young people, there is real benefit in Youth Officers and Youth Workers training together across denominations. The Spectrum course would probably be the most familiar example of ecumenical training for Youth Work, and this programme and many others are undertaken in many places around the country, and have a variety of benefits:

Youth leaders and Youth Workers are often isolated, and in need of local support and resources. Training with other Christian youth leaders creates an instant network of contacts and support locally. In addition, there is the possibility to create training which is appropriate to the local environment, to pool resources to create a more thorough training programme, and to learn from one another's traditions and experiences. Where new areas of training emerge it is always good policy to explore the potential for training ecumenically; though it may take a little more time, the workload will be shared and the results may be better for the effort.

Examples of Good Practice

Borderline: a residential event - offering places to young adults from across denominations in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, to meet together and to articulate their needs as members of the Christian Church and their local communities. Through this event the young people explored together the experiences of young adults in the churches, and produced a statement to challenge their church communities.

"Full Tummies and Empty Wallets" provided young adults from different Christian traditions with the time and space to reflect on Advent. The event was organised through the Cumbria Church Youth Officers group. This gave young people an opportunity for respite from the commercial preparations for Christmas to reflect on Spiritual issues and to prepare an Advent Service for use in their own church or school situation.

Ignite: provided an opportunity for young people (15 - 18) from the Greater Manchester area to meet together to explore their Christian vocations. This was an interactive overnight event with workshops, speakers and music. The focus of the event was on our calling as Christians and the impact that this has on our choice of career and lifestyle.

Zambian Youth Exchange: Young people have exchanged with the aim of providing an opportunity to experience life in each other's country so as to develop a greater awareness and understanding of each other's lifestyle, culture and spirituality.

Hyde Park Detached Project: empowering young people in the Hyde Park area to grow to full maturity. Encouraging and facilitating greater partnership between the churches, statutory agencies and community groups in the furtherance of the above. This project provided a range of opportunities and experiences for young people in the neighbourhood, including residentials to raise confidence and skill- developing workshops.

Scarborough Rock: A detached project established to provide the following ingredients: a large team of leaders and relevant role models, a way of being Christians together which is within the culture of the young people themselves and into which they would be happy to invite their friends and a large enough gathering of young people to form a peer group to help them withstand pressure from school and elsewhere to hide or abandon their church connections, through the churches working together, sharing ideas and resources.

First Steps: an introductory training programme in youth work for young people who are taking or would like to take a leadership role in a church youth club or group. This provided young people an opportunity to train with other young Christians and to gain a range of essential skills.

Jersey Safe and Sound: a booklet in response to the particular situation of churches in Jersey, designed to supplement any general guidelines and regulations on the protection of children and young people which are produced nationally by particular denominations.

Theology and youth work: a series of Consultations in Lincoln for Youth Work Practitioners and those interested in Youth Work, to explore a Theology that could underpin their Youth Work. These Consultations brought together a wide range of people working at local and regional level to share their work and further their understanding of the theology underpinning their work.

Further information about all these examples of good practice can be found on our web site - www.churches-together.org.uk. Follow the hyperlinks via the Youth pages. Please let us know of good ecumenical work with young people in your area, so we can help to share it with others. For those without internet access, a paper copy of the resource can be sent to you - send a large sae to Pat Madden, Churches Together in England, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH or email to commonlife@cte.org.uk. Copies of the leaflet may be obtained from Churches Together in England, 10 for £2 incl. p&p. You may photocopy this leaflet, down-load it from the website www.churches-together.net, or obtain it as a rtf file by email from commonlife@cte.org.uk. Feel free to adapt the text for particular local situations. Please acknowledge Text © Churches Together in England 2001.

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*O God, Holy and Eternal Trinity,
We pray for your Church in all the world.
Sanctify its life; renew its worship;
Empower its witness; heal its divisions;
Make visible its unity.*

*Lead us, with all our brothers and sisters,
Towards communion in faith, life and witness
So that, united in one body by the one Spirit,
We may together witness to the perfect unity of your love.*

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