

Youth Work from Scratch

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The Beautiful Disciplines

500 Prayers for Young People

Youth Work from Scratch

How to launch or revitalize
a church youth project

Martin Saunders

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To the teams behind *Youthwork* magazine and the
Youthwork Summit.
Your passion for God and for young people makes
me never want to leave youth ministry.

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Foreword

Gavin Calver

As is so often the case on a Sunday morning, the alarm rang early and I dragged myself out of my cosy bed to take to the motorway and drive for miles to speak at a church. Don't get me wrong, I always enjoy it, but leaving home first thing is a challenge! Today I had the privilege of talking to a congregation of a couple of hundred, mainly dominated by young families and the more mature. It was a great time of witnessing God at work amongst His people. However, it always stirs me up to see less than a handful of young people present – and challenges me to think about what kind of “church” we are encouraging them to join. Apparently on this particular morning they had stayed in the service because the preacher was deemed “accessible” for them! After the service had ended and I had chatted to members of the church, the vicar asked me to meet him in his study for a coffee. Before I could even sit down he chucked a question at me that I have been asked hundreds, if not thousands, of times, “How can we get more young people in our church?”

In the twelve years I have worked for Youth for Christ this question has been asked more than any other. Whether it is asked by church leaders or members of the congregation, they see a problem and this is the question they think will generate all the right answers. As if there is some sort of pithy solution to the massive issue of the missing generations in our churches! Equally I often want to ask a different question back: “Do you actually want young people or do you want young-looking old people?” Do we really want churches

full of teenagers, or is it more about our church photograph looking complete by covering the full age spectrum?

Into this reality I so welcome this wonderful book from my friend Martin Saunders. In essence it helps those churches who want to reach young people for Christ; to assist them in starting a youth ministry in as simple a way as possible. He begins with a powerful and persuasive look at why we should work with teenagers. I need no convincing but nonetheless found his argument clear and compelling. In truth, as I travel the nation it becomes clearer all the time that the church wants to get behind youth ministry. It is keen to reach new generations and is prepared to pray, invest, and consider the change required. It is a clear “Yes, but how?” moment. Yes, we want to have thriving youth ministry, but how on earth might this even begin to be achieved?

Martin absolutely excels in answering this “how?” question. This book is greatly inspiring, but moreover it is profoundly practical. There is no great need for a youth ministry book that aims to win over hearts and minds – what we need is a pragmatic “how to”. His use of very practical steps and linear approaches to things is so simple and if followed faithfully will prove greatly effective. I also think that the constant signposting to other youth ministries and help is excellent, as is the input from numerous youth specialists, making the content even more valuable. The FAQ section is not to be missed and I think will provide a regular return point for many. Martin is a genius at making the most of all his own knowledge as well as being hugely resourceful in collating that of his large address book.

I agree with Martin's suggestion that someone newer to youth ministry should read the book right through and follow what it suggests. Don't underestimate the quality of the forms and links included too. They may seem simple but are certainly effective and worth using fully. However as someone who has been in youth ministry for over a decade I also found it hugely helpful reading. Yes, a lot of it was refreshment, but it would not hurt any youth

worker to read the lot. In fact I would go as far as to say that anyone in youth ministry would not regret reading every word in this book and should get hold of a copy right away.

Buy this book, turn every page, and then get involved. We need as many people as possible getting active in youth ministry as soon as they can. I know that so many believe that the outlook is bleak for the church, but personally I believe that the future of the church in this nation is better than its past. Yet this cannot just be words – we must act, and that is why I am so grateful for this brilliant book. It gives a solution to a definite problem in an accessible and easy way.

I will have a box of these in my car. That way every time someone else asks me “how can we get more young people in our church?” I will at least have a resource to hand them and help them begin to answer that fundamental question.

Gavin Calver, National Director, Youth for Christ, Halesowen

Introduction

You are an incredibly important and brilliant human being. Why? Because you care enough about young people to have picked up this book and started reading. You are concerned enough about a generation who have been stigmatized by the media, who have seen their dreams crushed by a failing economic system; you believe that same generation are still capable not only of forging their own bright future but also of shaping ours. You see their potential. You love their passion. You, my friend, are someone special: you’re a youth worker.

Now, don’t get hung up on those two words. You might not be employed to mentor teenagers in a local café; you may not even be on a rota to drive the youth-club minibus. You could be pretty much anyone – but if you’re reading this book because you want, in some small way, to make a difference to the lives of young people, then for the purposes of these pages you’re a youth worker. The church needs more people to recognize that they can make a contribution to its ministry among young people. In fact, we need a church *full* of youth workers.

That said, you are most likely to be in one of two broad groups. Either you are taking this book at its word and are looking to set up a youth-work initiative for the first time, or you are seeking to breathe new life into a project that seems to have lost momentum. If the former, I’d humbly suggest you might want to read this resource in a linear fashion; if the latter, you may want to adopt a more pick ‘n’ mix approach to the content. If at any time you find me boring, whatever your context, do feel free to silence my self-important droning by skipping ahead.

If either of these broad categories does describe your situation, then once again I salute you. You have recognized not only that young

people are well worth your time and energy, but also that, without them, the church of today simply doesn't have a tomorrow. I hope this book – which has been crafted by a small army of passionate youth workers just like you – will be a real help as you try to build a better future both for young people and for your church – and a better present too.



You've decided to get involved in youth ministry. Why?

It's a pretty good and important first question. And, at one level, I can't possibly know the answer or hope to provide one. Working with young people is alternately the most rewarding and the most demanding ministry I know of: no one gets into it for the money, the fame, or the glory. On a personal level, either you have had a sense of calling (or vocation) or a persuasive phone call from a church or local leader, or you've realized that no one else is rolling their sleeves up to serve young people in your community. So I'm not really asking why you've picked up this book; rather I'm asking – why should any of us bother with youth ministry?

A gospel for everyone

Most simply, the answer to that is that God clearly doesn't have a lower age limit in mind when he invites us into relationship with him. Jesus staggered the disciples with his request to "let the little children come to me" (Matthew 19:14), because, in their culture, children were lesser citizens, intended to be seen and not heard. It seemed preposterous to them that a rabbi would be interested in children who were not yet of an age at which they might traditionally begin their discipleship. Yet Jesus is – and He goes further, pointing out that childlike faith is something not just to be cherished, but to

be aimed for in adulthood. Obviously Jesus isn't advocating childish and immature theology, but the idea of a *childlike* approach to faith is very positive: one which accepts a higher authority; which has no place for cynicism; and is abundant in love, quick to forgive, compassionate, and trusting. Jesus is saying that the faith of children isn't just to be applauded but replicated.

The disciples themselves may well have been young people. We know they were mostly young men; in the case of the fishermen, many commentators believe they were teenagers at the time Jesus called them. It's a little bit of a stretch to say that, as a result, Jesus was the first youth worker, but it is true to say that He believed in young people, He invested in them, and over the course of three years apprenticed them to the point at which He was happy to leave them in charge of the master plan to build His church.

In the Old Testament, there seems to be no line or distinction drawn between God's young and old followers either. For the people of Israel, family life revolved around God – everyone in the family unit was on the journey of learning the Scriptures, understanding the sacrificial system, and perhaps most importantly understanding the grand story of Israel's relationship with God. Parents invested in bringing up children to receive the faith that they carried (see Psalm 78:1–8); they would look forward to annual camping trips on which they would stay together in “Succoth huts” (see Leviticus 23:34–43). The week-long Feast of Tabernacles wouldn't have been a dull duty but a highlight of the family's year, as for seven days all Israel would celebrate together the stories of what God had done for them. Children weren't on the outside, but rather at the centre of this and other festivals. When God tells “all Israel” to come together, He isn't just talking about the adults.

What does all this mean for us now? It means that whether or not we choose to invest in young people is not a question of rota capacity or our own personal vision. It's a question of obedience to God. There is no group of people that God isn't interested in.

In fact, He seems to show a particular passion at times for our investment in the next generation. We do youth work because God loves young people.

A lost generation?

Newspaper headlines are dangerous things. Not only do they report the news; in many cases they reinforce or even create it. A good example of this, with which certain sections of the media are obsessed, is house prices. In the UK over the last quarter of a century, house prices have risen so fast, so totally out of proportion with earnings and basic common sense, that many people who might have expected to be able to afford a home find themselves unable to clutch at even the bottom rung of the “housing ladder”. At the same time, certain newspapers have found this subject enthralling enough to devote a huge and uneven proportion of their annual front-page space to talking about it. “House Prices Rocketing Again” was a familiar sight throughout the 1990s and early 2000s; “Home Market to Crash” is a more recent stuck-record example. In both cases the prophecies have usually proved accurate. Of course they have. Greedy (in boom times) or desperate (more recently) estate agents have used these headlines – and the sense of public confidence or lack thereof that they create – to manage sales, and either inflate prices (leading to that unnatural growth curve) or generate price cuts from worried sellers. The newspaper headlines (which most of us see, even if we don't read the newspapers themselves) play a huge part in setting the mood of a nation on a range of subjects. One of these is young people.

Negative headlines about young people have abounded for the last decade. A generation of teenagers have been demonized as malicious “hoodies” who deliberately congregate in intimidating packs. By reporting the negative and regrettable actions of a few young people, and by using emotive language like “feral”, “yobs”,

and “thugs”, the same newspaper front pages that have caused house prices to rise and fall have stigmatized and stereotyped an entire generation. In reaction, the readers of those papers, indoctrinated by a potent mix of loaded reporting, prejudice, and the all-important sliver of truth (because some young people do behave horribly), subtly change their behaviour and attitudes towards young people. They cross the street when they see a teenager in a hoody, unaware that in all probability they’re avoiding a fourteen-year-old girl returning home from a cold hockey practice. While as a society we still cherish our children, we’ve begun to develop a fear of our teenagers.

This fear, this act of crossing-the-street-to-avoid, does not go unnoticed by the teenagers themselves. They are developing a corporate sense of rejection, fuelled not only by the newspaper headlines and the regrettable actions of a few, but also by factors such as rising youth unemployment and the spiralling costs of further education. More than rejected, they feel let down, abandoned even – as a group they are not confident that their future is brighter than their present; not since the 1980s has a generation had to live in a context of depressed hope.

And this, of course, is where the church comes in. This is where we have something prophetic, practical, and powerful to say to young people. That there *is* hope – for them and for the world; that they are valuable and valued, both by us and infinitely more by the real and living God. Never has a generation needed good news more than this one. We don’t just have an opportunity to share it with them; I believe we have a responsibility to do so. God loves young people; the world has rejected them. Which side of that equation do you think we should be on?

The church needs a future

During seven years as editor of *Youthwork* magazine, I was occasionally asked to be a guest on “Inspirational Breakfast”, the flagship morning show on the London-based Premier Christian Radio, with whom *Youthwork* shared offices and a parent media group. An early show meant an early start, and I’ll admit to occasionally being grumpy during these interviews as a result.

One such morning, the topic of the live phone-in was set around my appearance on the show; something like: “Why your church should be doing more youth work.” The idea was that we would take calls from Christians who wanted to start a youth-work project but didn’t know where to start (sound familiar?), and I would give some basic advice from my limited fount of wisdom. The host was enthusiastic about the subject, and gave it an impassioned introduction. The interview began, and we were excited to see the red lights of the phone system lighting up – a sign that people were engaging with the topic and were calling in with their questions. The host put the first caller on air. Let’s call her Doreen.

“Good morning, Doreen,” said the host. “What’s your question for Martin?”

“Oh, I don’t want to talk to Martin,” replied Doreen briskly. “I just wanted to wish my amazing pastor (let’s call him Pastor Phil) a very happy birthday.”

Fair enough. Pastor Phil was a very influential figure in the London church; it was his birthday; Doreen was a fan. An amusing blip.

Or rather, not. Because the next caller was also ringing with birthday wishes for Pastor Phil. And the next one. And the next. The minutes ticked by, and as hard as the host and I tried to sound interesting about youth ministry, the eulogistic birthday greetings just kept coming. There were no callers who wanted to talk about young people and the church. Not any.

Five minutes from the end of my slot, I lost it. After what must have been the twentieth straight call from a member of Pastor Phil's congregation (I still swear he put them up to it), I grabbed the microphone and pretty much yelled:

"We've had an hour of this phone-in about youth work, and not one person has actually wanted to talk about youth work. Well let me tell you something: if you people (I shouldn't have said 'you people') don't start sitting up and thinking seriously about reaching young people, then in fifty years time you won't have a church at all. And then where will your precious Pastor Phil be?" (I shouldn't have said "precious Pastor Phil" either).

I like to revise history in my head so that I slammed something on the desk and stormed out in disgust at the indifference of the London church. Actually we cut to the travel news, and then I apologized for getting so hot and bothered. Yet my point, however unhelpfully I might have expressed it, still stands. All the statistics tell us that, over the last hundred years, the church has been managing steady decline. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were around 9 million children and teenagers in church each week in the UK.¹ Adult attendance was an entrenched part of British and American culture. The numbers haven't just sunk, they've plummeted, and one of the few rays of hope in recent years has been the growth and influence of youth ministry. Statistics from the UK organization Christian Research clearly demonstrate that the churches that are growing in number are generally those which also invest in youth and children's ministry. Those that don't (around 50 per cent of churches, according to the same survey), aren't growing at all.²

Simply put, if we want the church to have a future, then we have to commit to intentionally passing the baton of faith on to the next and future generations. We have to help young people to understand that they can take an active part in the church; we

have to create a church in which they will feel comfortable and wanted. If we have no young people, then we have no heirs. We can't simply hold on to the hope that people will drift through the doors of our churches in later life. And if a church has no young people, and holds no desire to get some, then it should probably start thinking about putting its affairs in order. Those old buildings would be perfect as a chain of trendy wine bars, what with all that cool stonework and those beautiful windows. Ironically, they'll be full of young people again.

The church needs a present

It's only half the story to suggest that we should be motivated by our desire to ensure that the church has a future. That is of course important, and as we look at our place in 2,000 years of church growth we should feel no small sense of responsibility. This message of protecting the future of the congregation is often the most persuasive when we're talking to church leaders and other church members, but it should not be allowed to drown out the imperative to see young people not only as the church of tomorrow, but also as the church of today.

Andy Hickford's landmark 1998 book *Essential Youth* was originally subtitled "Why your church needs young people". The answer to that wasn't that they will continue to ensure that the buildings are full when the present generation has died out – although as his starting point Hickford admits that he used to be motivated by exactly that outcome – but that they provide our best chance of effectively reaching and discipling those outside the church. As he says in his introduction:

Today's church is really struggling with contemporary culture, yet it has in its midst people who belong to that culture and who can be employed in helping the church engage that culture. These people are the youth of

¹ Source: Evangelical Alliance Council meeting, March 2012.

² *Pulling Out of the Nosedive* by Peter Brierley (Christian Research, 2006).

*our churches. The world needs them. The church needs them, and for everybody's sake we need them now.*³

Hickford's book – which was published just as youth ministry in the UK was starting to be taken much more seriously by the church – casts young people as cultural experts, able to translate between church and world. He argues that, for the good of its continued health, growth, and activism, the church must take young people to its heart, not seeking merely to entertain or keep hold of them, but allowing them to play an active, even leading role in ministry and mission.

The metaphor might seem a little dated now, but Hickford's central idea, that young people are an invaluable resource for the church because they see through the same “cultural specs” as much of the world they live in, still holds true. Teenagers have a much better radar for cultural relevance than those of us in the generations above them. To create an expression of Christian community that seeks to involve and attract young people, without actually consulting or involving any young people in that process, is a bit like asking an Uzbekistani man for directions without any sort of phrasebook or interpreter. You can vaguely attempt to head the way he pointed, but ultimately you've not been equipped for the journey because you didn't understand the language it was explained in.

We need young people in our churches, then, not simply because we want those buildings to be full in the future, but because we have a vision for a more vibrant, effective, and attractive church today. Properly equipped and mentored, young people can become effective leaders while they're still young. They can be given opportunities to unleash often-immense musical gifts; they can play practically any role in the context of a church “service” (theological and denominational boundaries permitting); they can be an asset to the life of the church in countless ways. So don't for a moment think

of teenagers as that group of people who occupy the back two rows of the evening service with faces wiped of life by catatonic boredom; if you want, they can practically run the place. And just think what might happen, and who might begin to come along, if they did...

Further reading...

Essential Youth (2nd edition) – Andy Hickford, Authentic, 2004

No Ceiling to Hope – Patrick Regan and Liza Hoeksma, Monarch, 2012

³ Andy Hickford, *Essential Youth* (Kingsway, 1998), p. 12.