



Being youthful

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About Candour

Candour is a monthly magazine about ministry and leadership. For more information, contact:

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The articles in *Candour* reflect the views of individual ministers or contributors writing in a personal capacity. They are not representative of the Church's official position. Please approach the author for permission if you wish to copy an article.

Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

Amanda Wells (editor) on (04) 381-8285 or candour@presbyterian.org.nz

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There is **refundable \$50 booking fee** for Glen Innis. This fee is payable to Margaret Black and refunded on arrival at Glen Innis.

Internet resources

Towards the end of last year, the editorial committee held a teleconference to plan the *Candour* themes for this year. I'm grateful for the advice of the committee, who are for 2009: the Rev Howard Carter, the Rev Mary Jane Konings, the Rev Allister Lane, the Very Rev Garry Marquand, the Rev Nathan Parry, the Right Rev Dr Graham Redding and the Rev Dr Kevin Ward.

One of the things we discussed was how to make it easier to share useful online resources. Perhaps we should have a regular column, by a different person every month, outlining what they find most useful; or perhaps we should just encourage people to send in snippets or urls pointing to good resources. If either of these approaches appeals to you and you have something to contribute, I would love to hear from you.

Please email candour@presbyterian.org.nz

Ministers' Information Forms

Ministers' Information Forms are an essential tool for ministry settlement boards looking to make a call. They are also an effective way for ministers to record their achievements throughout their career – including any additional training they undertake.

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The problem of youth

Amanda Wells

Despite its title, this issue of *Candour* is less about youth ministry than it is about church growth and trying new things.

It seems self evident that if you want your church to sustain itself, new people from younger generations must join its ranks. To put it in a more counterintuitive way, if you want your organisation to stay as it is, it must continually change. A group set up to cater for 50-some-things soon becomes a smaller club of retirees unless there is deliberate recruitment. And to fulfil the original vision, this must be recruitment of people younger than the existing members. You might think that's obvious – but it is always easier and more comfortable to maintain numbers by recruiting from your own peer group, which often means people close to your age.

Everyone wants to be part of groups that make them feel “normal”. Not normal in the sense of average or boring, but in the sense of accepted and respected. Let's say that there are two big sports clubs in your town. One sports club has many members and frequent fixtures; the average age of participants is in their 60s. You're new in town, and you're closer to New Zealand's average age (36 in 2008). You hear about this club and you go along. You quite like what you find, in terms of activities and the warmth of welcome. But you can't help noticing you stand out among the grey-haired crowd. This group would be very happy for you to become a member, but when you happen to hear about the other club, you decide to check that out as well. And you find that while this second club is similar in many respects to the first, your age and stage blends in much better. If there are only minor differences in the ways things are done at each club, these will be less important to you than the chance to fit in and expand your peer group.

The first club might be quite happy being an active, thriving group of older sportspeople, and it will not necessarily be declining in numbers. Its vibrancy might draw more people from the age group in which it has come to specialise. But some members will be looking over their shoulders at the other club, remembering that was how their club once looked. If there does come a tipping point towards decline, the time for taking effective action will have long passed.

Deliberately cultivating youth programmes is the an-

swer of many churches. However, having a large band of teenagers doesn't patch the gap left by 20s, 30s or 40s (and perhaps even 50s). Unless the church itself is open to change and to incorporating newcomers, these young people will graduate from youth programme to non-involvement. A careful strategy and wholehearted congregational commitment are just as necessary as a youth worker.

Many churches are thinking hard about this issue, as they take stock of their age gaps. Ryhan Prasad writes in this issue of *Candour* about St John's in the City's planning and execution of a new service for a new congregation; a service that is tailored around the needs and expectations of its audience. There is a recognition in parts of our Church that starting something new has more likelihood of success than an attempt to partially reform an existing service in the hope of enlarging its audience. Why only partially reform? Because realistically you can't alienate the existing members, who may well be quite contented with what they have. And partial reform puts you in the doomed-to-failure position of catering for a disparate audience with diverse expectations.

I was discussing with friends the aphorism that by the age of 40, your opinions on important things are set in stone. I desperately hope this is not the case, and a quick Google search has failed to turn up any supporting statistics.¹ (I would suggest that to learn is to be open to changing your mind. Is it possible to genuinely encounter a new concept without allowing the possibility it might affect your world view?) But this kind of research is often cited in tandem with “get them while they're young” evangelism. Encountering Christianity as a child clearly builds a foundation for future faith. But this doesn't mean we should view adults as hopeless cases. We can all practise the mind set of “being youthful”, and consider what messages it has for church growth.

The July issue of *Candour* will be about “Ecumenism and collaboration”. If you'd like to offer a contribution, please email it to candour@presbyterian.org.nz. The deadline will be Tuesday 30 June.

¹ Apart from a depressing *Observer* comment piece that suggests “in age-obsessed modern Europe, 40 is the moment when life runs out of promise and begins stacking up disappointment”, then goes on to enumerate mid-life crises.

Passing faith to the next generation

Carlton Johnstone, Youth Minister Development Leader, Assembly Office, Wellington

⁴ *Israel, [Presbyterian faith communities, parents] listen to me.*

The Lord is our God. The Lord is the one and only God. ⁵ *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength.*

⁶ *The commandments I give you today must be in your hearts.* ⁷ *Make sure your children [and young people] learn them. Talk about them when you are at home. Talk about them when you walk along the road. Speak about them when you go to bed. And speak about them when you get up.*

Deuteronomy 6: 4 -9 NIV

That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you!

Paul to his young apprentice Timothy (2 Timothy 1: 5-7 The Message)

The task of any community of memory is to pass on its stories, rituals and practices to those coming after them. Research, however, clearly demonstrates a breakdown in the passing on of faith as the religious affiliation of each proceeding birth cohort declines. (Belzer et al, 2006; Voas & Crockett, 2006; Nooney, 2006). Wade Clark Roof (1999, 51) points out that “children born into any faith community are the primary means by which that community replenishes itself, and for the mainline religious communities these defections have created a serious problem of institutional replacement”. Even baby boomers that do stay, Donald Miller and Arpi Miller (2000) suggest, were reluctant to impose religion on their children, contributing to generational decline from baby boomers to Generation X.

Eugene, one of the young adults I interviewed, for example, made an interesting distinction when he describes his family as a churchgoing one rather than as “a really outgoing Christian family”. His parents illustrate the reluctance to impose religion on their children, as Eugene explains: “Except for grace, there was not much prayer or reading the Bible at home. In many respects I think our parents left it up to us to find our own faith.” Eugene was one of those who did find his own faith and is actively involved in church today. The challenge facing Christian Generation Xers and Ys who are becoming parents is to take up the commitment to passing on the faith to

their children. But this challenge is not theirs alone; it belongs to the faith community as a whole. In this article I draw on my PhD thesis in sociology that explored the Christian faith journeys of generations X and Y. I present an understanding of church as a community of memory which emphasises not only the importance and imperative to pass on the faith to emerging generations, but also reminds us of the intentionality that is required to do so.

Communities of memory

Daniele Hervieu-Leger (2000) understands religion as a “chain of memory” (“a specific mode of believing”, Davie, 2002, 18). An individual believer becomes a member of a faith community through the chain that gathers past, present, and future members (2000, 81). The community’s existence and identity is founded on the collective memory.¹ Passing on the faith from one generation to the next provides a vital link in the chain of memory. It is one of the tasks of any community of memory to pass on its stories, rituals and practices to those coming after them. Failure to do so results in a break, and potentially missing links, in the chain of memory, resulting in what Hervieu-Leger calls “amnesic societies”.

Church congregations are communities of memory that retell their stories on a regular basis, remembering the scriptural stories of faith, as well as those of people within the congregation who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. Such stories can also include more painful ones, of loss, failure, struggle and doubt. The stories we tell are embedded in the story of the communities in which we participate. Memories decisively shape our identities. This occurs at an inward and outward level, as Volf (2006, 24) points out: “Inwardly, in our own self-perception, we are much of what we remember about ourselves...In similar fashion, outwardly, in the way others perceive us, we are what others remember about us...Memory, as the argument goes, is central to identity”. It is worth noting briefly that one of the challenges to both the social form of church and Christian theology in a “spiritual marketplace”, full of

¹ From this perspective Hervieu-Leger suggests that “a religion is an ideological, practical and symbolic system, through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled” (2000, 82).

competing and alternative stories, is to regain confidence in its own story and religious heritage. Berger (1979, 167), for example, suggests that what Christian theology needs is a prise de conscience of its own heritage, “something that presupposes critical distance to the cacophony of contemporary culture and to the assumptions of modern secularity”. And in relation to church, Miroslav Volf (1998, 15) argues that “the social form of the church must find its basis in its own faith rather than in its social environment. Only thus can churches function effectively as prophetic signs in their environment”.

Story-telling is an important aspect of embedded faith. People share their own faith journey with others within a community of memory as the community itself tells its own story that shapes its identity. The stories people share have to do with life and faith and how to integrate the two. Doubts, struggles, hopes, successes and failures make their way into various stories. Grace spoke of the way that church keeps her faith growing rather than stagnating.

My reasons for going to church are... one is the social network of being with other Christians. And I think I grew a lot more through just being with other Christians than I do just from the sermons in church, you know, just talking about life and their faith, and you're hanging out with Christians more. And the other reason for going to church is to help me keep becoming more like Jesus. I think if I stopped going to church and tried to do it on my own I wouldn't be challenged. I wouldn't see messages that challenged me, or hear something through somebody else's viewpoint that made me think. I would miss the worship and drawing close to God through that... And also being able to support other Christians in their faith as well. And I don't think that's changed a lot from when I was younger. I was going to be connected with other Christians and to grow in my faith through them and through what I was learning at church.

Dylan also emphasised the importance of the collective character of church:

So for you what are some of the most important aspects of church?
Fellowship...so you know, the ability to talk to people about what is going on. Because I think that at the most basic level, you know, if you have a church meeting and nobody could sing or play the guitar you'd still have a church meeting. And if nobody had prepared a Bible study then you'd still have a church meeting, so long as there were Christians meeting and

willing to talk about living life with God, then that's what I consider the base thing, that kind of fellowship and conversation and talking.

Talking about life, faith, and God takes place inside and outside of the “official” church gathering on a Sunday. Besecke (2005, 190) argues that when looked at culturally, “religion looks like a conversation – a societal conversation about transcendent meanings”. But religion within a community of memory is more than simply a conversation; it is also a learning community.

Learning the language of faith

But being part of a community of memory involves the process of what Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon (1989) describe as being initiated into a community of language, where ethics, and I will add faith, is a way of seeing before it is a matter of doing. What Robert Bellah and his research team in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) have called “second languages” of moral life; the first language being that of the self-reliant individual. Second languages are the languages of tradition and commitment in communities of memory. There are then, Hauerwas and Willimon point out, “ethical aristocrats”, whose habits and way of life is worth observing, imitating and copying (1989, 98). Faith journeys are embedded in church communities as individuals learn the language of faith and what it means to be a Christian.² Wuthnow (1999, xxxvii) comments on those he interviewed about growing up religious:

They assimilated religion more by osmosis than by instruction. The act of praying was more important than the content of their petitions. Being in Sunday school was more memorable than anything they may have been taught... Spirituality came to be understood as a way of life, and it did so because people grew up living it.

Becoming religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. Embedded faith learns to see, to observe, the way of faith, and comes to speak its language that comes with its own interpretative community dialect. Becoming Christian involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus “well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms” (Lindbeck, 1984, 34). But, as Stanley Fish's (1980) theory of “interpretive communities” makes clear, there is no single way of telling this Biblical Christian

2 Discuss the implications of Israel receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai Brueggemann (1999, 26) writes, ‘When one embraces Yahweh, one embraces not only a very different God, but also membership in a very different social practice.’

story, only extensions of community perspectives.³ So even within the Presbyterian denomination, we will have a liberal take and a conservative take on this great Biblical story, or one with a charismatic or evangelical flavour. And hopefully we are big enough and gracious enough to celebrate this diversity of faith within our denomination and to learn and appreciate one another. In fact strategically we need to if we are to engage young adults. One of the lessons learned from a study involving young adults attending congregations was that “young adults respond to a theoretical and practical balance between the particular and the universal”:

Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. Young adults appreciate when leaders and members refrain from disparaging other religious traditions and denominations. At the same time, they are attracted to congregations in which they are free to think critically and analytically (Belzer et al, 2006, 122).

Although research also shows that high levels of parental religious involvement, such as with church, are associated with more effective transmission of religious affiliation (see Nooney, 2006). Even when faith is passed on, those inheriting it need to decide whether they want to remain in this particular interpretative faith community or not.

The majority of those I interviewed have grown up religious (45 out of 50, with two of those remaining five having loose affiliations with church throughout childhood through grandparents or school friends). The transition from inherited faith to owned faith is in some ways a unique rite of passage for those that have grown up religious. This rite of passage occurs as people identify with the Christian faith and internalise it. Some of the participants who inherited faith cannot recall a time when God and church were not a part of their life. Many embrace the faith in childhood innocence long before they comprehend with any depth what the life of faith requires. Others simply perceive themselves as Christians because their parents are Christians, and they go to church. Church going and being a Christian are often inseparable in the early years. One is a Christian because they go to church, and one goes to church because they are a Christian. This is certainly the impression created for children by parents whose only visible form of religiosity is going to church

³ I am paraphrasing and adapting Fish’s argument from that of reading to that of telling: “There is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only ‘ways of reading’ that are *extensions of community perspectives*” (1980, 16).

on Sunday, such as Eugene’s story highlighted at the beginning of this article. It goes without saying that some parents are actively involved in passing on their faith to their children, and they need to be supported and encouraged in this role. However, this reluctance, or inability, to pass on the faith by parents to their children/adolescents is a serious issue that needs to be addressed in the life of our congregations.

Christian Smith, the Director of the National Study of Youth and Religion in America, and co-author of *Soul Searching* argues that many churches have a halfhearted commitment to their youth. What’s more is his suggestion that adults often fail to engage teenagers adequately. One of his three imperatives from a sociological perspective on the future of youth ministry is that “Parents need to be educated and equipped to take the lead in the spiritual formation of their own children” (2009, 66).

Passing on the faith means spending time with young people

It almost goes without saying that in order to pass on the faith to young people we need to spend time with them. The theme for this year’s Youth Week, which took place last month, was “Spend Time with Young People”. This is very apt for faith communities that want to take seriously the challenge of passing on the faith from one generation to the next instead of becoming a break in the religious chain of memory. Research has found that what adolescents desperately want, even if they are reluctant to admit it, is to spend time with adults who care about them and are not paid to do so (Clark cited O’Keefe, 2008, 55). The New Zealand study on secondary school students (AHRG, 2008) found that more than half of young people wanted more time with their parents, especially their fathers.

Do students get enough time with their parents?:

	Most of the time	Sometimes	Hardly Ever
Mother	46.2	39.6	14.2
Father	39	37.6	23.3

How adults live it out is watched and evaluated against measures of authenticity, realness and passion. In the “State of Youth Ministry” survey of over 600 youth pastors throughout America and around the world, one of the things that youth pastors would like to see changed in their youth ministry overall is to see parents get more involved in their kids’ lives (Lawrence, 2009, 57).

Kendra Casey Dean asks, “When we invite young people to participate alongside us in the practices of a con-

gregation, is our goal to make church more interesting or to equip them as Christ's envoys in the world?" This is a question worth reflecting on and engaging with for church congregations. No doubt it is possible to do both, but the question is one of priorities. The goal shapes our strategies and vision for youth ministry. Dean (2009, 60) argues that because youth mirror the faith of adults who love them, "parents and congregations need sustained and intentional models for Christian maturity". O'Keefe (2008) suggests one way forward is an intentional regularity of pairing young people with adults in ministerial roles (such as liturgical readings, offering community prayers) and in service activities (such as hospitality, various church projects and outreach opportunities). We could also be more intentional in pairing people in mentoring relationships with adults that are not always involved as youth leaders. Smith's research found that adolescents who have one or more significant relationships with adults in their faith community are more likely to be involved in church life and articulate about their faith (O'Keefe, 2008, 54).

The need to keep choosing faith

At the juncture of the faith crossroad lies an ethical imperative requiring consistency between belief and practice. The transition into faith ownership⁴ is an acknowledgment that belief, as in propositional beliefs or statements, or believing something to be either true or false, is not enough. Faith ownership involves living out one's faith. What one believes therefore shapes one's practice, one's behaviour, and one's attitudes. What we mean by owned faith is something similar to the understanding of faith developed by H. Richard Niebuhr (1960, 8) as "confidence and fidelity". What Niebuhr means by this is "the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the source of value and the object of loyalty". Niebuhr (1960, 35) goes on to say that, "as loyalty, such radical faith is decision for and commitment to the One beyond all the many as head and center of the realm of being; its cause, the universe of being, elicits and requires fidelity. So for faith, the kingdom of God is both the rule that is trusted and the realm to which loyalty is given."

Roger was raised in a Christian family. His first memorable experience of faith happened when he was nine years old. He attended a children's Bible camp where there was an invitation to give one's life to Jesus and accept him as Lord and saviour. Roger responded and went up and

received prayer and made a decision to follow Jesus. He remembers that as a marker point in relation to his faith. Fast forward another nine years; Roger is now 18 and doing his OE. Presented with alternative lifestyles Roger faces a faith crossroad:

And I remembered being there after two months and I need to really make a decision as to how I was going to live. And this ended up being the most significant decision that I've made. I guess just being pressured; the two main things over there were the girls and the alcohol, and with both being shoved in your face the whole time and just thinking, "oh my goodness, I really need to sort something out and really make a decision here otherwise I'm just going to end up being a bit luke-warmness," - like with what I was observing what was happening to my flatmate. And so I made a decision over a long period of time, as in a couple of hours of solid thinking, which is a long period of time for me thinking, and really weighing up the cost of following Jesus...and so in that time I weighed these things up in my mind and was really wrestling with them and decided well, it pretty much it came down to, in light of what Christ has done for me and all that I know is true then I need to submit my life to Christ pretty much and to not make decisions to go down this track of what was being shoved in my face everyday so that was really meaningful for me at the time.

The decision to follow Jesus at nine was made in a different social context and stage of life, and with very different implications, to reconfirming his commitment to faith at eighteen. At 18, away from home for the first time, Roger has to once again decide if he is going to keep following Jesus. His faith had remained important to him up until this crossroad. Now, Roger's comments would suggest, the stakes are higher. There is a clear alternative path that has a certain allure, albeit detrimental to his faith. As Roger explained above, it was not an easy choice, but a decision that he wrestled with. What is paramount in Roger's choice to keep following, is that when faith is understood as a journey, rather than a once-off conversion experience ("once saved, always saved" mentality), is that in a pluralistic society with many paths to choose, one needs to keep choosing the path one is on.

So to rap up and resound Youth Week's call to spend time with young people: how are we doing on this front? How is your youth ministry and church supporting and equipping parents to pass on their faith? (I'd love to hear stories of churches doing this and what resources they are using or developing, so please email me and let me know). How are we as a local church passing on the faith

⁴ I have explored the transition from inherited faith to owned faith in a recent article: 'Faith Crossroads and Social Networks: The Transition from Inherited Faith to Owned Faith,' In *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 2009 April vol 8 no.1.

(and what are we passing on) to emerging generations? How are we doing at mentoring young people whose parents are not involved in church? How are we doing on journeying with children and young people through stage of life transitions and the on-going journey of faith?

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Building a church that welcomes youth

Dennis Flett, Knox Waitara, Taranaki

“Dennis, we have got to do something; I don’t know how long we can sustain this.” These were the words of Daniel, the church’s worship team leader, who had taken over running the youth programme in the mid-winter months of 2008. With the onslaught of winter, we had thought the youth numbers would drop; many of the youth activities were inside.

The opposite happened. Two weeks before Easter we had completed “7 Days of Prayer.” For seven days we cleared most seats out of the church, and prayed for seven days from 6am till 10pm, using the 24/7 prayer model. In the days following, we lost our kids-families-youth worker because of a family illness. She was the critical person in much that we were doing: “how were we going to run things without her?”

The timing of these events seemed unusual. We had just prayed like we had never prayed before, and now, it looked like bad things were happening to us. There was a sense God was in this. In response, the people of the church rallied. In a very short time, every base was covered. Daniel took over the mantle of running the youth, and the youth pulled in behind him. In the weeks that followed, the numbers coming on the Wednesday night youth event began going up. My daughters, who are involved in the youth, came back each week saying, “there were more people tonight than last week”. It started at 40, and kept increasing; 50, 55, 60, and peaked at about 70. It was quite a sight to see 70 sweaty teenagers, attempting to play one hoop basket ball, in a hall half the size of standard gym. That was a year ago. There are now several youth small groups, and we now have 30-40 youth turning up for the service on Sunday morning.

I’d like to say I’d discovered the silver bullet for youth work, but the reality is there is no one thing that makes for good youth work. As in the case just mentioned, prayer allowed for the growth, but those youth that began coming to the Wednesday night programme needed to fit into a culture that would introduce them to the Christian faith and sustain them in it. Some kids attended just because it was entertainment, in a town with not much to do. Waitara is an ex-freezing works town where ready employment for big money has breed a sub-culture loose on drugs and light on personal discipline. In the months that followed, my office was burgled. Three of the four burglars were boys who had once attended the church youth. It was vi-

tal the church have a positive culture to counter the often “looser” culture of the town. Fortunately, a great positive youth culture already existed in the church, which has made a great platform to build on.

One of the dilemmas my wife Jenny and I faced when leaving Dunedin, following minister training, was finding a church where my three teenage daughters could grow in their faith. They had to find a God-reality for themselves. Dad being a minister was no guarantee that they would take Christianity for themselves. They had to have “buy in”; Christianity had to work for them on the coal-face of 21st century teenage life. Would they own their own faith? Although it is a work in progress, they have found God, by engaging in a community with other youth who are also working out what it means to be a Christian.

Jesus defined church as “where two or three gather together in my name ...” (Matt 18:20). For me, church is any group meeting together where Jesus is the reason for meeting.¹ The Wednesday night youth is a church in itself, as is any other group gathering during the week. One night I was trying to sneak home before Dynamite Bay Extreme (DBX), a programme we run for 7-12 year old boys, started. A Maori boy, whose team I used to lead, approached me. He said, “Dennis, how come you don’t come to church anymore?” DBX on Tuesday night was his church. By defining any group that meets for the sake of Jesus as a church, that group is empowered with the possibility of functioning as a complete entity within the church. In this sense, the Sunday morning service is a sub-church within the larger church of Knox, Waitara.

A culture that is conducive to youth has been here for a long time. I discovered last year that a couple in their 60s met each other while in their 20s through this church’s youth. Engaging the youth, I believe, must sit deep in the psyche of a church. Deep in a church’s psyche because when gear gets broken, when there’s a mess, or the music is loud, the youth need to know that the church is committed to them no matter what. I found a passion for God in my teens through a church youth group, and it gave me the dream, determination, and passion for the rest of my life. Now as I approach my 50s, it is vital I pass the baton to the next generation.

¹ Neil Cole, Organic Church: Growing Faith where Life Happens (Leadership Network)

If you came to Knox on Sunday, you might be mistaken for thinking you were visiting a Hillsong Church. We sing their songs, and engage with some of their theology. We have a stage, sound gear and lighting. Church is energetic and joyous. We laugh a lot, and sometimes we cry. For me, congregational worship is a party with God. I believe people were uniquely designed to connect with God, beyond any other creature in creation. Our worship team is 90 percent youth, usually eight or so playing guitars, drums, and leading the singing. By Presbyterian standards, our Sunday services would be loud. More than once, when I have walked to church on a Sunday morning I have heard the band practicing pre-service from the corner of the street, a couple of hundred metres away. We encourage the congregation to give their all when they engage God, and they do. When I speak, I do it with the awareness that I am dispensing God's words to people that need to hear from God. I go into each sermon with the attitude that this will be the best I have ever given. Whether people connect with God through the worship or not, they will have something to chew on when I have finished speaking, even if the way it comes out can sometimes be rough. Lastly, out of respect for older people among us, we always include a hymn.

Knox is not a youth church. It is a church for everybody. People of all ages are valued by everybody else. We have tried to not break the church up into age groupings, although for practical reasons we have to specialise to cater for certain groups, children etc. One of the leaders critical to the youth is a 60-something farmer. After church one Sunday morning, an older lady who had "made noises" to me about the sound levels passed my wife. Jenny asked her, "was it OK?" "Oh yes" she said, "I love all the youth here, I wouldn't have it any other way." Jenny's comment in return was, "Thank you, you are one of those who have given us permission to do church this way."

As the minister, I probably have the biggest influence, of any one person, in setting the culture of the church. As such, I see myself as a catalyst: I am here to make other people flower. I am unashamedly passionate about the claims of Jesus Christ. In every service I will challenge people to make a commitment to Christ. However, far more people have come to faith through the testimony of their friends than through me. I figure that I have set the bar of cultural expectation that says, "have your sins forgiven and commit yourself to God and enter a lifestyle far better than anything you have ever known," and I find people rise to the challenge.

Following are some of our youth's comments.

H is a unchurched year 13, who is Maori and who began attending in June 2008.

The first reason I came here was because I was following a chick. Those first couple of weeks were mainly because of the girl, but after that it felt good to come here. I used to come mainly on Wednesday night but I started coming on Sunday morning. I like the feeling I get with the people and the worship. I grew up in Auckland where life was harsh. My mates were good people but we had really bad circumstances, violence, drugs, "dog eat dog." Coming here has shown me something better than what I grew up with.

Tarja

The first time I came to youth was because a friend of mine said there was a hot new youth leader. I was intrigued. When I got there I was surprised at how nice and friendly everyone was. One girl who didn't even know me came up to me and hugged me as I came through the door. I had a lot of fun. Then at a youth service I got prayed for, and I saw in this person the passion and love for God. After a while I started going to church and I learnt so much about God. I am now a leader at youth and help out as a leader at Serenity, a girls' bible study.

Chelce

I first came to youth group because a few friends would say to me, "you should come to youth group tonight, it's so fun!!" each week on a Wednesday. It took a little convincing, but Mum let my sister and I come one week. We really enjoyed the friendly atmosphere, happy faces, fun, games and all the amazing people we met; and continued to come along. After a few months, I started to pay more attention to the reason behind youth group; to reach out and show youth Christ's love. I was a little bit of a skeptic at first and would often challenge my leader on what she was saying-something I now see as really hard to deal with! But it all helped me want to know more about why Christ would give his life for someone, not just random people I didn't know, but me. A really memorable moment for me was when Pastor Luka came to a youth service of ours, right at a crucial moment there was a power cut and this made the whole event that much more intense and emotional.² I absolutely love spending time worshipping God and learning about God at church. I was baptised in September last year and now, three years after I first came, I am a pas-

² Luka Robertson, a Samoan evangelist from South Auckland who visited Knox in July 2008. Near the end of Luka speaking, we experienced a power cut. In the dark, many kids responded to his appeal for salvation.

sionate member of our church community, a leader of Serenity, an intern for our church and have a role in many other groups and activities.

Esse

I came to youth group for the first time with a friend. She also took me to her church at River of Life and I went to church on Sundays with her occasionally and to their youth group on Friday nights.³ I liked it heaps so I decided to come to the youth group at Knox every week even when my friend got a job on Wednesday nights and she couldn't come any more. I have made too many new friends and had way too much to just not come anymore. And when my sister came, we decided to come to the church at Knox on Sundays too. I asked the youth leaders so many questions about God and Christianity, I properly annoyed the heck out of them but I finally got the understanding I wanted out of it all. I've been a Christian for about two and a half years now. And I enjoy coming to youth and hearing what everyone has to say about what they've learnt in Christ and going to church and worshipping God.

There is nothing like new Christians to give a church relevance. They bring life, and most of them here are in the youth. Their motives for coming are mixed, but they are coming, and they are finding God. They are setting their lives on a pathway where their potential, previously corrupted by sin, now has a chance to develop. It's all because of the goodness of God, what people used to call grace. The good news is God wants it, that puts us on the same side as God; the winning side. Youth are the church today, not tomorrow's church. They are the "now" people of God.

I believe it is possible to find God's passion for youth, but also God's passion for every other age group, and have fun doing it. I want to bring a Jesus-reality at the deepest level of people's lives where it is costly, personal, emotional, deep and life-changing. I am convinced that most people in their heart of hearts are desperate to find God, especially youth. Can I/we work with the Holy Spirit to bring the Good News to these people, and do what God has always wanted us to do?

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3 River of Life is a Pentecostal church in Waitara

Tongues of Christians and tongues of mortals

Tim Muller*

While holidaying in Melbourne a few years back, I was keen to get to some kind of church service on a Sunday morning. The people I was staying with weren't too sure of my options, but knew of a nearby church they drove past on their way to work. I wasn't in a fussy mood, so they dropped me off outside and I wandered in and pulled up a pew.

As you may have experienced, a visit to an unfamiliar church is often a confusing experience – language, behaviour and expectations vary widely from country to country, culture to culture, even church to church. Sometimes it can even be a little overwhelming, and this was one such case. With no familiar face for moral support, I was left to ask myself all the usual questions: 'When do I stand?' 'When do I sit?' 'Why are all the songs in Slovakian?'

The first two questions remain a mystery to me, but the last one I can answer: I was in a Slovakian Lutheran church. It was the most surreal of experiences. I understood precisely two words during the course of the service, and let's just say that my ability to sight-sing unfamiliar songs, shaky enough in English, was further impaired by having to do so in a Central European language which appeared to contain more "z"s than vowels.

Strange rituals, unusual priestly garments, songs whose meaning was far from apparent. If you've ever been a non-Christian in a church service, I imagine you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Slovakian for beginners

The truth is, you don't have to speak in Slovakian if you wish not to be understood. Churches, like any other community of human beings, tend to cloak themselves in ways of acting, thinking and speaking that help the community to define themselves, but may be quite mystifying to those from outside the community. There's essentially nothing wrong with this. Indeed, ritual acts and words have been a critical part of the way God has communicated and communed with his people throughout and beyond the Bible. The Passover meal, baptism, the grace – each is a simple ritual which is loaded with significance. Each communicates subtle yet important messages about what a faith community believes and values. What is this God like? What does it mean to follow this God? How do we view and treat others? God understands that symbolic

acts like these can teach us far more than mere words, and that's why the Bible is laden with such acts and images.

The problem with this arises when, in a community whose very purpose is to reach out in love to those beyond the four walls of our church building, the rituals and language we use to teach ourselves how best to do that become a barrier that prevents those new to church culture from feeling welcome.

The flesh became wordy

Take, for example, a church service I recently attended. The songs that were sung at this service featured language such as "Hosanna in the highest", "Hallelujah", "Worthy is the lamb". If you know what this means, it's powerful stuff – these unassuming words and phrases speak volumes to Christians about what it means to be part of a humanity that is being reconnected with the divine. The problem is, at no point during that church service did anyone feel the need to explain what this stuff meant. In the case of "Hosanna in the highest", this is reasonable enough. When was the last time a day went by without you saying that in the course of a normal conversation with a non-church-attending friend? The others, however, are desperately in need of clarification for a culture to whom we may as well be speaking Slovakian.

New here?

Now, imagine that someone with no background in the Christian faith (let's call her Poppy) wandered into this church service one Sunday. Maybe Poppy came out of curiosity, perhaps as the culmination of a long and tiring spiritual journey, or because life had brought her to the end of herself and she had nowhere else to go. As Christians, we would hope that whatever she thought of the worldview presented at that service, a stranger like Poppy would feel valued and welcomed as a child of God. Hopefully at the church she attended, she'd find numerous friendly faces and strangers eager to make her feel welcome. Hopefully this would be a place she could feel at home in.

This is very much how I was made to feel after the service in Melbourne. Apparently my secret agent skills are not all that I like to think them to be, and it seems that my pew neighbour cottoned on to my less-than-fluent Slovakian (it was probably my unusual pronunciation of "czbxy"). Afterwards, we were able to have a good laugh

about the whole situation. Even to a complete outsider, there was a strong sense of a close and welcoming community.

Parlez vous Christianese?

But still, there was the language barrier. Of course, I had no right nor inclination to feel aggrieved about this. I hardly expected the community I was visiting to start speaking in English simply because they realised an “outsider” was in their midst. The language barrier in this case was no one’s fault but my own, it was as amusing as it was annoying, but it was a barrier none the less.

And it’s also a barrier for Poppy. There’s the old joke about Britain and the United States being “two countries separated by a common language”, and Poppy probably feels much the same way. “Hallewhojah?” Where does this “Hosanna” chick fit into the picture? Which “lamb” are these people referring to, and what exactly is he “worthy” of?

Now, hopefully Poppy has found the service stimulating. Hopefully she’s been challenged. Hopefully she’s seen a glimpse of a new, more beautiful way of life. But we know for sure she’s been confused, and we know for sure that it was unnecessary.

We tend to think that the important thing is what we say, and that the presentation is secondary. To an extent this is true – I would rather see a preacher stumble painfully and monotonously through a theologically accurate explanation of a passage than see someone eloquently explain how Jesus’ primary purpose in giving the Parable of the Sower was to encourage more efficient farming methods. Nonetheless, as the adage says, “the medium is the message.”

If we aim to be a welcoming community, if we preach countless brilliant sermons on how best to show God’s love to strangers, if we go one step further and put those sermons into action with genuine acts of love to people both inside and outside our church community, we do a wonderful thing; we do as Christ instructed us. If we do all this but yet in our church services use language and rituals that are confusing and alienating for those unfamiliar with the culture and history of the church, we are working against ourselves. The message may well say to Poppy “welcome to you all, especially to anyone here for the first time,” but the medium is chock full of Christianese – deeds and words unfamiliar to the culture we find ourselves in – and no one has thought to explain them. This medium tells her “you’re an outsider. You don’t get it. You don’t belong.”

Don’t shoot the message

Let me be very clear here what I’m not saying. I’m not saying that these songs, or that language, or those rituals are the problem. If we took away from Christian culture everything that wasn’t immediately familiar to those from other backgrounds, we’d be left with a faith that was bland, insipid, and as deep as a puddle. The history and heritage of the faith is tied up in those songs, rituals and words. Taking them away would rob us of the greater part of the truth and beauty of Christianity. These are things we should understand. Things we should get excited about. Things we should teach others about.

The problem comes when we don’t teach. When we assume knowledge that people can’t reasonably be expected to have, we alienate them and rob them of the welcome to which they are entitled. When we use phrases like “you’re probably familiar with...”, it’s a little Freudian slip, revealing our assumption that no-one would ever come into a church if they weren’t already a Christian. If you enter a church for the first time in your life and this presumption is thrust upon you, how do you feel? We would hope, of course, that first-time visitors to a church find enough in the message and the community to get them interested in spite of this, but if we need to use the words “in spite”, isn’t there a problem already?

And now in English:

The good news is that the solution is considerably easier than faking fluency in a Central European language. Suppose when these songs were introduced the person with the microphone had explained in plain English what these words were about. Suppose they’d briefly mentioned the Jewish historical roots of the Christian faith and how and why these words from an ancient language still have something to say to us today. It needn’t be a sermon – a couple of sentences will do. It’s likely that our Poppy will still be a tad confused, and perhaps a little puzzled by the whole spectacle. Naturally we wouldn’t expect her to suddenly grasp the finer details of Judeo-Christian history in the three seconds before the first song of her first ever church service. But at least she isn’t made to feel like the only person in the room who doesn’t know what’s going on. That’s a tiny step, but it’s a step of love.

As I alluded to earlier, I would argue that a significant part of the reason that so many churches don’t do this is because they presume, consciously or subconsciously, that people who enter the doors of a church are probably Christian. And anyway, don’t we need to worry first about meeting the needs of our regular attendees? I have two responses to this.

Firstly, making the meaning of our language and rituals clear is in no way antithetical to facilitating the personal and spiritual growth of Christians. At worst, your congregation may get a little sick of hearing the same things explained multiple times (surely a small price to pay to ensure a considerate welcome for the new face at church – the one sheep in a hundred to use the metaphor of Jesus). However, acts such as communion are so rich in symbolic depth that they never need be explained the same way twice in the average working life of a pastor.

And as for the simple things, the words we use for instance, you may be surprised to find how many of those who regularly attend your church are less than certain what they're on about when they sing phrases like "Hosanna in the highest". It's not just the first-time visitors to your church who would benefit from being told the historical context in which a book of the Bible was written. It's possible to interpret Christian rituals for visitors to your church from a secular background while at the same time contributing to the spiritual growth and understanding of the most mature believers in your parish. It just takes a bit of thought.

Secondly, I would argue that this presumption – that everyone in a church is probably a Christian anyway, and hence church services should be tailored solely to those people's needs – becomes self-perpetuating. If we assume that no one unfamiliar with Christian culture will come to our church and tailor our services accordingly, we may well find that those who do come won't stick around, and that those who regularly attend the church won't feel comfortable inviting friends from other backgrounds. Rinse and repeat. Very quickly, we can create a subculture which is not just radically different from the culture of wider society (in my opinion an essential element of a good church), but one which begins to lack any meaningful point of reference for someone from outside that subculture.

Stepping-stones and stumbling blocks

One of the few times we see Jesus get really angry in the Bible is when he makes a scene in the outer courts of the Jewish temple at Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah had said hundreds of years earlier that this temple should be "a house of prayer for all nations", and yet these outer courts, the only parts of the temple open to people who were not Jewish by ethnicity, looked more like a noisy trading floor (and a corrupt one at that), making a mockery of any pilgrims' attempts at prayer or reflection. Religion is blocking the way to God, and Jesus is furious about it.

We can do the same thing with the language we use in church. We do it more subtly, we do it with good intentions, but we do it nonetheless. Our careless use of confusing language has the potential to block the path to God. By simply considering the perspective of someone from a non-Christian background, we can turn words and actions that could be daunting, confusing and alienating into a powerful invitation to take part in the joyful mystery of God's love that we have discovered.

Now, it's taken me some time to get around to it, but let me practise what I preach. My title is a reference to a letter written by Paul, one of the key figures in the early church, to a group of Christians in Greece. The letter is preserved in the Bible as the book of 1 Corinthians (named after Corinth, the city to which it was sent), and the quote is from chapter 13 if you care to read it in context. In the letter, Paul says, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Essentially, language without love is meaningless. In this context, I think this means that our language must convey our love for people new to the Jesus movement by meeting them where they're at and speaking in their own language. If we fail to do this, to borrow Paul's metaphor, we may as well just bang pots together every Sunday morning – loveless words are no more meaningful.

While I believe what I have said is true irrespective of the gender, generation or culture of the Poppys of your church, I think it is particularly critical today. Especially if the church genuinely cares about making itself relevant to my generation. Now in their mid 20s, many of my friends have grown up with no exposure to the Christian story whatsoever. Perhaps they've picked up snippets in the media, but that version of the story is often grossly distorted (by Christians and others alike). Convincing this generation that faith is (A) an intellectually viable option and (B) of importance today will be an uphill battle, and there will be no simple solutions. I put it to you, however, that speaking in English is a good start. My friends are an educated, intelligent bunch, but they're not going to learn Slovakian just to understand a church service.

**Tim is 23, a graduate of Otago University and of studentsoul Dunedin. He has degrees in chemistry and history. Recently married, his wife Sarah is finishing a law degree and they hope to go to India later this year into the International Justice Mission programme. They are learning Hindi together.*

Some thoughts on youth ministry

Mary-Jane Konings, Trinity and St Stephen's, South Canterbury

In an overwhelming buzz of competing priorities, where do you give time, attention, and money?

I believe that local churches need to be investing significant resources in children's ministries and youth ministries. This age group are THE most receptive to the Gospel. It's like a company investing in recruiting and maintaining a customer base; if you don't invest in new customers, you're in trouble. I don't just mean employ someone to "do" this ministry either; children's workers and youth workers are growing your future church members. If these ministries are not fully integrated with the structure and life of the church, we make it that much easier for them to walk away.

I also think that strong regional and national networks are important strategies for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. However, we need to think carefully about what it is we are doing. Gathering accurate data about youth ministry is tricky because young people are so mobile. Only time will tell if a particular strategy is effective, that is, if young people continue to be involved in some sort of faith community. There are plenty of anecdotal evidence, but the church statistics still tell us that whatever Presbyterians are doing isn't working all that well. Young adults (18-35) are conspicuous by their absence in the visible life of the church around my neck of the woods. Besides that practical information, we also need to think Biblically and theologically.

Fads and fashions go around youth ministry as they do in everywhere, but I think one thing remains the same. Effective youth ministry is all about relationships, between peers, between youth and volunteers, and between young people and the living God. I'd also add that significant periods of time are involved, and that those relationships need to be intentional. A youth worker is optional.

What?

Youth workers are optional. Don't get me wrong. I like youth workers. Youth workers are great. They do awesome work and we need to look after them well. For example, I think we need to do some more work on providing longterm career options for youth workers. If the national Church is going to intentionally draw on the ranks of youth workers to recruit candidates for ordained ministry,

some thought needs to be given to intentionally resourcing and training youth workers on the job. But there are some assumptions about youth workers and what they do that can turn out to be traps in the long term.

One assumption is that youth workers are employed so you can run youth groups because youth ministry is all about youth groups. Now, I like youth groups. Youth groups are great. However, youth groups are not the end product. They are a temporary community, a good Biblical concept. Good youth ministry happens outside youth groups as well, and not having one at the moment doesn't mean youth ministry isn't happening in your church. Youth ministry is all about relationships. Employing a youth worker to invest more time in building relationships is a good investment but it isn't the whole picture.

There are at least three places to go wrong with youth groups.

Firstly, I think it is a mistake to run a youth ministry, or a children's ministry for that matter, in isolation from the church. For example, with the best of intentions, we pitch the morning kids' programme to their level. The music is amped up, the teaching is high energy, it's a heap of fun. Nothing wrong with that. Except that we end up teaching them to worship in a way that is foreign to the rest of the church. Then we wonder why the teenagers don't want to come once they become too old for the programme. It's poor ecclesiology. Any programme or ministry that is isolated from the church that initiated it can lose its way because relationships falter without regular interaction and intentional nurturing. Outreach programmes can be particularly vulnerable.

On the other hand, struggling with the issues of wide age groups, for example in worship, can help churches to stay in touch with their local community and local culture rather than becoming a memorial to a tradition. One of the great things about Kids Friendly is that it challenges me as a minister to think about how I can involve children in our morning worship. I've borrowed ideas from key ministers I've worked with. At St Stephen's, the children bring in the Scriptures and light the Christ candle each morning. Nearly every week, the children have their own lines to say in the call to worship. We use the same call to worship at Trinity, even though some weeks there are

no children. But when they do come, we're ready! Some of our young people are learning to read and pray in public and others are running the technology for us, on the sound desk and computer.

Each week I struggle with putting together something that will connect with our age groups, which currently run from five to 85ish. If those young people weren't there, it would be quieter, possibly more reverent, and much easier to plan. But I'm glad they are there. They challenge me to at least think about communicating in a way they understand instead of slipping into my familiar "Christianese". They keep our worship real. And, after all, it is a mistake to let adults have things all their own way in worship. Too often, people see youth ministry and children's ministry as a baby-sitting service, while they get on and do the real work. However, the challenge of helping our children and teenagers to own their faith keeps me inspired and encouraged and, yes, a tiny bit enthusiastic. Yay.

Secondly, I think it is a mistake to run youth group as if teenagers are the only people who matter. An effective youth worker or youth pastor grows into a person who intentionally fosters relationships with children who are going to be members of their ministry in the future, and with the parents of teenagers. They look after the volunteers who run the youth ministries. In other words, they become a vital part of the church as a whole. They build bridges. They help with the market day and the holiday programme and maybe even go on the grey nomads bus trip once a year, to foster relationships across the church as a whole. The converse is also true. Those relationships should be reflected in the formal structures of the church. Young people must be represented at all levels of church. It is also a mistake to run church as if adults are the only people who matter.

Thirdly, I think it is a mistake to run youth group the same way year after year. As the Rev Helen Harray of Studentsoul (Dunedin) observes, there are distinct year groups with identifiable characteristics year after year. Some years go off, and other years don't turn up. Many youth workers observe the same thing, and in addition, they become older than the people they work with every year. Youth ministers need to re-invent themselves and the way they do ministry every couple of years, or they burn out and leave.

These sorts of issues are exactly why we need effective regional and national networks. PYM has a youth leadership training program for older teens running in a number of centres. The 10-week Going Somewhere course brings

together young people from across a region to learn and laugh together. The course has a continuity team who focus on building relationships and equipping them with practical skills, and invited speakers each week who go a little deeper with them about their gifts and skills, worship, even what it means to be Presbyterian (radical, I know!)

Coming out of the course, young people are equipped and inspired to become more involved in their areas of passion, whatever they might be. They also know some of the key people around the presbytery, because they were speakers at one of the sessions, and they know other young people around the region. These sorts of occasions help youth leaders to understand whether what's going on is part of a bigger trend or a local anomaly, and challenges them to create effective responses. We're good at doing that in New Zealand; local solutions to local problems. We need to be better at sharing our good news stories.

There is real value in having strong regional networks, but they don't just happen. Too many of our youth leaders and churches are so focussed on their local context they forget about their responsibilities on a wider stage. Our ecclesiology includes a national dimension. Most youth ministries are enjoying the benefits of workers and volunteers who have been nurtured somewhere else. Regional networks provide the infrastructure for larger gatherings that can be influential, stimulating experiences, that encourage and challenge our young people and our young leaders, and connect them with vital relationships and expertise not always available locally.

The Connect conference does the same thing, only on a national level. Connecting youth leaders with one another is high energy, inspiring, draining, and important. Out of gatherings at this level come some important discussions. There are some big issues. What exactly is the career plan for a youth worker? Do we really see this as a stepping stone to a wider ministry as ordained clergy? If so, perhaps we need to invest more resources in training and supporting those people working at the coal face. There is anecdotal evidence that youth workers who keep studying last longer in ministry, as do those with supervision, and who engage with a network of peers; I suspect part of the dynamic is that critical thinking on the practice of youth ministry helps leaders to engage effectively in the maelstrom of change that is the world of young people at the moment.

A second issue is whether we see youth ministry or even studentsoul type ministries as short term, temporary community, a means to an end, or whether they are a strategic

and intentional stage in a comprehensive, theologically engaged process of discipling and growing people. Youth ministries have to be asked about how they contribute to the mission of the church. The youth leader and their support team have to know where they fit in the big picture. A second unpopular but necessary question is evaluating the effectiveness of the ministry. It may be a difficult conversation to start, but often unstated expectations can trip up all parties, and a consultation or evaluation process can bring those expectations into the light of day. Churches need to ask themselves what they are intentionally doing for children, teenagers and young adults. What's your budget for this mission area?

A third issue is what we imagine is needed to support youth ministry nationally. Over the past 20 years, the Presbyterian Church has swung wildly in terms of the people employed and the brief they were given. We continue to employ good people nationally. There is an ongoing debate about what is going to be effective. Youth ministry is a long term strategic investment in people that builds on strong relationships over a period of time. A nationwide network of regional youthworkers employed by presbyteries would go a long way towards maximising the effectiveness of our national staff.

Finally, churches need to think about how they are going to effectively engage with people under 40. There is no point investing substantial resources in youth ministry if we produce young people who are alienated from most forms of traditional church life. At the same time, those forms need to keep changing. The challenge from the young people at General Assembly is to actively involve young people in a meaningful way in the life of the Church. Part of that challenge is to take a good hard look at the expectation that young people "should" join in with the existing traditions. What about starting new traditions that include young people?

There are of course many places that have vibrant and visible children's and youth ministries. However, paying attention to transitions is critical. If we don't attend to the process of moving children as they grow up, they simply slip out the back door. What a waste.

Recently I went to the first "Transformers" camp, run by Kids Friendly's Jill Kayser and Lorraine Morgan. The target age group is 9-12 year olds, but teenage mentors are an important part of this leadership training model. The camp equips children to serve in their church, using puppets, music, and technology on this occasion, but there are plenty of other options. There was good Biblical content, heaps of fun, and the establishment of a power-

ful dynamic, harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of the children.

What excites me about the potential of this model is that it directly addresses one of the key "drop out" areas in our ministries to children and young people. Transformers is inherently relational, but it is also intentional about those relationships. It involved a wide range of ages, from nine-year-olds to grandparents, who played, worked and worshipped together. Finally, the camp brought together people from all over Canterbury, fostering a regional dynamic that I think is worth investing in.

What would happen if every presbytery ran one of these Transformers camps? It builds brilliantly on a Kids Friendly foundation, but that isn't essential. What is essential is a faith commitment by each of the children involved, and the potential to be leaders, remembering that leaders come in all shapes and sizes and ages. The camp is one of those catalysing events, where children are set up to succeed.

There are a couple of assumptions behind the model. One assumption is that children and young people belong in church. Another is that all ages can and should worship together. A third assumption is that recent creativity can be included in our worship alongside traditional creativity. All of our music and traditions were new once.

One way to start is to try and involve children and young people in what you are doing already. This is an area where it is an advantage to be a smaller church. Listen if they don't want to be involved. Discuss what you could do that would help them to feel they could take part. One teenager I spoke with last year said she wanted to be more involved in worship at her church, but it seemed like they had it all sorted. "There's no room for me," she said. If you are in a situation where there aren't many or any young people, look around for a young person you can invite to be a consultant; an expert on youth culture.

It's easy to ignore children and young people; they go away if you don't do anything. They slip away quietly and don't come back if we miss those key transition points. There are plenty of other priorities competing for funds and attention.

And yet if you are looking for cost effectiveness, for influence, for a long term intentional strategy, I think you need to consider investing resources locally, regionally and nationally.

Starting something new: Church planting

Howard Carter, Studentsoul, Auckland

“I remain convinced that, far from having had its day and being allowed to rest in peace, church planting is a crucial component in any mission strategy in our Post-Christendom Western societies... I cannot imagine how we can respond to the diverse missionary challenges of the 21st century, or even survive as a Christian community, without the stimulus of church planting and the opportunities this offers to explore fresh ways to incarnate the Gospel in a changing context”- Murray Stuart¹

“Today there is great interest in and need for church plants that will reach a changing postmodern world. Being a missionary in a new culture, whether that culture is in another country or emerges in our own, takes discernment and wise planning.” – Ed Stetzer²

As you may have guessed from the above quotes, I believe in church planting. I believe it is a major part of the solution and strategy that we, as a denomination, need to adopt to reach emerging generations of New Zealanders. It is not the whole answer³ but it's time we explored it further.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and church planting

Historically Presbyterians have been good church planters.

We have planted geographically. As cities and communities have grown and spread, land was purchased and congregations planted. It fitted our traditional understanding of parishes: where the people settled, we settled in their midst⁴.

We have planted churches and congregations to connect,

1 Stuart Murray, 2008 *Planting Churches: A Framework For Practitioners*, Milton Keynes, Colorado springs, Hyderabad; Paternoster

2 Ed Stetzer, 2003, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, Nashville; Broadman & Holman. xv, xvii

3 In the early 1990s, church growth guru C Peter Wagner is credited with boldly (and as it turns out mistakenly) saying that “church planting is the best form of evangelism under heaven”.

4 It's great to see an initiative like Press Go established that can fund so what are called “green field” opportunities.

serve and do mission among different ethnic groups. Since my recent move to Auckland, it has been good to see an ever-growing number of multicultural churches.

We have planted congregations and new expressions of church⁵ to meet changes in culture. I have been part of Presbyterian churches most of my life that have planted new congregations as a way of doing church across cultural divides; providing traditional, more contemporary and emerging worship styles. The metaphor I use to describe this is moving from the big picture palace, which plays the same film all week long, to the multiplex cinema, where choice for the whole family is the big thing.

We have also been involved in planting churches by what Stuart Murray calls “accidental parenting”⁶. There are a lot of new churches that have started and grown with the benefit of youth, young adults and leaders from our denomination. One of the things that inspires me to want to work with youth and young adults is seeing the number of young leaders I have had input into who are now involved in church leadership around the country and the world. While denomination does not mean that much to this present generation, it does sadden me that they are mainly in other denominations. While chatting on Facebook, I quipped to a young guy who had been on my leadership team and is now a worship leader and song writer in the CCC movement in New Zealand, “that I should send them a bill for training their leaders”. And the reply I got was, “lol, yeah you should.”

Church planting and the bubble theory

Having done youth ministry for many years, I am aware of what is called the bubble principle. An age group within a church youth ministry can grow to a large size and take all the resources and energy of a youth leader or team. It can be invigorating and wonderful. They can also be the group that demands that things are done their way and influence the decision-making and traditions of the

5 Church planting is a historical and Biblical word for establishing new churches. Fresh or new expressions have become popular terms in some circles to talk of new endeavours that may or may not become separate churches. The term “emerging churches” has also gained popularity in recent years as a way of distancing from the very specific idea of church planting and as a way of embracing a wider definition of mission.

6 Stuart Murray, 2008, 52-53

group. “We have always gone to this camp or this event; we have always done it this way.” When that bubble group moves on, then often there is not much left behind. Unless, that is, you are focusing on the groups coming up behind. In Rotorua I was aware of this and put a lot of effort into starting a “Rock Solid Club” for intermediate-school-aged young people. The church has gone through this bubble phase and we need to focus on doing new things for new generations.

Beating the bubble means putting resources and money into emerging generations that are not there at all or in small numbers. Kid’s Friendly, becoming youth friendly and family friendly, and, I believe, being willing to invest in new church and congregational plants, of which StudentSoul is just one expression, are examples of this investment. Will there be churches willing to ask a church planter to come and start something new in their midst, or have the courage to close and give their resources to someone to do something new in their area? It will mean existing churches looking at renewing their visions for mission and how they employ their resources.

Church planting and the single generation church

One critique of church planting for youth or young adults is that churches should be multi-generational and all-age. Starting a next generation church goes against that ideal. I agree... but if you are rebuilding, there is the question of where you start. Having worked in a congregation with an aging population, I know it is hard to start with youth or young adults to redress an imbalance. You need to grow the church down.

Planting a church to focus on young adults or youth simply gives a different starting point. My friend Keith Nisbet talked of a young adult’s church in Wellington whose leadership were dealing with an issue of an aging congregation. They had to decide how they were going to make room for cots and a crèche as members of their church were getting married and having babies. “SpiritGarage”, a similar church planted by an evangelical Lutheran church in Minneapolis, had the same issue after 10 years’ existence when they had to look at doing children’s ministry for the first time. These churches are asking “how do these new church plants become kids friendly?” as they become more multi generational.

Church planting and new leadership

We have many people coming into ministry now who have a sense of calling and a background of pioneering and doing church in a contemporary way - yet they find themselves being placed in churches that are resistant to

change. Church growth guru C Peter Wagner says that the only difference between planting a new church and revitalising an old church is what set of problems you want to tackle; we need to find space for and encourage the church planters and pioneers in our midst and give them resources, space and support to do what God is calling them to do.

Church planting and reformation

Church planting is also a great opportunity to re-evaluate and reform what we do. It gives resources and vitality back to existing parishes to help them look at doing mission with emerging generations. Often one of the issues we the church face is inertia: a reluctance to change. I find myself cringing even saying this, but I fear some parishes want chaplains not change agents. Starting something new gives the church a chance to “re-imagine and experiment with new patterns and practises, integrate missional and ecclesial dimensions, review inherited traditions and assumptions, configure the relationship between Gospel and culture in fresh ways, and pioneer on behalf of the wider church”.⁷

Studentsoul Auckland

I have been blessed with the chance to have a go at planting a church here in the middle of Auckland city: a church (Studentsoul) focusing on university students and young adults. I am faced with the challenge and privilege of starting something new: to develop and do church with emerging generations of New Zealanders from scratch. Well, almost from scratch, as it is great to be able to look to and mine the depth of another Studentsoul in Dunedin. It is a real blessing to be doing this with St Andrew’s Symonds Street as our host parish. St Andrew’s has a great history of church planting and of starting new ventures in an effort to reach out to the changing needs of the city.

There are a lot of reasons why we should not start something new, and only one key reason to start: that is the desire to reach out to a people group that we are not at present reaching. I know that there are many parishes that are doing ministry to university students and young adults but the need is great. In Auckland, tertiary students number over 60,000⁸. Auckland city also has one of the youngest demographics of any city in New Zealand. According to the 2006 census figures, the median age for people in Auckland City is 32.7 years old. The single biggest age group in the city is the 20-24 age group, with about

7 Stuart Murray, 2008, 140-141

8 And I didn’t need a helicopter ride paid for by taxpayers or a tertiary provider to figure that out.

39,000,⁹ just slightly more than those aged 65 and above. Add in those 25-30 and you find there are over 75,000. If you add in the group 15-19, you find the number goes over the 100,000.¹⁰ Church statistics are a bit scratchy but we do not connect or serve this group well.

Secondly, historically when young adults and particularly university students get motivated by spiritual awakening, the impact has been huge. Edwin Orr's book *Campus Aflame*, while now rather old, inspired me as it showed how historically spiritual renewal on tertiary campuses has resulted in missions and social justice movements that have impacted the world. He points to the huge impact of the student volunteer movement in the first half of the 20th century. Even today, student ministries like Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ (StudentLife) are a result of awakenings on campuses in California in the 1950s¹¹. Historically, this is also where movements like YMCA came from. Many of the ministers within our Church who I look to as mentors and inspiration also became followers of Jesus at university. It is important that we focus on young adults and university students because such a ministry has the possibility of shaping the Church of the future.

We are all called to start something new

"Every pastor is involved in new church development. Every church should make as one of its biggest mission projects a new church plant - right where you are"- Leonard Sweet¹²

Leonard Sweet uses the metaphor of being the project manager for building the new O'Hare Airport as a metaphor for ministry today. He says the project manager has to keep the airport terminal going smoothly with minimal interruption catering for the two million current passengers, while at the same time building a new airport around them that will cater for the increased needs of the next 50 years. In Nigeria, they build new churches around the existing church and the last thing they do is pull down the old church when the new one is completed.

The reality is that the challenge of reaching emerging generations with the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us all

9 The largest growth in any demographic in Auckland City from the 2006 census.

10 www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/D5B067F9-7A06-483D-A6B9-D438E81ABAC2/0/AucklandCity.pdf

11 J Edwin Orr, 1994, *Campus Aflame: A History of Evangelical Awakenings in Collegiate Communities* International Awakening Press.

12 Leonard Sweet, 1999, *SoulTsunami* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 57

to start something new. Church planting is only one expression of this. It is a leadership issue. Reaching out to younger generations is a matter being intentional, deliberate and purposeful about reaching these groups in our community¹³.

We need to hear the words of the prophet Haggai to take courage, because the Lord of Hosts is with us, and build.

13 Ed Stetzer, 2007, *Comeback churches: How 3000 churches turned around and yours can too*. Nashville: B and H Publishing Company.

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Young people are old people with fewer years!

Steph Brook, Children, Youth and Families Co-ordinator, St John's Co operating Parish, Bucklands Beach

There are many debates raging within the church as to how to “run” youth ministries, what do we do for youth, with youth, about youth. The measuring bar for each church is different, like the heart of each church is different. But what are we called to do? What does Jesus ask us to do? “Go into all the world and tell them...” Tell of Jesus’ works, Jesus’ love, his saving Grace. Jesus didn’t say, “go find the young”, He said: “go find everyone!”

In this age of change, the desire for community is still as strong as it has ever been. People are hurting, people are lonely, people even sin, just the same as times gone by. Whatever “age” we are in - modernism, post modernism, whatever - the basic human need is the same. Physically, we need air to breathe, healthy food, warm dry clothes and a home to live in. Emotionally, we need love, we need secure relationships, truth, faith, boundaries and mentors to guide us and walk with us, we need respect, for us as people, and for our thoughts, views and experiences. Young people have the same needs as we do; they are simply younger and aren’t as good at covering their pain, or their desires, as adults!

Small children need a guiding hand. They need the basic essentials for their physical health, and the love, support, wisdom and boundaries that loving parents seek to give, as best they can. As children grow, their ability to provide for themselves grows, along with the ability to take responsibility for their actions. Similarly, the need for them to learn to think things through grows, and to learn to make choices; be they choices to eat well, or meet Jesus. As they grow, their thinking changes. They become aware that, for some things, there are grey areas. They move from concrete thinking to exploring all sides of an issue. They discover the frustrations, or joys, of confusion. For some this journey is easy; for others hard. Their desire for black and white answers to everything, in a grey world, is incredibly difficult. The need for strong, accepting, wise relationships becomes even stronger as children move into teen hood.

Teenagers so often are seen as “a problem”; unruly, rude, destructive, but yet are they? Many are simply hard working, fun seeking, and are needing a “village” around them. They are hungry for people to invest their hearts in them, in their welfare and in their development. Someone who will listen while they panic, answer questions, and enable

them to make their own decisions and mistakes.

Funnily enough, the hurt we feel when someone makes a snide and nasty remark about us is the same that young people feel (except we’ve learnt to hide the hurt better). For those who are “head” people, or rational, logical thinkers, it can be assessed and put in a nice safe box on the metaphorical shelf in our brains and left there until needed. For the “heart”, or more emotionally driven person, the comment tends to niggle, eat away at us and colour our thinking until enough time has passed that other things have covered it over, or we eradicate the hurt in whatever way works for us.

Part of the challenge of being a young person is moving from “everything is about me” to being aware that others have their own things to deal with that may have nothing at all to do with me.

This is a part of maturity; it is something that Paul admonishes us to work at: growing up. The Message is pretty blunt in Ephesians 4:14 *No prolonged infancies among us, please. We’ll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love – like Christ in everything.*

However, whose role is it to enable young people to develop this essential skill? Inevitably, it should be parents’, and many parents do, but naturally, like us, young people need to be able to check out several sources, and one source should be the church. For that to happen, we as part of the church need to have good, healthy relationships with our young people. Otherwise, we are in danger of sending our children out into the world, especially the world of education, as “easy marks for imposters”. If we do not hold up the marker for them to measure against, who will?

And how about those teenagers who are broken and wounded already; those children whose foundations are broken or breaking? Kids who have two homes, or are sucked into destructive relationships by adults they should be able to trust, or are so lonely they seek distraction in drugs and alcohol. They react in the same ways that adults do. How many times have you heard of a husband and father who is otherwise successful, has a great job,

pays the bills (more or less), has the house and the car, but is quietly drinking himself into oblivion? Because if you look underneath all the success, his relationship with his wife is going down the gurgler fast, his kids despise him (when they see him at all), the mortgage is crippling, and his company is on shaky ground. How is this adult reaction any different to a teenager's response in turning to alcohol, drugs and sex to cover up the loneliness of coming home to an empty house every afternoon, and knowing that when Mum and Dad come home there will be stony silence, or constant nitpicking and fighting? Or only Mum, or only Dad, coming home, and being so tired from trying to hold it all together on the home front alone and keeping their job etc,etc, etc. Broken, wounded, hurting people, needing the touch of the Saviour; someone, preferably more than one person, who cares enough to listen, to probe, to bring what is hidden out into the Light.

Before God, we are all equal: how many times have we seen, heard, preached on this subject? And yet, do we apply it? Jesus refused to allow the disciples to block the children from his presence, and in fact used their simple trust as an example. We are to attempt to exemplify it. And yet, as the years go by, we see, experience and learn many things. We carry many hurts and they stick to us, like the colourful dots in Max Lucado's children's story about Punchinello. Only when we hang out with our Creator do the dots, the hurts, the burdens, the brokenness fall away. However, unlike the children's story, it takes work; it takes people pulling alongside us, and it takes commitment, self awareness and other awareness.

Programmes aimed at youth are great. They provide an open door for the broken and hurting to walk through, as well as those who are more healthy and from loving, open families. But behind the programmes we need a vast number of people who genuinely feel the heart of the Father, who are prepared to walk the hard road (and it is a hard road) and develop deep and meaningful relationships with young people. It doesn't take a special person; it takes a person who is aware that they haven't "got it made", a person who is prepared to do what it takes to love, to serve, to listen, sometimes in the middle of the night, to answer texts, to fathom out Facebook and Bebo and whatever is just coming around the corner, to communicate with young people and create the village again.

Young people don't especially speak a different language, not any more than we do as adults. Their slang is different (slightly), but asking what it means is not something to be ashamed of. It's just the same as asking someone who speaks Spanish what a Spanish word means. We often use

language as a barrier, and as way of telling the insider from the outsider. Even in the church, we use such special words as lectionary, pulpit, plenary, vestry to name but a few. But what

do they mean? An outsider has to ask what we are talking about. We can hardly sit in judgement over young people and their language choices (barring swearing of course!).

When I listen to my children, and our young people at church, they are constantly dreaming up words that mean something different from the dictionary: "alg" (all good), "lol" (lots of laughs or laugh out loud), "sup" (what's up?). It's a way of being "in"; of creating a point of difference from someone else and being marked as special. We all want to be obviously individual. Look at Madonna, the singer, who has re-invented herself countless times over the years, to become something special all over again. Our faith teaches us that we are all special, individual, valuable and purpose-filled. Our challenge is to find our purpose, and for that, we need people beside us, just like young people need people beside them in their seeking.

It takes people who are prepared to look past negative behaviour and seek the reasons behind the behaviours. It takes people who are prepared to be honest with themselves and ask why they react to this particular situation, and come before our Lord and deal with it. Youth ministry, just like any other ministry, is about people, and about Jesus.

In the same way that we structure our Sunday services around the needs of our congregations, and our home groups structure themselves around their members' needs, so we need to structure our youth and children's ministries around their needs and modes of communication. Acknowledging that today's young people are growing up in a different world - not better, not worse, just simply different - and structuring our interactions with them in a way they can understand is pretty important, but even more important is the relationships we seek to build. It's about our hearts; it's about removing the fear

We need to structure our youth and children's ministries around their needs and modes of communication

and welcoming God's love for his young people and being prepared to make the first step. Because they certainly are not going to make it!

When I reflect on my own church, for which I work in the capacity of children, youth and families, my minister (and boss) spends as much time listening and walking with those who are broken and hurting, as I do. The problems are sometimes more complex, but in essence it's about people in pain who need a listening ear, some wisdom and our Lord. That is what young people need too, and an army of people to do it. The real question is, are we prepared to?

In second Corinthians, Paul lays it on the line for us *Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. God reminds us, "I heard your call in the nick of time; the day you needed me, I was there to help...*

People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly... in hard times, tough times, bad times...Dear, dear Corinthians, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Are we prepared to transform our churches? Are we prepared to encourage our people to love one another, even those who are young? To honour them, to respect them, to make building relationships with them our highest priority? Or even simply a priority? Young people are worth it. Sure they are different, but in a fun, intelligent, challenging and deeply searching way. And yet in essence they are simply the same. Young people are just old people without the years.

Taking a journey towards something new

Ryhan Prasad*

When I was asked to write this article I wasn't sure what I was being asked to do. Was I giving a brief account of what we were doing? Was I providing a possible blueprint for other ministries? Or was I doing a push for more contemporary service options within our Church? I think I have ended up doing a bit of all three. I hope that you can take on board that alternative forms of worship are critical if we are serious about sharing the Good News with the younger generation. And also that these "new" or "alternative" worship styles are not removed from the **function** of worship that we currently follow; it is only the **form** that has been adapted.

Embracing change is necessary to explore any new form of worship; and if it reaches the unchurched, then it is a positive change and it is actually not as scary or challenging as it may seem. The root of the change is being open to and responding relationally to the people you are trying to reach. I hope when you read this you get encouraged, inspired and hopeful for the future of our Church.

We hear a lot about the declining numbers of young adults in our congregations. St John's in the City, Wel-

lington, decided it wanted to do something about it. As a result of a session planning day, the church identified that it needed to do more to include young adults in the life of the congregation.

So we embarked on a fact-finding mission down to Duneedin to check out B@TCH and Studentsoul and the awesome work they are doing down there. We also held focus groups with the young adults in and around our parish. Some important needs came out of that research.

Key factors for St John's new young adults ministry

- Needs to be integrated with parish life
- Needs dedicated and appropriately resourced leadership
- A need for reflection and discussion on the Word
- A focus on fellowship and Community
- Less formal and more flexible styles of worship
- A shared meal
- Welcoming environment for young adults

The result was a new-look evening service that was specifically focused on but not exclusive to young adults. We

have been running the evening service since January this year and it has been a very positive and energising experience for all those involved. The service holds true to the “bones” of Presbyterian worship liturgy but expresses the liturgy in differing creative ways.

Some of the key learning for us so far is that we really need to take the feedback of those concerned seriously. To meet the need expressed, while still remaining true to principles of worship. Positive change is a good and needed process; our Presy Church motto of “reformed and reforming” should be a constant reminder for us to ensure we are reaching people where they are. Thus the evening service looks different from our morning one. We have a call to worship, some contemporary music, we pass the peace of Christ over coffee and then we hear the word and reflect on it in small groups and prayer; there is then an offering, prayers for others and then a benediction and grace before we share a meal together.

The key for the service seems to be the casual yet authentic nature of worship and the ability to explore and reflect on the Word during the service. Another big factor is the communal meal shared at the end of the service. The ministry is vibrant and welcoming and is injecting new life and energy into our parish. We have on average 32 people attending and we have had at least one new face every Sunday. This has happened simply by word of mouth and the parish’s usual advertising channels. We resisted the urge to do a big “marketing campaign” in favour of letting the community grow organically.

We also found that the worship space and environment were big factors. The aesthetic of the service is very different from the morning service, with more of a café like atmosphere. This café style is not a gimmick; it is a reflection of a space people feel is appropriate to worship in. This is because people feel comfortable in a café atmosphere because it is a space where so much community and relationship building is conducted in our everyday lives. Relationship is such a big part of this and any ministry. We have a great team of really special people that give a huge part of their lives to make this ministry happen and it is that passion and energy that really helps people feel welcome and loved. I cannot emphasise enough how important building relationship is when embarking on any kind of ministry. Being flexible and able

to meet and love people where they are is a fundamental principle of sharing the Good News in our new ministry here at St John’s.

Rather than rave on myself about how I think the service is going. I got a few people who attend to share some quotes on how it was unfolding for them.

Quotes from those attending

“God’s word illuminated through worship; reflection and a time of sharing.”

“In a new community, people have been so courageously honest and generous with sharing their stories in discussion. It feels to me that this openness has allowed God to fully hold us, challenge us and reveal more of himself through our deepening fellowship. As we feed each other you can almost feel God feeding

his church. It’s a very special thing that is happening.”

“At the heart of this service is a strong sense of community and fellowship. A key

part of this is the simple act of sharing a meal together. This ministry of hospitality, of serving and being served, unifies us in the body of Christ.”

“The service allows plenty of time for discussion and reflection. People feel comfortable to bring their questions and challenges, and to share their thoughts and reflections.”

“At the St John’s evening service we are able to learn, experience, share and worship amongst a group of friendly diverse people. A range of ages, ethnicities and cultures provides us with a wide perspective for thought and sets this church apart from any I’ve been to before.”

**Ryhan Prasad is coordinating the new evening service for St John’s in the City, Wellington. He has been accepted to train as a Presbyterian minister and is nearing the end of his theology degree, while also working part-time as a youth worker for the Boys’ and Girls’ Institute.*

Youth participation stinks?

Ross Davis*

A long time ago, in a city not so far away, a bunch of young people from the St John's Bible class got together and noticed their mates were smelly. True story. Sensing the Holy Spirit, they pulled together their pocket money, did a bit of fundraising, encouraged the community to get involved and eventually opened a makeshift bathing facility to improve the hygiene of their peers (Link, 2009). This is the fable that founded the Wellington Boys' (and later Girls') Institute, now known as BGI, in 1883. Ultimately, it is a story about young people identifying youth needs, creating a plan of action, and working with adults to create positive change for young people. It is a story of youth participation.

I moved to Wellington from Auckland seven years ago, leaving the successful business I had helped build to take up a new role with BGI. On my first day I was thrust into a secular youth work conference called Involve, where all the talk was the government's new Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa and this increasingly popular idea of "youth participation".

Because it was secular and government driven, I immediately had more than a few suspicions. I assumed it was some politically correct stuff based

on the premise that the youth already knew it all, and all we needed to do was ask a few questions and the knowledge would come spewing forth. I couldn't have been more wrong. Over the last seven years of working with young people, I have seen that youth participation is not just a good way of working with young people, but that it is God's way.

According to the Ministry of Youth Development, "youth participation means actively involving young people in all areas of our society – the family, school, workplace, place of worship, social group and wider community" (2003 p6). In her pioneering *Ladder of Participation*, Arnstein (1969 p126 cited in Baxter & Haxton, 2007) stated that "participation is the redistribution of power that enables those presently excluded from political and economic processes to be deliberately included". Sounds pretty Biblical to me. Youth workers "assist and manage the transfer of power from adults to youth in organisations" (Shen, 2006 p3 cited in Baxter & Haxton, 2007).

God the Father seems to be in this business of transferring power, setting the example by trusting his son. Setting the example by giving up his power and allowing us (his children by adoption) to make key decisions; even a decision to ignore him. There are suggestions that even secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven he has kept from the old and wise and revealed to the young.

St John himself seems to understand youth participation. In John 9 when the powerful Pharisees question the parents of the young man born blind, they tell the Pharisees to "ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself". Summoned before the Pharisees a second time the young man responds, "I have told you already and you did not listen". Then he mocks them about wanting to follow Jesus too and believing him steeped in sin, the Pharisees throw him out, and outside the temple he meets Jesus.

At least the Pharisees in the Bible story "asked him". Today we so often forget to do that. Even if we allow young

people to participate, we give them little or no power in the decision-making process. This failure of church leaders (and others in positions of power) to allow young people

to truly participate in the things we hold most precious has meant we have achieved what the Pharisees did by throwing the young man out. We are blinded to God's trust of young people with the really important things right through the Bible (eg the boy King David and the 14-year-old Mary). In our spiritual blindness, we have missed opportunities to be like God and share decision-making with young people.

Youth participation is about doing just that – sharing decision-making. For adult-led organisations, this means creating opportunities for young people to be involved in influencing decisions that affect their lives. True participation relies on clear, open and honest communication, and on really listening to what young people have to say (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2003). A youth participation process gives young people not a feeling of power, or the image of power, but authentic power. While this may seem huge, effective youth participation can take place at many different levels – from a large-scale project where young

people are completely in control, to a small consultation where their views are sought and they are informed of the outcomes. At its best, youth participation involves shared decision-making between young people and adults.

At BGI, this is what we aim for. We are committed to a holistic view of youth development that supports young people's physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being from a relational perspective. It is easy to lose a youth participation perspective, so we try to keep in mind those original young people. The organisation they founded was non-sectarian and had a strong sense of belonging for youth because, as the apostrophe in our name indicates, "the Boys" owned it.

BGI still has a reputation for developing and practicing innovative and effective youth participation. As an example, in 2001, 80 young people known as "the WYP crew" from Wellington and Hutt City were trained in action research methods. They were supported to use these skills to survey the needs of over 2000 of their peers. One finding was that only 17 percent of young people thought the wider community cared about them (Wellington Youth Project 2001). This passionate group of 80 change-makers used their survey results to create a student discount card, safer transport for young people, and a poster promoting youth support services. The WYP crew lobbied successfully for the development of Evolve Wellington Youth Service that provides free primary healthcare to young people, and they campaigned for the establishment of Spinks' Youth Café under a historic building on the very spot where the original youth had founded BGI 125 years earlier.

During the Spinks resource consent process, one young person, who described herself as an atheist said this:

Extending a hand to young people is not a gesture that goes unnoticed or unacknowledged. It is a gesture to an age group that is commonly treated as a minority void of individual substance. A gesture such as this is seen and heard and word is spread, and young people recognise the merit behind those who are willing to take the chance. Spinks, as a cottage, has enormous heritage value to everyone in Wellington, it's an icon. But it's this very value that makes the offer of Spinks as a youth café mean even more to the young people of the city. To us, the faith required to share something

held so close to the hearts of the St John's community and the city's own, is an incredible demonstration of confidence and belief in the next generation. Spinks will, in its new phase, combine young and old, join the past and present, connecting the two in a way that will be forever visible. (Alex Bayfield affidavit to the Environment Court 2008)

I was very encouraged when 80 percent of the St John's congregational meeting voted to support the WYP crew. This supportive message to the young people was blunted when a small group of members spent two years working and lobbying hard to help stop the café vision through the Environment Court. This small group seemed to the young people to care more about the old building. Like I had been, they seemed blind to the importance of youth participation. Therefore they missed an opportunity to

discuss their concerns with the young people. Imagine if the whole church had chosen to accept the wishes of the congregational meeting.

I can't help but think

about the chance our church lost to build lasting relationships with a group of young people who had little or no previous church connections, and indeed who were asking us, as a church, to join with them.

Instead, like the young man born blind man, the WYP crew found their chance of connecting with their spiritual and physical roots inside the religious site in tatters. One young person noted that the Environment Court would not allow them to raise Spinks Cottage 1.8 metres on the same site, yet had allowed dozens of historic buildings to be dramatically relocated for an inner city bypass. She mocked, "they value us less than a road!"

Now the group has evolved. In their current incarnation they are called Link, and the youth participation cycle continues. Their latest project involved temporary, recycled cardboard buildings in the basement of Civic Square. My hope is that, like the man born blind, they have already bumped into Jesus there. Unfortunately in our society, temporary cardboard buildings seem much more acceptable for young people than allowing them to impact on real buildings which may be "forever visible".

Despite the disappointing outcome for the youth café, many positive participation experiences came out of the process. The BGI Board provided a good example of how to uphold the participation kaupapa in the café process.

Rather than deciding for them whether to go to the Environment Court, the Board asked the young people. The young people's mature response weighed up the cost versus potential benefit, influencing the Board's decision to support them.

Since then, a young person from the Spinks Café project has been appointed to the BGI Board. However, it is secular organisations that are leading the way in supporting young people into positions of organisational power. For example, the governance board of the gay organisation Rainbow Youth is made up completely of young people, and young people are in positions of trust in numerous other high profile organisations and departments. The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC) has prioritised youth participation by contracting BGI to write a youth participation strategy for them. By contrast, how many churches have given people under 30 control over what priority we give to our spending? I hope one day we will, but presently, even in small things, we distance children and young people from things that concern them. I have seen them actively excluded from inputting ideas for the carving for a children's lectern, and we tend to display their artwork only temporarily.

Not surprisingly this lack of inclusion, leads to the lack of "a place of belonging" (physically and spiritually), and so young people listening to Christ's voice are increasingly doing so outside the traditional church. In my belief, this is a direct consequence of our unwillingness to listen to their voices and allow them true participation in church life. It seems to me that, for many in the church, the idea of sharing control with young people would be as absurd as the Pharisees allowing a young blind man to lead them to God.

Our sight, like that of the man born blind, is a gift from God. Let's open our eyes (and our ears!) to the ways we can better include young people in churches. In John 10:16, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Please allow the young people who do not belong the chance to share with us what Christ is saying to them. If we listen, maybe we will learn to share decision-making and they will sense the possibility of us all becoming one flock.

**Wellington Boys' and Girls' Institute Director and St John's in the City elder Ross Davis says that teen spirit smells of the Holy Spirit and there can be a lot of God in an apostrophe!*

This article was written with the significant assistance of young people and adults at the Wellington Boys' and Girls' Institute (BGI). BGI is a Christian organisation, but it is often the work of our staff who are not part of the church who have made BGI widely acknowledged as a leader in youth participation – thanks guys!

References and Recommended Reading

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The Uniting Church in Australia and New Zealand?

Once every couple of years, the six general secretaries of the Uniting Church in Australia and the two of us who fulfil similar roles in the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches here in New Zealand get together for three days.

It is a chance to talk about some of the challenges that our churches face, provide a bit of mutual support and to joke about the peculiarities of the Australian and New Zealand accents. We joke about theirs, they joke about ours (not to mention discussion about the sheer weirdness of Australian rules football – which I was told was developed to keep cricket players fit in the off season. Hmmm, now that does sound like the kind of story an Australian would tell a New Zealander).

The event was held an hour south of Adelaide. We took a visit to where the Murray River stops, a couple of kilometres short of the ocean, and enjoyed the bounty of the agricultural harvests from the region. They grow a lot of almonds around there. I got to Wellington airport 40 minutes before the flight left and it cost about as much as a full-fare journey to Dunedin.

The gathering has led me to think more about the similarities and differences between our Churches:

There has been a very long history of New Zealand and Australian ministers serving in one another's churches. All the churches involved value the length and depth and warmth of these relationships. In terms of moving between the denominations, the Uniting Church in Australia and our Church share unique formal and informal relationships. Churches on both sides of the Tasman are very supportive of these associations.

The UCA is a very large organisation. Many church schools and welfare services are still, at least in part, integrated in the whole Uniting Church structure. It would be like our Church, the Presbyterian schools and Presbyterian Support all being part of a singular entity.

The six synods, which pretty much reflect the Australian states, are to some degree Churches within a Church.

They each are somewhat independent and have their own unique character, training programmes, strategies, structures and property trustees.

New Zealand is entirely part of the Pacific. However, Australia and the UCA have multiple geographic orientations and neighbours. The relationship with their close Asian neighbours is a particular priority. As you move further west in Australia, the identification with the Pacific diminishes. The church on the Australian west coast has India as a close neighbour and focus.

While there is a significant commitment to Aboriginal communities, the understanding of biculturalism, the Tangata Whenua and the Treaty do not exist in the UCA in any way that would be familiar to most New Zealand church leaders.

The UCA is a new denomination. It does not have a history or a historical memory in the same way that the Presbyterian Church has. It is not a Reformed church in the way that we might talk about that. Generations are being born who only know what it is to identify with a Church that has no mention in any history book written before 1980. Most currently serving ministers have never been part of a Congregational, Methodist or Presbyterian Church and yet the UCA has international alliances associated with each tradition.

At some stage, and I am sure this has been thought about before, we could consider becoming part of a Uniting Church in Australia and New Zealand. We could become a synod of this new Church with

our own unique identity and ethos. Would such a commitment testify to our seriousness in finding a unity in Christ? Would it help enhance our commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel?

Clearly there would be benefits and challenges in pursuing such a course. But I do think that sooner, or later, it is worth a discussion. Just as long as we don't have to commit to learning Australian rules.

Let me know what you think. And thanks for your support. Mate.

