

Youth Work After Christendom

In this extract from their new book, Jo and Nigel Pimlott take a close look at where youth work has come from and where it might be going in the future

There are a whole host of things in life that I have never really understood: Why do people spend hours doing sudoku? What is the attraction in eating sushi (it's raw fish)? Why is it that no one ever talks to anyone else on the London underground? Does the number 2 window at a McDonalds drive-through have any purpose? How did we spend our time before the invention of google, myspace and facebook? Many questions which no doubt all have answers, but sometimes it can be hard to find the answers to some questions. Life, faith and our work with young people all pose interesting challenges and questions. We live in interesting times.

Christian youth work itself is in an interesting place. A glance through the job adverts in Christian magazines portrays a vibrant industry, with a wide variety of job opportunities on offer, ranging from work in traditional churches and youth clubs to specialist projects, outward bound centres, detached settings, mentoring projects and arts based initiatives. Growing numbers of Christian youth workers are accessing professional training and an army of volunteer workers serves young people and the church on a regular basis, providing a breadth of provision for both Christian young people and those who do not have a Christian faith.

Some churches have many young people attending, yet many others have seen no young people through the doors for several years. Christian youth festivals continue to thrive, whilst regular church attendance appears at an all time low. There are many resources and initiatives to help both youth workers and young people maximise their faith potential and yet the vast majority of young people have little or no contact with a local Christian church.

This is set against a backdrop of a major change in church and Christian history; that of moving from the era of Christendom to the dawning of the post-Christendom age. This change is exciting, stimulating and full of opportunities whilst at the same time it is potentially daunting, threatening and full of challenge.

Walter Brueggemann has done extensive studies of the psalms.¹ He has helpfully suggested that psalms fall into three overarching categories; speaking of 'orientation', 'disorientation' and 'reorientation'. We would argue that spiritually we are in a time of disorientation. No one is quite sure how things will spiritually pan out. Will we have a vibrant and growing UK church or will the demise continue with resources becoming more scarce and church closures increasing?

Gone are the days when all young people knew the Christian story. Christian young people find themselves in a minority amongst their peer group and often end up on the margins. Evidence of interest in spirituality amongst young people is at best unclear and at worst not very encouraging. Youthful mega-churches pervade some highly populated urban environments, but vast areas of the country have little or no Christian witness and no communities in which young people can share and express their Christian faith in anything like a culturally appropriate environment. Christianity is now just one faith option which young people can give consideration to when making life choices.

All these factors encouraged us to set about exploring how we might undertake Christian youth work and ministry in the coming age. By asking young people what they think, talking with others and examining the evidence we have tried to explore how we will do youth work after Christendom?

Where have we come from?

In its earliest days the Christian church was very much a marginal movement. The book of Acts gives glimpses of a grass-roots community, which engaged passionately in mission and experienced significant persecution as believers refused to bow to the demands of the Roman authorities. It is important not to idealise this early movement as there were inevitable struggles, but the pre-Christendom church was largely insignificant in terms of its political influence and respectability.

In 312 the Roman Emperor Constantine identified himself explicitly with Christianity and this, in many ways, proved to be a turning point for the Christian church. In 313, Constantine and his co-Emperor, Licinius, announced the toleration of Christianity in the Edict of Milan and during the century that followed, the Christian faith gradually moved from being a persecuted minority to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even before Constantine, the church had experienced rapid growth, begun to gain in respectability and become more institutional, with buildings becoming central to worship and leadership becoming more hierarchical. This subsequent political favour meant that these changes became even more institutionalised and gradually church allegiance became essential to success in society. From being a faith of the heart, Christianity became a faith of necessity, to ensure success and survival under an oppressive regime. Christendom was born.

Over subsequent centuries the influence of Christendom ebbed and flowed as it impacted both the church and wider society significantly. In more recent times this influence has begun to diminish. This decline and cultural shift has been termed the 'post-Christendom era'.

Stuart Murray helpfully defines post-Christendom as: 'the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence'.²

These changes are illustrated by the following transitions, which are taking place as we move from a Christendom paradigm to an increasingly post-Christendom paradigm:

Movement of the influence of Christianity from the centre of life and society to the margins. From a majority, Christians are becoming a minority group, force and influence in the Western world.

In Christendom, Christians felt that the world was our home. Our worldview had shaped culture and dictated how things were done. We were settled. In post-Christendom, Christians are sojourners who are aliens, exiles and pilgrims who exist in a culture that no longer feels like home.

In Christendom, Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many others in a pluralistic culture.

The Christendom church used to be able to exert control over society. Influence only occurs now through witnessing (conversing) about our story and implications.

Movement from a perspective of maintaining what we have and the (supposed) Christian status quo to an emphasis on mission in a contested environment.

Developing churches that in Christendom were in institutional mode to those that once again become a Christian movement.³

The Christendom era has greatly influenced our mindset about how we work with young people. The pioneers of the late nineteenth century who started modern youth work began a great movement. In so doing they not only took the needs of young people seriously, they also rooted their work in the cultural influences of Christendom.

Such influences have established how we view Sundays, perceive ministers, develop youth work programmes and encouraged us not to rock the boat in our work with young people! They have

established some good examples of work with young people whilst at the same time have left us with some potentially unhelpful approaches to discipleship which have little to do with mission and more to do with pandering to consumeristic imperatives and exerting social control over young people.

Some aspects of the human condition are undoubtedly timeless. Hence, some issues relating to young people have been consistent throughout history. These would include issues such as young people pushing boundaries, handling family, peer and intimate relationships, wrestling with parental demands and experiencing hormonal changes. Equally, there seem to be some particular issues which have risen to the fore in this postmodern and post-Christendom era and which appear to have added significance at this time. How society views young people in the UK and how the wider church responds to such views been paramount. It is into this mix of cultural influences, challenges, opportunities and tensions that the youth worker is often thrown.

Where are we now?

Several development theories have highlighted adolescence as a time of questioning and exploring. In his work on socio-emotional development, Erik Erikson identifies the years from 12 to 15 as those when young people are seeking to resolve issues around their own identity, a process which will inevitably involve much questioning, some element of crisis and the reconciliation of diverse roles.⁴ James Fowler, in his work on faith development, highlights the challenges which young people can experience as they seek to move from a conforming faith to one which is first-hand and not chosen and owned by others.⁵

The questions, doubts and tensions which emerge for young people during this time are exacerbated by both the experience-driven nature of the broader culture and the apparent dogmatism of much of the church. Contemporary culture, on the surface at least appears to run by the mantra 'If it feels right, it must be right'. Sometimes, because of this prevailing culture, churches feel the need to be even stronger on absolutes and in contrast, can appear to young people to be stuck in a time-warp when it comes to the issues of everyday life having little to say that helpfully informs the challenges they face. We know a number of young people who have hit seasons of doubt and questioning and have found no relational spaces within church, where they could explore these effectively.

It is important to acknowledge that virtually every youth work context is unique. Every church, group, community or team will need to consider their own situation in terms of the culture of the young people they are engaging with, their interests, needs and aspirations. It is also worth remembering that culture is not static. Today, more than ever, the pace of change is significant and the cultural environment in which we work will be ever-changing and will demand awareness and adaptation. Ridderstraile and Nordstrom comment on the uncertainties associated with the time in which we live.

.... we see a gigantic spiritual vacuum. It is a mist sweeping over the world filling us with doubts and hesitation. We are no longer pilgrims with a clear mission living in a well-structured environment. Instead we have become wandering vagabonds in search of?⁶

The sentence is left incomplete, such is the writer's hesitation about what we are actually seeking.

Some will throw themselves into working in this new cultural context whilst, sadly, others will continue to operate as they always have preferring a slow and lingering demise rather than risk what they have now for the possibility of a glorious, Spirit-led, missional future.

Where will we end up?

It is not possible in this short extract and exploration of the subject matter to fully explore all the

cultural drivers at work in the lives of young people today. It is certainly not possible to examine in detail how we might do mission and church in the coming age. The book considers these topics in some detail and seeks to offer some invaluable insights. It considers the impact of summer festivals, schools work and approaches to mission which focus on young people as a homogenous group and how we might do participative, empowering and earthed church with young people in the future.

Our travels have led us to conclude that we need to carefully reconsider how we use the resources and buildings we have so that work with young people can develop. How we enhance social capital and effectively use technology will be pivotal in ensuring the continuation of youth work after-Christendom.

Jonny Baker of the Church Missionary Society says ‘the book doesn’t duck any issues and is a wake up call for the church and youth ministry which I hope we have ears to hear and the courage to flesh out’. That is our hope too.

If this is to happen then perhaps our approach to work with young people needs to change. Part of the Christendom legacy has been a meeting-oriented culture, offering programmes, events, plans and courses until they come out of our ears. At the same time as resources for these have flooded the market, the decline in young people finding faith appears to have been greatest. Perhaps we have been doing something fundamentally wrong. This is a humbling possibility for those of us who have been involved in writing, developing and using some of these resources.

At the end of our journey of exploration we have confirmed our suspicions that many challenges lie ahead. We have also unearthed stories of great hope and situations of great opportunity. Young people are not faceless groups in hoods, but individuals created in the image of God who have needs, hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations and purpose. They need to be valued as individuals not as anonymous souls within a marginalized group.

We dream of a church which empowers rather than disempowers, which allows young people to share their views, which really listens to them and gives them a voice. We dream of leadership which is participative and collaborative. We dream of a church which supports absurd causes, fights unwinnable battles, prays impossible prayers. A church which resonates with the laughter of the Jesus we see in the gospels – the Jesus who swings children above his head, tickles them and plays games with them during the sermon. The Jesus who upsets the religious, surprises the respectable, welcomes the sinner and sinned-against.

We still have many questions. Might it be the case that in some situations we may need to enable some churches to have a ‘good death’ so that something new can emerge? Can the existing church really engage with young people in this post-Christendom era? Can she lay aside her preoccupations and rediscover her first love? And can she begin to dance with this generation of young people instead of sitting frustrated in an empty pew, waiting for them to come through the doors?

We might never be able to understand the preferences we have about how we live. Some will like sudoku and sushi whilst others won’t. The brave may strike up a conversation on the underground and the insightful may understand the design of a McDonald’s restaurant. Answering these questions may not determine the future of the world, but we do need to address the questions posed by Youth Work After Christendom – for all our sakes. ☐

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 2001).

² Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004).

³ Ibid. 20.

⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963, 2nd Edition)

⁵ National Society/Church House, *How Faith Grows: Faith Development and Christian Education* (London: National Society/Church House, 1991).

⁶ Kjell Nordstrom and Jonas Ridderstrale, *Funky Business* (Stockholm: Bookhouse Publishing, 2002), 88.