



Christian Youth Work

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Updated by Jonathan Carswell



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First published by Kingsway Publications 1986
Revised edition 1995

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This edition first published 2007 by Authentic Media
9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks, MK1 1QR, UK
285 Lynnwood Avenue, Tyrone, GA 30290, USA
OM Authentic Media
Medchal Road, Jeedimetla Village, Secunderabad 500 055, A.P., India
www.authenticmedia.co.uk

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Court Road, London, W1P 9HE

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 978-1-85078-730-3

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The authors of *Christian Youth Work* are no longer able to document some of
the quotations in this book. If they are ever able to locate this information they
will include it in any subsequent editions.

Cover Design by David McNeill
Print Management by Adare Carwin
Printed and bound by J.H. Haynes & Co., Sparkford





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Introduction

In 1981 Mark Ashton started work with CYFA, to help the work of the local church with older teenagers. One glance told him that this was an area of frightening weakness. In so many churches the older teenagers were the scarcest members of the congregation. He could see a few encouraging signs of life, but the overwhelming impression was that Christians had not thought out their approach to teenagers.

Over two decades later, we are not doing much better. At best, we are perhaps now just more aware of our weaknesses in this area. We see and hear that teenagers are flooding out of the church, and many are familiar with the by now infamous statistic that 'over 1,000 young people are leaving the church each week'.

Why is this happening?

Some youth workers major on finding sociological answers, and therefore seek to understand and relate to youth culture. Others search for psychological solutions, and take as their starting point an examination of what makes young people tick. Others seek ecclesiastical solutions, and argue for a revolution in our churches



in order to keep hold of the young people we do have and to bring in more teenagers.

All these approaches have much to teach us about young people, and we need to learn from them if we are to have an effective youth ministry. But these cannot be our starting point.

Christians have subconsciously assumed that the Bible has little to teach us about young people growing up in the twenty-first century. The weakness of Christian youth work today is a result. Christian youth work must be different from all other forms of youth work. It must be distinct in its aim, because Christians have a unique view of what it is to be a human being. And Christian youth work must be distinct in its methods, because God has provided us with guidelines for understanding adolescence in our own particular culture, and has not left us at the mercy of contemporary fashions in the social sciences.

This book is not a systematic theology of youth, written by academic theologians. Neither is it a practical handbook of church youth work. But it is concerned with theory and it is concerned with theology. It is written out of a great desire to give Christians a renewed vision for young people, a new confidence in what they can do for them, how they can do it, and why they should do it. But our theory and our theology should affect our practice, and so at the end of each chapter there is a response section which suggests how to think through the content of the chapter in order to put it into practice. Some of the ideas are for the individual, some can be worked through by a team of leaders.

We have tried not to tell the stories of our friends. There have been a number of good books telling stories of youth work. The approach here is theoretical rather than anecdotal. Obviously, we refer in passing to our



own experiences with young people, but we do not think that what we have done should, in itself, be accorded any authority. The most important test is not that the ideas in this book work in practice (which they do), but that they come from, and are true to, the Bible. This book follows one practice which you may find irritating. When writing about youth leaders and young people, we have deliberately switched genders regularly. It seems a good way of avoiding giving the impression that youth ministry is reserved for one sex or the other. It may be disconcerting, but it makes an important point.

The years from thirteen to twenty do not have a special value above that of other ages, but they are significant for the personal development of the individual. In young people we see a microcosm of society and, very often, a thermometer of the health of the nation and the church. Much of what follows applies to adults as well as to teenagers, because the spiritual principles are the same – but their application varies depending on the age of the people we are working with. It is not the task of this book to make that application, but we are well aware how wide the discussion could become at some points.

This is not a book for young people. It is a book for adults concerned about young people and the church. The church is the body of Christ. Whether we like the idea or not, the church (in all its forms and failures) is where Jesus is in the world today. He has a heart for the young. So must we, if we would be faithful to him, and if we would fulfil his commission to the young people of our day.



1. Gray's Anatomy, Michelin Guide or Instruction Book?

The biblical basis for youth work

Youth decay

The bishop listened intently to the church's steel band. Clearly, the racial mix of teenagers playing their animated West Indian rhythms had captured his interest.

'Do they come to church at all?' he asked.

'Oh yes, and we have a Bible study meeting each week as well,' the youth leader replied.

'You mean these young people actually read the Bible?' The episcopal eyebrows were raised in astonishment.

The Christian church is not doing well with teenagers. There is quite a bit of work with children, but after thirteen, most local churches of whatever denomination (or none) find it hard going. 'Youth decay' is now setting in earlier than ever before. We used to be able to keep them until they were fourteen. Now, if they make it to fourteen we reckon we've done well, and we've then got a reasonable chance of keeping them through their teenage years.

These feelings are supported by Peter Brierley's statistics. Previously, it was clear that many teenagers

are leaving the church: '13 per cent of English teenagers attended church in 1979, only 9 per cent were doing so in 1989. In 1979, 960,000 young people aged 10–19 attended church. In 1989, this age band of young people were 10 years older, and in the 20–29 age band only 490,000 attended church, a forty-nine per cent drop in church attendance.'¹ In the last decade this problem has intensified. Despite a population increase the attendance of young people at UK churches has continued to drop. And there appears to be no arrest in the decline. The projected figures for the coming years predict that by 2016 the number of those under fifteen attending church will be as low as 225,000.²

Youth decay sets in. For every church fellowship that has a flourishing group of teenagers in its membership, there are three with no children's or youth work at all.³

So is the whole teenage subculture becoming a no-go area for the Christian faith?

There has been no shortage of thought and energy expended in the attempt to reach young people with the gospel. Youth culture has been analysed and infiltrated by Christians. Pete Ward, formerly of Oxford Youth Works, wrote: 'As a Christian youthworker I live in two worlds. The first world is created by young people themselves. This is the continually changing bright and alive world of youth culture . . . The other world that I live in is similar; it's the world of the Gospel.'⁴

Much has been written about youth culture, and some of us reckon we are beginning to understand it. In the world of music, arts festivals, road shows, magazines, sport and the media, excellent work has been done. We know how to relate to teenagers. We know what they like and what they don't like. We know how to amuse