

Writing on the wall

CHURCH TIMES - 12th January 2018

Notes from a leading article and four pages concerning the lack of young people in the pews
'The reason...is clear – but is the Church listening' ?

1. Focus on the family - Ali Campbell: *youth and children's ministry consultant*

Average attendance by children fell by 22% between 2006 and 2016 *Statistics for Mission* 'These statistics are more than sobering: they are devastating' Revd Dr John Walker - we are in the 'Last Chance Saloon' *Resourcing Mission*

54 studies examined in 2016 reinforced that foundations for faith are laid in early childhood and the responsibility of the family is central to faith transmission. 'The problem is not adults leaving the Church: it is that half the children of church-going parents do not attend when they reach adulthood' Prof. David Voas *Church Growth Programme 2014* People who consider themselves Anglican seemed unconcerned about passing faith on to the next generation.

There needs to be a paradigm shift in the Church's thinking and our practice. There are numerous organisations offering the tools, *Care for the Family – Faith in the Family*, *Bible Reading Fellowship – Messy Church*, *Parenting for faith*, *Children Matter – Faithful Generation* There should be a lead bishop for faith transmission, and the Archbishops should encourage a national conversation that leads to practical action and engagement.

2. A lost generation – Professor David Voas: *Department of Social Science UCL*

'In 2005 I wrote an article suggesting that institutional religion in Britain had a half-life of one generation – people are only half as likely as their parents to attend church, say they have a religion or assert that belief is important to them...This position continues...The Church of England has fared particularly poorly'

The Diocese of London is often held up as an outstanding success story ... yet fewer than 2000 aged 11-18 appear in church there of 310,000 in that age group.

Anglicans seem surprisingly reluctant to make inculcation of religion a priority in child-rearing - *European Values Study* and *Theos* – Nov 2016. 'It is easier to minister to the older generation that attends ... but failing to retain young people is a recipe for slow death'

3. Sunday Schools - Dr Naomi Thompson : *Goldsmiths, University of London*

Historically, a radical movement, opposed by many Christians, to provide basic education: educating young people was seen as a threat! As day schools appeared (Remember it was also Churches who pioneered these) Sunday Schools focussed on religious education. In early 20th C three quarters of school age children were on Sunday school registers. Nevertheless, by late 19th C and early 20thC moral character and physical discipline became the youth focus, and YMCA, Boys and Girls Brigades, and Church Lads and Church Girls' Brigades emerged.

Rapid decline took place in mid 20th C – Sunday school was primarily used by churchgoing families. Church services began to have young people attend the first part of the service before heading to Sunday School. The move away from tapping into the youth needs of the wider community proved fatal in a time of shifting relationships with Christianity and churches.

'A narrow church agenda trumped the needs of those whom Sunday Schools were established to serve. Sadly we see this in youth work today. Success is measured purely by 'bums on seats' – the only priority is 'filling the church' . 'They don't think twice about meeting the needs of the young people ' – *a Church youth worker*

What can we learn from the success and decline of Sunday Schools? How is 'success' in youth work framed and understood by churches? What are the social currencies to be tapped into by churches today?

4. Caring, Curious, and seeking Connection : meet Generation Z – Dr Nick Shepherd : Youth worker and Researcher

‘Young people are open to asking spiritual questions and a majority believe in prayer. A substantive number have more liberal values than their parents on marriage, same sex relationships and recreational alcohol and drugs. Actual behaviour is likely to be more conservative than previous generations. Within this contradictory picture, one statistic remains fairly constant: disaffiliation from church continues apace, producing generational decline.’

Influence and importance of friends, family and popular culture forms a ‘midi-narrative’ – even those who identify with an historic faith prefer to think of themselves as ‘flexible adherents’, open to and accepting the varied views of others. Their beliefs and practices are more complex than any survey snapshot can convey.

What does this tell us about our own blindspots?

Most young people are now from families that have either never had familial ties with the church’ or have a tie through their grandparents. Young people acquire their spiritual values in a post-Christian... and post-secular culture. Religion has not disappeared, as once predicted; belief in things that are sacred in life remains. Young people outside the church are trying to make sense of their lives in this context. They are interested, sometimes intrigued by Christianity but lack religious literacy, having patchy or misinterpreted ideas. Music, art, film, and social media are where young people find meaning. Continuous conversation and personal experience invoke genuine response.

What is sacred will often be more material and immanent than eternal or transcendent – ‘organic and multidimensional’ – Prof Abby Day, ‘things that generate ‘belonging’ and ‘identity’. Key values and worldviews are set within close ties of family and friends. This highlights the main problem we have in the church – we lack the capacity to make such connections and form and foster such communities. Re-establishing these relationships with young people is vital if we are to understand and not ‘problematise’ young people. Connection matters.

5. In need of a heart transplant – Phoebe Hill : Head of research at ‘Youthscape’ LOSING HEART project

Losing Heart report covered 2054 churches, large and small, revealing some have lost confidence in what works well with young people today. Many felt desperation, out of ideas and lacking resources. Yet, the Church remains one of the biggest voluntary youth service providers, with quiet and faithful service by many in their community.

What does effective youth work look like? – given that so many churches do not believe it to be so. If we are expecting ‘cool’ youth workers to put on astonishing technicolour worship services, we may be disappointed. Effective youth work often looks small, - fewer than ten, and humble; yet these acts of sharing, loving and simply being with young people have proved effective in many young people’s lives and journey of faith.

Second question: Who does youth work? Many respond, ‘a youth worker’. And the truth is there may well be no-one else. BUT – the future of church cannot depend on your being able to employ someone else. Youth ministry training colleges are closing down, and candidates declining. We need to make the most of what we have got, and ask ourselves ‘Could I do youth work?’

The third question: Do we believe in God’s power to sustain his church? Must we begin from a place of anxiety, fearful the future? The future church might need to look and feel different – we need to develop a theology of hope. What does / will this mean – Kingdom aims, not anxiety . It’s God’s job to sustain his church and our job to be in faithful partnership with him. Are we in need of a heart transplant?

1. Why I left church in my teens :

5 testimonies – 2 of the five returned. Alpha and marriage/ parenthood are cited as significant.

2. It's time to start listening – Becca Dean *Youth minister and Durham PhD student*

'What is the theological understanding of young people in the church today? It seems to be 'adults do' and young people are 'done to', ie. expected to conform and assimilate – this attitude is haemorrhaging our churches' a fresh insight and change is vital (Ave age of current church members is 61)

'Ministers, leaders and adults see numerical progress, wealth and influence as signs of God's blessing – children and young people inevitably disrupt this theology – their influence and frustration are gifts! Ask... and listen!! We need to create a new dialogue and new relational skills with them – beyond pew filling'

3. Schools – It's not about seats on Sundays – Nigel Bender : *C of E Chief Education Officer*

4. What I wish the Church knew about young people – Hannah Barr

First: The **whole** church needs to be involved in young people's discipleship

Second: Authenticity – young people sniff out fakes!

Third: Loving and **liking** children and young people. We need to know needs through loving reciprocal friendships. N.B. Government concern with growing mental health issues among young people - grumpy, difficult and despairing – will you love and like them? – genuinely? – it's called grace!

Lots to think and pray about here ! – Barry Roche 18 Jan 2018