

Introduction

The story of this book is really the story of my own ministry with young people. In 1980 I was employed by St. Michael's Church, an Anglican church in Macclesfield, England. My job title was lay missionary and I was employed to work as an itinerant musician. This meant that I travelled around the country doing concerts and taking part in missions. Schools seemed to be the place for the aspiring Christian singer-songwriter at that time and I would often find myself alongside a Scripture Union worker presenting lessons and assemblies for unsuspecting pupils.

Three years of this work had left me with two convictions. The first was that I wanted to stop travelling around. The second was that there must be a better way of reaching out to young people than short-term missions. I solved the first problem by taking a job with St. Clement's Church in Oxford. Here my role was to run the church-based youth group and to play an active part in the life of the congregation (being active seemed to involve quite a lot of chair moving as far as I could see). My first idea in my new job was that I would try to take what I had learned from travelling around the country and apply it in my local situation. So along with other church youthworkers I set about running a school-based outreach in the Oxford area. The plan was that in each church there would

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be an evangelistic coffeehouse and these would be publicized through assemblies at lunch time events at the local school nearest to each of our churches. In this way we planned to run two or three coffeehouses in different parts of the city.

The plan was excellent and worked very well in the churches where there was a good-sized lively youth group. In the church I attended, however, we had only a very small group. This meant that we did not have the wide network of friendships between young people that was the basis for success in the other churches in town. Looking back, I am sure that a more experienced youthworker would have taken a lot more time to build up the existing group in the church, making sure that they were confident in themselves and their faith before setting out on a mission. My going the coffeehouse/school publicity route was a mistake, but I have to say that the experience of going to the local school during that mission changed my life.

I should explain that the person who has had the most influence over my work among young people is an American: Arnie Jacobs. I met Arnie for the first time when I started my job at St. Clement's. On my first day in the parish I found that Arnie had been booked to speak at the fellowship meeting. Of course, I had been around a bit, and I felt I knew it all and there was no way that an American, least of all one in his sixties, was ever going to teach me anything. As I listened, Arnie talked about the way that Jesus changed people's lives through relationships. He spoke about the need young people had for friendship with adults and how this could lead them to faith.

From my experience I knew that what Arnie was saying was true. I had seen young people changed while I had been visiting schools around the country. The problem was, I could recall occasions where my heart had ached as we drove away in the van and I could see no way that these young people would ever connect up with a local church. I had moved to Oxford precisely for this reason. Hit and run evangelism had left me searching for a better way.

Arnie worked for a US organization called Young Life, and he was generous enough to invite me to come and stay with him in Colorado Springs and find out more about what he called "incarnational evangelism." I was due to travel to Colorado the month after I finished my work in the schools, and I went knowing that I had given it my best shot in Oxford and it

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hadn't worked. Arnie took me to his local high school where I watched as he was greeted by groups of young people as we walked down the corridor. I was impressed with the warmth of relationship that he obviously had developed with them, and with their obvious delight in seeing him again. All this I found very challenging, but I wrote it off as an American thing. What did change my mind was the experience of meeting a small rock band at the school. They invited me back that evening to one of their rehearsals. Their openness was amazing, and as I confidently told Arnie that this sort of thing wouldn't happen in England, a group of boys at my local school came into my mind.

During my work in the schools near St. Clement's, at one of the lunch time concerts I had been surrounded by guys who wanted to talk with me. At the time I had found comments like, "My brother's got a guitar," and "I've got an amp," slightly amusing. In the light of my experience with Arnie I realized that these comments were an attempt on the part of these guys to build a relationship with me. They wanted friendship. Unfortunately I was so intent on my own agenda that I had missed what was an open invitation to get relational.

I came back from Colorado with several pairs of Levi's and a resolve to return to the school and try and meet these young people. I went to see the music teacher and arranged to offer informal guitar lessons at lunch times. Then I did another assembly and asked anyone who was in a band to meet me in the auditorium at break time. It was a success: I had a group of boys waiting to see me. Within a week or so I was meeting four or five groups of young people who were in bands, and there were about twenty beginners happily strumming away in the music room every Thursday lunch time. My ten years of relational youthwork at Oxford School had started. This work forms the backdrop to Chapter 3 of this book, where I explain relational youthwork as a theoretical model. Each stage in my journey is reflected in this chapter. The theory of relational outreach I present was generated by the questions raised by trying—not always with success—to find a way forward for the work with these young people.

In my first flush of enthusiasm I have to admit that I was much too critical of the fellowship group method of youthwork. I was convinced that the relational style of work was the only answer to the immense task of reaching out to the wide diversity

of young people in British society. I realize now that my critical stance to what was the majority of church-based work was very unfair and somewhat misguided. In my defense I would say that I was filled with the enthusiasm of what I had found out. It has been my job with the Archbishop that has given me a much broader insight into the reality of youthwork on the street. Once again I am able to travel around the country, and my eyes have been opened. I have met so many church-based youth ministers who have seen remarkable success in their work that I have been forced to revise my opinions.

The result of this rethink is presented in Chapter 1, where I spell out what I call the two disciplines of youth ministry. I now understand the importance of both the relational and the fellowship group approaches to work with young people. In a way the seeds of this perspective were there in the first mission in the schools in Oxford, where the coffeehouses in the other churches were self-evidently successful. Further travels in the United States and contact with Young Life, however, has convinced me of the importance of relational “contact work” as an addition to the fellowship group style of ministry. How this could work is also spelled out in detail at the end of Chapter 1.

My journey of discovery in youth ministry has not been a solo effort. I have been extremely fortunate in working alongside a number of very skilled and insightful colleagues. The insights into relational youthwork presented in this book are very much a team effort. In 1988 Kenny Wilson from Scripture Union, Bob Dupee from Young Life in Canada, Tina Freimuth from Young Life U.S.A., and I started Oxford Youth Works. Oxford Youth Works was a course designed to train people in relational outreach. Over the years staff have come and gone, but each has contributed to our collective wisdom. I owe a good deal to these people; they are Jude Levermore, Sam Richards, Nick Allen, Anna Chakka George, Hannah Barnes, Lyn Wyatt, and Darren James.

As plans for the new training course were coming together, I felt the need to return to theological study. I spent two years travelling to Birmingham University where I did an M.A. in Religion and Culture. The course introduced me to two areas of thinking which have together enriched my understanding of youth ministry. The first is the sociology of youth

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subcultures. At Birmingham I became aware of the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. As a youthworker I was familiar with the richness of the cultural world of young people. Suddenly here was whole body of literature which was an aid to unlocking this world and developing ideas concerning the meaning of the way young people chose to act, dress, make music, etc. The subsequent result of my investigations into questions concerning youth culture and popular culture are presented in Chapter 4 of this book. The second area of thinking was the whole field of mission studies. While I was doing my M.A., I began to realize that the insights and approaches which were developing in countries around the world could be of considerable help in my own work with young people. While missionaries had started to develop theology in the culture and context of people in Africa, the Pacific Islands, Asia, and Latin America, it was clear to me that youth culture might be a context for similar exploration. Combining the insights from the study of youth cultures with the theological methods which were now commonplace in missiology might lead to a contextualized theology of young people. My current understanding of contextualization is presented in Chapter 5, and in Chapter 6 I develop these ideas in two short case studies to show how different styles of youth ministry might emerge from this kind of theological approach.

A contextualized theology of young people inevitably brings about changes in the church. My own journey in respect to the relationship between young people and the church has been affected by two very different experiences. The first came when I walked into the Big Top at Greenbelt, a Christian arts festival, and encountered the embryonic Nine O'Clock Service. The Nine O'Clock Service was the pioneer alternative worship service in England, using visuals and dance music. I stayed for only about ten minutes, but what I saw was enough of an inspiration to make me realize that contextualization of youth culture needed to be carried into the worship of the church. In Oxford I decided to work with the young people I knew to create a service which was based on their cultural expression. The result was a service we called JOY. Being creative in worship was a real challenge, and my reflections on this experience form the background to the second half of Chapter 7 on sacraments and creativity.

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The second experience has come through my links with the Charismatic youth festival, Soul Survivor, where I have been very happy to form part of the team during the last three years. At Soul Survivor I have been exposed to the growing move toward the development of “Youth churches.” I have had cause to revise my opinions once again, and these are the thoughts I present at the start of Chapter 7. Youth ministry is a growth area in the life of the church. The current scene is characterized by considerable innovation and experimentation. Amid all of this activity there is a need for some of us to take a few steps back from time to time and reflect on the way we are working with young people. This book represents my own thinking over the last few years. We all stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. I hope that others will read this and find it to be a helpful “leg up” in seeking to present Christ afresh in each generation.

Questions to Ponder and Discuss

1. What sorts of gifts or talents, such as being able to play the guitar, can be helpful in making contacts and building relationships? What sorts of gifts do you have that could be used in this way?
2. Do youthworkers need professional development? How have you received training?
3. “Greenbelt” is something like “Creation” in the US. What can be the impact on a youthworker and her dozen uncommitted kids when they see thousands of highly-charged young people worshipping God for all they’re worth? How can such worship become an evangelistic tool as well an expression of a young person’s spirituality? Do you think people can come to Christ through worship?