

Frontier Youth Trust and Worth Unlimited have been talking to youth workers about ...

The Future of Christian youth work



We have drawn together the thoughts of many youth workers we have talked to and are calling for some clear, achievable and defining actions to help ensure that Christian youth work takes its place at the heart of effectively serving young people in the UK.

We are asking that the following commitments be made:

- 1) That 2009 be a year when young people are invested in, celebrated and empowered in churches, Christian organisations and the wider community.**
- 2) That churches and Christian organisations commit to spending at least 25% of their income on working with young people - especially marginalized young people.**
- 3) That Government commit to long-term funding of Christian faith-based youth work.**

We are calling for these actions in response to the issues raised in our consultations with youth workers.

Please join with us in seeking to bring about these changes by campaigning for positive change.

Suggestions about how to do this are included on the following pages with more ideas at: www.fyt.org.uk

The consultation findings are set out overleaf and are divided into a number of subject areas that youth workers have told us are the key areas of both challenge and opportunity.

Young people

The future is a continuing fast-changing environment full of complexity, possibilities, anxiety and confusion. The impact of technology and its continued evolution will create new ways of young people relating (or not relating) to other young people, adults and wider society.

Key Questions:

- How will young people nurture & develop relationships in an increasingly virtual world?
- How will young people react to issues facing them regarding marginalization and issues of immigration?
- Will the gap between generations become less defined or will it increase?

Discoveries

- The technological & virtual worlds young people inhabit will increasingly shape them
- Young people's social engagement is increasingly within virtual worlds
- The media is shaping both social attitudes towards young people and how young people feel about themselves in society
- In some ways the future will be difficult and complex for young people

Pointers and Stimulus

An increasingly complex society with competing pressures and influences on young people's sense of identity, value and decision making might be seen as problematic but also one in which good youth work, based on positive values of humanness, could play an increasingly important role in young people's lives.

Invite the young people you work with to write a 'good news' story about themselves and send it to your local newspaper.

Ethics

Ethics was felt to be a neglected area of teaching and consideration in the church but it has huge implications for how and why churches do youth work. For youth workers the issue of ethics and how we relate to external stakeholders is seen as a bit of a minefield and we need to have some route-maps to be able to explore the terrain more fully.

Key Questions:

- Will youth work ethics be consistent with church ethics?
- Will a more polarised division evolve between individual, and 'privatized' discipleship and morality and wider global issues such as global warming and social justice?
- Where will be the common ground between universal (for everyone) and contextual (local and specific) ethics? Will church hold closer to one view, youth work to another?

Discoveries

- We need to develop an ethical stance on how we do evangelism
- We have few articulated ethics. They all seem to be underlying
- Employers, workers and volunteers all need to be aware of their own value bases

Pointers and Stimulus

The future contains many ethical dilemmas and issues to work through and it is vital that we have some grounding and understanding to begin to think about these issues as they arise.

Invite the young people you work with to meet with the decision makers in your church or organisation. Decide together how much money is spent on work with young people.

Working together

Many churches and organisations partner with others in their work. There is increasing experience of work contracts and tendering for services. It is recognised that that this is likely to increase in the future.

Key Questions:

- Will we continue to hold to the integrity of our vision when we are asked to tender for work in the wider statutory sector?
- How will we balance the need to work in unity with each other, cohesively and with common purpose, whilst retaining individual identity and vision in a way that maximises resources for the Kingdom?

Discoveries

- Equality, trust and integrity are always issues
- The 'partnership world' has its own language
- The influence of government and social policies is having a big impact

Pointers and Stimulus

With much to do and resources in short supply, partnership is key. Understanding one's own vision, ethics and motivations are seen as key in trying to work successfully in this whole area.

Theology

Theology can be perceived as a dull and academic subject that has little relevance to youth work. However, we all have theologies which significantly impact work done with young people. Enabling young people to develop their own theological thinking underpins discipleship.

Key Questions:

- How will we equip young people to be theologians?
- How will we continue to make the story of God and his relationship with humanity accessible to all?
- How can we equip youth workers and young people to have the tools needed to reflect and respond to life theologically?

Discoveries

- There is a tension between theological practice and making theology accessible
- We need to develop narrative and non-book theologies

Pointers and Stimulus

Enabling young people to grow beyond the experiential and take responsibility for their own faith development can be helped by increasing theological understanding. Understanding future work requires clarity about understanding ourselves, Christian distinctives and what motivates and inspires us to work with young people.

Write to your MP and Local Council highlighting the work you do with young people and ask them to commit to funding such work on a long-term basis.

Practice

There have been many debates about whether we are youth workers, youth ministers, youth pastors and/or youth evangelists. It could be argued these debates do not matter, but they might in the future as understanding of what it means to be 'Christian' becomes less clear in an increasingly pluralistic and secular world.

Key Questions:

- How do we understand our Christian distinctives in youth work?
- Will vocation still be an issue of calling or has training and youth work specialisms 'professionalised' the Christian youth work sector?
- In undertaking youth work, do churches have different success criteria to youth workers?

Discoveries

- There is a need to value ourselves as youth workers and ministers
- Sometimes churches and employers get confused and talk about one thing when they mean another

Pointers and Stimulus

Reminding ourselves who we are and deciding what we are trying to do will help focus our work and ministry and prepare us for the challenges of the future. In so doing there needs to be equity regarding role and remuneration. E.g. if a worker is working in more formal education settings (e.g. mentor, pastoral worker) they need to be paid at a similar rate to that of a teacher.

Host an event to celebrate all that young people are and can be. This could be an awards type evening, a showcasing of young peoples artistic talent, an evening where adults and young people have meaningful conversations or a good old-fashioned party!

Vocation and training

It appears a shift in thinking has taken place which has made youth work more of an outcome-driven activity aligned with a more professionalized approach to it. This has an impact on both church-based and other Christian youth work.

Key Questions:

- Will there be an increase in resistance towards the 'professionalization' of youth work?
- Will legislation and an outcomes culture mitigate against real relationships being formed with young people? How will the training currently available adapt to this?

Discoveries

- The needs of volunteers must be fully considered
- There is significant misunderstanding about training, qualifications and professionalism in the church

Pointers and Stimulus

How we train youth workers will be vital in helping them retain a sense of calling and vocation in their work. Working as a 'professional' in the world of the church is often difficult for workers and the future needs to contain much better understanding of the nature of the work, ministry and the motivation of workers and volunteers.

Church

For many, church and young people is clearly still a marriage full of tension, mistrust and uncertainty. Whilst there are many exciting and great things happening, there are also many tales of woe and reasons for frustration.

Key Questions:

- Should we re-imagine the 'Christian package' enough to make it accessible and open enough for all? Will young people be able to openly question and reject parts of 'the package' without rejecting it all?
- Will we discover, build or plant church? Will we look for church in unexpected places? Will there be added value in more promptly naming 'church' for young people?
- How will we use the limited time youth workers have to meet the real needs of young people and not always use the 'packaged' programmes on offer?

Discoveries

- We need to move beyond our present practices
- We need a mission with young people that shapes the existence of church as authentic counter cultural communities of faith that connect with the real life experiences of young people

Pointers and Stimulus

There is an argument that church is never going to be 'right' and that we just have to get on with it and do the best we can. Traditionally mission with and for young people has often been at the forefront of exploring the terrain. Youth workers as missionaries will have much to offer to the church in thinking through issues and tensions of church, faith, discipleship and culture.

Invite representatives of a local or national youth organisation to come and talk to your church, organisation or community group about how you could get more involved in serving young people.

On the margins

Young people continue to be demonised and marginalized by the media and much of the adult world. Youth workers have a key role in modelling acceptance of, and investing in, young people.

Key Questions:

- Will punitive government and social control policies make marginalization worse? Do we need a radical rethink on how we approach marginalized young people?
- Will church still be perceived as middle-class irrelevant to young people on the edge?
- How might long-term, committed and funded youth work take place in marginalized areas such as inner city and rural localities?

Discoveries

- We need a radical re-think about how we work with these groups of young people
- There needs to be a definition of marginalization that truly embraces the poverty it encompasses and that doesn't pit one sector and cohort against another
- Work with young people needs to have a cutting edge that reaches marginalized young people

Pointers and Stimulus

Positive steps need to be taken to ensure that young people feel welcomed and that they have safe places to go, positive things to do and people who will care for and listen to them.

If you go to church, consider making at least one Sunday during 2009, 'Young People's Sunday'. The young people could plan and run the service or the adults could honour and celebrate the lives of young people.

