

# HOPE: Stories from the road

Tim Evans and Dave Wiles spent the week on the road together, with only £10.00 in their pocket; with no plans, no hotels, no transport and some would say no sense... their journey began!

Dave and Tim head up Frontier Youth Trust (FYT) and Worth Unlimited, both are organisations that work with and for young people on the margins of society. They joined forces to create a trust fund that will be controlled by young people, for young people and which will enable them to act on their own concerns. Tired of the negative stereotypes about young people, the trust will seek to enable them to demonstrate that young people can be positive force for change in society. In order to create the 'Talent - Young People in Action Trust Fund' FYT gave away £1000 in £10 notes to youth projects/groups to use to turn it into as much cash as they could. As Christian organisations we see this as related to the parable of the 'talents' (see Matthew 25:14 for details), however, we are quite happy about the double meaning in that we believe in young people and want to give them an opportunity to demonstrate their talent. To launch the initiative Dave and Tim received £10 to go on the road for a week in order to collect stories of hope from young people as a sponsored activity.

For 5 days we travelled between Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham and Liverpool with no resources or arrangements other than contact with several local youth work projects, radio stations and £10! We see this as an alternative model for Christian leaders to promote their ideas – a substitute for large scale Christian PR campaigns!

This book is based on diaries that we kept on the road and we hope that it will interest, encourage, challenge and inspire you in any work you may do with young people or in relation to your thinking about them. Names are changed throughout the book to respect those who shared with us. We came back from our journey with £4 in our pockets, having given away £5 and spent £1 on chocolate and we would like to give thanks to God and His people for the care, generosity and love that we received. The journey has been a reminder that faith is spelt 'risk' and we have received so much more than we have given through our pilgrimage together, but now – back to the beginning...

**Day 1:** We walked from the railway station praying that God would be in our journey and that we would be able to make a small contribution to challenging what we perceive to be a "dominant narrative" about young people that is rooted in suspicion, fear, generalisations and stereotypes. Neither of us are naïve about young people's potential to behave "badly", however bad behaviour is not the full story and we wanted to make a contribution to sharing something of the more positive side of young people by listening to their stories and sharing them with a wider audience. We very nearly missed our first opportunity to listen to young people as we passed a large group enjoying their cigarette break. However, we crossed the road to explain our journey and to ask for their help in collecting our first story....

*The group we spoke with were cautious to begin with, two middle aged guys approaching them out of the blue! However, the initial caution turned into very real supportive interest in our journey. We chatted*

*about their training and discovered that we had stumbled upon the Gordano Training Scheme, here was a group of young people engaging in the government's agenda for education and employment. They were warm, welcoming and communicative despite the fact that some of them may have been labelled as "Not in Education, Employment or Training" (NEET) by government definitions. Their thoughts about hope were interesting and each of them spoke about the way they and their friends looked after each other, especially when alcohol was involved. On the one hand it is important to express concern about binge drinking and the associated short and long term risks it presents young people, on the other hand it is also important to remember that this is not the whole story, these young people had all been involved with supporting and looking after their friends when they had used too much alcohol. They had patted the back of their friends whilst they vomited in toilets and sinks and even cleaned up when the target was missed! The young people wished us well on our journey and waved us goodbye...*

After 15 minutes of conversation we left the young people and it occurred to us that these youngsters may well have been seen as a gang of threatening youth by us and others at times – yet here they were providing us with a positive, respectful and sincere response. The young people directed us to their training centre and Dave realised that a couple of good friends from his church worked there (serendipity!). The training centre, where Dave's friends work, is a vibrant, happening and exciting youth orientated education/learning centre where we heard our next story...

*It was that morning that Jan had come to meet Jack, a young man who had been referred for support by his psychiatrist. Jan was a bit concerned as she drove to work on the basis that she had been warned that Jack was dangerous and would need careful supervision within a safe working environment. So she was slightly preoccupied when she was greeted that morning by a smiley young man who opened the door for her with a cheery grin. Jan, who is one of the most good natured and friendly people Dave knows, bantered with him and hoped to be working with young people who were all as nice as him that day! The banter continued and covered holidays, (Jan had just been on one!) and hair styles – the young man had just got his hair cut. Jan said good bye to the young man, hoping she might meet him again. She was taken aback when he shook her hand – shaking hands with someone is not what you might always expect from a young person. Several minutes later she was even more shocked to discover that the young man she had just met was the Jack she had feared meeting! Jan reflected that she had been given the impression that Jack was, "a piece of s\*\*\*", however her sense of hope was engaged as she realised that giving respect often led to receiving respect.*

It was just after this that we talked with another of the workers, Pete, about his reflections on hope; we were stood outside the project drinking our coffee (our first free drink of the day!!) with a group of young people when Pete told us his story of hope...

*... One of the young girls that Pete worked with, who has difficulties reading, had approached him for help with a Bible reading that she had been asked to do at a wedding. Whilst the young girl didn't go to church she was willing to struggle with her reading problem in order to read at her friend's wedding in front of hoards of people! Pete helped her practise in front of her friends, breaking down the words phonetically and getting her used to public reading. It was encouraging for us to see the sense of pride and joy that Pete was taking in his work with young people and the "happy ever after" side of my nature couldn't wait to find out how she got on! However, her reading was called off at the church and she took on a far more important role as she sang to the happy couple during the Karaoke at the reception!*

From the training centre we had the notion to go to St. Paul's, a district of Bristol with a notorious image, famous for the riots in the 1980's. What we came across was two inspirational grassroots projects that both had helped St. Paul's become a better place to be in during the intervening 25 years.

The One25 project works with women involved in street prostitution, supporting them to make positive choices about their lives, often helping some of the most vulnerable young women in our society escape from abuse and addiction. We heard several stories of young women sending cards of thanks, describing lives now involving stable, loving relationships. To show how even lives that seem positive from the outside can so easily be destroyed was the story of a young woman who, whilst completing her 'A' levels, became addicted to heroin. In order to feed her habit she began to work the streets but now thanks to the project she has turned her life back on course.

*Anne was a young woman who had a baby at 15. Unfortunately her relationship with her family broke down resulting in her leaving home without her child. As with so many a drug habit saw her dragged into the world of prostitution to pay for it and a couple of spells at Her Majesty's pleasure followed. Eventually she met outreach workers from one25 on the street. Through a process of relationship building, being encouraged and challenged about her life she gradually came to see that things could be different. Not long ago the team were invited to a family party to celebrate her being reunited with her daughter and reconciled to her wider family as well as being in a stable relationship and generally putting her life back together. At the party she remarked to the workers that Psalm 23 (which they had given to her), was the thing that she held onto whilst in prison.*

We asked the workers at One25 how they felt about their work. "It is our privilege to reach out to women trapped in their lifestyles and addictions, outworking our mission by offering friendship, practical support and help. Transformed lives may not be commonplace but we see genuine change occurring in the face of failure, heartache and trauma that encourages us to keep going." One of the volunteers voiced the feelings of many "working with the women and volunteers of one25 is uplifting, enlightening, frustrating, uncomfortable – but most of all it is a real privilege to share life with these vulnerable women."

For us it was a great to be able to spend time with committed people working with some of the most vulnerable women in our society and seeing real change but change through pain and joy that involved the giving of oneself to serve the needs of others.

Dave had supported the One25 project in developing a youth work post in the past and had enjoyed the privilege of acting as Father Christmas to the project on several occasions, having written about the experience in 2005 we offer the story here...

*I was dressed as Santa Claus once again and the sad thing is that I don't need the cushion to bolster up my tummy any more! It was a party for the children of some of the sex workers that attend one of the projects supported by Frontier Youth Trust. It's my favourite time of the year – the CEO gets chance to let his hair down (what's left of it!), face paint the kids, do the amateur dramatics (ho ho ho!) and facilitate the parachute games!*

*As I came down the stairs of the project in my red garments (with accompanying false beard – that I soon discovered I was allergic to!) I found myself surrounded by a group of working women. Before I could stop myself I slipped into Santa mode, opened my mouth and promptly put my foot in it! "Have you all been good girls this year then?" I had said it before realising what a naff thing it was to say to a group of women who must be so tired of the moral indignation that they so often suffer on the streets and in wider society. Thankfully one of the girls saved me by taking the comment in the good spirit that it was intended and told me that if I let her sit on my lap she would show me how good she was! I can't think what she meant!*

*I reflected on this encounter as I was painting the face of one of the children later as I sat in the corner of the room by the Christmas tree, led on the sofa beside me was one of the other working girls who had over done the crack cocaine that had her on such a short lead of spiralling dependence. This is where I want to be was what I was thinking, I learn so much here, I feel part of this community, I love this and yet I so quickly have to return to the world of managing, of e-mails, phone-calls, organising events, committees, reports, public relations, fund raising, letters, blah blah blah!*

*How on earth do you manage the interface between the differing worlds that we frequent as youth workers? How do you sort out the performance indicators to measure the quality of your sense of humour? What self assessment procedure do I go through to check out with the kids whether or not I was a decent Santa? What contemporary youth work theory was I drawing on in this work? Was there scope for another funding bid to get the work onto a better footing? Has the professionalization of youth work done any of us any good?*

*The youngster I was face painting brought me back to myself, "can you make me into an angel mister"!? Well you know I don't know if I can... but I'll have a darn good go! That's what it's all about being alongside people, growing together, listening, ensuring that the training,*

*management, theories and theologies are rooted in the questions of the children and young people... after all redemption ripped through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny child. Perhaps I need to listen to the cry more carefully?*

From One25 we took a short walk to the Crisis Centre, an organisation that is 22 years old and that is often a first port of call for those who feel they are on life's last chance. From homelessness to addiction, self harming to poor mental health, we heard story after story about those who are seen, or rather not seen, by society as being at the very bottom of the pile. As with one25 we were struck by how far staff and volunteers were prepared to journey with people. Keith had been known by the same worker for 20 years, the worker had seen him journey from crime to Christian commitment and the into a stable relationship and now being an expectant father. Another young person just turned up at the café with nothing, including no place to stay, he was helped and supported by the project to find a roof over his head, he often comes back to tell them how he is doing.

The wall of the life skills training room was decorated with photos describing many people's stories, from all kinds of situations and backgrounds, who had found their way into work, housing, relationships. Perhaps the most moving was one of the walls where the young people had drawn their aspirations for life. Seeing statements like 'to be married' or 'to have a nice house' underlined that for many young people far from obsessing about play-station games or the latest mobile phone, that the simple, but profound, things of life like relationships, love and family, were what those on the underside of society long for. God's shalom of a whole and fulfilling life.

*Jane is a particularly tragic story. Now 31 she had been addicted to anti depressants since the age of 12. She had been prescribed them due to her self harming but they became a natural part of her existence. She even met her partner over an argument over who should use the knife on their arms first. Eventually she was diagnosed with a fourfold personality disorder. For many institutionalisation is the next and sometimes right step but Jane came to the Crisis Centre. Not an overnight success story but slow, painful, gradual change where even the smallest step is significant and to be celebrated. Now on a reduced number of anti depressants she is holding down a relationship and piece by piece putting her life back together.*

Andy Luxford, who works at the Crisis Centre, has kindly shared the next 3 stories from people who have been involved with his training programme (LITE) within the Crisis Centre.

*"Seeker regains smile"... A Christian asylum seeker from Eritrea, left home to escape the war and persecution. He'd had a responsible job in education but would have had to go to war if he had stayed in his own country. He travelled by night across many countries before reaching the UK. He was granted refugee status but then found himself on his own, on the streets in London. He heard there were jobs in Bristol, but ended up in a hostel surrounded by drug users. He came into the Wild Goose Café (Crisis Centre) and was befriended by one of our volunteers, who suggested he came on the LITE course. He completed*

*the training and went on to another course. After months of applying for endless jobs he went through a very discouraging and despondent time, feeling he must be a "disgusting person, who no-one wanted to employ". Eventually he gained a full time, paid care job. He has completed his probationary period and is enjoying the work. He is a changed man; the smile has returned to his face and he is so grateful for the start we were able to give him...*

*"From trauma towards a career in nursing"...After a traumatic experience, which affected her considerably, this student gained confidence and friends on the LITE course. She is continuing with part time voluntary work and has been referred to a mental health agency, where she will receive one to one mentoring. She is keen to train for a career in nursing.*

*"Ethiopian overwhelmed with appreciation"... An Ethiopian came to the UK seeking asylum. He had worked in the family business as a taxi driver and mechanic but was imprisoned for his political beliefs. His father had died in prison, opposing the war with Eritrea. He doesn't know what happened to his mother and sister, as they were deported to Eritrea (his mother being of Eritrean descent). He found himself in a strange land, with no friends and unable to communicate. Fortunately he came across a student who recommended the LITE course; he even brought him along to sign up. He completed the four modules and now has a paid job. He is also doing a course at college, to improve his English. We gave him an old computer to practice on and he was overwhelmed, saying he didn't have the words to express his thanks. He joined half way through the last LITE course and finds it is benefiting him in restarting his life from scratch. He is attending mentoring in self-employment and has also started a photography course to expand his knowledge.*

Having enjoyed our first free lunch (thanks for the sandwiches Trudi!) we wandered on through Bristol and Wesley's Chapel provided inspiration for travelling pilgrims! John and Charles Wesley may well be saddened though by their empty chapel which has no regular congregation. We walked on into the Broadmead shopping centre to talk to two young lads sat in the centre of The Mall....

*The two lads were rolling cigarettes when we asked for their help! We explained our intentions – only this time rather than looking for a "story of hope" we began by asking how they think young people are portrayed in the media. Their response was sophisticated and well thought through. No trite, shallow or defensive analysis but rather, a clear concern that 'yes' some young people are a problem, many of them do get in trouble but not all who wear hoodies are the spawn of the devil! Both lads had been to a local university and knew the Bristol night life and were familiar with the local sub culture. They were aware that they can sometimes seem intimidating but they were proud of their friends and spoke warmly of them. We chatted about terrorism and the generalisations and stereotypes that run the risk of becoming "self fulfilling prophecies" – hardening attitudes between faith groups and races in the way that generalisations across the generations*

*perpetuate barriers and divisions. One of the young men mentioned how his mother spoke highly of a mate of his who had helped her with her shopping the other day – however, we all agreed that this was less likely to make the news than the negative diet that the media markets so successfully! We said good bye and the lads offered to shake our hands, check out on our journey and wish us well...*

Dave wrote the story above on a bench opposite the boys and for the tentative purposes of reliability and validity showed it to them. They thought it reflected our conversation well and told him that they had been having a great discussion about these issues since we had left them! It was then that a young man who was drunk came to ask us for money...

*One of the things about surviving on limited resources is that in all honesty you don't have a lot to give away! We had an extra £1.00 from some money that Dave's daughter had given us to buy a lighter – in case we needed warmth on the road (!!)* so we gave the young man this. *This led to a conversation about him and his dogs – he assured us that the money he wanted was to buy the dogs some food. His wife had just left him for the third time, he hadn't eaten all day and he was in an area of Bristol from which he was banned (by Anti Social Behaviour Order) from being in. It seemed like a daft question to ask him about hope – but then, we were pretty daft! "I have no hope," was his reply, "there is no hope." Of all our meetings during the day this one got to Dave the most. We talked about the hope we felt was demonstrated in his care and concern for his dogs, however, philosophical reflections on the nature of hope were not for him, 'there is no hope'. We talked some more and then he spotted another target for cash and was gone. Perhaps a story about the stark reality of someone who has lost hope should feature here as a reminder that this is where some people find themselves in life.*

After our conversations in Broadmead Shopping Centre we visited Young Bristol, a city wide organisation. It provides sport and activities, supports local youth clubs and projects, enables young people to have volunteering opportunities and runs youth award programmes. It was great to gather some stories from the project...

*Chris is his own words. "A few years ago life was very different for me. I was homeless and using drugs. I had no energy and no confidence. This year I met a worker from Millennium Volunteers and we talked about what I was interested in and what I wanted to do with my life. Millennium Volunteers helped me turn my interest in animal welfare into action and now I have volunteered 200 hours for animal welfare charities. I feel like I have been able to make a real difference to the places that I have volunteered. Through being a Millennium Volunteer I have grown in self confidence, learnt new skills, travelled to new places, led a healthier lifestyle and had loads of fun."*

*John in his own words. "I learnt to work in a team. It was a bit scary at first but then it's ok when you get to know people. The work was good. I liked being outside, it's good exercise and makes you strong."*

*David in his own words "I turned up at Young Bristol just to hang around and kill time. I was doing nothing with my time. The staff at Young Bristol kept encouraging me to participate in awards or volunteering and eventually I gave in and started my Bronze Award mainly to keep the staff sweet! Looking back over the last year I'm glad I have achieved my dream to join the Royal Navy. I first applied to join the Royal Navy four years ago, but got turned away because I wasn't doing anything. They sent me away to prove to them that I could stick things out and work in a team. Thanks to Young Bristol's encouragement and friendly atmosphere I started to enjoy working on my Bronze Award. The Navy saw that I was committed to coming to Young Bristol and believed that I would be committed to the Navy and on the 20<sup>th</sup> November I enter the service."*

We can certainly testify to a warm welcome from Young Bristol. We decided that our day was not done so sought some advice as to where young people hang out late afternoon/early evening. The consensus was that College Green would be our best bet. Interestingly the Marriott Hotel is on the edge there and had been holding a day's conference on the Respect Agenda with Louise Casey from the central government unit. One of the youth workers we met had attended the conference and found that his perception of young people and how to work with them was not entirely reflected at the conference! We decided we would check out these perceptions for ourselves by engaging a group of skaters. After getting over some initial suspicion as to what we were up to, one young man in particular was eager to share his perceptions.

*"I come to skate everyday. If I miss a day I feel that something is missing." Our perception was that nobody, other than his peers, had ever taken the time to show interest in his skating and the place it had in his life. He had a lot to share about how it was perceived by others. His premise was that the people who saw them skating in the park thought they were either up to no good or should have something better to do with their time. When asked about this perception we got a surprisingly passionate response. Skating is actually quite a 'polite' pastime. He said that whilst there tends to be quite a lot of young people hanging out and skating on College Green they are very aware of other people walking through that area and always make every endeavour to get out of the way. He told one story to illustrate the response he often gets. He fell down in front of one woman and so apologised for getting in her way. Instead of accepting his apology, all she seemed to see and think was that someone was doing something pointless and asked him if he didn't have something better to do with his time.*

*Another story he recounted was of him skating in the street. He was accosted by someone who told him it was dangerous. His perception was that it was on a long straight street with very few cars; the cars could be seen from a long way away and travelled very slowly. She told him that he should do something 'useful' with his life, portraying him as a layabout, a good for nothing. He politely pointed out that firstly he was still in education and so was actually doing something with his life, that he wasn't some layabout. Secondly, he asked that perhaps there were some other things she would like him to do with his time such as*

*drinking in the park, robbing her house or bullying her children. Instead he had a hobby that kept him fit, had a community of peers who all looked out for each other, he mentored the younger kids in both skills and decorum of skating – the culture of the older ones being a role model for the younger ones. As we sat, he pointed out that he knew everybody there, and some had become close friends even though they were from different backgrounds and cultures. His observation was that this was how hobbies worked for most people including adults! We asked him what the woman's response was. He shrugged, she didn't really say anything. How hard it seems for us adults to apologise to young people even though we often stigmatise and stereotype them. Then he came out with one of the most profound observations, 'I reckon adults have a go at us because we have something they don't have.' We think he meant 'a life' but didn't quite say that. Instead he said he had found a hobby that he enjoyed, he got to meet people and make friendships, he did something that kept him healthy and in particular was part of a global community where he could go anywhere in the world and he'd make friendships, have places to stay despite cultural and social differences and barriers. Sounded like the ideal church to us! Frontier Youth Trust is running a Young People as Prophets Project ([www.ypap.org.uk](http://www.ypap.org.uk)). We felt that we had encountered a prophetic utterance to our own sense of 'adulthood' where we often forget some of the things that make life, life. He enjoyed the counter cultural elements of skating, that it was something other than mainstream, a place where you could be yourself and belong.*

We thanked him for his time and he thanked us for listening. Our lives had been enriched by the small amount of time our lives had connected.

We walked on from College Green to Clifton and from here on to stay at Em's home, a care worker from the One25 Project. Em had offered us an overnight stay when we had visited the project earlier, she was such a blessing! Two rooms, cosy bed, warm shower, red wine and chilli!! We reflected on how much more you value people, events and the things we take for granted when you don't have the normal security of home, regular meals, warmth, transport, money etc around you!

**Day 2:** After a good night's sleep and breakfast we set off again. We had last night's left over chilli stored away for the journey and with Em's benediction in the hall of her home we were on the road again. After a fifteen minute walk we decided to show our hitchhiking sign for Cardiff and to our amazement had a lift to Newport organised in less than two minutes!

*We were picked up by a labour councillor in his MG and, having explained our "mission", began a wide range dialogue about children and young people and the role of a local council in understanding and responding to youth issues. After a minor disagreement between us over targeting in education, our host mentioned what his council responsibilities were in relation to young people. He was well aware of the way in which roads and community layout had devastated opportunities for play and the freedom of association for young people on the street. It was interesting to note that the teenage shelter (a*

*place for young people to meet out of the rain) that his council had installed, in his view, had worked well. It had been up for three years and, "you can tell from the graffiti that the kids use it well!" Our 'host' was also keen to ensure that adults who complained about young people were listened to, but that they should also be reminded that they had been young once too! Voluntary groups did not seem too active in his locality – he had no sense of church based work – which seemed a shame. His overall philosophy seemed to be that provided you can cope with the four or five years of adolescent turbulence most young people would make the transition into adulthood okay.*

It was another ten minutes wait before we got a lift from a man who was running ten minutes late for an interview in Cardiff – we were so glad he found the time to give us a lift and prayed that the interview went well for him, as he dropped us on the edge of Cardiff.

We walked to Cardiff Bay and enjoyed the sun on the sea. Just when we started to develop coffee withdrawal we were rescued by Lee! Lee was a youth worker in Cardiff who Dave had met in Oxford a couple of weeks before and having told him that we were going to be in Cardiff and given him a mobile number, it was a great joy when he got in contact! Lee took us for coffee and suggested he take us to a project near Barry that he had worked at during his training placement – The Amelia Trust.

The 'Amelia Trust Farm' is a charity set on a 160 acre lowland site in the middle of the Vale of Glamorgan; it is a working farm with a variety of livestock that gives free access to anyone who wishes to enjoy the tranquillity of the countryside. Visitors are welcome to explore the farm and surrounding play areas and nature walks. All these facilities and more are used on a daily basis by disaffected young people and adults with learning difficulties, who travel from the urban areas of South Wales to train, experience and share positive changes to their lives.

Having talked to Liam (one of the Amelia workers) and had a look around, chatting to several groups of young people who all seemed enthusiastic to be there, we went up to one of the fields to meet three young people weighing sheep! Facilitated by their youth worker they drove sheep onto the weighing scales and decided if they'd eaten enough to go to the market. For two of the young people it was their first day on the farm, but their confidence visibly grew as they were given responsibility and believed in. We stood for a while as the young people explained to us what they were doing and how they enjoyed coming.

Rumours of another group building fences meant we moved on. After a goat chasing incident, we arrived to see Chris, Kim and Jacob, monitored carefully by their youth worker Ian. They were really keen not just to tell us about the work they were doing but how their journeys had resulted in them attending Amelia on a regular basis.

*Chris is 13 and been in nine schools during his school 'career.' His first exclusion was at the age of 3 and his school life went downhill from then on. Trouble with the police started with some thieving before going onto commit Actual Bodily Harm and an accusation of arson. Since*

*coming to the farm Chris has managed to stay in the same school which he goes to three times a week with the other two days spent on the farm. Asked what he enjoyed Chris said that he had found something he wanted to do once he left school. Learning to use tools, drive and mend a tractor and build fences had given him skills and a sense that he could be good at something. Asked what else he thought he had learnt Chris said he always got into trouble for fighting but here he could work with a much smaller group; that workers like Ian were interested in him and he could talk to them when his anger had the potential to become problematic. He had never got into a fight at the farm. Instead he had learnt how to speak to other people and put his views across.*

*Kim had a similar story to Chris, not getting on at school. In particular she felt that teachers never listened to her and she found it hard to cope in large classes. Now she feels able to go to school by coming to the project once a week. We asked what made the difference here and she said that even if she didn't feel listened to the rest of the week she could come to the project and find a listening ear. Working in small groups, feeling supported and being in the outdoors, had all contributed to an increased sense of well-being. On that note she put her iPod back on and went back to building her fence!*

*Jacob was a young man that Ian, the worker, described as having to learn about what the proportions of two ears and one mouth were for! Jacob was very articulate about having been let down by the school system. He commented on how often he had been asked to give respect by people who never showed respect to him! His rage at the system meant that he had quit school in year 8 and had done nothing for two years. Coming to Amelia for a few days per week gave him the confidence and aspiration to think about his education again. He agreed that if he could keep coming to the farm for one day per week he would accept and participate in home tuition. Jacob obviously has several issues to work through but the strong sense was that Amelia had given him some solid foundations to begin to move on in his life.*

The workers at Amelia were a great inspiration to us and the stories we heard underlined the value of this kind of work tremendously. How tragic that our society is willing to spend in the region of £25,000 a year to keep so many young people like those that we met at Amelia locked up when projects like this one, that struggle for funding, could prevent the need for incarceration.

Lee, our guide for the day, also inspired us as he took us around and one of his stories follows...

*Lee was working as a youth worker in a fairly "safe" middle class church setting. His placement at Amelia seemed to have had a deep impact on his view of youth work. The story of hope that emerged from our conversation was that he had worked with so many youngsters at Amelia who had been written off as "violent, lazy, thugs" and within a month of outdoor work, farming, wood work, pottery (etc.) he had seen many of these same youngsters working side by side in a working community. All of the youngsters at Amelia have experienced*

*difficulties and most of them would not be coping with school and yet we visited a lively, happy, working environment that seemed incredibly positive and useful to the young people. We are sure it is not always as “glowing” as our visit suggested, but we didn’t meet any young people who had a bad word to say about the project. Sadly, many young people are stuck in school structures and systems that can never meet the complex needs of everyone whilst resources, class sizes and educational agendas mitigate against those who are just too challenging for our systems.*

We had great conversations with young people and youth workers at Amelia (many sadly lost to memory!), however, one short story that moved us most was shared by Liam.

*Liam described one young person who joined the project having been excluded from school and how this young man had made friends with another youngster at Amelia who had Downs Syndrome. Liam described how this “tough”, “unresponsive” and excluded youngster became inseparable from the young man with Downs Syndrome and how this relationship was so mutually beneficial to both lads’ development.*

We enjoyed a couple of hours walking around the Amelia trust farm chatting to young people and workers – one of the lads spoke to us as he dismantled and repaired a tractor saying, “it’s well cool here”. We were very impressed with the quality of services and activities and especially the dedication of the workers and volunteers at Amelia and are excited at the potential of this kind of project.

Lee drove us back into Cardiff where we left him and wandered around Bute, an area of the city that is on the edge of the impressive dock developments, however, an area that has something of a reputation for social issues. The area has a high Somali population and we enjoyed some banter with local youngsters as we hung around.

*The two white lads on the astro turf pitch were hammering the ball from end to end of the multi purpose football/basket ball court when we said hi and introduced ourselves as Welsh talent scouts! They laughed and carried on blasting each other. Chatting to them about what we were up to we found the same willingness to talk and interest in our journey. The lads felt that the greatest sign of hope for them was the pitch they were playing on. They didn’t feel particularly well connected to the Cardiff Bay success story but were glad of the employment it had brought. They said that they liked their community other than the \*\*\*\*s who had set fire to one part of the astro turf, they felt that there was a good deal of harmony between the local white and black population – they like their neighbourhood.*

We caught up on our journal and sunbathed in Bute for a while before contacting a friend to check if we could stay with him – no problem – a bed for the night and the promise of a Mexican supper! Lee had offered us a bed for the night too; however, our friend Dave was on the best side of Cardiff for tomorrow’s trip to Birmingham so we decided to go with his kind offer of

hospitality. On the way out of Bute we met two Somali lads and checked out their stories.

*The first lad was sat on his car smoking a joint; he was friendly and keen to help us when we asked for help – even before he knew what we wanted! This remains our experience, young people who are willing to give time, to listen and to share. Bute has three of the highest indicators of social need in Wales (we discovered from our friend Dave later on) and it has a reputation that goes back to the “fearful” days of Tiger Bay. However, the first young man we spoke with was proud of his area and made a great offer to us and to anyone, “people who say bad things about this place should come and live here, they should visit us for about a week before saying anything about us”. We thought this was a great idea and would like to say to any politicians or opinion formers that we will take them on a journey like this if they are interested. We then spoke with the other young man who was fiercely proud of the area in terms of it’s history, diverse culture and friendliness. He said that he never wanted to live anywhere else and had been in Bute for all of his twenty years. He was passionate about the community spirit, the carnival and his home. We were also surprised to some extent at the depth of his social analysis as he chastised those who wrote young people off saying how young people would respond to negative labels and attitudes by fulfilling those expectations. Having developed something of a good relationship in such a short time we shook hands and said our farewells. We reflected that either of these lads would have welcomed us into their homes to stay.*

**Day 3:** We left Cardiff grateful to Dave for his friendship and hospitality; we even forgave him for not sharing the miniature bottle of Jack Daniels that we had bought him! As we walked past a group of young girls they asked us about the hitch-hiking sign that we were carrying and where we were going and why. The brief conversation leads to our shortest story from the road...

*When the girls had finished laughing at our challenging journey, we asked them why adults should place any hope in them. They looked at each other, thought deeply and then one of them had an idea and said, “well we’re all going to college!” Hearty agreement followed – she had captured the answer. It’s interesting that these young girls cited education as the promise of hope and it made us wonder how many of the youngsters who don’t go on to do A levels might feel they’re letting us down. Have we reduced success to academic achievement for young people?*

We reflected on the lifts we have had on the road – today we received help from David (who comes from Toxteth), Joseph (a Polish lorry driver – challenging conversation!) and a young Brummy lad who was fast (!) and a Leeds supporter! We noticed that the majority of our lifts have come from people who appeared to be poor. Whilst not wanting to claim empirical validity to our hypothesis that poorer people are more generous, we couldn’t help noticing that most of the frowning and dismissive looks we were getting came from the best cars!! It also has to be said that the generosity of the

“Crusty Loaf” sandwich bar (Junction 2 off the M42) was amazing! Getting to Birmingham took five hours.

*After being dropped off in Birmingham we wandered up to Victoria Square having heard that it was the place in the middle of the city where young people could be found. We saw a group of three skaters who were very willing to talk to us and show us their moves! We had to look away a couple of times as they attempted seemingly impossible tricks! Immediately we were struck by how polite they were, despite the stares and glares they were getting from passers by. They were keen to stress that they had no desire to offend people but felt stigmatised by adults and even by other young people. One lad in particular told us about how he had been permanently excluded from school due to mental health problems, yet found a sense of freedom, creativity, excitement and achievement in his skating.*

As with other stories we were struck by how much young people appreciated having a couple of adults take an interest in them, their lives, experiences and stories. As we said we needed to move on they urged us to watch one last trick. One lad in particular was determined to ‘land’ (technical term for success) a particularly difficult trick and proceeded to do so with his final attempt in front of us. They seemed genuinely bemused by the idea that they might be a threat to society, simply wanting somewhere to express themselves and be with their mates. We were struck by their creativity, turning everyday objects into challenges just by using their imagination. Where we might have expected old fashioned male pride and bragging, we found mutual support, care and encouragement. When he landed his final trick in front of us, boards were banged in appreciation. We left with a slight degree of envy that we didn’t always find such support and camaraderie in our own lives. ‘You can’t let your mates down’ was their philosophy of life that challenges our individualism, insularity and selfishness.

*After kindly being bought a cup of coffee and a sandwich we walked up towards the main library. On the way we engaged two young Muslim men who were deep in conversation. Apologising for interrupting we explained our journey and asked them about hope and young people. To them hope came from Allah, from God. On hearing that we were Christians they became quite animated, but not in the way our stereotypes might expect! To them we all, Christians, Muslims, Jews come from the same God. Rather than trying to convert us they said we should each immerse ourselves in our religion to both understand it and live it. Hope for them was linked to peace and to them each were peaceful religions. They saw common cause for concern in people misunderstanding and misrepresenting religious faith and its importance. They also felt that many involved in our respective faith traditions had not understood the basis of peace that ran through them. One of them spent much of his time encouraging his peers to seek the wisdom of elders to understand their faith which far from radicalising them would actually enable them to live the religion of peace out properly. He did challenge us to read the Koran and see what its actual message is rather than the distortions the media give. He also felt that the media had a responsibility both with regard to hatred of Muslims and their radicalisation. The wider British population needed to realise*

*that not all Muslims were the same. Just as Christians had their extremist elements and differing denominational perspectives so did Islam. He noted that many extremist positions in Islam did not understand Islam properly or were using it for their own ends.*

To see two young men take their faith seriously, but not uncritically and encouraging us to do the same was a mind blowing experience. As we were about to take our leave, expressing our thanks for letting us interrupt their conversation, they shook our hands and thanked us for all we were doing to overcome barriers and really listen to what was being said. It certainly was a source of hope for us that the challenge of interfaith could be met by genuine encounters of respect and listening without trying to dumb down the importance of our own faiths, its traditions and scriptures.

We decided to sit and write up the story from our two Muslim friends with the sun on our backs in Victoria Square. As Tim wrote, Dave noticed six lads in hoodies and baseball caps looking around on the steps. Four of the boys were using their phones to video a staged fight between two of the lads. The white lad had a sling on whilst the black lad attacked! Suddenly the sling came off and white guy turned the cards and fought back – drama at it's best! Dave approached the lads with the kind of trepidation that many of the adults around Victoria Square were probably experiencing as they watched the drama unfold, but the welcome and interest that these youngsters showed to our interest in them was typically welcoming.

*We asked the lads for a few minutes of their time, to listen to them, the angle we took in our conversation was, "don't you think that some of the adults around here will find what you're doing a bit scary? Do you think adults might get a bit intimidated or scared of you guys? After all you're wearing hoodies and caps." The response was quick and unanimous from them, "that's because they never talk to us - we just want to have fun, we're not hurting anyone are we – you were laughing!" They were soon off again, pretending to drown each other in the local fountain! Actually when I looked around Victoria Square some of the adults were actually smiling at the lads! Hope?*

We sat on a bench to catch up on our diary writing and eventually fascination over the racial background and conversations of the guys sat next to us got the better of us and a great story emerged...

*The two guys were both immigrants. One was illegal and had been in England illegally for the past 3 years. He was from Persia (Iran) and was fearful for his life if he returned there. He liked England ("much better than Germany"). We had watched him help his friend complete forms. His friend was from Afghanistan (aged 21) and he too was sleeping rough and reporting to the Police weekly – he had asked the Police on several occasions to arrest him so that he could stay in a Police cell which would be warm and provide regular meals. Despite sleeping rough both men made a point about their cleanliness and both felt that England was a good, hospitable and welcoming place. Whilst we talked another homeless man came up to us to check that all was well. We felt part of a subterranean secret community that looked out for each other! Both guys were interested in our stories and wished us*

*well. We offered the guys £2 of our remaining £7 and the Iranian man asked us to give it to his Afghanistan friend as he already had some money of his own. We were so moved by this demonstration of inter-racial harmony in such challenging circumstances.*

Having received a late lunch from Pip Piper (of One Small Barking Dog – check out their great web site! [www.osbd.org](http://www.osbd.org)) after he had filmed us for Youthwork Magazine, we thought it was time for dinner! Tim rang his friend Andi who took us to his gym for dinner. Andi shared stories about young people he had worked with in the past, which we offer below.

*Tommy was a very troubled young man. He had been beaten up by his alcoholic father who subsequently died. Tommy led a life from a young age that involved crime and drugs. He used to come to youth club in Aston, an area of Birmingham associated by the media with the New Year shootings of two young girls when they were simply having a party with their friends. Tommy got to know, like and respect the youth workers he met who constantly encouraged him that perhaps there was a different way to live his life. Above all the workers became positive father figures trying to put him on the straight and narrow.*

*Tommy had heard about the expeditions the project ran to Africa and on becoming eligible in terms of age he was encouraged to apply. Tommy found the experience challenging but engaged with all the tasks that went with bringing aid to others such as building work on a new local school. The end of the expedition was a four day hike up one of the largest mountains in the continent. This was no small task for someone who had found committing to himself, to others, to teams, to tasks so difficult all his life. Day three of the expedition and Tommy was severely struggling, not least he struggled with a drug habit that had sapped his natural physical capabilities. Faced with the possibility of failure, something Tommy was well used to and often believed about himself, he found some new resources within. Given the option of turning back he pressed on. The youth worker who recounted this story to us tried to find the words to describe Tommy's reaction on reaching the summit. We could see how moved, Andi, the worker, was at the memory of such a fantastic achievement.*

*Tommy came back determined to change his life. He knew that he could not just come back to his old haunts and so moved to another part of Birmingham. Now in a long-term relationship with his own children, Tommy had the courage to face up to his experiences, and with support, encouragement and challenge, has become the kind of adult many of us aspire to be.*

*Sam was a quiet young man. Quiet because of the dysfunctional nature of his background; quiet and unemployed as he entered the transition time between adolescence and adulthood. Sam still has many things to work through and deal with but he has come a long way. We asked Andi what his secret was to working with these young people. 'Simple but costly' was the response, 'I was to him what others had been to me, a role model, a father figure, a friend, a listening ear, believing he could be so much more'. Andi persuaded Sam to come on*

*an expedition. The experience of seeing others destitute and in poverty left an indelible mark on Sam. He resolved to do something about it when he got home. Volunteering with the youth project has seen him join the management committee of the agency running the expeditions. Sam himself would say he has a long way to go but giving to others has been the start of that journey rather than just personal introspection. I suspect that is what Jesus meant when he spoke of how giving your life away meant that you would find it.*

Then Andi shared something of his own story about his past, his youth work and his faith.

*Andi comes from a family where he was physically abused by his mother. He talks openly and honestly about the bruising and harm he went through as a youngster. Adding insult to injury many people, especially professionals, didn't believe him despite the bruising. In fact he was often made to feel it was his problem and even spent time in police custody when he was reporting abuse. Andi became involved in serious and sophisticated car crime, he left school at 14 and was very involved in organised crime, violence and drugs. A crisis occurred when at the end of his tether he broke a bottle to attack (or his words, "to murder") his mother. At this point he met a Vicar who actually believed him and showed him care. He also moved in with a foster carer and met with 2 youth workers who showed interest in him and invested in him. Transformation came over time and Andi is now a qualified and dedicated youth worker enabling, supporting and nurturing other young people through the changes that they will go through. Andi's story and Dave's resonated deeply and it was good to explore forgiveness and faith - not in an absolute and fixed/finished terms but as brothers working out our salvation in fear and trembling.....*

Andi then took us in his minibus to a youth group in Handsworth – Fusion – run by Janey, Charlotte and Penny, David and a few others. The story from our conversations at Fusion....

*We let our hair down (well, what we have of it!) by playing pool, table tennis and football with the local young people. It wasn't long before we were sharing our adventure and the young people began to open up about their experience. Gangs are 'order of the day' in Handsworth and they are divided and labelled by postcode. The young people we felt honoured to meet (including Joseph, Niko and Marisha) were part of B21. We asked them how they saw the gangs on the basis that many adults would be fearful of them and newspapers would be very negative about guns, hoodies, fights, knives etc. The young people were not naïve or defensive about their image, they were aware of bad things that happened but stressed that adults needed to talk to them rather than write them off. They felt the gangs offered them safety and a sense of belonging and that they were close friends, which interestingly connects with Scottish research into gang culture ('Parenting and children's resilience in disadvantaged communities', which can be found at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)). Perhaps the most moving element of their story is that the young people were very interested to*

*hear about Dave's own involvement in gangs as an ex-racist who shaved his head and engaged in racial violence. They were also interested in Dave's reflections on the dangers of racial separation and segregation that he had come across in South Africa – during the years of apartheid. They were also very interested in our 'Talent Youth in Action Fund' and Joseph became the ring leader in ensuring that all the young people gathered to listen to our plans to raise money and give it away! The youth workers said that nothing like this had happened before as the young people had sat, listened and started to plan! We were thrilled at their interest and commitment to the idea. The icing on the cake (quite literally) came when the young people presented to us what they had been cooking - a huge bag of cakes for the journey! Chocolate ones! Tim and I were moved to tears.*

And the supply of food continued as Al, Janey, Charlotte and Penny took us for curry and beer and capped the evening off by allowing us to stay in their home!!

**Day 4:** We were up early for a West Midlands interview for the BBC and enjoyed great banter with the DJ's Mas and Jo about our journey; they were so supportive of our efforts. After breakfast Jane, one of the youth workers from Fusion, took us to the BBC to do an interview for 5 Live National Radio - stars at last! The interview with Victoria Derbyshire went very well and we planned follow up interviews. A friend contacted us later to say that a listener had written to say the interview was the best 10 minutes of radio she had heard and that was her first ever time of writing to a radio station! Tim and I were encouraged and even more encouraged when Gary gave us a lift having heard the West Midland Radio show! Gary was on his way home from having radio therapy for cancer at the top of his leg and we shared something of his concern, his hopes for the future and his worries – he has a 9 year old son. We tentatively (in quite apologetic terms) offered to pray for him as we parted and discovered he was thrilled to be asked. He dropped us off at the edge of the M6 Toll Road and we prayed for him as he drove into a future that we hope will be good.

Our next lift came from a lorry driver who was actually listening to 5 Live (we had exploited the fact on our hitch hikers signs, they read "Tim and Dave, 5 Live , Charity hike for Liverpool!") The driver was surprised to discover that 5 Live had just phoned us and he was promptly drawn into a live interview as well! As has been the case in all our lifts we explain our 'mission' and found that he was very interested in our journey too.

*We have found agreement with many adults that we have talked to on our journey, that young people are portrayed in the media badly but also genuine concerns about why things go wrong for young people. The driver, Ben, was concerned about schools, exclusion and the use of pupil referral units. Despite the fact that his partner worked in a pupil referral unit he was worried about young people being isolated from society – does it work? Why do they do it? We felt that this man was well in touch with wider issues that young people face and would have made an excellent mentor or friend to young people.*

It was then that Tim got a call from Tim Prew of Bristol Street Motors (Birmingham) who had heard us on 5 Live and organised for Bryn Langford of 'car collection' (Solihull) to collect us from our current lift to take us all the way to Liverpool!

### **Some closing thoughts and reflections**

When you think about the people that you come into contact with do they 'measure up' to some of the dominant narratives that you hear about them? Are 'immigrants' the threat to national security that they are often implied to be? Are young people all the yobs, thugs and vandals that the headlines so often depict them as? Are all football supporters 'hooligans'? Are Daily Mail readers really fascists? An interesting exercise to explore the notion of 'dominant narrative' verses 'local reality' is to compare what you think you know about an issue (e.g. Palestinian – Israeli conflict) with local perspectives on the world wide web (e.g. see <http://bethlehemghetto.blogspot.com/>); we are not attempting in this statement to endorse any particular perspective as being more valid than another – simply to point out that differing perspectives exist and they require the engagement of our critical faculties. Our ability to generalise and speculate are gifts to enable us to attribute meaning, form opinions and speculate about the world around us, however, they also have the two edged capacity to foster dogma, misunderstanding and fear. It seems to us that young people have had a bad press of late and, if our experience on the road is anything to go by, it is time to re-evaluate what we are willing to put up with in terms of generalisations. Perhaps especially those generalisations propagated by the media need challenging if we are to ensure that they are kept in perspective and don't lead to knee jerk attitudes and actions that increase hostility and anger between generations and differing groups. There are undoubtedly factors relating to our journey that have skewed our perspective about young people, however, we have to report that our experience of the young people we met led to nothing but potential friendship, interest and mutual respect, which is a clear contradiction to many contemporary messages about young people that we have seen.

Many of us work and operate in ways that take us away from face to face contact with young people. Our attention and activities are dominated by thousands of perfectly reasonable organisational needs, busy schedules dictate priorities and a multiplicity of differing demands crave our attention and lay claim to priority in our lives. At times it can feel like the human race is just that – a wild chase to the elusive finish line! We would want to argue that time spent listening to young people is critical to maintain some sense of balance in our professional, personal and spiritual life. This kind of 'interpersonal contemplation' has helped us to be clear about our beliefs, has inspired our efforts as leaders and shaped our understanding of personal and organisational priorities. Reflective theological discourse on the road is a must in our opinion! We have also realised that our personal faith often runs the risk of becoming somewhat pedestrian and that it has been good for us to prioritise a time to stop, listen and go out on the occasional limb.

*“Come to the edge,” he said. They said, “We are afraid.” “Come to the edge,” he said. They came. He pushed them... And they flew”  
(Guillaume Apollinaire).*

We would want to endorse the powerful action of seeking to hear someone else's story as being of mutual importance and benefit to young people and adults alike. Some years ago The Children Society ran a campaign about young people that promoted a picture of a slightly 'threatening looking' young man with the caption, 'what he needs is a good ... listening to'! We found young people more than willing to share their stories with us and have felt illuminated by their honesty, candour and wisdom. Many liberation theologians would argue that a key starting point in mission and building church/community is to begin with the experience of those we find ourselves amongst. They argue that simple guiding principles to mission are the three crucial questions: who are you, who am I and who are we? Jose Marins outlines the importance of starting from people's experience and personal stories as church is developed in 'The Church from the Roots' (CAFOD) and whilst we were not attempting to evangelise or build church in our short journey we discovered again the power of connecting our faith to the stories of the people we met. Most young people are simply misunderstood living lives separate from the adult world but just being normal young people and if only we listened and connected more with them we might learn something ourselves about life

Some young people, down to some combination of circumstances and choice, do things they shouldn't and need to take responsibility for their actions. BUT firstly, we all need to take responsibility for the broken society, what we would call a 'non Shalom society', that is a causal factor in which we are all complicit and have a degree of responsibility. Secondly, we met and heard stories about young people who had redeemed their lives and, far from being the once bad always bad stereotype, had found ways to change and become positive people living positive lives. Change is often facilitated by the amazing committed, underpaid or non paid, people we met who spend their lives giving of themselves to young people that others write off and these people were often motivated by a God who commits himself to those of the edge.

We close this publication with our final story and rather appropriately it seems to end where we began by underlining the something of the talent of young people:

*The final group of young people we met were a group who had given up a year of their lives before going to University to do Christian youth work. They talked enthusiastically about how they were being role models to other young people, as well as learning to be a team together. It was an apt end to our journey – a group of young people giving of their time, talent and energy for the sake of others.*

Tim Evans and Dave Wiles

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might make a small contribution to making positive changes for all young people and especially those that are too often left out of church and society.