

Bringing our Young People 'Home'

A brief reflection on hope for the future of Youth Ministry in
the Roman Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba

James Bryant

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to briefly consider the current state of the relationship between the Catholic Parishes in our Diocese and the young people in these communities by firstly reviewing some of the history and recent studies on Church life in our region. Secondly I wish to propose some practical ways of utilizing some of the concepts from this Youth Ministry course¹ in my ministry setting.

Opening reflection

I remember the first time that I ever pondered the incident recorded in Acts 20:7-12². A colleague who was running an opening session for a youth ministry training program invited us to spend time reflecting on this scripture. Now in the big scheme of the scriptures many people may pass this incident almost unnoticed, for myself as a “green” youth ministry coordinator this passage held a revelation. As I read about how poor young Eutychus sat in the back row in a seat that may have offered at least a bit of interest, as this bloke raves at the front of the room to a group of ‘oldies’ who seem to find something quite fascinating, I am transported 2000 years to our modern day church where our young people are sitting on the edges, maybe at the windows trying to get a view of something that might catch their interest. And I read about Eutychus nodding off and I recalled the many young people I have spotted in our congregations who overcome by the drone of a sermon that they will never recall droop their heads in a light snooze and if they are unfortunate they get an elbow in the ribs from an embarrassed parent or knock their nose on the pew in front as they fall forward. Poor Eutychus was a bit unfortunate in his choice of seating and fell a bit further than the pew in front. It is a scene as ancient as our church. And just as the community of 2000 years ago looked at the still body of Eutychus and proclaimed him dead so it seems the majority of older members of our community look around in despair and see our young people sitting with glazed expressions or falling away from the church and they declare “they are dead”.

Now the comparison may not be entirely a completely fair one, from what I have heard and read Paul was a fairly lively and effective preacher and his letters to Timothy show that he had passion and love for the youth of the early church and a desire to mentor and encourage them. This story from Acts however offered me a revelation, ‘this is not new’, this issue of considering and reaching our young people is not a new one. The assumption might be made that with 2000 years of living as church that we would have honed a most effective strategy for reaching our young people. However experience and research tell us otherwise.

Brief review of recent study results

Results of a survey taken during the 2001 National Church Life Survey show a dramatic drop in the number of people attending our weekly Catholic services (around 13 % in the past five years,). Other results from our Diocese in this same survey showed up some concerning facts about the connection of the Local Church with its young people. I was disturbed to note that in the 15 – 18 yr age bracket less than 5% of young people were very satisfied with what was offered for their age group and in the 19 – 25 yr age bracket this dropped to just 3% (Professor Wolfgang L Gritching & Bob Dixon, National Church Life Survey, Report for the Diocese of Toowoomba; (NCLS research, October 2002), 33). More than half our young people in these same groups were dissatisfied, very dissatisfied or unsure about what was offered for them. Another concerning outcome of this study was when 15 -29 year olds were asked about their sense of belonging only 18% of our young people stated that they had a growing sense of belonging. 39% either had declining, no sense, or were unsure of their sense of belonging (Wolfgang and Dixon, NCLS Toowoomba report 2001, 48). We might be tempted in taking comfort in the fact that 43 % of young people had a stable sense of belonging however the survey gave no indication of how great this sense of belonging was.

In John Westerhoffs book on the theory of faith development (John H. Westerhoff, III, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, Revised edition, Morehouse Publishing February 1, 2000) he points to the importance of the primary stage of faith development, ‘Experienced faith’, where a young person learns from the faith actions of others and the following stage of ‘Affiliative Faith’ where a sense of belonging to a faith community is essential. Westerhoff tells us it is important for people to move through these stages before entering phases of ‘Searching faith’ and eventually onto a state of ‘owned faith’. If as part of their faith formation we want our young people to experience a sense of Gods love through our community, then I believe we should be very concerned about this high percentage of young people who seem to be lacking a sense of a reasonable level of care for themselves and their peers. If we take from the results of this survey that a large number of the young Catholics who attend mass in communities in our Diocese are having a limited sense of an experienced and affiliative faith in our communities, then how is this effecting these essential stages of faith development. How can we hope to move our young people onto a stage where they own their faith for themselves when they are not even sure if they belong. We should note also that this survey did not allow for those young people who no longer attended mass regularly, those who may have begun attending with parents at a young age and have “fallen out the window” already. Figures from the 2001 NCLS survey tell us that at the time only an estimated 15% of people identifying themselves as Catholic actually attend mass (J.Bellamy and K.Castle, Occasional Paper three 2001 Church Attendance Estimates, February 2004, Online publication of NCLS research accessed Nov 2004 available from <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?docid=2270>). One encouraging sign in the NCLS Diocesan study was that most adults are not oblivious to these issues, only around 10% of all people were very satisfied with what was being offered for young people in the communities in our Diocese (J.Bellamy and K.Castle, October 2002, 48) The question is what are we doing or should we do with this realisation?

Looking for solutions

History tells us that things have not always been so bleak for our youth. There have been times in our not so distant past where ministry to our young people seems to have been quite effective. In our own Diocese we had a period of many vocations to the priesthood where by most accounts the youth and young adult movements of Young Christian Workers and National Christian Girls Movement under the guidance of the many young priests and religious were really booming and doing significant work in the formation of our young people from the 1940's to 1960's. This was followed by youth group movements such as Antioch and Vision which came to Australia from the United States of America. These movements were driven by parent couples and the young people themselves in cooperation with priests and religious order members. These ministries significantly impacted the lives of hundreds if not thousands of young people in the communities within the Toowoomba Diocese during the late 70's and 80's. Whenever I meet with groups within our communities to discuss youth ministry with people in our communities there are always people there who hark back to these "glory days" and fondly recall the triumphs of these mighty ministries. So can we return to the format of those days?

The quick answer is no. Times have changed dramatically as has our community, numbers of young people in our Seminaries and religious orders have dropped dramatically. At this point in time we have no young people from our Diocese in the Catholic seminary at Banyo in Brisbane. Parents of young people are getting busier, in many cases both parents are employed at least part time to meet the increasing financial burdens. This leaves them with less time to offer to groups like Antioch and Vision. I believe that these ministries were ideal for their time and tailored to the reality of those days and would just not "cut it" in the world of today's youth. There is a lot of research and reading material around which shows us just how vastly different today's young person and their needs are from the young person of 40, 30 or even 10 years ago. William Strauss and Neil Howe are credited with being the ones to come up with the Generational Theory and how it affects our communities. There is quite a good summary of that I found of this theory by Kenneth C. Harper at http://www.trinitysem.edu/journal/harper_k.html. For the sake of this reflection the bottom line is that what has worked for previous generations will not meet the needs of future ones because of the vast differences in society, technology, environment. So the previous 2000 years or so of living as church have not led to the creation of the perfect youth program that will last from generation to generation. So do we bounce from generation to generation hoping that someone comes up with the "secret formula" for reaching the young people of the time? or are there other possibilities that might be applied to all generations? One thing is certain, considering the statistics above we cannot afford to stand idle.

The Theory of a Comprehensive youth ministry has been developed by organisations such as the Center for Youth Ministry Development (CYMD) in the USA. Comprehensive ministry looks beyond 'creating the perfect program', and encourages us to see that youth and young adult groups, while important are just a small part of an effective ministry to young people. Comprehensive Youth Ministry moves us from a mind set that youth ministry is any one particular person or groups responsibility, to the realisation that it is in fact the whole communities responsibility. (Center for Youth Ministry Development, *Youth Works*, Section 3: Youth Ministry Today (Ministry Support Services Australia, 1993)). There is an African proverb that says "it takes a village to raise a child", I believe this is the understanding that we need to move our communities to if we want our youth to flourish. The document 'Effective youth ministry practices in Catholic Parishes – Preliminary Research and Symposium Report' (Thomas East, , Online Publication of the Centre for Youth Ministry Development; accessed November 2004 from <http://secure.cmdnet.org/symposium/Preliminary%20Report%20Findings%20Epdf>) is based on research done on youth ministry in Catholic Parishes in the USA. The research has backed up the hunches that youth ministers such as myself have had for years about what makes ministry to young people effective within a parish. The key findings of the research showed overall that, youth ministry thrives with the support of the whole parish community.

Comprehensive ministry also works in the understanding that our young people are not all the same, they have different needs and lifestyles and so looks at the need to minister to young people in the different "settings" in their lives, Youth Programs, Family, Church Life and Civic Community (in Australia we add Schools as a fifth setting) and the need to use both Gathered and Non-gathered Programs to make the ministry wider reaching. The 'Youth Works' resource created by the CYMD names eight components that should be present in Youth ministry to allow our Young people to take part in the Churches mission. These components are Catechises; Community Life; Evangelisation; Justice, Peace and Service; Leadership Development/Enablement; Pastoral Care/Guidance; Prayer and Worship. Having a wide variety of components in a ministry means that there are more points of entry where a young person may get involved in the life of their Church community. (*Youth Works*, Section 3: Youth Ministry Today (Center for Youth Ministry Development, 1993))

Practical Steps

Comprehensive Youth ministry is certainly a forward thinking model of youth ministry and has lots of exciting potential for the future. However within our setting here in the Diocese of Toowoomba where most of our parishes are struggling to exist let alone do exciting and dynamic things with their youth how, do we present the concept of Comprehensive Youth Ministry without overwhelming people. I believe that there are many people in our parishes who are genuinely concerned about the involvement of young people in the life of the community. Most Parish priests and pastoral leaders that I have worked with tell me that "issue" of young people is among the

top 2 concerns of their communities. However if you present them with the full blown concept of Comprehensive Youth Ministry in the form of a weighty resource such as 'Youth Works' and told a parish that this is what they need to implement to have an effective youth ministry they would laugh at you or throw their hands up in hopelessness. Our lecturer for this course Charlotte McCorquodale gave me quite the insight when she suggested that we see Comprehensive Youth Ministry as a vision or ideal to aim for rather than a model to implement. I think that this makes the concept much more realistic for our parishes, most of which are tiny rural communities with less than a handful of attending youth and young adults. What our Parishes need is a realistic starting point, something like some basic guidelines or principals for creating an environment within their communities which is more inviting for young people.

The "Effective youth ministry practices in Catholic Parishes" report mentioned above came up with a list of key findings in parishes which had highly effective youth ministries, these were;

- Youth feel at home and are genuinely known and liked
- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish
- Youth share in leadership and decision making in the parish; youth also have opportunities to witness to their faith with peers, children and adults.
- The involvement of youth is encouraged and affirmed.
- Parish staff and leadership are supportive of youth ministry and youth involvement."

(Thomas East, *Effective youth ministry practices*)

These are some basic principles that can be implemented in all parishes at some level. Many of these findings are based around young peoples need to feel that they belong to, that they are a valued and vital part of the Church community. How are Parish priests and Pastoral teams challenging their community members to consider their role in reaching out to their young people, to build genuine and meaningful relationships with them. How are the needs of young people being considered in their communities during parish planning. How are we encouraging and affirming our young peoples involvement in the life of the Church community. These are sort of things that our parishes could use as good starting points for developing a healthier ministry to their youth. I have noticed with interest when discussing these means of effective youth ministry with older generations that often the reaction I get is that they are aware that these things are missing from their communities and that they are also things that would make community life more appealing to their own generation. So it is possible that in making our communities a better place for our young people we will end up making them a better place for all.

Conclusion

In Concluding I return to the passage from Acts of the Apostles, I love the line where it says 'Paul bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for there is life in him."' This is such a beautiful loving scene. We need lots of "Pauls" in our communities that can take our young people into their arms and hearts and see the life that still dwells within them. People who can see the potential, the great gift that our young people have to offer our communities and help them bring that to fulfilment. . In his Advent Letter for 2004 to the people of our Diocese, Bishop William Morris encourages us during this season to 'be more aware of Gods plan... to respond courageously and without fear, and to be prophets of hope as we minister to each other'. This is the kind of response we need from the people of our communities if we are to answer the cry of our youth and change the future outlook of our church. Earlier this year a colleague of mine from another church shared with me some articles by the late Mike Yaconelli who used to write the back page reflection of American Magazine 'Youth Worker'. Mike had a lot of very controversial things to say that often shook up the youth ministry world, looking at some of his articles I believe that he was a bit of a modern day prophet for youth workers. He was not Catholic but regardless a lot of what he had to say really spoke to me. I felt the following passage from one of his articles though a bit lengthy was worth putting in as a closing passage as it sums up very nicely some of what I have been reflecting on.

Mostly, church is the place where we can grow old together. And it turns out that growing old together is still the best way to bring lasting results with students. Growing old together is where we teach (and learn from) each other what discipleship means in the everyday world.

I pastor a church that for the last sixteen years hasn't had a youth program (in spite of the fact that I can provide free resources). Nothing. Just church on Sunday morning at ten o'clock where the students had to muddle through a very uncool morning service filled with mistakes, awkward gaps, interruptions, and imperfections. The music? In the language of students...it sucks. We've never had many students in our services, but we've always had some.

And here's the crazy part. The few students we have had over the years? They keep coming back. Most of our students leave town for college or work; but when they are in town they are back in church, usually fighting back the tears. Why?

"It feels like home," they say. "Everyone's so glad to see me. After all these years, I still feel like I belong here. It's like Jesus never left the building."

Somehow, being with a group of diverse people week after week caused a bond to be formed—a family was created, and community happened. The mystery of community became a reality. Community isn't complicated. It's just a group of people who grow old together. They stick with each other through the teenage years, marriage, children, getting old, sick, and finally dying—all the while teaching each other how to follow Christ through the rugged terrain of life.

Maybe the body of Christ is the place where youth ministry was supposed to happen all along.

(Mike Yaconelli, Youth Worker Magazine Sept/October 2003, CCM Communications, Inc. accessed Nov 2004 available from <http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/Yaconelli/idea.php>)

Endnotes

¹ The Course referred to is “Ministry with Young People in the Catholic context”, Centre for Christian Spirituality, Broken Bay Institute, Winter Intensive July 2004. Presented by Dr Charlotte McCorquodale.

² *On the first day of the week, when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and kept on speaking till midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus who was sitting on a window sill was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead. Paul went down, threw himself upon him and said as he embraced him, “don’t be alarmed; there is life in him” Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed. And they took the boy away alive and were immeasurably comforted. Acts 20: 7-12 (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, New American Bible – New Catholic Translation New edition (St Pauls 1995))*

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