



THE **Y** CHURCH REPORT

Avril Baigent
RC Diocese of Northampton

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Shortened Version

Contents

Throughout the text there are quotes from young people giving their opinions on their faith, the Church, and where we should go from here. They are taken from the focus group sessions and the questionnaires, and are exactly as said or written.

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How to use this document

This document is the result of a year's research into youth ministry undertaken for the diocese as a way of planning for the future. It is the shortened version of the fully Church Report, and has gone out to every parish and school in the diocese. We hope that it has reached everyone involved with young people: if you haven't received one, ask your parish priest, or contact Brin on the number below.

This is very much a starting point rather than a set of answers. There are questions all the way through to prompt you to think about your own situation. We are hoping that all those working with children and young people in a parish can come together to discuss the report and work out what their response will be. Parish and deanery pastoral councils also need to have this discussion, as young people are the responsibility of the whole Church, not just a few hard-working volunteers. As Pope John Paul wrote in his Letter for the New Millennium:

Let us go forward in hope! . . . After the enthusiasm of the Jubilee, it is not to a dull everyday routine that we return. On the contrary, if ours has been a genuine pilgrimage, it will have, as it were, stretched our legs for the journey ahead. We need to imitate the zeal of the Apostle Paul: "straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ".

Foreword

Working with young people always has been and always must be central to the Church's mission and task. It is a task that is very different from what it used to be. Our young people are subject to so many social and cultural influences that are far removed from the spiritual and moral values that lie at the heart of the Gospel. Many young people become disillusioned by or disaffected with the Church, but many good things are happening too. There are signs of life, of revival, of a new fidelity and a real desire for a relationship with the Lord, nourished by personal prayer and the sacraments. Cardinal Daneels has said that we need to be with our young people but we also need to help them to swim against the tide.

Avril Baigent's report was commissioned by the diocese to look at Youth Ministry in general and at the situation of the diocese in particular. Avril's report is the fruit of much hard work. She set her findings in the context of a cultural analysis of our present situation. She looked at initiatives and good practice in the diocese and considered what is lacking and what the opportunities are. She also proposes a programme for future work. You will find much in the report that resonates with your own experience. You may also find things you would want to question or explore further. That is part of the purpose of the exercise. It is my hope that we will be enlightened and energised to recognise the gifts of our young people, and to foster them so that they may have life, and have it to the full.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin', written in a cursive style.

Kevin, Bishop of Northampton

Young Catholics Today

“I think if young people were to know and understand more about the Christian faith, and be given the opportunity of a spiritual guider or somebody who they could question, then there would be more young Christians. Those who have not been brought up in the Christian faith are more dubious towards it because the influence of their parents is so great”

Back in the fifties, when the Church first began to recognise the unique value of young people, the culture they lived in was largely Christian. Church-going, family values, and respect for authority were not just Catholic principles, but were taught (and enforced) in the media, in families, in the community and at school. These days, however, the world is a very secular place: shopping has replaced going to church, marriage rates are dropping and the media seems to be pushing at the bounds of morality rather than imposing it (just think about Big Brother!). Young people today (sometimes known as Generation Y) are growing up into a materialistic world that sees the Church as an old-fashioned institution, whose rules of behaviour are just meant to stop them having fun and getting on in life. Pluralism and tolerance are the new virtues, and relationships the basis for morality. ‘Post-modernism’ is often used to describe our culture, meaning a reaction away from reason and authority, and towards freedom, flexibility and open-mindedness.

What do these changes mean for young people?

Choice This dominates every part of a teenager’s life, from the clothes they wear to their sexuality, career and lifestyle. ‘Having it all’ means that expectations are very high, as is the fear of failure – more choice just means more opportunities for getting it wrong. Choice stretches into the spiritual arena too, with young people no longer being content to follow their parents. They want to make their own decisions, and they are looking for something ‘real’ – something that will change their lives.

Uncertainty Although the flexibility of today’s society has meant more freedom and options for many people, there is also a greater sense of insecurity. This affects jobs, relationships and health, and contributes towards drug use, mental illness (10% of children and young people suffer from some sort of mental disorder)¹ and family breakdown. With uncertainty being normal, the idea of truth seems old fashioned and institutional. Absolute truth – the kind that the Church proclaims when it says that Jesus is our saviour, once and for all – is unthinkable for many. However, young people are still seeking answers (see the spells and love potions in girls’ magazines) and are open to mystery. Uncertainty about faith is not the same as scepticism, and it is up to us to find new ways of proclaiming the Gospel.

‘You are what you have’ People no longer find their identity in their family, region, class or religion. Instead, young people in particular are looking to themselves: their friends, their lifestyle and their possessions. They are constantly being bombarded by advertising offering them popularity, sexual prowess, success, money and good looks. No wonder they are bored when they come to church – they are used to being courted and entertained. Those who want to opt out of this world of false promises go looking for reality: levels of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and suicide attempts are all rising;² alternatively they get involved in service projects, fundraising for charities, or single issue and direct action groups.

‘If it feels good, it must be right’ As people no longer see things as being fundamentally right or wrong (instead, we say “it depends”), they are thrown back on their own resources to make moral decisions. Because relationships are very important, notions of morality focus on the effects on other people, and it is common to hear people say “it doesn’t hurt anyone”. At the same time, people are very sensitive to hypocrisy. They see a huge gap between the teaching of the Church, particularly on sex and marriage, and a community which has no lower a divorce rate than the national average. Our challenge as a Church is to re-

present Christian morality in a way that young people can understand, and that speaks to their own experience.

What are the main problems for the Church in presenting the Gospel to Generation Y? What is our main message? What do young people need from the Church, and what does the Church need from them?

The Northampton Diocese Youth Survey

287 surveys were filled in by young people aged 11-18 in Catholic schools and parishes across the diocese. The survey was based on a much larger one (Reaching And Keeping Early Secondaries - RAKES - completed by 2000 young people) thus giving us a comparison, and looked at a wide variety of subjects including what they liked to do in their spare time, how they thought about themselves, what they believed in, and what they thought of church and church based activities. There were also eight focus groups, which allowed small groups of young people to explore some of these issues further. The information we have gained is very valuable in helping us to see what we have been doing wrong, and how we can plan for the future.

The cultural world of young people

Important aspects include:

- Technology – over half the young people surveyed are on the internet every day or more than once a day. Well over three-quarters of them have their own computers, and carry a mobile phone. Two-thirds have a games console and a personal CD player and half had their own DVD player. This all adds up to intense, largely solitary entertainment – few of them, for example, watched TV with their families.
- Fast turnover – trends have short lives and companies encourage this. Think about the rush to buy this year's 'must-have' Christmas present that happens every year – Playstations, Buzz Lightyear, Tamagotchies, Furbies.
- Multi-media – listening to music while chatting on the phone while reading email while getting ready to go out . . . No wonder they get bored so easily!
- Friends and family are very important. This came out very strongly in the report. The young people in the survey largely saw their homes as places where they felt loved and secure; trusted their parents more than anyone else; and hoped that others saw them as a good laugh and a good friend. The results for these were higher than in the larger survey – they are particularly important for young Catholics.
- They are practical, if not pragmatic when it comes to making choices, asking "what am I getting out of this?". The answer can be anything from a good laugh to an addition to the CV, but there does need to be an answer. They are not interested in activities for the sake of them, but want to *do* something.
- Friends are also important when it comes to doing activities and attending clubs. The young people were more likely to take part in something, whether it be helping others, going to church or belonging to a group, if they could do it with their friends. This is an obvious but often overlooked fact.

“[belonging to a group] helps, for me, I get to meet more people, which makes me sometimes on a Sunday, it makes me wanna go, cos if I'm really tired and I can't be bothered and my mum says 'get up' I know I've got my friends there, and it's like, yeah, keeps me going”



- Caring came out strongly as an important value. They saw themselves as caring, they were attracted to church by caring people, and two-thirds of them were actively involved in helping other people near where they live. This would explain why Youth SVP and other service projects are attracting young people who don't come to 'church' groups.

There was a big split between the young people in the parishes who filled in the forms, and those in the schools. Our parishes are attracting a much higher proportion of middle class teenagers than are in the schools. It was also the case that those attending parish groups tended to be the same as those going to Mass. And the majority of the young people in the parishes were going to church with both of their parents. This means that we are not reaching a huge proportion of our young people who are not middle class, not already going to Mass, or who don't have Mass-going parents. Of course we must nurture those faithful teenagers. But we also have a responsibility to be reaching out beyond our parish communities.

Think about what impact each of the points here has on your ministry to young people (for example, how do we cope with the trends in youth culture that disappear as fast as they arise, and make young people fickle? How do we deal with such rapid change?) What challenges do they give us for the future? Do they suggest any new projects or directions for your parish/school?

The faith world of young people

Recent research³ done on the Christian faith of young people broadly divides them into three different groups:

- a) Those with high levels of Christian faith have a close, personal relationship with God. It is a strong faith that recognises absolute ideas of right and wrong, and gives meaning and direction to their lives. However it is also dependent on having a close friend or member of their family who shares their faith. We can say that there is a fair number of these young people in our diocese. The question is, what are we doing to nurture them?
- b) Those in the medium group tend to believe in the more comfortable aspects of Christianity (God, prayer, heaven) and also hold what might be called common beliefs (horoscopes, luck, destiny). The medium group would account for the surprising number of the young people surveyed who said they believed in reincarnation. This group are particularly dependent on their family and friends for their faith – this means that if their circumstances change (families break up, they move away from home) their faith may well not survive. Nearly all those surveyed said that they believe in God, and nearly half pray every day. This might give us cause for complacency. But there is also a much lower number believing in Jesus as the Son of God, or as their Saviour. Therefore we can see that the majority of our young people in this diocese have an undeveloped faith. They are spiritual people, but see the Church as being utterly irrelevant to their faith. They also don't really see Christianity as being important. Our challenge is to take both their faith and their dislike of church seriously, and to work out how to reach them.
- c) The group with low levels of faith tend to be very scientific in their approach, and to dismiss things that cannot be proved. They dislike ideas of mystery, and suspect that someone 'made it up'. They are resistant to all kinds of faith except for some residual common beliefs in luck or fate. This is a smaller group than the other two, but requires a different approach.

“I have been able to make my own decisions about what I believe, making me ‘genuine’ rather than forced to believe. . . my faith is central to everything”

“I do believe in God and I do believe in miracles . . . I never pray, but I did pray twice to ask him to help me and he did, I don't know if it's him, but that's what happened”

“cheer up – no seriously, like, cos church it’s like, you go into church and it’s half way through the service and you look round and no one’s smiling, they’re all depressed . . . we’re in church and I see like about fifty people all looking at their watches, when’s this going to be over, basically”

What all these young people had in common, however, was their experience of church. No matter which group they are in, they are, almost without exception, bored – not so much wanting to be entertained as turned off, and shut out. They have no way of accessing it. The readings are too long and complicated, preaching either goes over their heads or patronises them, the music is dull and dreary, and they are locked into their pews without any way of expressing themselves. When asked what they would like, time and time again they answered “gospel music”. Closer questioning revealed that they felt that this is joyful, happy music, that people smile when they sing, that everyone joins in, that it appeals to all generations, and that it is basically a lot more fun. They want to see the people around them looking as if they are having a religious experience – as if it means something to them. Other suggestions they made include more teaching, particularly in the homily, and more stories; better music generally (and more people singing!); more young people participating; and a better understanding of what is going on. All of this explains why we have decided to make the liturgy a major part of our strategy, and why this should be a priority for all parishes and schools.

Outside church, what do young people want? Not necessarily youth groups – this was particularly the case for older teens, who felt that they have grown out of these groups, which they see as rather ‘naff’ anyway. It was mainly those aged up to 12-13 who were interested in a purely social group. Others wanted to use their skills – sports, drama, music – or to contribute something practical. They were also interested in spiritual input – they genuinely want to know more about their faith. A later chapter will show the ways some of the parishes in the diocese are meeting these challenges. What was very clear, however, is that the majority of parishes are not offering young people what they want, and so are missing out on that potential.

How do we take account of the different kinds of faith among our young people? What provision do we make to help them to grow? What do we need to change in order to make it more attractive to them?

Conclusions

“they go on about all these psalms and that, it’s just chat, it’s like, what are you talking about?”

The way that teenagers see the world today is very different even from those in their twenties. Therefore, when the Church tries to communicate with young people, it often misses the mark because it does not understand how the message comes across. This is why young leaders are so important, and why the various youth mission teams are very effective. They understand what the particular concerns of adolescents are, and can explain the faith in ways they can understand. As a Church, what priority do we place on helping our young people to live as Christians in their world?



Declining

In common with all the mainstream denominations, the Catholic Church has a serious problem of declining numbers in this country. Baptisms have dropped by a half since their high point of 1965; marriages by two-thirds in the same period.⁴ Mass attendance in England has dropped from the 1960 high point of 1,869,665 to 1,041,728 in 2000.⁵ Only 26 priests were ordained in England and Wales in the twelve months between September 1999 and September 2000. A picture of doom and gloom? If we are counting numbers, then yes. But over the same period, Catholic lay people have been encouraged to read the Bible and learn about their faith; they are now much more active in their parishes in many different ways; relationships with other churches are improving; Catholic charities are working effectively and well in lots of different areas. However, if we do not act now – radically and successfully – to stop the drift of young people in particular from the Church, the reality is that Catholicism in England will be reduced to a tiny number of old faithfuls within a generation or two.

Assimilating

“When people see you going to a Catholic school, they think you’re a goody-goody”

Every adult born before a certain date remembers the ‘old days’ when Catholicism was not just a faith, but a culture and lifestyle. Fish on Fridays, no breakfast before Mass, large families: all these were recognisable signs of ‘being a Catholic’. Over the past forty years, however, Catholics have gradually blended in to the general population. As immigrant families from Ireland, Poland, Italy and across the world have settled down, they have become like the rest of the British population: more wealthy, more middle-class, better educated as a whole. But for young people, the only distinctive factors about Catholicism are that there are rules that stop them having fun, and that people pick on them for going to Mass. It is not a very attractive picture! We have to work out what the Church is offering young people, and how to present it in a way that makes sense to them.

A post-modern Church?

“they make them come across as rules, not like what we’re supposed to believe, basically, you’re not to have sex before marriage and not supposed to use contraception . . . they don’t explain it, they just say ‘oh, you’re not to do that, you’re not to do that’”

The Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s, led to a different way of seeing the Church. Theologians started talking about “a pilgrim people” rather than “the rock of ages”. The image of the Church as the people of God on a journey, having different experiences but all heading the same way is a much more ‘post-modern’ one than that of a ‘rock’, never changing and complete in itself. But how far can we see this in our local communities, and what would a post-modern Church – a Church for today’s culture – look like?

Relationships not rules Jesus always concentrated on making relationships with the people around him, getting to know their deepest needs. In him, we have a perfect model of ministry, but one which we forget in favour of shortcuts. It takes time to build a relationship with someone; it is much quicker just to tell them what the rules are. We speak about people who “belonged before they believed”, or that faith is “caught, not taught”. These are terrible clichés, but express a real truth: that people tend to be attracted by a loving and enthusiastic community, rather than by doctrine. This applies to young people above all. However, the Church still needs rules and doctrines, and a post-modern church would have to work out how it passed these on to an uninterested congregation.

On Mass outside, in Malta: "it didn't take very long, but he got straight to the point, the sermon was good, he told a story . . . there was a nice nun, she smiled, everyone was smiling"

"after church [here] you can sit in the club and start talking but other churches don't have that . . . other churches you just go there and you just walk out"

Story-telling Again, this is a technique that Jesus used very skilfully in communicating with those around him. The parables are simple stories, using everyday situations (the housewife losing her money, the widow demanding justice, the sower going out to the fields) but which often have a twist at the end. In the story of the prodigal son, just as we are getting all misty eyed over the reunion between father and child, in steps the finger-wagging older son, the worst personification of a hard-working morally upright person (me?) on a bad day. Rather than just telling us to be good, and be nice, Jesus is able to get over a very complicated situation which forces us to look again at ourselves and our reaction to the characters. This very ancient technique is popular again today, as everything from the news, sport and adverts to history and science uses the 'human angle'. Stories are especially important at communicating faith, because they allow for doubt and mystery – two more essential aspects of the post-modern world.

Worship The secular world is getting into candles, incense, and chant at the same time as these are disappearing from our churches. As we watch more and more TV (which is dramatic, colourful and ever-changing), it becomes harder for people to concentrate at church. This is because we do not use our other senses or our bodies very much in our worship. A flexible liturgy (the options are there at the moment) would also take into account the seasons of the year, the gifts and experiences of the community, and that particular celebration. In this way, church could never be 'boring', as it would be different every time, within the current structure.

Small groups In the post-modern world, we are all looking to belong, but don't necessarily want to commit ourselves! The only way to get round this difficulty is to have a fluid number of groups in a parish with particular gifts that come together for specific tasks, and then disband. In this way, someone could help with the youth group barbeque without worrying that they'd have to come along every Friday night after that. Small groups also give people a way into a community: they can't possibly relate to 300-1000 people, but can make friends with the ten in the prayer group, or the parents who help with children's liturgy. Without regular shake-ups, though, groups can get stale and clique-y. However, in an atmosphere where groups flourish and wither and new ones spring up, people get to know one another, local needs can be met, and it is easier to start new projects. Cardinal Murphy O'Connor said:

Basic communities can be the source of new inspiration, of new hope and new evangelisation for the Church of the future.⁶

Conclusions

Some of the ideas here are already happening in our parishes – after all, the people running groups are living in a post-modern culture too. Some ideas may be regarded as unsuitable for the Church. However, thinking about how things might be different – how they might relate to young people better – gives us the freedom to look at our communities again. How can we move forward in an uncertain time?

Young people are asking "Why should I go to a church that is largely old and middle age people, doesn't practise what it preaches and doesn't give a 'real' experience of God/community?" How we can answer them?



Youth Ministry Today

In working out what the strategy for our diocese could look like, it was very helpful to look at other dioceses and denominations to see how they do youth ministry. Even within the Catholic church in England the range is very wide: some dioceses have quite a large staff, while in others there is just one person responsible for youth ministry. Movements and communities within the Catholic Church contribute some of the leading edge youth ministry, while in other denominations there is a much greater commitment to paid youth work. It was also useful to see how two dioceses worked in the States, giving a very different perspective.

In general, Catholic youth ministry in this country tends to depend on diocesan staff, schools, and volunteers in parishes. There are several problems with this structure:

- If youth ministry is about relationships, then it also has to be based around how many people one person can have a relationship with. Diocesan staff cannot make relationships with all the young people in a diocese, or even all the volunteers.
- Catholic schools are not primarily about evangelising young people, but rather educating them within a Catholic environment. They are supportive of existing faith, but staff do not have the time (or necessarily the skills) to spend nurturing new faith. Chaplains have more scope for this, but have a very big task in some of our large secondaries with over a thousand pupils. Parents have traditionally introduced their children to the faith, but if this is not happening now, it is unfair to expect schools to pick this up with no extra resources. Parishes and schools need to work closely together on this issue, and support each other, working out what each can offer to the other.
- Our volunteers tend to be parents (and as such, are already busy juggling work, home and children), and are often involved in helping at several groups. According to the survey done in the parishes, the main reason for activities stopping is leaders leaving. There is a terrible culture of over-using people which makes volunteering less attractive to those considering it: if your previous youth leader got burnt out through dedication and managing with too few helpers, who else will take that role on, and risk the same happening to them?

We can sum up our current situation by saying that there are too few people at every level, and that those who are working with our young people are often too busy to work with one another. This is not only the case with parishes and schools, but also with parishes working together, and Catholic churches working with those of a different denomination. If, however, we make youth ministry a priority, then joint projects become an obvious solution, because they make the most of the limited resources we have.

Think about your situation. Who is working with your young people? Does it all depend on one or two very committed people – and what would happen if they moved away or couldn't continue? Can you encourage others to get involved by coming along occasionally – say once a month? Think outside the usual group of volunteers – are there people with particular skills, say with computers, cars, arts and crafts or cooking who could do a session with your group? Who else can you work with locally? – think about other parishes, schools or other groups.

Sacramental programmes

Not only are we under-resourced, however, we are also wasteful of our contact with young people. Nearly all the young Catholics in the survey had made their first communion, and two-thirds had been confirmed. But sacramental programmes tend to presume that the young people they are addressing have a deep, knowledgeable faith, and just need some extra input on, for example, the gifts of the Spirit. We know that this is not the case. We should accept that for many young people these are their first extended encounters with the Church, and perhaps their first opportunity to question their faith in a safe and supportive environment. For parents, too, this is a special time – one when their child may be asking a lot of questions, or want to go to church. What provision do we make for those adults being forced to think about their faith for the first time since their childhood? A sacramental programme based on the needs of the young people and parents would look very different. It is almost common-place to say that there are no young people in the parishes. Over the course of a confirmation programme, however, they will be there, however reluctantly, and we cannot afford to waste that opportunity.

Follow-up to these programmes is just as important. For the year of confirmation or first-communion preparation, that young person is listened to, given opportunities to participate, and treated as an important member of the community. As soon as they have taken that sacramental step, all the attention stops. We wouldn't think much of a friend who treated us like this. For confirmation in particular, there are no clear consequences, and we need to consider what exactly becoming a full member of the community means. What privileges and responsibilities are part of this? (Perhaps our congregations need to think about this too!)

Think about the sacramental programmes in your parish. What are they aiming to do? Are they making the most of the opportunity to reach children, young people and parents? Other than the catechists, who else could be involved in planning this?

Different age groups

“it would be better if I knew more people there, who were about my age group. It would be a lot better if they had like, well, a youth club. We don't have anything like that, it's quite boring”

Surprisingly enough, there are very few groups in the diocese to link first communion and confirmation (only nine in the diocese, with three in Corby deanery, and three in Slough). Other denominations, with their emphasis on 'children's work', tend to have more comprehensive provision, starting with mums-and-toddler groups and working up to young adults. However, in our diocese, and perhaps more generally across the Catholic Church in this country, the majority of the groups are aimed at 11-13 year olds (there are twenty-one of these). These tend to be general social gatherings, with games and outings. The 'church' element is mostly the atmosphere and behaviour expected, with some having prayer during the evening. There are also discussion groups, Youth SVP (more on this later), and occasional socials. Some of the groups in Northampton are affiliated to the Northampton Association of Youth Clubs (the NAYC), and make use of their training days, insurance scheme, and sporting events.

By the time the young people reach 14, they have pretty much given up on church groups, if not church altogether. They no longer require entertainment, except perhaps in the outlying rural parishes, and are looking for something more constructive, either in the form of practical activity (music group, helping with younger groups, fundraising) or in a group that tackles serious faith issues. In other denominations young people of this age are starting to be leaders, and so are encouraged to stay on for a few more years by their involvement. The most successful groups for 14-16s in the diocese combine social time (these teenagers need to know they are not alone in their faith) with solid spiritual content. Both

Turntables (St Gregory's, Northampton) and *Teenlife* (St Joseph's, Gerrards Cross) start with a pizza-and-coke meal, working on the same basis as *Alpha* that eating together builds community. Then they go on to look at subjects such as life issues, the Holy Spirit, or martyrdom in a variety of interesting ways, including video clips, discussion, bible study and speakers. Both of these groups challenge their members to think seriously about what it means to be a Catholic for them, in the 21st century.

Provision for young adults aged 17+ in the diocese is even more scarce. There are really only two or three general groups and a number of *Youth 2000* prayer groups in the 74 parishes.

Are your activities all concentrated around one age group? If you have servers, confirmation and a general youth group, the chances are that mainly 11-13s will be involved with only a sprinkling of others. Is there scope for a post-communion group, an occasional pizza and video night for older teens, or one-off socials?

What are the priorities?

“I do the reading and I'm a Eucharistic minister too. It's far more interesting than just sitting there, having something to do, you're more involved”

Apart from 11-13s, most of what is available to young people is either sacramental programmes, or **involvement in the liturgy** – practically every parish has servers, and many have some young readers or Eucharistic Ministers. And yet, when offered a list of all the different opportunities around, the young people placed these somewhere near the bottom. For those involved in this way, though, (or in a music group, doing bidding prayers, helping with children's liturgy, or welcoming people), it really helped them to get more out of coming to church. Having a job, they felt involved, useful and a lot less bored. So if the roles currently available do not appeal, a wider choice at the Sunday liturgy would involve more young people, and make it much more accessible to all. At one youth Mass recently, three lads did a brilliant rap about life issues.

Easy ways to involve young people include: as welcomers, readers, praying on behalf of the faithful, collecting money, doing the offertory, and as Eucharistic ministers. In addition, they make good servers and members of the music group, can produce interesting dramas, help with the children's liturgy, run the PA and lighting, and express scripture through the creative arts. Get creative! What kind of things could your young people do at Mass on Sunday?

With our groups attracting mainly middle class, church-going young people, we also have to consider **out-reach**. This will vary from area to area, but every group needs to consider what it can do to draw in new members, and how it can actively reach out beyond its usual boundaries. Links between parishes and schools will help this, as will young leaders. One-off open socials are an easy way in, and practical projects will appeal to those nervous about attending a 'church' group.

How does outreach fit into your strategy for youth ministry?

A wider **choice of activities** would attract more young people. And if you are having enough difficulty finding volunteers for one group, let alone a range, then perhaps consider targeting one-off events through the year at different ages, or joining with other churches locally. St Edward's, Milton Keynes, has a flexible programme under the umbrella name *NEDZ*, which includes a half-termly social, short breaks away, involvement in the liturgy, helping with some of the younger groups, and ad hoc sports. At St Edmund Champion's, Hazlemere, there is one group for 11-18s, and so they provide a mix of activities that will appeal to the different ages: open nights, with table tennis and snooker, tend to attract the younger ones; meals out are for 13+; some of the older teens run evenings for the rest of the group from time to time, and there is a monthly youth Mass.

“I went to church with my parents but never really felt part of the community until I went to our youth event and met more people my age. . . Now I am in charge of my own group at the [Saturday] classes and get spotted by the children in and out of church and really feel like I am making a difference and am part of something great”

“I want a drama group and a sports group – rugby. I want to be able to read in church and help more”

If your activities concentrate around sacramental programmes, sports or socials, try adding a Taize night, a fundraising event, a service project, a BBQ, decorating the church at Christmas or Easter, a football tournament or a retreat so that your young people get a mix of experiences. You may even see some new faces.

We are currently using our older teenagers in as **young leaders** only in a very few places. But involving them in this way not only gives those young people a sense of purpose and responsibility, it also keeps programmes fresh and focused on the burning issues of the day. Older teenagers can act as mentors and peer ministers often far more effectively than adult leaders. But their needs must be recognised too, and the young leaders should have the resources available to them to challenge their spirituality, and give them a sense of common identity. Young adult groups are very effective at providing this, but there are very few in the diocese. Either in the summer of 2003 or 2004 the diocese hopes to have a summer young leaders’ training camp.

Do you already have older teenagers helping in any way with your youth ministry? If not, what scope is there for encouraging them to do this? What training and support would they need?

Geographically, too, there are major gaps in youth provision. There are whole deaneries which have virtually nothing going on except sacramental programmes and serving. Rural parishes can find it difficult to get young people along to activities because of transport difficulties and small numbers whilst urban parishes are competing with all the other attractions around. There are beacons of good practice around, but there are large areas of the diocese with little provision for young people.

Each parish has been given a sheet showing all the activities in their deanery by age group. Where are the obvious gaps for your location? What resources do you have for filling them? Is there scope for a deanery plan so that parishes and schools work together towards a comprehensive strategy?

Sports were the most wanted activity among the young people surveyed in the schools; almost half of them wanted to be involved. And where these groups do exist, they are among the largest in the diocese, appealing to teenage lads, in particular, in a way in which little else about church does. Despite this, there are very few parishes offering sports, with St Margaret’s in Luton having two pool teams, St Francis’, Wolverton, having karate classes, and other sporting activities on a more ad-hoc basis.

If you can’t have sports events in the parish, what about a deanery or town summer tournament, or taking over the local sports centre for the day?

- From the list of questions above, work out what you want to prioritise. This will help when working out your aims and objectives.



Mission statement, aims and objectives

As a result of the research done over the past year, the Bishop's Council for Youth decided to adopt a revised version of their mission statement, and develop a set of aims and objectives. Sometimes these kind of documents are only a paper exercise, and never get looked at again once they are completed. And yet, done properly, a mission statement says who or what a particular group is, and what their main responsibility is, stopping them wandering down tempting side streets. Aims are the final destination, and objectives the route markers along the way. In order to be useful, however, they have to be looked at regularly: every time a new programme or event is planned it is necessary to work out how this fits in with the aims, and which of the objectives it is fulfilling. In this way, the work done will be more effective.

The new mission statement for the diocesan youth office is:

The Bishop's Council for Youth supports youth ministry in the diocese of Northampton. In partnership with young people and those that work with them, we actively encourage the personal and spiritual growth of our young people in their relationship with Jesus Christ and each other.

The aims arising from this are:

“The children of today will be the leaders for religion in years to come and should be made to feel welcome and listened to”

1. To empower local church communities in their mission to call young people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. To encourage young people to grow to their full potential, developing a life of prayer and spirituality, so that, rooted in the living tradition of the Church, they can live as disciples in the world today.
3. To enable young people to participate fully in the life of the Catholic community, recognising the intrinsic value of youth and all that it has to offer to the Church.

The Council recognises that it cannot achieve anything without all the workers on the ground – volunteers, teachers, priests – but that all these need support and resources from a diocesan structure. It also recognises that young people have something special and unique to offer to the Church, without which we are all poorer. The core of the aims is to encourage young people to come to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their saviour.

The objectives define the work of the youth office over the coming years:

1. Over the next three years, to provide all those working with young people in the diocese with the tools and motivation to look afresh at their provision for youth ministry, and support them in putting together a plan of action.
2. To run 8 pilot schemes over the next year to assess the best ways of assisting in the implementation of those plans.
3. To provide basic training in youth ministry, integrating child protection training, across the diocese, and to support youth leaders in their ministry.
4. Through diocesan events, conferences and liturgies, to encourage the personal and spiritual growth of young people and to provide opportunities for young Catholics to form friendships, have fun, and develop a sense of belonging.
5. To be advocates for and with young people.
6. To work with other diocesan agencies and other bodies to achieve our aims.

7. To bring together groups with similar aims (for example, different parishes, parishes and schools, diocesan agencies) so that they can work in partnership.
8. To provide the financial and human resources to implement the first year of the strategy, and to research ways of funding the continued implementation of our aims after that.

If you were to do a similar exercise for your youth ministry, what would it look like?

Mission statement: this says who you are and what your main area of responsibility is. Keep it short!

Aims: these define your goal or destination. Don't make them impossible to achieve ("we are aiming for world peace") or too vague ("we aim to work with young people in our parish").

Objectives define the work, and are SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely. You should need to change some of these after a year or two as things move on.

Adding this to all the thinking about your current situation, and what the gaps and priorities are, gives a solid basis for planning for the future.

Strategy

There is no one solution to our situation because there is no single problem. Instead we have a range of factors that are preventing our young people from connecting with the Church: from a suspicion of institutions and rules to poor liturgy and few activities. Therefore, any long-term strategy has to find ways of tackling all the different factors, and will include music and liturgy, sacramental programmes, the role of the schools, volunteers, holistic youth ministry, diocesan events and training.

Our strategy also has to be flexible because every parish and school is in a different situation. The solution for a town-centre church in Slough or Milton Keynes will not be suitable for a rural parish in Northamptonshire; primary schools have different needs from secondaries. Individual communities also vary widely: some are going to find it much easier to get moving with a new plan; others are bruised by their repeated failure to reach their young people; while yet others have very few young people in their congregation. Therefore, rather than coming up with one idea for everyone, we are asking parishes and schools to take a new look at their particular circumstances and make their own plan, supported by the youth office.

Any strategy would need to be:

- Relational – focussing on the needs of young people and youth leaders.
- Holistic – with different kinds of youth ministry appealing in different ways to young people.
- Flexible – reflecting the situation each community finds itself in and open to change over the coming years.
- Creative – able to include the best ideas, even if this means changing our current practice.
- Substantial – demanding a long-term commitment of financial and human resources.
- Mission-oriented – taking the Gospel outside the existing church community.

“Is Christianity relevant to career and life planning?”

In order to support these plans, over the year Sep 2002-Sep 2003, we will be running a series of pilot schemes around the diocese. Each deanery will be asked to consider which they would like to have, and to present a shortlist to the youth office. This will mean that each project will be running in a suitable location.

Local mission teams

At the same time, we will be implementing our most radical project. Rather than one mission team to cover the whole diocese (again, one team just cannot have an ongoing relationship with all our young people), we are hoping to have mini-mission teams in some of our towns. This would begin with one trial centre, based in a vacant presbytery, and would consist of a professional youth worker and team of gap-year volunteers. They would be responsible for building links with schools and parishes, supporting existing groups and starting new ones. They would meet with parish youth leaders to plan on a deanery basis. Each member of the team would have a connection with a specific parish, would support the volunteers in their ministry, and would be present at Mass there regularly, so that relationships made in schools and nurtured at the centre would be carried on in the parish. However, they would not be expected to be responsible for youth ministry in the parishes, being there in a supporting role only. The centre would also be a focus for training volunteers and networking people. We hope to see the first centre opened in the next year or so.

Pilot schemes

1. Volunteer training and support

The Sion community have a vast amount of experience in working with young people, and in training others for this work. From their base in the south of the diocese, they will be providing a basic introduction to youth ministry, covering youth culture and spirituality, youth ministry, and programmes and activities in three sessions. The course will include lots of practical ideas and resources, and will come with a handbook for reference. The final session will cover child protection and health + safety. Led by Virginia Bird, our assistant child protection officer, it is the official child protection training for the diocese, and all those completing it will be registered. The course as a whole will give a basic certificate in youth ministry, and is suitable for all volunteers working with young people. It will also be offered as a professional module for the CCRS, running in Luton this year.

2. Music and liturgy

This pilot scheme would involve the youth project officer working with several churches in a deanery to look at their liturgies, perhaps to put together a small liturgy group, and to work with the musicians:

- An afternoon workshop for the deanery laying out the principles of the liturgy. This will help people to understand the possibilities available.
- Visits to the Masses of participating churches, and a meeting with the priest and interested laity – including young people – to explore current options (some of those present might then become a liturgy committee).
- A meeting with the musicians to look at repertoire and investigate new possibilities.
- A meeting with the liturgy committee, young people and youth leaders to plan a specific celebration.
- A follow up meeting several months later to see how things are going.

*“set up a music group
because I love music
and I really think
many others will enjoy
it also”*



3. Older teen groups

A very successful format has been developed around the diocese involving a powerful combination of pizza and prayer: that is to say, social activities and serious spiritual input. The pilot would entail the project officer meeting with the youth leaders in that deanery to discuss the formula, with a leader of an existing group to give advice. Parishes would have been encouraged to find adults who would be interested in starting such a group well in advance. There would be on-going support of those leaders, providing resources where necessary. If the groups were successful, they could plan to get together for an event, or even a series of these.

4. Confirmation and post-confirmation programmes

This would explore how to make the most out of existing contact with young people. In a workshop format, catechists and youth leaders in the deanery could discuss their current provision, and if possible hear from those parishes with successful programmes. They would think about the purposes of confirmation, and see if their programmes were fulfilling these. Then catechists and youth leaders from each parish could discuss how confirmation fits in with the youth strategy of the parish (or how to write one, if necessary), and think about what changes would need to take place. This could all be done in an afternoon workshop which also had a resources stall, with on-going support and follow-up. The groups would be encouraged to evaluate their programme once it has finished, to look at its effectiveness and plan for the following year.

5. Service

Youth SVP is already taking off around the country, and in the south of the diocese particularly. It emphasises practical ways of helping others, is led by members of the group who are responsible for chasing each other up and encouraging each other, and has a social and prayer aspect too. The groups particularly appeal to older teenagers who still want to be involved in church activities but have grown out of the youth group: membership also looks good on their CV or university entrance form! This pilot would consist of gathering interested parties in the deanery to hear a presentation by Paul Lever, the SVP youth worker. They would then decide what kind of group would be appropriate (a deanery one, or several in parishes, or school groups too), and these would subsequently be looked after by a local group advisor and either Paul himself, or one of his field workers. Like the older teens groups, having more than one group in close proximity opens up all sorts of possibilities for socials and joint events.

6. First Communion and post-communion programmes

In a similar format to the scheme concentrating on confirmation, this would look at how to maximise the effectiveness of communion programmes. Post-communion provision would provide important continuity, and an on-going relationship with the community until confirmation. It would broaden out from the scope of the first communion programme. The workshop would provide an opportunity for youth leaders and catechists to get together in a way that they rarely do, to plan their parish strategy in a holistic way.

7. Sports

This project would involve gathering representatives from parishes and schools to discuss what kind of facilities are around, and what kind of sports could be undertaken. If the deanery were in Northamptonshire, they could take advantage of the excellent facilities offered by the Northampton Association of Youth Clubs. Sports could take the form of a one-off day for the deanery, a summer event or an on-going league. However, it would also be important to explore ways of keeping these groups within the Catholic community, and giving them a Catholic identity.

“Sunday school at our church is really good, we cook, make stuff and go on trips. I have loads of friends there. . . I think my church is very sociable and that is a big reason why I come”



This could be done through an emphasis on good sportsmanship, a prayer said together before playing, or discussions on forgiveness and fair play as part of the team tactics.

Other aspects

Prayer

We will be committing ourselves to doing God's work in a new and risky way. It is essential, therefore that we galvanise the diocese to pray for these projects. Therefore, we will be inviting young people to send in their prayers, with the chosen one being printed and distributed across the diocese. This is something that all groups in every parish can do: from the Catholic Mothers' League to the toddler group.

Conference

Our conference on Saturday 26th October is an opportunity for young people and youth leaders to gather together, discuss the report, and hear from some of our local 'stars'. In the afternoon, there will be workshops concentrating on different aspects of young people and the Mass, including creative arts, music, drama, dance, setting up and running a PA system, using visuals, justice and peace issues, teenage spirituality and "what is good liturgy". The day will end with Mass bringing all this together. Jo Boyce and Aidan Pepper from CJM music will be leading our worship, and there will be book and music resources on sale as well. All are welcome!

School-parish links

The Episcopal Vicar for Religious Education is planning a series of meetings around the diocese to discuss the future of Catholic schools. The youth ministry project officer has been invited to speak at these meetings, ensuring that youth ministry and parish-school links are an important part of the agenda. From these meetings, it is hoped that local commissions will write a strategy for their area, looking at the way forward. In this way, deanery events, school-parish partnerships, or closer relationships might develop; at the very least, there will be better communication.

Youth ministry networks

A common complaint of our youth leaders is that they often feel unsupported and under-resourced in their work. Therefore, we are suggesting that deanery groups of youth leaders and catechists get together for prayer, networking, mutual support and new ideas. The key catechists are changing their structure to meet in this way, and would welcome others coming along. An email group would build community and help people out, as they could exchange information such as where to take a group on retreat or if anyone has good ideas for a session on drugs or peer pressure; could advertise their event; and could find out whether another parish would like to join up with them to make up the numbers for a SPEC retreat. We hope to launch an email group at the conference.

Youth leadership camp

A week-long training camp (run jointly with the Sion community) would provide the skills and confidence needed by young people if they are going to take on positions of leadership. We would hope to run this in the summer of 2003/4.

Communications strategy review

This would look at the current newsletter of the youth office "DYSpatches", our web-site, email facilities and other ways of communicating. A new web-site could have an events section, photos sent in from groups around the diocese, documents to download, and the latest news and resources.

Conclusions

*“Whenever I need help
or am in need, holy
forces get me through it
all the time.”*

This report is not a static document, but rather a living vision of how things could be in the Diocese of Northampton. The next few years will be an exciting time of change as local groups make new plans, and the youth office begins to support them. A well-thought-out strategy will enable local and diocesan structures to work together to make the most of all that we have.

This will be a growing process for our diocese. It will not all go smoothly, and not everything we try will succeed. There is a great deal of work to be done, and a growing sense of urgency about doing it. Nevertheless, this report is the first step along an exhilarating road – who knows where the Lord is leading us?

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under the sun.
(Eccl 3:1)*

Now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2).

- 1 *The mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain*, Office of National Statistics, London, 2000, p22
- 2 A recent study by the Samaritans showed that as many as 24,000 young people a year are attempting suicide or harming themselves. Leader, *The Guardian*, Thursday December 27, 2001
- 3 Sylvia Collins (1997), *Young people's faith in late modernity*, unpublished Phd, University of Surrey, Guildford, summarised in Sylvia Collins (1999), 'Immanent faith: young people in late modernity' in Leslie J Francis ed. *Sociology, theology and the curriculum*, London, Cassel
- 4 Table 8.8, *UK Christian Handbook: religious trends 2000-2001, no 2*, ed Peter Brierley (1999), Christian Research, London
- 5 1960 figures are from *UK Christian Handbook*, and 2000 figures from *Catholic Directory* as figures after 1998 in the *Handbook* are estimates based on trends.
- 6 Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, addressing the National Council of Priests in 2001. Full text online at <http://www.westminsterdiocese.org.uk/arch/>