



# Faith in young people



Challenges and opportunities  
for youth ministry in the  
Diocese of St Albans

THE  
YOUTHSCAPE  
CENTRE FOR  
**RESEARCH**

January 2021



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# About this research

In 2019, the Youthscape Centre for Research was commissioned by the Diocese of St Albans to carry out research to establish the scale and scope of youth work in the Diocese and to identify the challenges and opportunities facing churches.

Inevitably the COVID-19 pandemic has created some significant challenges; not only for carrying out the research, but also for churches themselves in sustaining their relationships with young people. While acknowledging the impact of the pandemic, this report focuses on the wider context, challenges and opportunities.

The findings are drawn from a survey and focus groups conducted with clergy over the Spring and Summer of 2020. Surveys were completed by 101 people, representing 188 churches (46% of the Diocese). In addition, 108 people took part in focus groups, that were hosted by 17 of the 20 Deaneries. We also held two focus groups for volunteer and employed youth workers, with eight participants.

Our other major data source was Statistics for Mission returns for the Diocese between 2015 and 2018. These data sets were integrated with our own survey, to enable us to undertake secondary analysis and a variety of statistical tests.

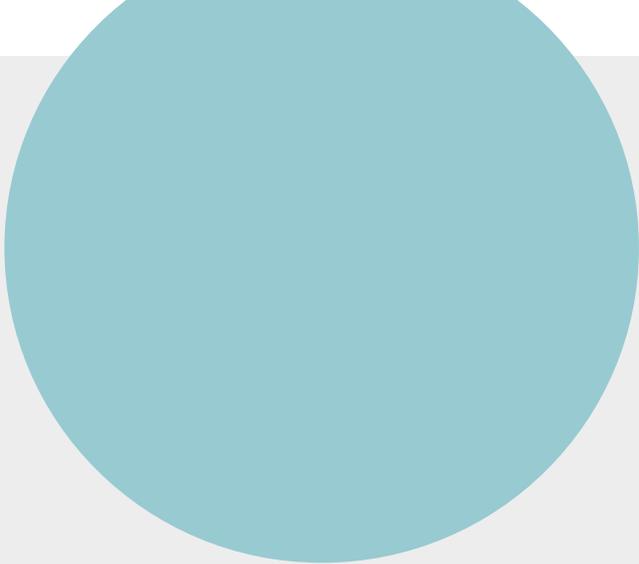
In building our research sample we sought to reflect the diversity of church contexts, including rural, urban and suburban parishes as well as different traditions within the Church of England. Nearly three quarters of survey responses (72%) were on behalf of Benefices.

**Dr Lucie Shuker**  
Director of the Youthscape Centre for Research

## Notes

All quotes in this report are taken from the survey or focus groups. The study was approved by Youthscape's Ethics Advisory Board. Terms used are as follows:

- **Children:** 0-10-year olds
- **Young people:** 11-17-year olds
- **Children and young people:** 0-17-year olds, or in the case of Statistics for Mission data, 0-15-year olds



# Foreword

This important research was conducted in a year like no other, during a global pandemic. Plans had to be adapted quickly in light of new circumstances, like so many other aspects of life, work and ministry in 2020. Youth ministry over the past twelve months has needed to adapt as well. The demanding events of successive lockdowns and restrictions have presented numerous challenges and opportunities, and engagement with young people through groups, clubs and worship has not been possible in the usual ways. Through the tremendous creativity and dedication of leaders and volunteers across the Diocese, many churches have continued to help young people to stay connected, to grow in their faith in Christ and to express this in ministry and service.

However, as the report demonstrates, there is a great deal to do to ensure that youth work flourishes in our communities in the future.

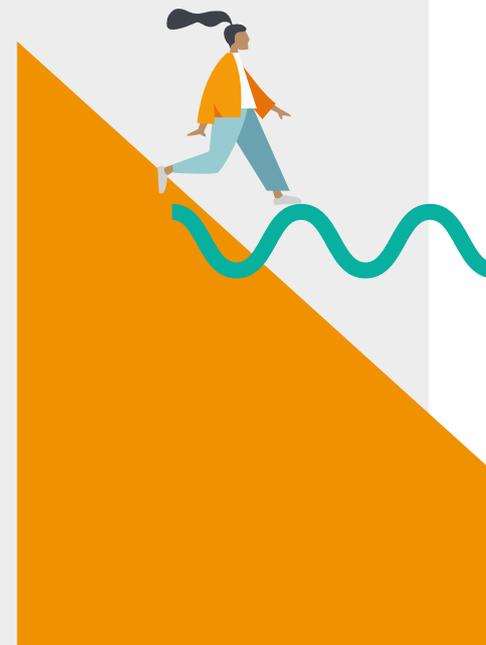
Our children and young people need the love and care that the church can provide during and after this difficult period. Lockdown, disrupted learning, pressures of digital engagement, financial difficulties, strained relationships, limited job opportunities and mental health issues are just some of the challenges our young people are up against as a result of the pandemic.

I would suggest that the greatest gift we can offer to our young people at the moment is the love of Christ shown in our listening, care and support, which will enable them to see for themselves where God is at work for good in and through the world they inhabit. As the title of this report suggests, the faith of young people requires that we have faith in young people.

Rarely in history has there been a more important time to do just that. We must show faith in our young people by living God's love for them in the months and years ahead and introducing them to the person and gospel of Christ so that they can choose to follow Him through this tough period and beyond through the whole of their lives, and to take their place as members of his church.

I whole heartedly commend this excellent research and report to you, which has been conducted with great integrity and care by the Youthscape team. It is only by honestly and fully understanding the true picture of youth ministry across the Diocese that we will be able to work together, with God's inspiration and strength, to face the challenges and opportunities ahead.

**Revd Canon Tim Lomax**



# Summary of Findings



- 1** Most churches are in a trajectory of decline when it comes to the participation of children and young people in the church. At the current rate, the average Sunday attendance of 0-15 year olds in the Diocese would be zero in just ten years time. This trajectory is highly likely to accelerate as a consequence of COVID-19.
- 2** Most churches are at the point where they have few or no young people attending services. They are often caught in a cycle of decline in engaging young people which is difficult to interrupt.
- 3** There is much greater focus on work with children than young people across the Diocese. Without the development of youth provision many of these children are unlikely to stay connected to churches when they reach adolescence.
- 4** Less than a third of churches offer any kind of regular youth activity and youth groups are no longer the main way that churches provide support to or engage with teenagers.
- 5** Youth-focused activity in churches is mostly led by small numbers of volunteers. There are few paid workers. Where there is someone with responsibility for young people (voluntary or paid) clergy are more likely to prioritise youth work and to feel equipped to reach young people.
- 6** Less than half the churches surveyed actively partner with parents to support young people's discipleship.
- 7** Confidence and hope about growing work with young people are much higher among clergy than their sense they have the right resources and skills, with only a quarter feeling equipped to engage positively with young people.
- 8** Congregants and clergy encounter young people in a range of ways outside formal church activities. But few churches create ways to grow these contacts into relationships, or build pathways to faith.
- 9** There are opportunities for every church to engage with youth ministry, regardless of their circumstances.
- 10** Moving forward, clergy stress the need for a renewed confidence in the relevance of the gospel for young people. They also identify a need for more partnerships, whole church ministry, openness to change and a need to look beyond Sunday service attendance.



**Part one:**

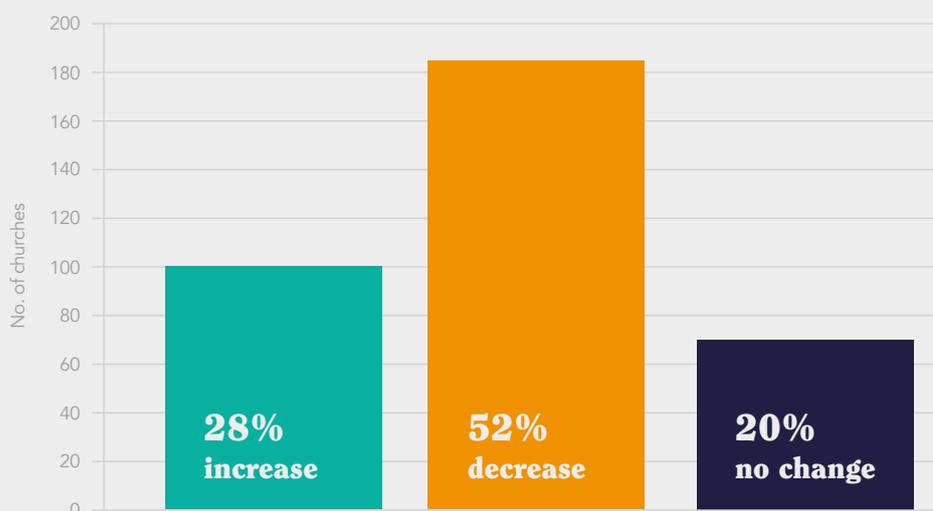
# The big picture

Most churches are in a trajectory of decline when it comes to the participation of children and young people in the church.

Just over half of all churches (52%) saw a reduction in the average weekly attendance of 0-15-year olds between 2015-2018 while a further 20% did not have any children and young people to start with.<sup>1</sup>



1. These figures were 53% (decrease), 26% (increase) and 21% (no change) for average Sunday attendance.



**Figure 1. Number and percentage of churches experiencing an increase, decrease or no change in the average weekly attendance of 0-15 year olds between 2015-2018**

This trajectory is clear, regardless of how participation in church life is measured - attendance at Sunday services or participation in the worshipping community.

There are significantly higher numbers of 0-10 year olds in churches than 11-17 year olds, and children and young people are more likely to be present across the week than at Sunday services.

However, decline is the norm across all ages and measures, with average Sunday attendance of 0-15 year olds falling most quickly, followed by the number of 11-17 year olds in the worshipping community.<sup>2</sup>

	2015	2016	2017	2018	% decline
Average weekly attendance (0-15-year olds)	6187 (4538)*	5399 (4138)	5115 (3988)	5122 (3858)	14.9%
Average Sunday attendance (0-15-year olds)	3966 (3824)	3629 (3523)	3397 (3321)	3178 (3088)	19.3%
Worshipping community (0-10-year olds)	3582	3211	3130	3166	11.6%
Worshipping community (11-17-year olds)	1427	1239	1227	1190	16.6%

**Table 1: Measures of church engagement 2015-2018**

*\*The figures in brackets exclude returns for St Albans Cathedral*

**Worshipping Community:** number of 11-17 year olds attending the church regularly ( at least once a month), including attendance at church services and fresh expressions of Church.

**Average Weekly Attendance:** Average number of 0-15 year olds attending a weekday service across four weeks in October

**Average Sunday Attendance:** Average number of 0-15 year olds attending a Sunday service across four weeks in October

## On the current trajectory, the average Sunday attendance of 0-15 year olds in the Diocese would be zero in just ten years' time.

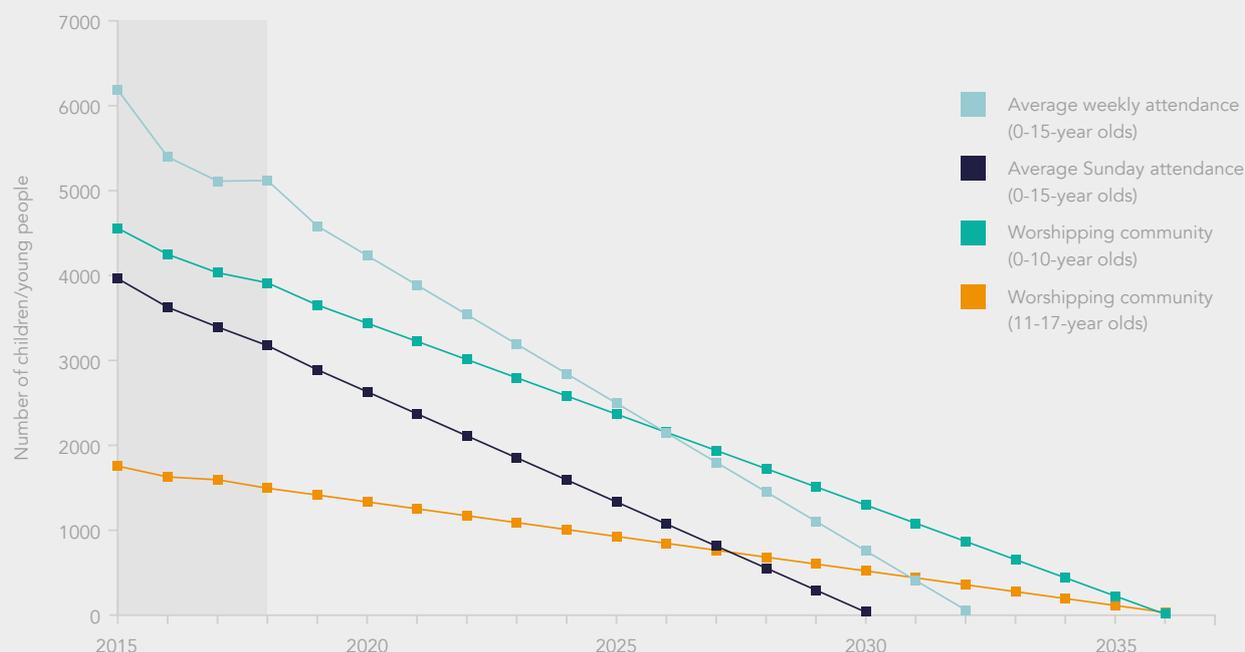


Chart 2: Projection of average change between 2015-2018

This projection is only based on four data points but suggests that there is a significant loss of children and young people from churches, and that time is short for reversing the trend. Even the worshipping community, which appears to be a more resilient context for youth participation, would barely exist in fifteen years, at the current rate.

## This trajectory is highly likely to accelerate as a consequence of COVID-19.

All churches experienced seismic turbulence in 2020, and it is not yet clear what the medium or long-term impact will be. We know the pandemic significantly disrupted existing contact with young people. While some activity moved online successfully, other projects or groups have ceased completely.

It is not clear when it will be safe to run a full range of youth activities, whether churches will want to or be able to run those same activities, or whether young people will want to re-engage with them.

*"I think for them [young people], doing it on the Zoom, is really good, and they enjoy it because I think they actually feel more involved than sitting around a table."*

*"I'm sitting here thinking, 'Gracious I don't even know that we've been in touch*

*with our youth group.' How embarrassing is that? And then I sit here, and I think, 'Wow I wonder how many young people are feeling forgotten at this time?' Not just by us, I'm sure we're not the only church?"*

Where church attendance has been negatively impacted by the virus, we might expect this to reduce the number of volunteers available for youth work, and the resources the church can invest in this area of ministry. Clergy in churches with older congregations are likely to need to prioritise the health of their congregants, which may make this a challenging time to emphasise supporting young people.

Youthscape's own research in Luton showed that by September, churches had lost 38% of the young people they were engaging with at the start of March 2020.<sup>2</sup>

2. In October 2020 we interviewed the 33 churches in the greater Luton area we knew to be actively doing youth ministry, as well as many others. We specifically asked them what youth programmes they ran regularly (at least fortnightly) before COVID-19, during lockdown (March - August), and since schools returned from September onwards.



## Most churches are at the point where they have few or no young people attending services.

Churches of all sizes have been affected by this trend, with more churches now providing support to relatively few children and young people. The number of churches with more than 10 children or young people decreased between 2015-2018, while the number with either zero, or between 1-10 children and young people saw a corresponding increase.

In October 2018, according to Statistics for Mission, the largest group of churches in the Diocese were those that had between 1-10 children and young people (42%) by average weekly attendance, followed by those with zero (24%), those with between 11-24 (21%) and finally those with 25+ (13%).<sup>3</sup>

When looking just at young people, the proportion of churches with 1-10 is even greater. Statistics for Mission 2018 shows that just over half of churches (54%) reported 1-10 11-17 year olds in the worshipping community, while 33% reported having none at all.

	<b>2020 youth survey</b> No. of children (0-10) or young people (11-17) engaged with in a typical month within the congregation	<b>Statistics for Mission 2018</b> No. of children (0-10) and young people (11-17) in the worshipping community
No children or young people	11%	19%
1+ children but no young people	15%	14%
1-10 young people	55%	54%
11-24 young people	16%	9%
25+ young people	3%	4%

**Table 2: Percentage of churches/benefices by numbers of children and young people in the congregation**

In reality there is a significant difference between having one or two and having ten teenagers in the worshipping community, not least the viability of running activities. Of the benefices/churches in our survey with 1-10 teenagers in or across congregations, 65% had between 1-5. Given that 72% of survey responses were for multiple churches, many of these young people are likely to be spread out more thinly across churches than these headlines suggest, making it even harder to run groups.

3. For average Sunday attendance these figures are 1-10 children and young people (44% of churches), zero (26%), 11-24 (22%) and 25+ (8%).

## A fragile context

Decades of secularisation and cultural changes have weakened young people's engagement with churches. Across the Church of England as a whole, average Sunday attendance amongst under 16s fell by 28% between 2008 and 2018 and most churches have no, or very few under 16s attending.<sup>4</sup>

No 'core' of young people to work with was a key challenge described by clergy. As previously identified, most churches in the Diocese do not have enough teenagers to form a viable group. It was not unusual to hear that there were just one, or two and that their attendance was patchy.

*"We don't have many teenagers so joinability is low."*

*"Any group needs at least 6-8 to be successful and lasting - we cannot achieve that."*

## External barriers to youth ministry

Families and young people have busy, secular lives and a cultural gap exists between churches and young people.

Churches have become peripheral to most people's lives, and that space has been filled with other priorities and activities. The challenge of 'competing' with other Sunday activities was frequently raised, usually with the sense that this was an intractable problem.

*"For many, Church has not been part of the family routine for two or three generations. Even if young people do attend, families often schedule busy lives for their teens, focused on education and sport which usually clash with both traditional and flexible church timetables."*

### Part two

# Breaking the cycle

Few young people in church often means no critical mass for a group

Youth work is not prioritised or resourced

Families / young people leave or don't join churches

Patchy, weak or non-existent youth provision

*"I've seen massive cultural shifts in my lifetime, and I feel unequipped to start building some of these bridges, because I feel culturally generations are so, so far apart."*

In many cases, clergy either reported that young people travelled out of the area to attend school, or that a nearby school was not open to the church being involved in school life. This was seen as a significant barrier to outreach to young people.

*"There are no secondary schools in our parish which limits the amount of contact we can have with teenagers."*

Clergy described youth work as a 'difficult' area of ministry. This diagram captures their experiences and how these challenges interact to create a cycle that needs to be disrupted if positive change is to happen.

## Internal barriers to youth ministry

When youth engagement already feels weak churches tend not to prioritise this area of ministry.

By far the greatest challenge described was the lack of committed and energetic volunteers, with a vision for youth work. With much older congregations, this challenge was exacerbated.

*"Our biggest challenge is having people with a heart and commitment to work with young people. Those who have this enthusiasm are already busy and cannot give the time required to build anything that lasts."*

While volunteers were seen as the greatest resource, most churches also lack the funds to consider employing a part or full time worker. Poor facilities and a lack of suitable space to host activities also hampered engagement with young people.

*"I'd love to have a youth worker...the reality is we are incredibly thinly spread as it is, and our focus is very much on doing things like Messy Church and things for the younger age group."*

## Disengagement from mission

In a low-priority/low-resource environment it is hard to recruit volunteers and turn the situation around. As a result, provision for young people in most churches is weak or patchy, and there is unlikely to be a group for young people to join. Youth work provokes a need for theological reflection and cross-cultural mission because young people are at the cutting edge of emerging culture. Where the Church disengages from young people, institutional culture may therefore lean more toward maintaining the status quo.

*"Having been in this Diocese for 25 years, we talk as if culture hasn't changed, we talk as if the world hasn't changed around us, and it is absolutely useless. There's got to be a seismic shift to be able to do what we are required to do, because I want each part of the church to be able to flourish."*

## Part three

# Activity & engagement

### How are churches engaging with young people across the Diocese?

Across the surveys and focus groups we heard about a wide range of events, groups and forms of outreach happening with young people, including the following.

- Outreach/community events (e.g. youth café, drop-in, choc-stop, food nights, sports events, light parties)
- All-age services
- School assemblies
- Mental health support groups
- Duke of Edinburgh/other forms of volunteering or social action events with the church
- Visits to the church building
- Seasonal/occasional services (Easter, Harvest, Remembrance Day, Crib/Christmas service, Taize, school services)
- Forest church
- Meeting young people through weddings, baptisms and funerals
- Events run with local youth charities
- Young people helping with holiday clubs, Messy Church or other activities with younger children
- Youth churches
- Residential camps and day-trips
- Mission trips abroad



## Case studies of outreach to young people

**1. All Saints, Datchworth** runs a regular social event for Year 7s and 8s, designed to create a positive context for friends to meet. The church then established another group called 'Choc and Chat' as a deliberate stepping stone for those interested in discussion and deepening their relationships with each other and the leaders. They also run two or three bigger events a year that these young people are invited to, where they can become slowly involved in church life e.g. giving a presentation during Christian Aid week.

**2. St George's, Toddington** support their local Middle and Upper schools with bereavement and remembrance activities, after the vicar took a funeral for a pupil and found students who needed support having experienced grief and loss. The church also helped to establish a forum called 'Busy Getting Stronger', which brings professionals, teachers and young people together to focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing in the schools, after the community experienced youth suicide.

**3. At St Helens, Wheathampstead**, a family of four (two teenagers, two younger children) started coming to the church on a Saturday, asking if they could charge their phones and using the building as a safe space to hang out. Despite initial concern amongst some congregants, the team got to know the family and invited them to 'Tea-time Church' in the local school. The church has been able to support the older teenagers through some challenging experiences, and they are some of the most regular attendees of the Sunday afternoon service.

**There is much greater focus on work with children than young people across the Diocese. Without the development of youth provision many of these children are unlikely to stay connected to churches when they reach adolescence.**

Our survey shows that churches/benefices are twice as likely to be providing activities for younger children than they are for older teenagers, with activity levels dropping the older they get.

Young children (0-6)	Older Children (7-10)	Young Teenagers (11-14)	Older Teenagers (15-17)
74%	84%	46%	31%

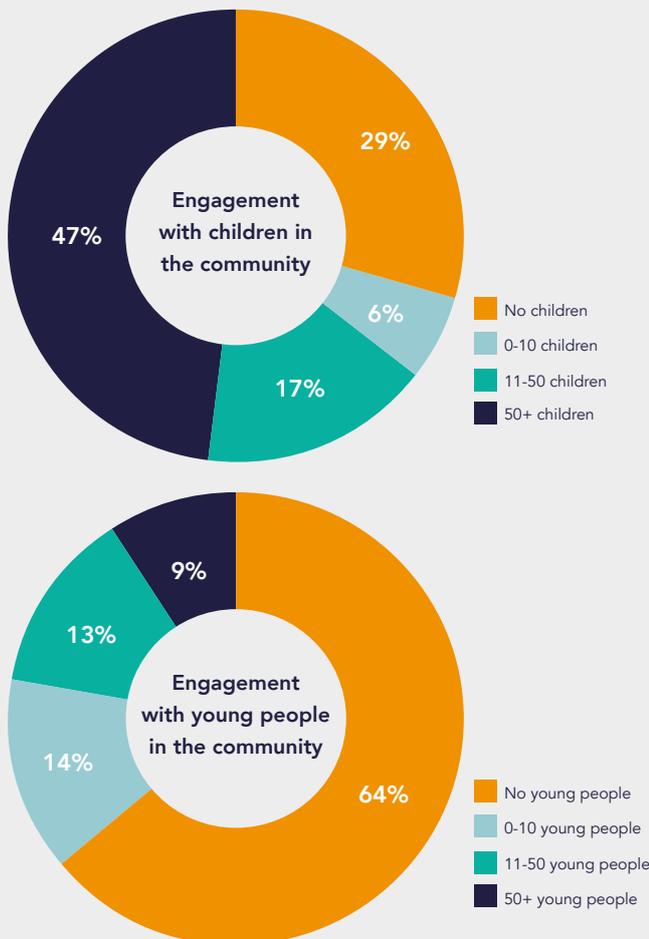
**Chart 3: Percentage of churches/benefices providing at least one activity for different age groups**

Half of all survey respondents<sup>5</sup> (50%) reported that children tend to disengage from church as they approach late childhood. Whether a lack of provision is the cause or effect of this disengagement is not clear, but this may help to explain the low numbers of young people in churches, compared with younger children.

5. Only respondents reporting that they had children in at least one of their congregations were included.

## Churches are also much more confident in their outreach to younger children than teenagers.

While a majority of survey respondents (71%) reported that their church(es) regularly engaged with 0-10-year olds in the wider community, this fell to 36% for 11-17-year olds in the wider community.



**Chart 4: Percentage of churches engaging with different proportions of children and young people in the community**

*“We have volunteers to work with children but not young people.”*

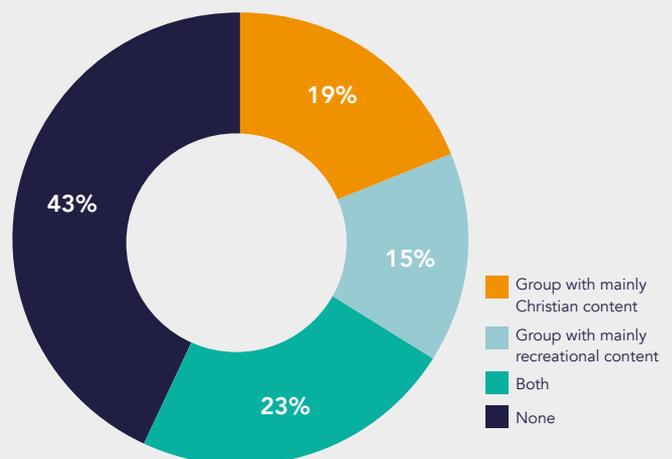
*“When we recently started a youth group as an experiment, we made it not 11-17, but 10-15, starting with the top year of junior school, because that’s where we have the most contacts. We lose them after that if we’re not careful.”*

*“There has not been a teenage youth group for some years. ‘Sunday school’ provision reduced to only primary school age (not pre or post)”*

## Less than a third of churches run regular groups or activity for young people and youth groups are no longer the main way that churches provide support to or engage with teenagers.

Less than a third of churches (30%) reported that they ran any regular groups or projects for 11-17-year olds in October 2018 (Statistics for Mission). The focus groups confirmed that this was the case, with few churches in most deaneries actively engaging with teenagers through schools work, youth groups, chaplaincy or other points of contact.

Only 57% of survey respondents with young people in at least one of their congregations ran a youth group, and youth groups/clubs were referenced less frequently than youth participation in services, school links, special services (e.g. Christmas, or Remembrance) or relationships with uniformed organisations.

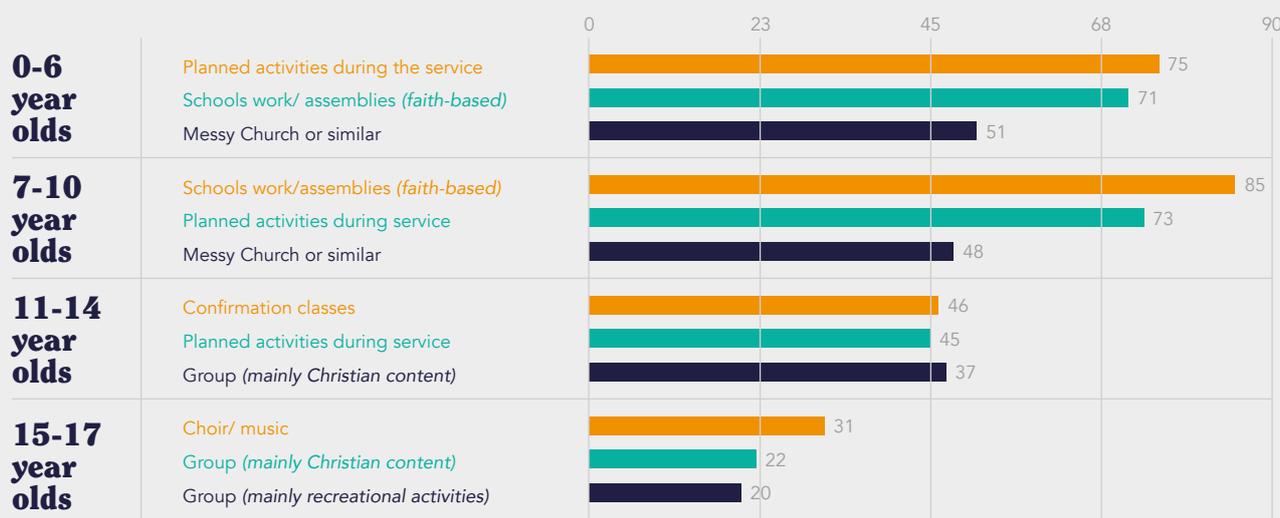


**Chart 5: Percentage of survey respondents whose churches/benefices run a youth group**

Statistical analysis showed that churches running groups with mainly Christian or recreational content were significantly more likely to engage with larger numbers of young people in the community than those that did not run either type of group. While they are not the only model of youth work, youth groups have often been open to young people beyond the congregation. A loss of such groups may be part of the reason only a third of survey respondents (36%) reported that their churches engage regularly with teenagers in the community.



## Other activities have taken the place of the traditional youth group



Number of survey respondents whose churches/benefices provide the activity

**Chart 3: Top three activities provided per age group – 2020 survey**

According to our survey, 13 year olds in the Diocese are more likely to attend a confirmation class or planned activity during a Sunday service, than they are to be part of a youth group. If you're 16, you're more likely to be involved in a choir or church music than be part of a youth group (see Chart 3).

Similarly, young people's participation in services or church life was a more significant theme in focus group discussions than youth groups, perhaps reflecting that this is easier to facilitate when resources are constrained. Of those who responded to the survey, 83% reported that young people had participated in helping to lead a service over the past year. In many churches where teenagers are present, they support children's work and social/outreach activities. There were few mentions of teenagers being involved in PCCs or other decision making bodies.

We know churches have low numbers of young people and difficulties recruiting volunteers, which makes running groups more challenging. If these other activities are more viable in many contexts, then it is important that they are taken seriously as activities that can support faith development, relationship-building and participation in church life.

*“If you take the children’s contribution to the music of the church, be it a traditional choir or whatever, their role in leading worship, take that really seriously, you can watch the growth happen.”*



## Part four

# Leading youth work

Youth-focused activity in churches is mostly led by small numbers of volunteers. There are few paid workers.

In most of the churches/benefices where young people were present in/across the congregation(s), survey respondents reported that there was someone with leadership responsibility for teenagers, and most of these were volunteers.



**48%**  
of churches/benefices  
have someone  
with leadership  
responsibilities  
for youth

**64%**  
of these are  
volunteers

**36%**  
are  
employed





## Where there is someone with responsibility for young people (volunteer or paid) clergy are more likely to prioritise youth work and feel equipped to reach young people.

In churches/benefices with a youth leader and higher numbers of volunteers, clergy were more likely to:

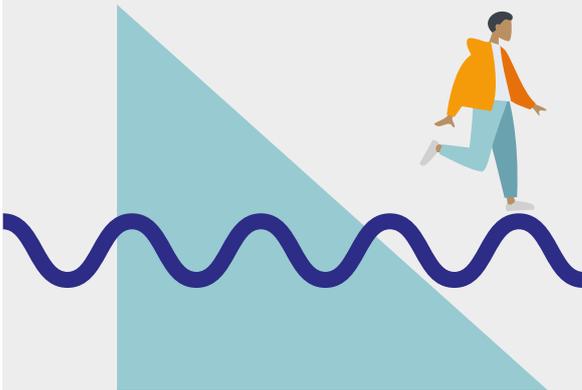
- prioritise youth work
- feel equipped to reach young people and
- perceive their congregations to be confident when it comes to engaging with young people.

Clergy were also more likely to rate youth work as a priority where they engaged with higher numbers of young people in the congregation and/or community.

In churches/benefices with a volunteer or paid youth leader, clergy also felt significantly more hopeful than those that did not. However, there was no significant correlation between how hopeful survey respondents felt and the numbers of children or young people the church/benefice engaged with (within or beyond the congregation) or the number of volunteers supporting young people.

There was no statistical difference between the numbers of young people in congregations where youth leaders were employed, compared with those where leaders are volunteers. However, churches with employed youth leaders were statistically more likely to engage with more young people in the wider community.

*“As a full time employee who volunteers as a youth church leader, I am not able to visit schools which I would dearly love to do to build relationship with groups of young people...”*



Of these voluntary or employed youth leaders, just over half (54%) also had ministry responsibility for families and/or younger children.

In 2018 Statistics for Mission included some youth-focused questions which aids our understanding of who leads engagement with young people. Of the 30% of churches in the Diocese that reported running regular youth work activities in 2018, just over half were led by a volunteer from the worshipping community (52%), with 22% run by clergy, and 17% a youth worker paid by the parish.

Of the churches/benefices in our own survey with teenagers in the congregation 83% had at least one volunteer supporting these young people in some way, though many worked across the younger and older age groups. In total, 233 volunteers were reported to be supporting young people across these 87 churches: an average of 2.7 per church.



Confidence and hope about growing work with young people are much higher among clergy than their sense they have the right resources and skills, with only a quarter feeling equipped to engage positively with young people.

### Less than half the churches surveyed actively partner with parents to support young people's discipleship.

The family context is known to heavily influence the faith development of children and young people, but only 46% of survey respondents (where young people were present in at least one congregation) said their churches actively partner with parents to support young people's discipleship. In focus group conversations intergenerational relationships were described as playing a valuable role in helping young people feel connected to a church community.

*"I think for a lot of young people, they don't have that many adults who are part of their lives actually, and most of them value, to one degree or another, having us there in their stories, that's what I've found."*

*"We have a lot of grandparents who are heavily involved in the faith teaching to their grandchildren. And some of those are teenage grandchildren... And we're really encouraging them to see themselves as that's their frontline where they're serving God is in their ministry to their grandchildren."*

69%

Over two thirds of survey respondents (69%) said that youth work was either medium or high priority for them, though comments suggested this was often in terms of belief and intention, rather than action.

59%

Most clergy (59%) perceived their churches to be fairly or very confident engaging with young people in the church, but this figure dropped to 28% for engaging with young people in the community.

54%

Just over half (54%) said they felt hopeful about their churches reaching out to young people, with an additional 33% saying they felt 'somewhat' hopeful.

27%

However only 27% reported feeling equipped with the skills and resources to work with young people, with 48% saying they felt somewhat equipped.

Clergy reported that they would like support with a wide range of areas, including ideas/vision, administration, resources, volunteers and understanding youth culture.

*"My experience is I can't do it on my own, I've got to find the right people to team up with..."*

*"Deeper access to schools would be a help as would someone with technology skills and facilities that were welcoming to young people and families."*

## Part five

# Encountering young people

Congregants and clergy encounter young people in a range of ways outside formal church activities.

We know that most churches have seen the number of teenagers in their congregations decline steeply, but these churches are still embedded in communities and networks of relationships in which young people are present. Clergy described a range of ways that they encounter young people in their communities.



### Local organisations/groups

- Sports (at sports venues, through local clubs and matches)
- Through links or involvement with local organisations/charities

### Social events

- At fetes, fairs or fun days
- When young people are volunteers for local or church events

### Public spaces

- In the pub, McDonalds, or community cafes
- In shops and supermarkets
- On the street or in local parks/skate parks

### Relationships

- Teenagers are the friends, neighbours, siblings, children, nieces/nephews, cousins or grandchildren of church members
- Online connections through social media (e.g. Facebook)
- In professional or voluntary roles (e.g. teachers, healthcare or social workers, school governors)

### Periphery of church life

- Young people hanging out around/in the church building or passing the church on the way to and from school
- Hire of church hall (uniformed organisations, theatre, sports, drama clubs etc.)
- Weddings, funerals and other services that young people occasionally attend



A vicar's presence in primary school was seen as the foundation of many encounters later in life where young people recognise and talk to clergy. In every focus group we heard examples of incidental encounters between clergy and young people, but this was a particularly strong theme in villages and smaller towns with a vibrant sense of local community, and where clergy had been present for a number of years and built relationships across the community.

**Participant 1:** *"In our parish, two out of five of the primary schools are parish church schools, and a third one we do assemblies in. So, a high proportion of the children who are at the secondary school, we will have built a relationship up through primary school. It's just that we don't have the access that we had before. So, we know them, but we don't have any ongoing contact."*

**Interviewer:** *"Do you ever come across them?"*

**Participant 1:** *"Yeah, all the time."*

**Interviewer:** *"In what kind of spaces would you encounter them?"*

**Participant 1:** *"Walking around in the park, in shops, all sorts of places."*

**Participant 2:** *"Quite a lot of them are in our churchyard quite regularly."*

## But few churches create ways to grow these contacts into relationships, or build pathways to faith.

We know something about the ways that churches are encountering and supporting teenagers across the Diocese, but we also wanted to know what role these encounters play in young people forming a connection to the church community and deepening a faith of their own. In analysing the focus group conversation and survey data, we saw three main ways that participants described their relationships with young people: being present, building places for relationship and creating pathways to faith.

In the focus group discussions there was greater emphasis on presence than on places and pathways. While it is encouraging that clergy and congregants are present in and around the lives of young people, where possible these opportunities for relationship need to be translated into places where young people can belong and pathways of discipleship they can journey along.

### Presence

Churches have a role in the community that means they can be present at a number of points throughout someone's life. The cumulative effect of 'sowing seeds' might not be known but was still seen to be meaningful. Clergy emphasised the importance of readiness, availability and being there for teenage parishioners when and if random encounters occurred. This posture requires an ability to be responsive when opportunities present themselves and was usually accompanied by appeals to trust in God. When asked about the potential impact of these encounters, most people felt that it was unknown, and that a long-term view was required if we were to judge whether they made a difference to individuals or not

*"Meeting people at liminal points at funerals and occasions like that, it's impossible to judge that impact, but I believe those things do have impact, but we may not see it when they're 11 or 18, we may see it when they're 40, or 50, or 60."*

*"It all adds up, every little moment you see them, every interaction that you have with them, all eventually mounts up, and I think it's just the more opportunities you have the better in different ways."*



## Places

Some churches have created contexts for ongoing connection with young people, where they can build relationships. This might be the Sunday service, a choir, a youth group, or a project where young people volunteer to support a holiday club for example. What makes this distinct from presence is that the church has actively built some context in which teenagers can engage with church and faith, and crucially – where they can build relationships. While one-off encounters can certainly be meaningful, there was general agreement that for faith to grow, young people need to have someone take the time to invest in their journey and invite them to participate in church life, both of which help young people experience a sense of belonging, according to our focus groups.

*“If you can build a good relationship and spend some time, which is an expensive thing to do, with individuals, then you’re more likely to get a faith that actually means something to them”*

In one focus group conversation two vicars reflected together that it might take intentionally investing time with 20 young people to see two or three have faith as adults.

*“...because actually we have to be realistic, we are swimming against the tide.”*

But, although this was challenging and not always possible, they agreed that

*“...the ones that do stand out I think are the ones that we have intentionally invested in.”*

## Pathways

Where one-off encounters were emphasised, we heard about ‘sowing seeds’. Where ongoing engagement was possible and prioritised, we were more likely to hear about ‘stepping stones’, ‘pathways’ and ‘next steps’. In other words, someone was thinking about what kind of activity would most likely help young people travel onwards on their faith journey or build a deeper connection to the church community. For example, we heard about youth groups that were set up because children were ageing out of Messy Church, but still wanted to do something together – and that some of those young people then went through confirmation as a result.

*“If you just think of one event, or one thing, then it’s going to die flat, but if you think big picture, ‘How are we going to take them on this process of faith?’”*

*“When we’re meeting these young people we’re trying to think, ‘What’s the next stepping stone for them in their journey of faith? How do we help them make connections? What’s the next thing we can invite them to? Who’s the person we can put them in touch with?’”*



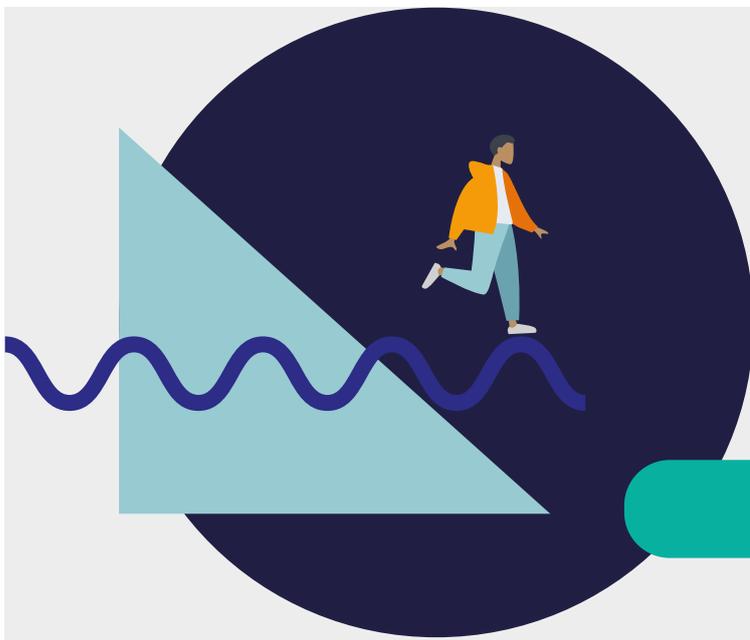
## Part six

# Looking forward

**There are opportunities for every church to engage with youth ministry, regardless of their circumstances.**

When clergy were asked where they saw opportunity to engage with 11-17 year olds the two clearest answers were through schools and through existing church relationships/ ministry with young people - largely reflecting the activities churches currently provide or the places they are most likely to encounter young people.





## School

Opportunities were perceived to run assemblies (particularly around Remembrance Sunday), encourage teachers, teach Religious Education, support the Christian Union/lunchtime clubs, host seasonal services, offer chaplaincy, act as school governors, facilitate school trips to church buildings, and lead chapel services. A small majority of churches in the Diocese (54% n=219) have a school within 1 mile that serves the 11-17 age bracket, so it is encouraging that so many churches perceive this to be a real opportunity.

## Existing ministry/relationships

The second area of opportunity was in sustaining or building on existing ministry. Within this there were references to youth groups of different kinds, young people's presence for Sunday worship or other services (including in the choir), outreach activities, general relationships with young people and a few mentions of trips and young people acting as leaders of church activities. A smaller number saw opportunity through links with uniformed organisations, friends and family of congregants and other ideas.

**Clergy stress the need for more partnerships, whole church ministry, openness to change, a need to look beyond Sunday attendance and renewed confidence in the gospel.**

## Partnerships

In many contexts partnerships were seen as necessary for youth work to thrive, or even to happen at all. Suggestions included pooling resources across parishes, benefices or ecumenically in order to be able to appoint area-wide youth workers, or host youth groups, activities or events. Beyond the practicality of pooling resources like this, these partnerships were seen to give teenagers the opportunity to meet other young people of faith and feel less isolated.

## Being open to new approaches

There was agreement amongst some people that the religious landscape had shifted dramatically in recent years, and that this called for new ways of engaging with young people. Although this shift was largely perceived as a challenge, some also saw this as a positive and even exciting thing.

*“I think waking us up to the fact that we’re actually in a mission situation like people were back in the First Century, we’re almost starting from scratch. And actually, that’s not a bad thing, it’s just a different thing.”*



## Looking beyond Sunday attendance

Several focus group participants highlighted how hard it was to get young people to turn up on a Sunday morning, and there was a need to accommodate a focus on sport and extra-curricular activities that took up people's time.

*"I don't think you can use attendance on Sunday as a good measure for your success or otherwise, working with young people. I think you have to look much more broadly across the week, or across the month, to understand how effective you are being in youth work particularly."*

## Encouraging the whole church

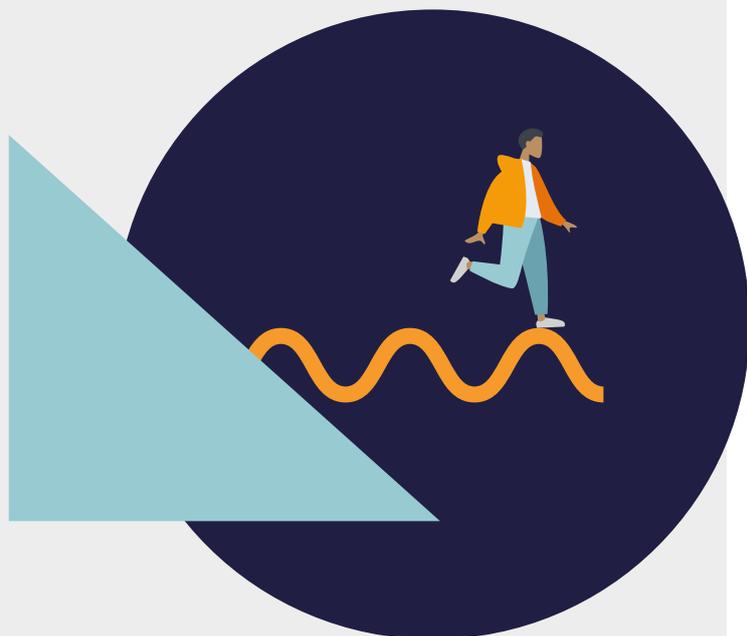
Whole-church engagement with young people was seen as important if youth work was going to be a success. When only one person held the connections to gatekeepers or young people in the community, youth work was often seen as fragile. Encouraging and empowering the congregation is incredibly important then, along with recognising how people's individual skills and gifts might be utilised to engage with teenagers.

*"That relationship with young people, with children, has to be the responsibility of the whole of the church so that it continues into the future. Otherwise if one individual leaves, then that whole thing can crash down."*

## Renewing confidence in the power of the gospel in this culture

We know that a 'cultural chasm' between young people and older church members can feel like a barrier to engaging with youth; but there was also real conviction amongst many participants that the gospel still speaks to young people, and there is a need to both communicate this, and help work out the implications in a new cultural landscape.

*"I think there's two things that the young people are desperately hungry for; they're hungry for spirituality and they're hungry for relationships, and I think within the church we can give them both of those things. It's just a question of how we do it."*



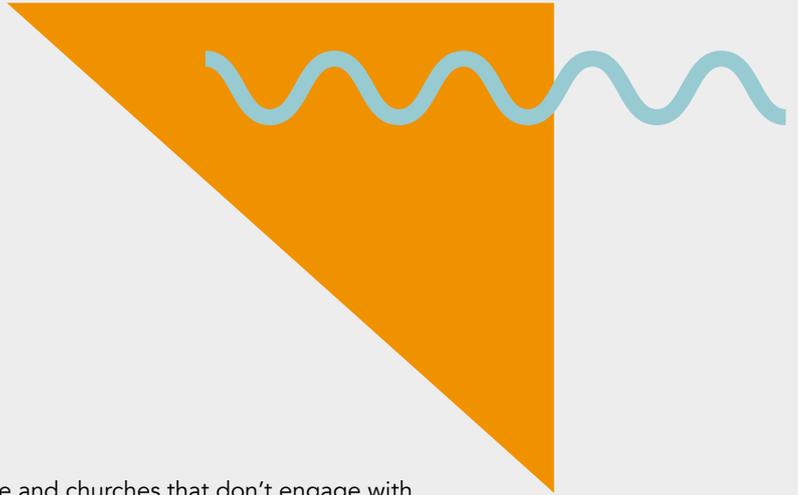


## Part seven

# What does this mean?

**If nothing is done, the decline in engagement with young people will continue with gathering pace. Few churches will have any contact with young people or play a part in serving their needs. The impact on the long-term sustainability of the Church's ministry will be catastrophic.**

The research suggests that decline has become normative, but there is a risk that it will also be normalised. There is an opportunity in this moment to acknowledge the fragility of much engagement with young people, the experience and efforts of those who continue to lead youth ministry and the need for significant investment.



Culture continues to change and churches that don't engage with young people lose an opportunity to translate the gospel for a new generation, potentially losing energy for mission more generally in the process.

The numbers are small, but this is a reason to invest in cross-cultural mission to teenagers, not to abandon it.

In 2019 only 7% of churches said they would offer online support to children and young people, even if they had all of the necessary resources and skills in place.<sup>7</sup> Yet only a year later the pandemic has accelerated the capacity of many churches to adapt and change their way of operating. Given some of the significant challenges facing the Diocese when it comes to investing in young people, this shaking could also precipitate the reimagining of church and youth work in some places.

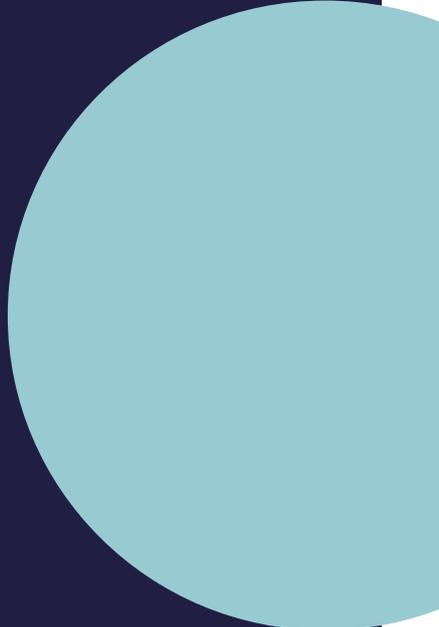
Not every church will be able to provide youth activities, but every church can hold young people in mind, and understand that they have a role to play in prayer and being present to those who cross their paths.

For those that have a handful of teenagers, there is a need to think creatively and deeply about how faith development happens and hold confidence that the Church can be a safe place for young people to encounter the radical love of God.

And of course, some churches may need to lead: to share what they are doing and help to inspire and equip others to join this high calling to serve young people.

**Everybody has a part to play.**





## Acknowledgements

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**This research was undertaken by Gry Apeland and Lucie Shuker.**



*“Kids today are really switched on to creating a better world... surely our messages are totally aligned to the desires of young people.”*

*“There aren’t quite the same immediate barriers and cynicism and default atheistic position that perhaps a lot of young people had when I was a youngster.”*

*“God hasn’t changed. His power is undiminished, he can still change lives and work through hopeless people like me. That’s why I remain hopeful, despite our weaknesses.”*

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