

# FAITH IN YOUNG PEOPLE

## STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR A NEW YOUTH STRATEGY

**Youth ministry, church's support and provision for young people to discover and grow in faith, may have never been more challenging or necessary than it is today. The research carried out by the Youthscape Center for Research reveals the challenges and opportunities faced by churches as they welcome young people. It finds that prayer, plans and action is needed to address the ongoing decline of young people in our churches.**

This paper outlines four important areas for consideration. Drawn from the findings of the Youthscape research project, these proposed strategy options seek to move the diocese from a strong ministry of presence and seed sowing toward a goal of fruitful and flourishing young people. We must agree the goal of such a strategy before undertaking this new journey, with three key aims suggested.

### KEY AIMS OF A YOUTH STRATEGY:

**To see flourishing young people across our parishes and benefices, consistent growth in the number of young people growing in faith.**

This is an ambitious and perhaps provocative aim for consideration, that every young person in St Albans Diocese should have the opportunity to attend a local church where consistent and sustainable youth discipleship is an intrinsic part of its community life. Given the findings of the Youthscape research, this vision is an ambitious and long-term aim, requiring our generosity, joy, imagination and courage.

**A church confident in its gospel message to young people and the relevance of church community to their lives.**

A key aim of our Living God's Love strategy is to grow the faith of children and young people. We are not looking to draw a crowd but share the same good news of Jesus that so transformed our lives. We need to encourage one another to be emboldened in our testimony and be ready to dedicate energy and resources to an expansion of opportunities for young people to explore faith.

## **New structures of support and integrated partnerships for churches to meet this challenge.**

Our churches are seeking new partnership opportunities to address the challenges they face. An innovative new approach should be constructed to enable churches to sustain ministry with young people in a secular world.

### **How might we measure our steps toward this goal?**

- The number of MAPs prioritising Youth and Children.
- Statistics for mission indicators including worshipping community by age.
- Numbers of baptisms and confirmations.
- The number of clergy, lay volunteers and employed youth leaders taking up training, consultancy and networking invitations.
- The number of new youth discipleship activities in churches with children's but no youth provision.
- The numbers of deanery or key area partnerships, connecting small groups and sharing encouragement and resources.

## **FOUR STRATEGIC OPTIONS**

The analysis of the shape of youth provision in the diocese as summarised in the Faith in Young People report, present four areas for us to strategically focus our prayers and resources in pursuit of the proposed key aims of a new strategy.



# 1

## TARGETING THE 1-5

With many churches reporting between 1-10 young people in their congregations but with a suggestion that it is mostly between 1-5, a strategy that begins with revitalising sustainable discipleship support to these small, committed groups is an important starting place, particularly when churches report having little confidence in reaching out to young people in the wider community.

### **Actions to consider:**

- Promote a vision of small groups as a sustainable model of youth ministry in the Diocese, celebrating investment in the small and providing all the needed training, resourcing and encouragement to embed such groups and see them grow.
- Supplement small group youth ministry with key area, deanery or 'hub' partnerships. Such networks would offer the 'critical mass' that many leaders listed as important but are not able to resource, for instance including opportunities for weekend/overnight trips, vibrant worship and equipping days. Activities that an individual church may not have the capacity to provide.
- Invest in opportunities for young people to engage with digital resources and Diocesan level training events. Enable young people to engage with a Diocesan digital space to equip them to serve their peers and local church, particularly where local discipleship opportunities are limited.
- Recruitment of network leaders to significantly develop this area. Develop funding opportunities for network youth missionaries to encourage and build volunteer teams and organise connection events and training within deaneries or hubs. Ideally this would involve the recruitment of a small team to work with the Youth Missioner in targeted areas.

# 2

## SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS

St Albans Diocese is blessed with the pioneering work of voluntary leaders who impact the lives of young people each week. The Youthscape research reports that much of the youth discipleship in our churches rests on these leaders who work with clergy to inspire their congregations to be welcoming and supportive communities, enabling young people to thrive.

Recruitment of voluntary leaders is challenging, and increased partnership opportunities and a vibrant youth 'movement' could sustain and expand this invaluable group, bridging the perceived cultural gap between generations.

### **Actions to consider:**

- Training that is delivered regularly and locally for new volunteers, with follow-up refresher training and ongoing support. This training could be linked to a small group new network structure, inviting group learning and peer support to meet the demands of this ministry role.
- Improved opportunities for recognised training and development for youth mission, recognising the importance of these key missional roles and enabling youth ministry specialism.
- Development of a central resources suite for individuals, teams and churches to access at their convenience. This could include providing corresponding resources for group discussion and reflection and be joined to a diocesan digital training hub.
- If greater investment is possible, the recruitment youth ministry enablers to work alongside clergy to support and mentor teams of volunteer leaders to serve parishes, benefices, and deaneries. Key areas with limited youth provision could be identified and youth work enablers appointed to oversee the building of teams of volunteers across benefices and deaneries.

# 3

## BUILDING ON FOUNDATIONS

The Youthscape research was revealing in participants' emphasis on church's work with children, including many mentions of good connections to schools and good utilisation of children's resources. A foundation is therefore in place to build young people's faith development from childhood to adolescence. The 10-13 age group is a key time of transition, with many young people discontinuing church when they outgrow children's activities. There is a perceived limited strategic logic to investing in teenagers, so where resources, personnel and confidence are limited, an invitation to receive ongoing partnership support should be provided to stimulate efforts. A youthwork network that supports the growth of small groups and provides larger scale youth events will begin to encourage churches to work to better provide for young people who 'graduate' from children's activities, particularly those with limited youth ministry experience.

### **Actions to consider:**

- Guidance for churches to plan for a pathway of faith formation from childhood and through adolescence, as part of the mission action planning (MAP) process. Expectation that future MAPs include youth pathway plans.
- Develop available support and resources for equipping parents and grandparents in sharing faith with teenagers at home including training opportunities for clergy and wider ministers.
- Encourage churches to begin youth engagement by utilizing school connections to invite children to stay connected to church after they disperse. Enable a small group model of ministry that churches can begin to invest in even if they have little or no youth presence in their congregations.
- Identify churches with established and growing children's activities that could begin youth work partnerships across deaneries in pilot projects, with access to resources needed to start from scratch.

# 4

## SHIFTING CULTURE

Despite church leaders reporting that youth ministry is a priority, a clear vision is needed to address where institutional priorities and cultural norms are obstacles to investment in youth provision. A renewed vision of why churches should love and support teenagers should be agreed and embedded. This vision should address the questions of the relevancy of the church community and its gospel message to young people today and offer a hope-filled outline for how all churches could be enabling this ministry, however small. Addressing stretched church leader's reports of the lack of strategic logic behind investing in youth discipleship and outreach should also be heeded.

### Actions to consider

- A new youth strategy should account for a needed culture shift, reflecting the competing priorities that often limit youth ministry investment.
- An accessible fund to support churches when beginning or continuing to engage with young people in the wider community, meeting the experience that this comes at high cost but with little 'return'.
- Annual moment of focus on young people with a 'Youth Work Sunday' or similar, with every church encouraged to celebrate young people, plan for their flourishing and pray for them to come to know Jesus. This could come with a new expectation that every Mission Action Plan of the diocese address youth and children's ministry as a priority.
- Enable youth input into worship, mission, social justice and decision making, developing opportunities for young people to champion causes across the Diocese.
- Explore a new model of sustaining employed parish youth workers. Look at commissioning and partnerships in the recruitment and training of youth ministers to grow in their calling and sustain them for long term ministry.
- Greater emphasis on youth, children and families within authorised lay ministry training.

## ENCOURAGING THE RESTART OF YOUTH DISCIPLESHIP AND OUTREACH IN 2021.

In the first half of 2020, The Youthscape Youth Ministry Research Project invited church leaders to constructively consider the place of young people in church and their opportunities to grow in faith. Encouragingly, feedback from research meetings and surveys suggested that this re-energized many participants to the priority of investing in young people. However, both established and new youth ministry activities were curtailed by the pandemic, with many churches reporting a reduced capacity to reach young people. The pandemic has brought our challenges around youth provision into sharp focus, so with the sharing of the research report and launching of a new youth strategy, the spotlight can be set on our mission to young people, stirring prayers and imaginations in 2021.

### **Suggested actions as first steps in 2021:**

- A new online location to present key information from the research report and invite a response. This will communicate the findings including through video content, with interviews and reflections from the Youthscape researchers, access to the reports themselves and material for churches to consider their response to the findings.
- Invite facilitate youth input into a new strategy. Invite churches and youth leaders to have conversations with young people and record and feedback their insights. Create opportunities for youth focus groups to further contribute to strategic discussions.
- Café and webinar events explaining the research findings and facilitating feedback of key groups.
- Invite churches to identify a youth 'champion', with a webpage inviting those interested or nominated by their congregation to sign-up to a new network. These volunteers would not be expected to lead youth activities themselves but encourage and empower congregations, sharing with clergy some of the responsibility of promoting youth inclusion. They could work with existing youth leaders, report to PCCs, advise on the challenges of young people in the wider community and identify and invite new youth leaders to undergo training.
- Invite churches to participate in an annual 'Youth Sunday' or similar Diocesan wide moment of prayer and celebration of young people, asking every church, whatever their context or capacity, to consider the young people in and outside their communities.

- Pilot a volunteer training series for leaders, to be delivered locally in support of volunteers restarting their youth activities as restrictions ease and exploring opportunities for partnerships across churches and ongoing resourcing and consultancy.
- Build opportunities for youth online engagement on Diocesan channels, exploring ways of investing in digital youth equipping and support.

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the strengths of the suggested strategy areas?

What may be missing from this proposal?

What does Diocese need to do to get behind and resource a new youth strategy?