

A VIEW FROM THE TOP

When I was a teenager, in the late 1960s, the church I belonged to had quite a reasonable number of young people, largely people who, like myself, had come in via the youth club, as most of the children of church members were dropping out of church life.

What was, in retrospect, sad was the ambivalent attitude of the church towards us.

On the one hand, quite a lot of money and effort was spent on us - we had a whole wing of the church premises designated as a youth centre, and a small band of members worked hard to keep the youth club going. We were praised warmly from the pulpit just for being in church ("it's good to have so many Young People in our midst" - actually we all sat together in our own part of the church), and every month or two we were given a youth service to run as we saw fit.

On the other hand the church didn't really seem to care much about us. At our youth services, nobody actually said they'd found our ideas valuable, nor made helpful apart from (invariably) saying the music was too loud and you couldn't hear the words. Those of us who became church members soon found that there was nobody to give us any teaching in the faith, to listen to our problems, or to encourage us to listen to other people's. Nobody gave us advice on how to sort out our muddled adolescent vocations, though there was much publishing of exam results in the church magazine. Nobody encouraged us to find our roles within the church family - and nobody seemed to follow up those church members who, having made their profession of faith, were now spending more of their Sunday evenings at the pub than at church.

We soon found that the church-meeting was less a forum for ideas than a rubber-stamp for schemes worked out already by the eldership, nearly all middle-aged professional people, and that any thoughts we did put forward were always received in gratitude, but would be discussed elsewhere, and quietly shelved.

In other words, young people were like a rich man's children - pampered but uncared for: fawned over but not really part of a family.

Now, sixteen years on and a hundred miles away, is it really any different for young people? Do we cherish them as our brethren in the Lord, or do we follow the world in treating them as a race apart? Are we glad if they use musical or dramatic gifts in praise of God, or do we criticise them according to worldly standards? What do you and I do to prevent those who pass through the waters of baptism becoming part of the 75% of teenagers in English churches who desert the faith? Do we make any real effort to learn from their spiritual experience, and correct their youthful errors (as we should with all our brethren), or do we leave them and a few "youth leaders" to get on with it?

I suspect that the whole idea of "Youth Work" stems from a false division imposed on us by the non-Christian world. Surely our efforts should be directed towards involving all our members - young, old, white/black or green - in finding their place in the whole body of Christ.

Young people are not "the church of tomorrow" — they are part of the church of today***

JCG

