

## **Youth work at St Paul's**

### **Church based youth work in 2016**

Many church youth work projects are taking over key roles in their local communities as government funding is withdrawn. There is also much debate about the future of paid youth work in churches, with many suggesting that a new way forward is needed. Since the introduction of professional youth work in churches, very few churches across the UK have actually seen a rise in numbers of younger people attending their church services.

Far fewer Churches have employed children's workers, which St Paul's has done to great effect. Perhaps this combination of employing both a youth and a children's worker is where other Churches have missed out? One of the key issues often brought up is that Churches have, after employing Youth Workers, enabled their congregations to back off the youth work and let 'youth workers' get on with it. Some Churches have developed some interesting new ideas to bypass this problem, such as one church which started up a Youth club for all ages!

### **Where have we come from?**

When I arrived at St Paul's there was already a thriving youth group meeting on Sunday mornings, with an excellent team of volunteer leaders. There had been a period without an employed youth worker and therefore other programmes had stopped. The young people were keen to get involved with new activities, although I discovered that many of them were so busy with School and other commitments that they often couldn't attend any extra Church related activities! So to begin with the focus was placed on one to one or small group meetings to get to know the young people and parents.

### **Where are we now?**

Our youth team has grown to be even more passionate and engaged with the work with young people. We have been on mission trips, to conferences, and on weekends away. I have seen our leaders grow as youth workers and it was a pleasure to have three of the young people who had moved on to University join the Kosovo mission trip as leaders. All of the young people who came on the Kosovo trip lead a bible study or did a talk on the camp we led, and they also led a prayer meeting on returning at which all who attended were amazed to see their growth in faith and confidence.

The Ink youth group on Sunday mornings has grown slightly in numbers with an average of 14 compared to 11 in 2013, however the growth in commitment and faith has been clear to see, with many of the young people going on to serve within the children's work, refreshments team, on a mission trip, in a band, or on the PCC and presenting 'up front'. The lack of a larger growth in numbers is perhaps related to two factors; few parents of teenagers joining the Church, and as yet little cross over from the Illuminate programme into Sunday attendance.

The Illuminate youth club which was started up towards the end of 2013 has changed rapidly over the last two years. Having started out focussed mainly on the young people

who already attend Church, it is now mainly attended by young people whose families don't attend Church. Young people have invited their friends and the youth club has grown to be 'the place to be' on Mondays if you are in year 6 at Garden City Academy! In the last few months, however, attendance of those in the older year groups has dwindled and it has become clear that something new is needed to bridge the gap between our 10-12 year olds and the Friday Youth group which is suitable for ages 15 and above.

The Friday Youth group developed out of the mission trip to Albania, and to begin with thrived. In the last year it has been less well attended as some young people left to go to university and there were fewer in the age groups below. It now meets once a month and there has been renewed optimism about the group from the young people since changing the frequency, and also making it more relevant by studying the bible alongside watching relevant films.

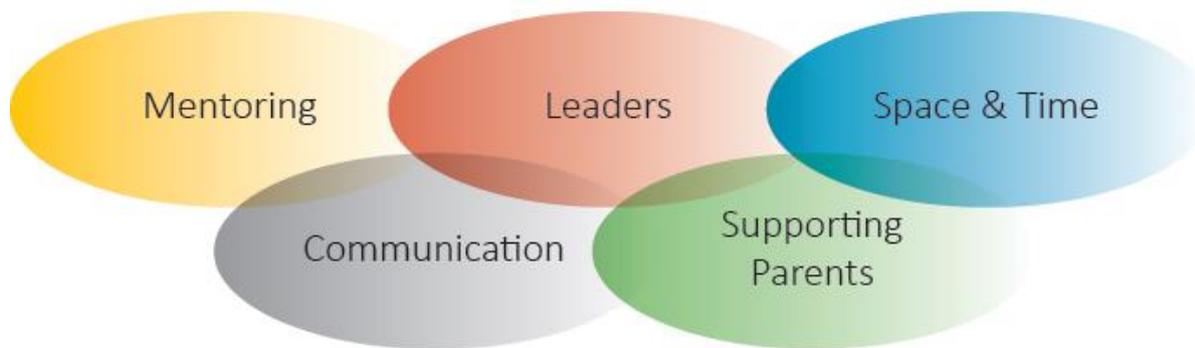
### **What is possible?**

Before Christmas 2015 I mentioned to our Illuminate team that we should plan as if we were going to have double or even triple the numbers of young people. Not two months later this started to happen and that is without a huge promotion campaign. Young people from the local community are open to coming to the events and youth clubs organised by St Paul's, and there is a huge potential for the young people already here to grow as Christians.

My largest concern is still the same as it was when I arrived here, however. Are we making it possible for young people to make the jump from being 'youth' in the church to being fully fledged adult members of this church, or indeed another church if they have moved away? I think there is a long way to go in this respect, but we have started to go down the right paths. The question is, whether the traditional values of most churches are just too far removed for this current generation to relate to. We need to find a way to provide a place and setting where young people can feel comfortable and worship God in their own way as they grow into adults. I fear that some of the work we are doing with the young people is actually making this progression more difficult. Our group sessions and activity/fun based studies are far removed from the formalities of church services and as such we are not initiating young people into the traditions and ways of worship of the Anglican Church. Perhaps there is a middle ground that can be found? I think it may require some thought and changes within the youth work activities, but also within our Sunday services.

The work in local schools has seen some incredible God moments in the last year. The group at Highfield has expanded so rapidly that it seems as if more than half of the year 7 and 8 girls have attended at some point! God is at work in our schools and I believe the Church in Letchworth needs to work even more closely together, and there will be great opportunities in the coming years. St Paul's is already involved in many schools, as are other Churches and with a clear strategy across the town there could be exciting times to look forward to.

## What might be the key areas to focus on?



The key areas listed above are just an idea of what might be important within St Paul's youth work moving forward. They are not exclusive and also have multiple facets, or interlink. For example, when thinking about leaders this refers to our volunteer youth leaders as well as young people who are developing as leaders themselves.

*Mentoring*- Although 'mentoring' is a fairly recent concept, it can be based on the principles of discipleship which Jesus took from the Jewish culture, whereby a leader has two or three mentees (disciples) who he/she encourages and teaches. I see mentoring here as somewhere between the modern mentoring and Jesus' discipleship models. The purpose of it is to bring people forward in their faith, by challenging and encouraging them, although this might not take the form of teaching. It is more learner led and allows the mentee to learn by guided discovery, but can also allow some challenge from the mentor.

*Leaders*- St Paul's has been blessed with some hugely talented and passionate youth leaders and the aim must be to continually expand this team, to provide more training opportunities and also to be aware of boundaries, especially in how much time commitment can be expected of volunteers. The growth of the twenties and thirties home group is an exciting development and it may be that in the future our twenties and thirties are able to bring their energy and enthusiasm to new youth work ideas and projects.

The young leaders I have been mentoring over the last few months have shown that young people should not be looked down upon when it comes to church leadership. They have shown wisdom in PCC meetings, presenting in church, or assisting with children's activities. The goal is for young people to be accepted as equal contributors to the church community and where they have God given leadership talent, for this to be encouraged, just as it would with adults.

*Space and Time*- Having somewhere for young people to meet and 'hang out' is becoming more and more important, especially since many of the activities they are already involved in don't allow for individual creativity and simply 'being' and spending time with friends.

*Communication*- Within the broader communication strategy it is important for us to consider the best ways to communicate with young people and how to reach young people

in our local community. Social media plays an important role for young people and the use of this could be developed more within the youth work. I have recently developed a social media policy, but this needs to be regularly updated due to the rapid changes within social media.

*Supporting Parents*- Engaging with parents has always been an important part of youth work, as it is here at St Paul's, but further development could be undertaken. Claire and Andreea are currently starting a parenting course and I see this as something a youth worker may wish to contribute to. With the parents of teenagers there may also be a case for simply spending more time with them in social settings and creating opportunities for them to support each other and spend time with their young people in new settings.

### **Options going forward:**

#### **1. Continue to employ a youth worker 30 hours per week**

It may be difficult to attract youth workers who are likely to stay long term. The role is attractive to those who are less experienced, who are studying, or have other commitments. This has worked very well with the employment of Claire from within the St Paul's community, but may be less likely to be successful when recruiting from outside.

#### **2. Employ a youth worker full time**

Many churches now employ full time youth workers, however this is often to the detriment of children's work, with one worker (generally a youth specialist) overseeing all the age groups. Advertising a full time role may open up the field of applicants to the more experienced youth workers who may also be more likely to stay in the role for a longer period.

#### **3. In addition to either 1 or 2 above also work towards having youth interns**

If employing a youth worker either part or full time, it might be worth taking on one or two youth interns. If the right person is found and a good line management plan is in place Interns can contribute massively to the expansion of a church youth work project by freeing up time for the head youth worker to build visionary and strategic plans as opposed to being constantly involved in the day to day running of every project.

#### **4. Not employing a paid youth worker**

This is probably not the route that will be taken, but it is worth noting that there is a growing concern amongst youth work 'experts' that employing paid youth workers may not be the best way forward in some settings. It can lead to less involvement from the broader church congregation with young people, unless there is a very clear strategy and a youth worker who is quite innovative at making this happen.