

A look into the lives of Generation Z

As we consider the relevance of Christian faith to young people in the 21st Century and means of transmission, we must examine the context in which these young people are living. Many of us can remember the influences on us during our teenage years and it can be tempting to assume that the young people we work with today face the same issues. It is true that there are age-old teenage concerns that will always be relevant but, especially in light of the gargantuan cultural shift we've seen in the last couple of decades, we must take a step back to look at what's trending in the world of a young person today.

Internet/Digital

Digital content has swept into children's lives, with two thirds of children and young people having their own device.¹ Whilst the previous generation had been glued to their TV screens, children are now spending more time on the internet, with YouTube providing the most popular online entertainment.² In this context, internet pornography is becoming a significant issue for young people, with a recent NSPCC survey reporting that 28% of 11-year-olds have seen pornography online, increasing to 65% by age 15.³ Home Wi-Fi access and the prevalence of portable electronic devices contributes to this phenomenon, which has resulted in children going online more in their bedrooms.⁴ 44% of boys surveyed wanted to emulate pornography⁵ and the same proportion of girls have engaged in sexting, with many feeling pressured to do so.⁶ Approximately half of young people reported that sexting is part of everyday life for teenagers.⁷

Technology is also changing the way in which we communicate and form relationships. We have seen a journey from spoken word, to written word and now to pictures; text messages have overtaken phone calls as the primary method of long-distance communication and there is evidence that Snapchat may be fast replacing texts as the most popular messaging service.⁸ Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter were not around ten years ago but today they mean that users have many more online relationships with people they have never met face-to-face. Geography no longer forms the primary basis for community as emergent communities are increasingly dependent upon networks of relationships. One consequence of this is that people are generally less inclined to make lasting commitments.⁹ Membership clubs, sports organisations and voluntary associations are struggling to retain young people beyond the age of 16 - a trend which is linked to a drop in "social-connectedness".¹⁰ "Virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining", along with trust in other people and institutions.¹¹

¹ Childwise Monitoring Report: 2016

² Childwise Monitoring Report: 2016. Children age 5-16 now use the internet for an average of three hours a day and watch TV for 2.1 hours. Half of those surveyed use YouTube every day.

³ NSPCC, 2016

⁴ Childwise Monitoring Report: 2016. Three in four children (73%) can now access the internet in their room, up from two in three (63%) last year.

⁵ NSPCC: 2016. 44% of boys wanted to emulate pornography.

⁶ STIR Report: 2015. 44% of girls in England have engaged with sexting. 27% of girls sent explicit images because they felt pressured to do so.

⁷ IPPR – Young people, sex and relationships: the new norms: 2014. 46% of young people say sexting is part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays.

⁸ Nelson: 2015

⁹ Mission-shaped Church: 2004

¹⁰ Young People Social Attitudes Survey: 2003-2012

¹¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation: 2000

Mental health

79% of UK schools have seen an increase in young people self-harming and reporting suicidal thoughts.¹² About 25% of young people have self-harmed on at least one occasion,¹³ yet 55% of parents have reported never having spoken about mental health to their children.¹⁴ Over half of young people in England said that they had been bullied in the past two months, with 15% experiencing cyber-bullying.¹⁵ The cultural challenges surveyed here have made teenage life more complex and pressured, resulting in increased anxiety levels for many young people. However, this situation isn't being met by an increased provision of professional mental health services.¹⁶

Family life

Family life in the UK became less homogeneous towards the end of the twentieth century, although figures in recent years have stabilised. The number of single person households in the UK increased from 17% in 1971 to 29% in 1998, and there was a sharp increase in the number of single-parent families (from 8% to 25%). These figures have remained relatively stable in recent years.¹⁷ The number of births outside marriage/civil partnership is increasing every year, reaching 48% of UK births in 2015, and cohabiting couples are the fastest growing family type.¹⁸ A greater proportion of mothers are working, and more of them are working full time.

Church

Unfortunately, the Church isn't a part of most children and young people's lives. Less than 5% of young people under the age of 20 in England and Wales regularly attend church, and this figure is declining year-on-year.¹⁹ Approximately half of all churches have 10 or fewer children²⁰ and almost half of Anglican churches have fewer than 5 children aged under 16.²¹

Analysis of these cultural shifts highlights where the Church has failed to respond. Whilst young people are eager to talk about how faith relates to mental health and relationships, less than 10% of churches regularly address these issues.²² The emerging family types are largely unreached, with single parent households accounting for only 1% of churchgoers and cohabiting couples 2%.²³

Various factors have contributed to the decline in church attendance of young people. For example, only 36% of self-identified Christian parents want to pass on their beliefs to their children, a figure which is significantly higher amongst other faiths.²⁴ Whilst this figure increases with church

¹² National Children's Bureau: 2016

¹³ Wright: 2013

¹⁴ Time to Change, YoungMinds, Mind and Rethink Mental Illness: 2015

¹⁵ What About YOUth? NHS Survey: 2015. Over 55% of young people in England said that they had been bullied in some form in the past couple of months.

¹⁶ National Children's Bureau: 2016. 65% of schools said that it was becoming more difficult to access professional mental health services.

¹⁷ ONS

¹⁸ ONS

¹⁹ Church Statistics 2: 2010-2020, Peter Brierley

²⁰ Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016

²¹ Anecdote to Evidence: 2014

²² Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016. 10% of churches regularly talk about mental health and self-esteem in their youth groups and even fewer talk about sex and relationships. Yet young people are eager to talk about how faith relates to their experiences, with 80% of young people in youth groups wanting to talk about mental health and self-esteem and over 70% wanting to talk about sex and relationships.

²³ Church Statistics 2: 2010-2020, Peter Brierley

²⁴ Passing on Faith, Theos, 2016

attendance, nearly a third of churchgoers are indifferent about whether their children share their beliefs.²⁵ Approximately a third of Christian parents say that they never read Bible stories to their children, contributing to the decline in biblical literacy across the generations.²⁶ However, this trend partly reflects a general decline in book reading due to a preference for other types of media.²⁷ Parents have reported that Christianity doesn't come up in conversation with their children.²⁸ This is partly due to a decline in Christian practices in the home and a failure to engage the question of how faith relates to everyday life.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Christian parenting continues to be the most effective means of faith transmission, with half of children of churchgoing parents attending church as adults.²⁹ Conversely, the likelihood that the offspring of occasional churchgoers will become regular attenders is less than 3%.³⁰ Religious beliefs and practices are largely settled by the time an individual reaches 16; the importance of religion at this age is "a reasonably good predictor" of who will retain or not retain an affiliation into adulthood.³¹ As Anecdote to Evidence elaborates, "Decline in church attendance has not happened because many adults have stopped going to church. It is because more and more adults never start attending in the first place." Surveys have witnessed a generation of nominal Christians who identified as Christian in census returns but don't attend church. Researchers have labelled this phenomenon "believing without belonging", often explaining it away as a product of institutional decline. However, we have now also seen a decline in Christian belief as well as attendance amongst the next generation. In 2012, 65% of 18-24 year olds reported no religious affiliation, compared with 55% of the same age group (18-27) in 1983.³² Interestingly, this does not signify declining interest in spirituality – for example, a quarter of respondents to a YouGov study in 2013 said they were spiritual but not religious.

Christian parents are giving children greater autonomy at an increasingly younger age, including a choice over whether or not they attend church. The average age at which children stop attending church is 14.5 years old, with peaks of dropping-out at age 13, 16 and 18. These broadly correspond to the beginning of secondary school, the end of Key Stage 4 (GCSEs) and the end of Key Stage 5 (A-levels or the equivalent).³³ The absence of these children in church congregations is a great loss to church communities. Anecdote to Evidence found that churches where there is a high ratio of children to adults (more than 1:5) are twice as likely to be growing than those with lower proportions of children. This is corroborated by research into Fresh Expressions of Church, in which the average proportion of those under 16s attending is 38%, with Messy Church, child-focused church and church based on under 5s having 50%+ under 16s.³⁴ They are also finding that Fresh Expressions of Church is the C of E's single most effective means of outreach to the non-churched population, and these three types of Fresh Expression are found to be the most effective.

²⁵ Passing on Faith, Theos: 2016. 69% for Christians who attended church once a month or more.

²⁶ Pass It On, YouGov Bible Society: 2014. 30% of Christian parents surveyed said they never read Bible stories to their children. Children are increasingly unable to identify Biblical story plotlines.

²⁷ Pass It On, YouGov Bible Society: 2014

²⁸ Passing on Faith, Theos: 2016

²⁹ Voas and Crockett: 2005

³⁰ Voas and Crockett: 2005

³¹ Voas: 2015

³² The British Social Attitudes Survey: 2012

³³ Rooted in the Church: 2016

³⁴ The Day of Small Things, Church Army Research Unit: 2016

In light of these findings, the C of E looked at what helps young people stay rooted in their faith and church life. Many responses highlighted the role of a “bridge person”, such as a youth worker. The work of these “bridge people” is under-resourced and under-valued, resulting in “bi-modal” congregations, with “radically different groups operating within them” and “very few ‘bridge people’ to navigate between their differences”.³⁵ Intergenerational relationships play a significant role, and although young people appreciate some age-specific activity, they should not be artificially separated from the main body of the church. Children and young people should be valued as full and equal members of the whole church family, with meaningful roles and opportunities to contribute in the decision-making processes. Responses also had a focus on inclusion and welcome, having a safe space to ask questions and experiencing consistent love and care throughout transitory phases of sporadic attendance.

In light of these findings, it is perhaps unsurprising that half of our churches feel that their youth work is not effective.³⁶ When asked what their greatest need was in working with children and young people, 30% of churches responded with more leaders/helpers. In fact, 25% of churches indicated a need for more of something, be it workers, money, time or resources. The responses emphasised having a youth ministry or increasing the quantity of what they offered, more so than improving the quality of the work. Negligible reference was made to the spiritual dimension of the need, with only 7% of respondents referring to the Holy Spirit and a further 2.7% citing a need for prayer.

Conclusions

There are a number of common themes arising that are relevant to all Christian faith communities:

- Christians are losing confidence in transmitting faith to children and young people within the home and church, notwithstanding the wider context. Attention should be given to how Christian faith is relevant to the experience of young people today and equipping to talk about this. Young people in church are wanting to discuss how faith relates to their everyday experiences in life and how they can share their faith with their friends, but only 19% of churches are doing this regularly.³⁷ Programmes and resources from Romance Academy, Think Twice and Bex Lewis help youth leaders think through how Christian faith sheds light on issues around relationships, mental health and responsible use of social media.
- We need distinctively Christian faith communities that are welcoming and inclusive, regardless of how “messy” people’s lives may appear. Research looking at faith generation in both the home and the church found that children and young people need a space to question faith and “know that there is a raft of love which they can float on until they reach a shore”.³⁸
- Children’s and youth ministry cannot be left to the paid workers in a silo – we need everyone who is involved in the lives of children and young people (including themselves) participating, listening and learning together. It takes a whole church to raise a child and intergenerational relationships play a key part. So whether we are parents, church leaders, older congregants or youth workers, we need to prioritise creating a culture of welcome and sharing faith that is relevant to young lives.³⁹

³⁵ Rendle: 2002

³⁶ Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016

³⁷ Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016. 75% of young people want to discuss sharing their faith with their friends.

³⁸ Rooted in the Church: 2016; Passing on Faith: 2016

³⁹ We Are Family, Methodist Church: 2015

- An understanding of ministry to both children and young people is needed. Children are increasingly being exposed to experiences that were once considered exclusively teenage problems. This poses a challenge to parents and those working with children, requiring them to extend their domain of understanding. It is a pressing challenge for the many churches (especially small congregations) that currently only do children's work.⁴⁰
- Children, youth and family workers are essential. Churches with youth programmes or youth workers are more likely to be growing, and paid youth and children's workers are the most effective type of lay workers for growing a church.⁴¹ However, they need more support from church leaders to feel valued and be adequately resourced. This is paramount if they are to be effective in overseeing mentoring programmes and increase leadership opportunities for young people. Groups that feel supported by the church leadership report greater impact. The reduction in youth work training providers (and fall in numbers of those enrolled) poses a challenge in ensuring that youth workers are adequately supported and resourced – for example, there are currently only four institutions offering the JNC qualifying route linked to a theology degree.⁴²
- A strategy for ministry to children and young people should be integral to the church's vision. There is a lack of clarity from all corners about how churches are seeking to generate faith in young people. When asked what the church's greatest need is in working with children and young people, one response succinctly summarised the feelings of many churches: "Our church has never had lots of families in it, and although we have a desire to see them in church we have no clear vision as to how that might be achieved."⁴³ Building upon the findings of Anecdote to Evidence, the Church of England has produced a From Evidence to Action programme to help churches reflect and act on the factors linked to church growth.
- More prayer is needed. Groups with greater prayer support through team members and churches engaging in public and private prayer report greater impact.⁴⁴ Prayer unites Christian communities and offers an opportunity for deeper engagement of the wider congregation.⁴⁵ Christians may be losing confidence in their own efforts but we can trust God for personal transformation and guidance needed for so great a task as this.

⁴⁰ Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016

⁴¹ Anecdote to Evidence: 2014

⁴² UK Christian Youth Work Consortium: 2016

⁴³ Losing Heart, Youthscape: 2016

⁴⁴ The impact of Church-based parent and toddler groups, Jubilee: 2015

⁴⁵ Toddler group research, Church of England: 2016