



Bath
**YOUTH
FOR CHRIST**

Shaping church to disciple young people

A report reflecting on conversations with young people, youth workers and parents about discipleship

James Vaughton - 2017

A report on conversations about discipleship among young people

Introduction

Over the last couple of years there has been a growing sense, based on experience, anecdote and research published in various Christian media outlets, that discipleship of young people is an increasingly difficult area for churches and Christian organisations. Indicators include:

- Research by Youthscape Centre for Research, titled *Losing Heart*, published in December 2016 found that confidence of local churches in delivering youth work is low and resources are limited.¹
- Paid workers and volunteers acknowledging struggle of discipleship of young people with Christian heritage
- Paid workers and volunteers acknowledging the challenge of discipling those who young people who make first-time commitments
- Christian media articles concerning young people and church.²
- At YFC we are increasingly being asked by churches for support as they look to disciple the young people which they have in their organisation. They are, particularly in towns and more rural areas, an increasingly small or non-existent group.

Encouragingly conversation about the very nature of helping young people grow in their faith has increased over the last couple of years. There appears to be a recognition that we are struggling and need to give some time to thinking about how we can begin to address the challenges of 'making disciples' in this time.

This paper is an attempt to offer some insight into the situation, offer some reflections and possible ways forward for those who, like me, are concerned about the passing on of faith to young people and their ongoing discipleship.

This paper is limited in scope: limited numbers of people spoken to and within a limited geography of Bath and West Wiltshire. During the research I held conversations with about 20 young people, 14 youth workers and 6 parents. It is, if you will, a scouting-mission to consider the land and offer some initial insights. It is intentionally brief and I hope will spark more conversation, reflection and action in our attempts to address the challenges and opportunities of discipling young people.

If I was to develop the research there are a few things I would do:

- I would like to ask young people more about the role of parents in discipleship
- I would like to present what I have found back to those who contributed to get further reflections
- I would extend the conversations to more young people in a broader number of youth work contexts
- Develop theological reflection by bringing the findings of the research to scripture and other theological reflection on discipleship of young people

What did I do?

¹ <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/publications>

² <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/the.time.bomb.in.the.churchs.midst.and.how.to.defuse.it/54470.htm>

The research was focused around conversations held with small groups and individuals about discipleship of young people. In addition to this there was some reading of other research and writing about the area of discipleship.

The conversation started with a group of young people and adults involved in youth work. This initial meeting was used to invite comment on my proposed approach of using conversations around a meal or food to consider discipleship of young people. This first meeting was an opportunity to begin to get a picture of how this group would define discipleship, to shape the questions that need asking and begin the conversations.

Following this meeting I met with two groups of young people, one in Bath and another in Trowbridge. In Bath the group was made up of boys, who had no faith background but had come to faith through the community work at All Saints Weston Church. In Trowbridge, the group had been brought up going to church. They were from 5-6 different churches and denominations and an even split of male and female. I also met with a young person one to one to get her perspective on discipleship. I ran a lunch for youth workers with about 10 in attendance and spent time meeting with and talking to individual youth workers. Finally, I met with a group of parents. They had a mixture of church experience and range of ages of children. Some have children who are continuing in their faith, whilst others had children who were unsure about faith or not currently actively (in the understanding of the parent) following Jesus.

It is notable that I did not speak to paid church leaders. This was intentional. This report is for the whole church but aimed primarily at those with the decision-making power in churches. I wanted therefore this research to be a message to those who make the decisions and a medium for voices that may not always shape the way church disciples young people.

What did I ask?

The conversations focused around a few key questions

- What is discipleship?
- What does a church that disciples young people well do?
- What does a church that disciples young people feel like?
- What do parents who disciple well do? (to parents group only)

I had prepared more questions but these seemed to be the ones that provoked most conversation and insight. With that in mind I felt the voices of those I was conversing with would be stronger with a focus on depth rather than a scatter-gun approach to questions. It also meant that each conversation had the same starting point and comparisons could be made between the different groups.

What did I hear?

What is discipleship?

Broadly speaking four main themes emerged from this first question. If I was to try and consolidate them into a phrase, aware that this flattens the impact a little, I would propose the findings suggest the following when people think about what discipleship is:

- Relationship with Jesus
- Teaching and learning the way of Jesus
- Community with other followers of Jesus

- Living out and experiencing the way of Jesus

These are of course, as the comments below suggest, not mutually exclusive, all have a bearing and impact on, and are linked to, each other.

Discipleship as developing a relationship with and getting to know Jesus

“Pushing towards having a better relationship with Jesus” / “Being a light for Jesus” / “Becoming more like God and whatever aids that” / “Our biggest prayer is that our children will know Jesus” / “To let Jesus do what he wants in our lives” / “to be embraced by God and Jesus” / “Helping young people make a decision for themselves”

Discipleship as teaching and learning about Jesus

“Receiving and handing on” / “We are disciples that need discipling” / “What can we do to model this so that they go, hey that’s awesome I want some of that” / “Helping people in their journeys” / “Learning through accountability, who Jesus wants me to be in my imperfections” / “Discipleship involves teaching and learning” / “Disciplines” / “Learning together” / “Talking to others about God”

Discipleship being rooted in genuine relationships; doing life with young people and others

“Having someone there who cares, feeling loved and valued” / “It’s two-way” / “Shared experience and sharing our own experiences” / “Journeying as a group” / “A shared experience” / “Community and other people” / “Meeting regularly” / “Coming together, working together” / “Accountability” / “Learning, teaching, praying with each other” / “Listening and being there for them”

Discipleship as being ‘lived out’ and experienced

“Daily life, homes, food” / (YP on a mission trip) “Now I understand” / “Actions become the apologetic for our faith” / “Being prepared to live out what we are learning” / “Faith...rooted in the gritty realities of life” / (YP talking about a service) “We had a lovely BBQ and ate bread from Jesus” / “It’s whole life” / “Intentional”

This paper does not have the scope to reflect theologically about the findings however, I think it is worth saying that there is much that resonates in what was shared and the writings of others on discipleship. It would not take too much to bring these themes to a biblical framework for discipleship and see that scripture would make a similar case. This is encouraging as it means that those I spoke to do have a biblical understanding of discipleship.

The question which we now go onto concerns the experience of discipleship and what a church that encourages the growth of disciples actually does. It is notable in the book of Acts that the early church approach to discipleship, was not without problems, but was certainly fruitful. We are of course beneficiaries of that fruitfulness. It is true that fruitful discipleship is not easy to pin down and there would be debate about what that looks like. However it is also true, as stated above that churches are struggling with discipleship and as *Losing Heart* makes clear, they have diminishing confidence in the efficacy of what they are doing.

With that in mind, and from the basis of a good understanding of what discipleship is I wanted to draw out of those I met, what a church that disciples young people well feels like and actually does.

My hope is then to pose some questions that provoke thought in the mind of church leaders for them to consider for themselves whether they are part of a church that is working towards a model that works or not. If so, then my hope is that they are encouraged. If not then I hope that the

comments made and questions asked will help a church begin a conversation about what it might mean for them to begin to shift towards more fruitful discipleship of young people.

1. What are key elements of discipleship in your understanding?
2. How do you as a church embed what you describe through its ministry?
3. Where are there gaps in terms of your discipleship of young people?
4. How might you enable young people to be disciplined, where your context provides a 'limited' experience of discipleship? (who could help you?)

What does a church that discipled young people well feel like?

Having asked those we spoke to about what they saw discipleship is we moved the focus onto church and what a church that discipled young people well, feels like and does. I have attempted to put the responses into three categories below, with samples of their comments. I have then briefly reflected on these comments.

It is welcoming and safe – like a family

“Inclusive – not matter who you are you can come” / “It feels homely” / A place where you can break off from reality, meet up, chat, be yourself, reflect on the week” / “No judgement, we used to get the odd look ‘oh it’s the tracksuit mafia’ – from older people” / “Like a family / “When I was struggling a bit I took a break off church...people would still ask after me if I wasn’t there” / connections outside of Sunday

It is exciting and open to change

“Positive – excited for new ideas” / “Open to change – understanding that one thing that works for one group may not work for another group” / “It is exciting” / “Creative”

It values young people, what they bring and allows them to shape things

“Good communication, young people communicating how they are feeling in their discipleship – giving feedback on how discipleship is working.” / “...a place to share new ideas” / “Gives us space to talk, an opportunity for everyone’s opinions...it was led by X...he didn’t always take other people’s points of view” / “We want to pick the subjects” / “Everyone is the teacher, rather than there being just one teacher – like circle time in primary school.”

“The number of ordained people who have actually got involved in youth has been minimal. A church leader needs to get to know the kids. It’s fine to have youth workers. You look at the diary and it’s great but it’s all meetings”

Fundamentally **a church that discipled young people well, feels good to young people**. Not in a superficial sense, as their responses make clear, but more deeply. Young people are looking to really belong. *Home* and *Family* were two words used several times. These two words also describe a place that is ‘safe’; for most young people. Is your church a place of safety for young people? A community with whom they will express doubts, questions, make mistakes, be challenged, turn to in difficult times? Furthermore it lets them know they belong and are valued not through words but through encouraging participation, whether within an individual group or at a more strategic level, in terms of shaping the church and its teaching and ministry.

A church that discipled young people well feels alive. What that looks like will vary according to context. To understand what the young people in a specific church setting might mean by that, it is best to ask them. The research gave some hints as people talked about church that was creative,

exciting and open to change. Is that how young people would describe your church community? If not how could they help shape the community towards this? The church of the New Testament and churches down through history that have been growing, have always felt alive. That is not a call to go and dig up successful approaches and copy them or to change the message. It is simply stating that if a church feels alive it is probably growing. Something I hope, we all want to see. We must take seriously the call to invite young people to help us shape a community. Their youthfulness is a gift to the church, not to be taken for granted. Their genuine (rather than token) involvement and participation makes belonging possible and will bring life.

This need to involve young people reflects the third category, that **a church which discipled young people well feels encouraging and encourages their involvement**. This church is a place where young people's presence and participation is valued and encouraged, not in a patronising way but because they are part of the body of Christ. In a church that feels like this young people will sense that they have some power to influence the shape of the church and its ministry.

Ideas and questions that you could ask?

1. Why not survey young people in your community and church about how welcoming they see the church? Consider what you can do to make the church more welcoming and open to young people
2. What words might young people use to describe your church?
 - a. Would they use 'family' or 'home'?
 - b. Would one of them be 'alive'?
3. Who brings about change in the church? Is it limited to a leadership team or committee?
4. How could young people be enabled to come up with ideas?
5. Would young people describe church as exciting in your context?
6. How valued do young people in your church setting feel?
7. How much influence do young people have in shaping the church and its ministry (not just youth ministry)?

What does a church do that discipled young people well?

The next major area of discussion was about what church that discipled young people well was perceived as actually doing. In the previous section I considered what a church that discipled young people felt like. The responses of young people, youth workers and parent to this question are directly related to what the church did to enable those feelings. This section considers the thinking and action that will hopefully create that sense of family being part of something alive and knowing they (young people) are valued.

Creates the opportunity for genuine relationships

The strongest thing that came out of the research was the absolute importance of relationships as a baseline for discipleship. Before exciting programmes, great teaching, dynamic worship or exciting mission trips, relationships are foundational. This operates on a couple of levels. Firstly young people do need space and a critical mass for peer to peer relationships. That is not to say churches with one or two young people cannot disciple young people, but from young people's perspective peer relationships are important and where they do not have them, discipleship is often tougher. Secondly intergenerational relationships are very significant in their discipleship and a culture where this is encouraged needs to be developed.

"For me: Christian friends. I would appreciate a close group – social and spiritual."

“If you don’t have friends, if you don’t have people who will have a chat when you are there, you are not going to come, are you?”

The importance of a peer group was particularly clear where one parent was a Christian and the other not. Developing a culture of faith at home in this situation was more tricky. One parent cited the youth group at church as significant in keeping her son “interested”.

1. How could you help young people connect with other young people in an area?
2. What are the possible ‘gathering’ places for young Christians locally?

Young people want to know that old people are interested in them and it is important that if something is promised, such as intergenerational mentoring, it is followed through. One young person told me of her disappointment that support in this way was offered but not delivered on.

“They said that someone would pray, but I didn’t even know...it’s more encouraging if you know”

The following quotes make very clear the important role older people played in the discipleship of young people:

“I tell you who is good at discipleship...[remembers an older couple]...Stella will always talk to me, prays for me even when I don’t know it. They don’t really do much but like Stella will give me the flowers at the end of the week or send me a card. They are a couple who are quite stable, I see them all the time, they are really committed”

“Intergenerational mix – old can disciple young, like a family” / Older person paired with a young person – doing it because they want to. E.g. people pray for you, you know them, you pray for each other.

One parent reflected on the father of another parent having impact on her son and others; *“he gave him a Bible.”* *“An older person sowing into them, showing interest in them, someone who likes them.”* They went on to cite an example of the older person showing interest in their son when they had invited young people around to their home, to help them raise funds for a trip to Mexico.

Relationships require a sacrificial commitment to young people, even when young people may not reciprocate the commitment. It was notable that they noticed and perceived those who gave time to connect with them and serve them. Whilst the young person may say nothing at the time, when asked during the research they recognised the commitment others had made to them.

“We’ve spent 3,4,5 years with X, X and X, they’ve helped mould us”

Young people acknowledged that they do not always want to come to church, they go through periods of doubt and walk away from their faith. What they are looking for are people who will stick with them whatever is happening in their lives. One girl talked about the value she put on hearing that, even though she was not going to church, people would ask her Mum about how she was doing.

As I started by stating at the beginning of this section, relationships were by far and away the most important thing a church can encourage. The following sections are also important but my sense is that when they are ‘done’ in the context of relationship they will be far more fruitful. Relationship is the prepared soil in which the following intentional activity of the church towards young people can be planted. They will be less effective if simply delivered through programmes and initiatives.

3. Would you say the ministry among children and young people is dependent on programme or relationships?

4. What drives discipleship within your church community, programme (Sunday School, Youth Alpha) or relationships?

Let me be clear, I am not saying there is no place for programmes. They are indeed important but if not rooted in relationships with other disciples (older and peers), they are far less likely to be fruitful. As a church leader I am challenged to consider whether I would ever scrap the programmes or are they sacred cows I am unable to sacrifice? In truth programmes make me feel like 'we are doing something,' so I would find this hard. Yes, of course programmes can be a tool for building relationships but that is very tricky. This is often how they start out, but once established this approach can be hard to maintain as groups or programmes become established, or in a situation (such as my own church) when the Sunday School teacher is on a rota once a month.

5. What would a church youth ministry look like that started with building relationships as foundation on which the programmes were built?
6. How can we create opportunities for the Sunday School Teacher or volunteer youth discipleship leader to really get to know the children and young people they are working with?

Relationships are fundamental, but it is true that we must build on these foundations if we are looking to make disciples. Christ founded his work with The Twelve in a relationship but in this context, he modelled, taught, sent them out and exposed to life-changing experiences.

So first and foremost, we must be church that builds relationships with young people but we cannot stop there. The following sections offer some insight into how a church can intentionally disciple within the context of relationship. These may or may not involve programmes.

Create, encourage and make possible encounter and experience opportunities

"We are not geared up to disciple – not got the right people, resources or time" / "Running events, Malawi (mission trip), weekends away, Soul Survivor – you strengthen your beliefs and you experience other people groups, and how wide the Christian community is in their faith. How can you doubt when you have seen someone's eyesight come back or worshipped with 600 other young people"

"Malawi Mission trip – makes me look at the world differently. E.g. throwing food away or pouring water away – "why would you do that". I don't think this all the time but sometimes it clicks."

Young people, parents and youth workers spoke very passionately about the importance of experiences. Whether in sung worship, a bible study or festival style events as well as the overseas mission type experience., it was clear these experiences enabled encounter with Jesus Christ and brought faith to life in some way. The quote above from one young person about seeing the wider Christian community and the comments below of one girl for whom the mission trip experience helped her express her faith in practice, are enlightening.

One girl talked about a mission trip and how not only had it brought her faith to life as it was practical it had also enabled her to decide how to express her faith in practice (empowering and participative) and also helped her see what she would like to do after school.

This again reminds us that discipleship does not simply impart theology or information but creates opportunities for us to live out our faith. Arguably if all we do is teach 'correct theology' (as the church concerned understands good theology of course) then we are not discipling young people!

Churches may not have the resources, skills or people to facilitate such experiences but all churches could consider how they could enable young people to encounter God in such ways. In the Diocese of Bath and Wells, Tony Cook DYO has historically run the field at Soul Survivor for young people whose churches are unable to come with them. Organisations like Urban Saints and Youth for Christ offer mission (home and abroad) opportunities. The Mix, Arise, Movement and The Pulse are worship events in the area that create space for young people to come together, to worship and encounter God.

1. Are young people in your church community given opportunities to experience and encounter God?
2. What are the opportunities you create or connect young people to, to enable faith to come to life?

Encourages and enables participation

“Gives us space to talk, an opportunity for everyone’s opinions...it was led by X...he didn’t always take other people’s points of view” / “We want to pick the subjects” / “Everyone is the teacher, rather than there being just one teacher – like circle time in primary school.”

A repeated theme throughout the gatherings was the importance of participation of young people in the life of the church. The sense of belonging to the community (whatever the community) will be directly related to the participation of the individuals in that group. Children will appear more committed to church (using attendance and involvement in programmes as an indicator) because their parents are involved. However as they grow up and begin to make their own decisions about where they belong if they are simply consumers of programmes they are unlikely to be as committed. This culture of participation needs to run through the church. Young people will be able to discern if it is simply a ‘strategy’ or ‘initiative’. Again a church founded on relationship-led discipleship will find encouraging and enabling participation far more natural and that young people who are more likely to take up the opportunities. This is because they already feel safe and a sense of belonging.

1. How are young people involved in your church community?
2. How much responsibility do you give to young people?
3. What aspects of church are young people able to shape?

Speaking personally, I know that being asked to preach at my church at the age of 17 was critical in empowering me towards what I do now with YFC. It is often easier to find ways of inviting participation of young people around Sunday services but of course not all will be drawn to speak, play an instrument, lead a Sunday school group or run the projector. It is therefore important that we listen to young people about how they would like to participate and it may be that the opportunity to live out faith does not lie within the activities of the church but that someone with whom the young person has a high-trust relationship can help the young person find opportunities to live out their faith, perhaps in a local business, foodbank or (dare I say it) even another church community.

Some reading I have done recently, resonated and I thought it worth citing.

“If you invite the ideas of young people and take these ideas seriously, it will not only make a difference in their lives and those of your neighbours, it will also make a difference in your church. It will communicate that you value them, their ideas, and their participation. I think you will see an immediate difference in how they relate to your church. When you take them and their ideas

seriously then they will have a sense of ownership. Then they will not just show up out of loyalty to their parents – it will be their church too!” (Tom Sine, Live like you give a damn!)

“I encourage other established churches first to invite young people in your community to become involved in changemaking and then to encourage their growth toward a more personal faith. I suspect that many of us may be surprised by how many become followers of the Jesus who calls us to more authentic lives of loving servanthood.” (Tim Morey, Pastor)

4. What would a church look like that encourages young people to be involved – to bring their creativity – rather than this being seen as a threat?
5. What could be the impact on young people and your church mission-field?

Discipleship is modelled

“A leadership that models discipleship beyond the walls of the church” / Outreach – a church that is active – I think it encourages them (young people) to get involved. Young people need to know that the church wants them to do stuff.” / “When I saw Jo (leader) lead worship, her confidence is tenfold and it is incredible to listen to the power and listen to the passion of her worshipping.” / “They are pillars of the community, their house is open, they always give the glory to Jesus. “You walk the talk.”

Whether older members of the church community, peers, church leaders or friends’ parents, high value was given to the importance that discipleship is modelled. The quotes above make clear that we can’t just teach we must model what we teach. Furthermore, that seeing those who lead them model what they teach is itself a teacher and encouragement to those being discipled.

1. Who are those people the young people really look up to in your church (ask them)?
2. What sort of discipleship do they model?
3. How can you encourage the whole church to see themselves as potential role models for young people?

It is interesting that one parent noted, that the church leader in their setting never engaged with the youth work, beyond some initial visits in their early days. This is at best sad and at worst negligent in terms of discipleship. What sort of message does it send when the leader gets to know and shows interest in the smallest and those on the margins of the church – young people?

4. If you are a church leader reading this, how well do you know the young people the church is connected with?
5. What sort of role model are you in terms of discipleship?

If discipleship is rooted in programmes delivered by a local church it is far harder for those who lead the programme concerned to recognise the link between their own discipleship and that of those they lead. Discipleship rooted in relationship will require the ‘leader’ to think about how they live and what their lives ‘say’ to those younger people they disciple. This is because a programme-led approach means the leader sees their connection with the young person as ‘when I am on the rota’, rather like a dashed line on a page. A relationship means there is a ‘constant connection’ at some level, more like a radio wave. That connection varies over a period of time from thinking about and praying for the young person (whilst they may not be present), leading at church where those with whom are connected are part of the wider congregation, leading a bible study or perhaps taking them for a coffee. With this greater connection comes a greater responsibility to integrity and within a relationship the ‘leader’ is more ‘exposed’. It will therefore be critical that relationship-led discipleship is well supported and those involved accountable. Furthermore, what this means is that relationship-led discipleship of young people will strengthen the discipleship of those discipling too!

Intentionally resource discipleship of young people directly and through others

Most churches do not have the resources to 'be all things to all young people'. This will be particularly true in smaller churches. Having spoken to a lot of church leaders, whilst working with YFC, I am aware there can be a sense of guilt or feeling of pressure from the church, if the church is not providing 'cradle to grave' programmes. If relationships are the foundation on which we nurture our discipleship of young people then we can consider those people and what is needed to resource discipleship rather than simply try to 'cover all bases'.

One parent asked "what are the barriers to discipleship and what can the church do to help those barriers be overcome." They went on to mention (very practically), that some young people want to go to Soul Survivor but don't have tents and the church could buy tents to make the annual trip to Soul Survivor more possible.

I know of churches who will put on a minibus to take young people to Christian worship events or invite other smaller churches to join with them.

In Bath there are some churches that have worked together to deliver Sunday morning group sessions. Sharing leaders and resourcing the work together.

One parent I spoke to commented, *"We never ever have children on the agenda of the PCC?"* If that is true for the 'business meeting' of the church, what does that tell us about the business the church expends most time and energy and resource on?

1. What are some of the practical barriers to discipleship of young people in your church context?
2. What could the church do to help them be overcome?

Support for parents to disciple their children

Parents are a key part of the discipleship of their children. However it is clear that most, if not all parents, find it very hard, spiritually, emotionally and in practice. When I spoke to parents there was a lot of emotion around discipleship of their own children, which is hardly surprising. It is also important to remember that, if they are Christians, they are themselves seeking to be disciples.

All parents I spoke to emphasised the struggles of discipling their own children. All parents seemed to wish they had done more to support and there was a sense of 'guilt', particularly for those whose children didn't appear to be following in the footsteps of their parents faith.

One parent who is a Church of England Bishop said we need to *"encourage and support parents towards intentional and confident rather than hopeful and passive discipleship of children...that may include 'a letting go' but done intentionally and with thought and does not mean giving up."*

1. What does the church do to resource and support parents in bringing up their children in the way of Christ?

Where children had grown in faith it seemed clear that parents had been intentional about helping their children grow. That had not prevented ups and downs and included parents intentionally 'letting go' at times. This approach included reading the Bible with their children, a culture of saying grace at mealtimes, trying different bible reading notes, relationships with other Christian families or significant adults and attending Christian conferences or festivals.

During my meeting with parents, one person highlighted a church in Bath where parents meet simply to pray for their children. At the end of our meeting she proposed that the group of parents present do something similar.

2. What might it look like for church leaders to facilitate conversations among parents in the churches where they lead, about discipleship of their children?
3. How might churches develop a culture of prayer for young people within the church and those in the community?
4. How might parents and grandparents help disciple the children of other parents in the church community?

Conclusion and final comments

This research is not a comprehensive doctrine discipleship. I have tried to report what I heard and then draw out some themes. As I have written the report questions have come to mind and I have tried to include them. I hope they will be helpful to you reading this, enabling conversation around discipleship of young people in the church context in which you find yourself.

If I had more time and pages it would be good to develop the research a little further in a few ways.

Firstly I would be interested to engage in greater theological reflection, bringing scripture and other writing in the field of discipleship to these findings. Secondly it would be good to speak to more young people, parents and youth workers. It would also be helpful to reflect on current youth culture, its impact on and the opportunities it offers in the area of discipleship. It would also be interesting to consider who else I should speak to and finally to dig a little deeper into the themes which emerged.

I would like to finish by making what I believe are the two key points that I have learnt from this research.

The primary finding, which most will know in theory, is the importance of the practice of relationship building. Relationships are absolutely fundamental in discipleship. Teaching without relationships is primarily information-sharing. Relationships bring the teaching to life. Great programmes without relationships are just entertainment. Relationships must underpin our youth-orientated discipleship.

The second thing is that for churches to disciple young people well they will need to be intentional. There will need to be an intentionality about relationship building. However young people are unlikely, in a world that intentionally seeks to pass on all sorts of messages, to simply pick up faith by osmosis. There will need to be an intentional approach to modelling faith, encouraging encounter, experience, participation, learning and so on. That will require time to pray, think, plan, execute plans and review them. It will require commitment on the part of a church (intentionally) to the discipleship of young people both in thinking strategically (E.g. giving time in leadership meetings to such matters) and then delivering on this (E.g. training and equipping).

The reality is that a church that is led or driven by running programmes, initiatives and ministries will have youth ministry that is brittle and weak. However the church that starts with relationships and allows relationships to shape the youth ministry (whatever that means), will have a ministry of discipleship that is strong and flexible.

Let me illustrate with a couple of stories.

Simon was a teenager in the youth group that I got my 'youth worker stripes in'. He was a likeable lad. He was interested in faith and with Christian parents was supported and encouraged. I got to know Simon well. I saw him choose to follow Jesus and I baptised him. I disciplined him through youth group and had a strong relationship with him. In 2005 I left the church, Simon was 17 and doing well. Since that time my contact with Simon has been minimal and occasional. In the last 12 years Simon's life has not always been easy, he has questioned his vocation, he has been married, had a child, been made redundant, his wife has been unfaithful and the marriage has broken down. It has been 12 years since I was his youth worker and a lot has happened. I have been very much on the periphery of his life. Simon is still following Jesus. Over the last year I have started to connect with Simon again, primarily because of a mutual interest in launching a new YFC centre. It's been great to reconnect and then more recently, Simon asked me to meet with him, to mentor him. I was a little hesitant because of how much time had passed. But here's the thing, it's perfectly natural. I am discipling him again. My discipleship of Simon was and is based on a relationship.

Jack was in a football project at a school in Bath in my first five years at YFC. He was not one of the most committed but was regularly at the football sessions. We got to know him reasonably well. He enjoyed football and the company of the leaders. His life was a tough one for various reasons. Over time he left school and we lost contact. About two or three years ago I bumped into his brother, who I barely knew but recognised. I asked how Jack was. "He's in prison," came the response. Since that time I have been able to reconnect with Jack, writing to him, visiting him in prison, sharing the gospel with him, praying for him, telling him and his brother bible stories. Since reconnecting, Jack has been in and out of prison a couple more times. He has spent time in prison chaplaincy and been reading scripture. He is not yet a Christian, but I am discipling him. I don't use those words with him and neither does he, but that is what it is. I have recently realised, this is only possible, because of the relationship I had with him. People like Jack, often trust very few people in life and I am no-one special in that sense, but for some reason he trusts me, is happy for me to share life and faith with him and spend time with him. It is because of a relationship. I am trusting that one day, Jack will have a relationship with Jesus.

Relationships are strong and flexible and this means that if discipleship is rooted in relationship, whatever is thrown at young people, there is a greater likelihood that the opportunity for discipleship will still be there. Perhaps dormant for a while, like in the stories above, but there nonetheless.

A reflection

Shut your eyes for a moment.

Imagine. Imagine a church where there were no programmes, initiatives and ministries.

Only relationships.

Yes, really.

No Sunday School, no Alpha course, no Sunday service, no home or cell groups...

Only relationships.

Relationships so strong that people gather because they want to, they worship and grow together in Christian community, giving themselves and their resources generously.

Relationships so strong that when people need support in a crisis, or wanted to celebrate success, it just happens. Not because someone organised something but because of relationships.

Relationships so strong that when a sister or brother stumble, mistakes and sins are shared within the safety of relationships and they are loved back onto the path.

It's hard to imagine but dare to try. Perhaps it is possible.

Relationships so strong that other people, unexpected people are drawn into this community of relationships. It's magnetic, and in being drawn in they are drawn towards the very source of power in those relationships.

Jesus Christ.

Just imagine.

And then consider, what might be one step 'I' could take towards that.

If you want to, ask God for the strength, by his Holy Spirit, to take that step...

Amen.

I recently presented this paper to a group of church leaders and before I spoke the group read verses from John 17 and 1 Corinthians 12. Both are about the importance and power of unity. It struck me during the meeting that when we consider unity or disunity we tend to consider theological matters, unity projects or church traditions. However what about unity across the generations? In a time when the young are increasingly mistrusting of older generations and where, following the EU referendum in the UK, some young people are angry with older generations, (who rightly or wrongly, they perceive as taking them out of something they, according to voter demographics, wanted to be part of) what does it mean for the church to outwork intergenerational unity, and what might be the impact?

Jesus prays,

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one. Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us" – in other words one with us. Why? we get the answer, "so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

In other words when we are one, across the generations (as well as other social and cultural divides) we witness to the oneness of God and others may believe in Jesus as 'the sent one'. When relationships are the foundation of our discipleship of young people, we reflect the Trinitarian oneness and so draw young people to Christ.

This brief and limited piece of work I believe does offer some insight into discipleship of young people today and some thoughts on what a church that disciples young people well does and feels like. I hope it will provoke some fruitful conversations that result in action so that church communities are empowered to persevere in their discipleship of young people and develop the important work of passing on faith to the next generation.

James Vaughton – January 2017