

## Children, Youth and Family Strategy Group

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**Purpose:** to review the needs and current provision and plan a 5-10 year strategy for children, young people and families within WBC.

We met on:

18<sup>th</sup> October, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 23<sup>rd</sup> May

### **Mission statement:**

In order to reflect our Heavenly Father’s caring relationship with us, we as a church aim to provide the best possible environment in which children and young people can be reached for the gospel, nurtured and taught, and to provide training and support for parents to encourage them to bring up their children in a loving Christian environment.

### **Process:**

- Listening to children and young people
- Listening to parents
- Listening to interested others
- Prioritising needs
- Discussion and strategy planning
- Recommendations to the elders

### **Listening exercises**

The first stage in the process took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2005, when 35 parents met together at the Mount Conference Centre to share their views on various aspects of the current children and youth provision in church. Responses were structured around four different topics and parents were invited to give honest views on the following key areas:

- Sunday stuff (Crèche, Junior Church, Teenage Bible class)
- Family experience of church
- Mid-week stuff (Tuesday Plus, Parent and Toddler Group, Youth Fellowship)
- Safety, welfare and facilities

Responses were stimulating and helpful in establishing where our initial focus should be. The pressing needs of teenagers were identified as a priority area, and the themes of inclusion, participation and belonging were recurring factors in the discussion.

This listening exercise was the first of several, and the views of children and young people themselves were central to any consideration regarding future development. Several "listening exercises" were undertaken with the children and young people, both in terms of discussions (formal and informal) and written feedback.

Further views were invited by any interested parties through questionnaires and via the Windsor website. Several detailed responses and suggestions came informally from parents through discussions or correspondence. We are grateful for all the views we received, and all were relevant to our discussions.

## **Prioritising needs**

It quickly became apparent from the above that the most pressing issue concerned the provision for teenagers, and this is where the group began. (We plan to meet again in September 2006 to begin examining and planning for the primary school and pre-school age groups.)

# **Teenage Report**

## **Making sense of teenagers**

All societies distinguish between childhood and adulthood. The period of transition between these periods (adolescence) requires the individual to reconsider and redefine themselves and their capabilities as they make choices about their "social self". It is a process of development which is critical in making sense of the future and the individual's role in it. Some common features of adolescence are:

- the individual requires greater autonomy, but will continue to require boundaries. This tension can often manifest itself as conflict within the family as the individual and care givers struggle, with the teenager not quite being a child, but not quite being an adult yet;
- being placed in new roles and responsibilities which require choices and decisions;
- more independent relationships, spending more time with their peers and away from their caregivers;
- physical changes associated with puberty requiring choices about such things as sexuality;
- cognitive changes providing the foundation for more abstract thinking about social, moral and ethical issues, and
- the peer group is pivotal to the development of the individual's identity and theorists believe that the key to this period of development is the interaction that the individual has with others (peers, families, institutions and society). Forging an identity is a social as well as mental process.

Children and young people learn from the modelling and communication of values within their family, and also from people they look up to, or with whom they have a positive relationship. It is through these relationships with parents, peers and other adults (or mentors) that young people find the bridge to adulthood (Biddulph, 1997). Adolescence is a time for making "glorious mistakes" but in having enough adult care

and guidance that these mistakes are not fatal. Children (especially boys) from about the age of fourteen need role models or mentors- other adults to whom they are special, and who can help guide them into the adult world.

Adolescence tends to get a bad press, with parents often waiting in fear and trepidation for their little darlings to turn into monsters. At the root of this are the attempts by the teenager at emancipation from the family (or authority figures in general) and the search for identity. However, both these issues begin their development at a much earlier stage; the process simply moves faster in the adolescent years. Nevertheless, parents must be empowered and informed about the psychological, behavioural and emotional changes in adolescence, to enable them to parent as best they can and guide their young people into adulthood with as little baggage as possible!

### **Dominant themes from the listening exercises regarding teenage provision**

Our current provision of alternate Sunday mornings (Bible class) and alternate Friday nights (Youth fellowship) was evaluated positively by most responses (both the young people themselves and their parents). However, a number of concerns were raised:

1. We believe that the issue of “belonging” is central to our Christian experience, yet how do we in Windsor create and convey to our teenagers a sense of belonging?
2. Related to this is the view that children and young people are relatively invisible in terms of participating in the “normal” Sunday service. Several commented that they feel excluded from church when exiting to Junior Church/Bible class, particularly when the praise group is taking part in the service (however, Junior Church and Teenage Bible Class were both evaluated positively).
3. Broadly speaking, teenagers do not participate in the general “adult” events in Windsor, apart from the Praise Group (which was high on the list of positives from the young people). All age events are successful in bridging the age gap, but they are limited and often seen as “special events”.
4. The predicted numbers of young people currently in junior church and teenage bible class eligible to attend the Friday night Youth Fellowship will increase in September 2006 from fourteen to thirty.
5. With this throughput, the age gap widens- the Youth Fellowship currently caters for over ten year olds (the upper age is now seventeen). It was felt that this age range is too wide, and this creates difficulties in age appropriate activities as well as the difficulty of retaining the older members who may feel that they have outgrown the YF.
6. It was recognised that there is a gap in provision: namely that there are limited opportunities for informal, yet organised fellowship and opportunities for discussion of relevant age related topics.
7. Parents were clearly saying that they wanted more extensive provision for their teenage children, both in terms of developing relationships with peers,

and others in Windsor, and also in terms of Christian growth and discipleship. In addition, parents requested support in the task of parenting adolescents and in understanding the needs of their young people.

Several of these issues were recognised as being particular to WBC, but many of them are broader themes in general church life throughout the Western world.

## The Big Picture

The issue of teenage “dropout” or teenage “turnoff” is one facing all Christian churches across all denominational boundaries. A study cited by Teencoach showed that 71% of the teenagers who go to church at the age of fourteen will have stopped doing so by the time they reach the age of twenty. The English Church Attendance Survey of 1998 found that 1000 young people under the age of 15 leave the church in the UK each week. The most common reason cited (of many) was that church is boring. Yet this is a key demographic group, given that 75% of Christians are converted before they are 20.

An Australian study looked at two different groups of young people: the first group had left church and the second group was still attending. Of the first group, when asked if there was a caring adult (in church) who could have helped them through their difficulties, only 20% answered yes, while a staggering 74% replied no. Of the group that remained 93% answered yes to the same question (from an MA Dissertation in Evangelism Studies, University of Sheffield at Cliff College by Nigel Lane.).

This reinforces the need to address the issue of belonging for our young people, and confirms that any approach we adopt in WBC must be based firmly on **relational youth work**. Children, and adults for that matter, remember people more readily than they do words. The earthly ministry of Jesus demonstrates the fact that our work with young people needs to be individual and relational. Jesus did speak to large crowds but the majority of His time and energy was focused on a few people. Church Growth Magazine suggests; *“Churches that develop ministries designed to help families and young people to live their faith together will create an important network of relationships. Each relationship that a person develops in a church is like a strand in a rope. The more relationships you have, the harder it is for the person to break away from what that rope is tied to.”* Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus we see a person- centred, discipleship ministry.

The young people surveyed who remained in church also considered church far more than a Sunday morning service. What seemed to be of greater importance was the way that they were linked to others with the common aim of strengthening their relationship with God. For ten to fourteen year olds in particular (“tweenagers”), being with friends is the most important factor in enjoying any activity in church. Other key values identified for this age group are family and fun. Many of the young people surveyed said they had come to the point where they felt they could make a contribution to church life [in music or drama or children's ministry] which increased their sense of worth and value. This fact encouraged them to stay involved, as they had responsibilities and felt that other people were relying on them.

## Discussion

### Belonging

As a group we considered the issue of how we convey a sense of belonging and value to our children and young people. Two things quickly became apparent. Firstly, the teenage group themselves identified that they feel they have a role to play in the Sunday morning service (from practical activities like lifting the offering, to involvement in the praise group/music). There is evidence that churches that encourage active participation by young people do best in retaining them (2001 Church Life Profile). As a church we need to include this group in a more visible and central way and actively encourage and facilitate them in taking on responsibilities, which are opportunities for service and development. This is a whole church ministry (do we give our young people feedback when they do take part?), as well as a structural issue.

Secondly, an aspect of belonging refers to the relationships that we establish with our young people. The value of, for example, having coffee on Sunday mornings has been recognised by many parents. One of the advantages of this is that our children get time to form relationships with other people in church. There are many excellent role models within Windsor for all ages, and this is a strength that we are keen to make central to any "all church ministry". Many parents of small children value and appreciate the time taken by older teenagers and young adults who spend time talking to and taking an interest in their children at coffee time. As parents, we recognise how influential and important it is for our children to have relationships with people they consider to be "cool" and whom they aspire to be like. This is the stuff of lasting memories and is a real influence in their development. It must not be underestimated in shaping eternity for these children. Children remember people more quickly than sermons. "To have an important influence in the lives of young people, you do not need to be a dynamic speaker, know all the latest rock musicians, or even dress in the latest fashions. You must, however, love young people and be willing to spend time with them, which is basically what relational youth ministry is all about." ([www.teencoach.org](http://www.teencoach.org))

With this in mind we suggest that the church should explore a scheme of mentoring. Mentoring is defined as "a relational process in which a mentor, who knows or has experienced something, transfers that something [resources of wisdom, information, experience, confidence, insight, relationships, status etc] to a "mentoree".

We recognise that the process of mentoring may be difficult to manage from several perspectives, not least of all from a child protection perspective. However, the core element within the concept of mentoring is one which we feel could be integrated into already existing structures (or proposals contained in this report) within the church, for example into the role of Junior Church teacher, or youth club helper. In addition to this, we wish to promote a sense of responsibility amongst the whole church for our children and young people. Fostering a sense of belonging for children and young people is a whole church ministry and not just the sole responsibility of those who are already involved in youth ministry.

There are times when young people may require a different level of support and listening than can be provided by a mentor. Society in NI is beginning to recognise that teenagers also have emotional needs that must be taken seriously. Sadly we

have too much evidence in NI (in the form of rising numbers of youth suicide) of the effects of mental distress for teenagers, and examples of young people who feel they are unable to express or manage their fears and worries. Counselling for young people must be an essential ingredient in our provision. This will be addressed later in this report.

Many people in WBC spoke to us about extending all age events, as these are recognised as an effective way of genuinely developing all age relationships and are well supported by the teenage group. The current all age activities include the Mournes Invasion, the church weekend, the church BBQ and other events. We feel that the church weekend needs to have a more explicit focus on the children and young people who attend where they are engaging in meaningful activities (rather than “being minded” during the adult sessions). This may be facilitated by a team of volunteers to manage a special youth programme at the weekend.

As a group we discussed the possibility of a regular all age event outside of Sunday. Recognising the commuting issue for many families during the week, it was felt that the weekend may be the most appropriate time for this, although we also looked at having all ages in the buildings on a Wednesday night, with a structured programme for different age groups. We reached consensus that an all age event needs to be just that, rather than bringing everyone together and then separating out. Whilst this may be appropriate from time to time, we would recommend activities that are for everyone, thus reinforcing the idea of “friends, family and fun”. Friday night may be the most appropriate evening for this, and we recommend that initially this should be on a monthly basis. On a week when the mid week meeting is planned for the church building, this could occasionally be replaced by an all age event. Events would not necessarily be confined to the premises, but could include the aforementioned events, as well as sporting events or a nature trail/treasure hunt. It could also facilitate the meeting of particular groups at particular times (eg. praise group practice). We would also suggest that food could be a component of these events (either regularly or as special events). Coordination of this event is critical, as is variety and the incorporation of activities that will appeal to all (although we recognise that different people have different preferences). Distributing responsibility for organising one or two events throughout the year could be spread amongst the fellowship groups, thus producing fresh ideas, and catering for as many different styles as possible. Currently, we already have several all age events, which we would propose to retain; therefore, an additional six or seven could be planned more evenly throughout the year.

### **Opportunities for focussed teenage activities**

While there were some views expressed regarding the sufficiency of our current provision, we feel that there is a need to make this more extensive. Feedback from the young people themselves on both the Teenage Bible Class and the Friday pm Youth Fellowship was generally positive, and this formed the starting point of our discussions.

Firstly the YF. This provides opportunities for making and developing peer relationships and also relationships with the adults and young people who are helpers. This currently takes place fortnightly and combines group activities, outings, and a variety of leisure opportunities, as well as a focus on the Bible. We considered various options including continuing the provision as it is currently, dividing the age group into two groups and meeting at different times, and dividing the age group into two groups and operating concurrently. This is our preferred option for two main

reasons. Firstly, we recognised that from September the group eligible to attend the YF will result in an age range from ten to seventeen. This is too great an age range to be able to manage as one group. Therefore, we propose splitting the group into a 10-13 age group (with predicted numbers of 22), and 14-17 age group (predicted numbers of 8). Secondly, taking the commuting issue into account, and also that several families will have children or young people in both these groups, we feel that both groups should run concurrently but separately. Obviously this requires appropriate facilities and space to be able to coordinate two sets of activities. We feel that at present the YF (perhaps more of a youth club) should continue on a fortnightly basis. There are obvious implications here (as with all the recommendations) for recruitment of volunteers and helpers, and overall coordination, as well as appropriate facilities.

To supplement this opportunity for relationship building, we feel that there is a pressing need for informal opportunities to explore relevant issues for young people connected to living out their Christian faith, and deepening spiritual fellowship with each other. The Sunday am Bible class continues to play a significant and vital role in the lives of our young people, particularly in reflecting and applying at an appropriate level the Bible teaching from David. The dedication and effort of the leaders of this group is hugely appreciated by both the young people and parents. In the same way that adults need time for more informal learning and fellowship through the Fellowship Groups, our young people need time and space to focus on their own spiritual needs related to being teenagers. We propose a Youth Fellowship for the older group of teenagers (14-17 years), which would meet on a fortnightly basis on a Sunday evening during the evening service. The teenagers have already suggested topics and formats for this meeting (see attached). These include Christian witness (living in the world but being separate), relationships, drugs, alcohol, life in school, the future, time for prayer and worship, and opportunities for service. Residential weekends and linking up with other YFs should be encouraged.

We debated whether an event should be organised which would be in competition with the Sunday evening service, or may have the effect of encouraging young people to absent themselves from this service. We also considered if we should be encouraging young people to attend the evening service on a regular basis as a priority. However, Sunday does seem to be the most suitable time for a fellowship meeting, as many teenagers are at a loss on Sunday evenings, but are involved with other social events on Saturday (for example with friends, cinema etc.). The issue of commuting led us to suggest that meeting during the evening service may be the most appropriate time. An alternate Sunday evening YF may encourage some young people to attend church on the "in between" Sundays, particularly with their peers.

We discussed how this group should be organised, and felt that the Junior Church idea of a rota of teams may not be appropriate given that building relationships of trust and confidence will be vital to this group. However, we feel that the YF may also benefit from having a variety of people involved. Coordination, again, is the key, and we recommend that there be two teams of two, ideally a gender mix who could alternate, thereby allowing variety, as well as consistency.

## Youth Worker

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that youth work works in terms of retaining the attendance of young people in church, encouraging their participation in the life of the church, establishing a strong sense of belonging, and involvement of all ages in outreach activities (The Profile of Youth Workers 2003 Report). A research project carried out in England in 2001 (The 2001 Church Life Profile) identified that churches with salaried youth workers are more likely to be growing numerically and have more members involved as volunteers in youth work and evangelism. A recent study estimated that 17% of churches in the UK have dedicated youth workers either part time or full time.

We propose that Windsor should appoint a youth pastor, who would have four main functions (although others could be added), which shall be expanded upon in the rest of this report:

1. Provide children and young people with active pastoral care,
2. Oversee and develop the children's and youth programmes,
3. Promote and provide opportunities for service for children and young people, and
4. Coordinate, promote and develop a programme of all age activities (see previous discussion).

Firstly, children and young people require active pastoral care, and this can include visiting or meeting with young people throughout the week (as individuals) as well as involvement in the proposed events. Meeting young people after school or for coffee, for example, may be significant in the establishment of meaningful relationships, and we believe that this post should be based on the principles of relational youth work. Providing active pastoral care would encompass ensuring that young people in the church feel supported, being available to the young people for counselling, and representing the needs and views of the young people to the church leadership.

Secondly, the youth pastor would be responsible for overseeing and developing the children's and youth programmes. This would involve co-ordinating and reviewing the programmes to cater for the spiritual and social needs of children and young people within the church, providing and co-ordinating resources for children's and youth work, recruiting volunteers to assist in implementing the programmes, and providing training for junior church teachers and other helpers in the children's/youth programme.

Thirdly, the youth pastor would have responsibility for promoting and providing opportunities for service for children and young people. This may include offering opportunities for young people to minister to others and to participate in the church services, providing opportunities for the young people to develop their gifts, and providing evangelistic opportunities for young people both within Windsor, and further afield.

We discussed the need for support for parents of teenage young people, and while we recognise this as a need, we feel that it may not necessarily fall within the remit of a youth pastor. It may be a tall order to expect one individual to be skilled in communicating and working with children and young people, as well as providing

support to parents. Windsor has developed a framework for providing support and guidance to parents of younger children and infants, and we feel that this should be extended to parents of teenagers.

While further work needs to be completed in order to make this a concrete recommendation (including costing) we would suggest that a youth pastor be appointed as soon as possible, and recommend a small team of people to take this forward as a priority.

## **Summary of recommendations**

In summary, then, the recommendations for teenagers for implementation in September 2006 (or as soon as possible thereafter) are as follows:

- Two youth groups (ages 10-13 and 14-17) to run concurrently on alternate Friday nights.
- An all age activity to be held once a month, usually on a Friday evening.
- Alternate Sunday evening Youth Fellowship for the 14-17 age group.
- A mentoring scheme to be explored.
- Support for parents of teenagers in the same way that WBC supports new parents and parents of small children.
- Appointment of a youth pastor.