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I'm writing to those of you who, like me, spend a good part of your life working alongside young people.

Some of you have taken what I can only describe as a huge step of faith (in terms of salary if nothing else) and made this your full time occupation. I can only say I have the greatest respect for you in following this calling. I understand the sacrifices you and your family are making in order for you to do what you are doing.

Others of you manage to fit your work with young people around the demands of a job, family and goodness knows what else. You have probably got used to rushing through the door at the end of the working day, grabbing something to eat, and rushing out again to a youth group or planning meeting or bowling trip. I suspect you are often made to feel the poorer relation to those of us working 'full time' (I know you hate that phrase), but in truth I have a feeling it is you, not us, who have made the tougher choice. If anyone should have respect for juggling so many demands and responsibilities, it's you.

I found myself in youth work almost by accident and, before I realised it, nearly 20 years have passed. The first generation of teenagers I met have long since grown up and have teenagers of their own. I've lost count of the number of young

people I've got to know in that time, sharing with them the ups and downs of life and trying to make them think as much about faith as they have for me.

I'm so often challenged by the commitment to this calling that I find in fellow youth leaders. You are almost always unsung heroes, prepared to give huge amounts of time and energy to the young people in your care, sometimes battling with churches who seem to care more about the Coke stains on the carpet than the messy process of discipleship. You share my sense of awe in your work as you see, little by little, the presence of Christ emerging, like treasure in jars of clay, in the young people in your care.

I have a few thoughts I'd like to share with you, although I'm well aware that this sudden desire to stop and reflect may be a sign of an approaching mid-life crisis (38 this year). I'd also like to think that it's God gently nudging me to finally stop and ponder what it is I'm doing in my work with young people. What I write is, in truth, probably more about me than you.

The problem is I think we all know we're missing something crucial in our work, but don't know quite what it is or how to find it. We may or may not have a flourishing 'youth ministry' in our own church, but let's not kid ourselves that the bigger picture, in our towns and in this country, is one where the majority of young people remain untouched by and uninterested in the church (this is more true today than 10 years ago and will perhaps be even more so in another 10).

As I look back over the past few decades I realise that, despite my best efforts (and not forgetting some real moments of success) a generation of young people has remained largely untouched by our attempts to reach out.

This kind of honesty may seem negative or uncomfortable, but actually it is the only real starting place for change. Unless we know where we are, how can we work out how to get to where we need to be?

I try to blame all kinds of things for this failure (it hurts to call it that, but isn't that what it is?) to reach the majority of young people. I can point to changing youth culture (even though in these post modern days, young people are more interested and open to exploring spirituality than ever), I can find fault with churches whose services seem to have reached the 1800's, stalled and never moved on (even though, confusingly, some of the churches I know to have kept and nurtured young people the best, are exactly these kind). I can lay the blame at the feet of the media who have ridiculed Christianity and enraptured our young people with a heady mix of consumerism, sex and banality (though even they now seem to realise that young people want and need something deeper). But I can't escape the feeling that the problem starts with me.

And it's as I turn to reflect on myself, that I find one question which won't go away. It is about the nature of the relationship between a youth leader and young people. And the role I have chosen to play as youth leader. In short it's this: I

wonder if we, by that I mean me, have forgotten that youth work is more about sharing our spiritual journey than portraying ourselves as spiritual gurus?

Our youth work seems forever centred on the personality and zest of the youth leader, apparently full of faith, sharing in weekly bite-sized chunks the spiritual truths which we hope will enable young people to believe and grow, wrapped up in the sugary outer shell of whatever youth trends are current. I suspect that churches hope that the charisma of the youth leader will rub off in the spiritual commitment of the young people. It's a model of youth work that, as some have pointed out, is rooted in white middle class American suburban life from the middle of the last century. Somehow, even with the books we have bought, the conferences we have attended and our ability to keep up with trends, our methods have remained largely unchanged in the last 50 years. And this despite our culture experiencing the most earth-shattering and profound change since modernist thinking began 400 years ago.

In this old style model of youth work, the focus is on the youth leader themselves. They are held as a beacon to young people. Expected to be a shining example of faith, they are not allowed to be fallible or fall since, like a house of cards, the faith of the young people rests partly on the sheer force of their personality.

What is hard for any youth leader becomes even more difficult for those in paid ministry where, unknowingly or not, it is all too easy for additional pressure, both

from churches and, if we're honest, ourselves. We can easily fall into the trap of feeling we have to 'hold it together' even when things feel like they're falling apart. Come on, most of you, like me, have delivered talks on prayer, temptation or whatever else, fully aware but never admitting our own ongoing failure in these areas.

This style of youth work also seems focused on protecting young people from the world outside rather than preparing them for it. We seem afraid to let them explore and question faith, seeing doubt as a sin rather than the precursor to a faith that is far deeper and lasting. Our approach concentrates on delivering the 'truth' of the Christian message (quite rightly) but tries to avoid talking about the alternatives (in case they seem too appealing?). But how will our young people know how valid the Christian faith is, unless they have seen their faith in the context of the real world?

I have an image in my mind of a room with all kinds of doors leading out. Each one represents a different philosophy or view of life. The Christian youth leader stands with his young people in the room and has a choice. On the one hand they could explain to the young people what each door represents and help them recognise that Christianity is the only true option that doesn't lead to a dead end. Or they can try and distract the young people, providing wacky entertainment and excitement around the Christian door in the hope that the young people will never even notice that there are also other choices. Which, if we're honest, is our youth

work setting out to do? And how much confidence do we, as youth leaders, have in the power of the Christian choice to remain the only real choice, even when all the others have been considered.

The truth is that most young people will notice the other 'doors': it's just a matter of whether it's in our youth groups, where we have a chance to help, or somewhere else, like college, where they may meet people with confident and rational world views that seem incredibly appealing. But what have we really got to fear from helping our young people understand how their faith relates to other philosophies and world views? Christianity has been robust enough to survive these questions for 2000 years, surely it can survive a few more.

Isn't there another way of seeing youth ministry? One where we are sharing a common spiritual journey with young people, finding ourselves only a little further along the very same road, and discovering that our work with teenagers will change us as much as it will challenge them? One where who you are becoming, is as important as what you are achieving? In this model of youth ministry, the youth leader is not the end product the church hopes the young people will one day become. They are co-travellers, fellow disciples, walking the same journey. Just like Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

I think I read somewhere that only a tiny alteration in our genetic make up would change us completely, turning us into pigs or bananas or something. This subtle

change in how we perceive our work seems to have something in common with that idea. I am not suggesting that we do not have something to teach young people or that our faith is on the same level of maturity as a teenager. What I'm saying is that a subtle change to seeing us as sharing a spiritual journey with young people might have a more profound change in the way we do youth work than we imagine.

Perhaps I can make a few suggestions as to what might be different.

1. I suspect our work would become less programme-centric. Somehow, even though we are expert at talking about relational youth work, we are not very good at actually doing it. What would we do after all, if we had no youth meetings? (Hold that thought, if you dare, it may not be as mad as it seems.) Or at least, imagine a meeting where young people can explore and think and ask questions about God, where there is space for reflection and silence, where the emphasis is as much on sharing as telling. After years of developing some of the noisiest and wildest programmes and events, I have discovered that young people, however noisy or wild, are desperate for this space and long to talk about their beliefs and feelings (sometimes we need to help them find the language to express these beliefs and feelings, but that's another story). We have to grasp that, in this post-modern world, young people are far more engaged by people who 'do' the truth, rather than those who assert it.

2. Our work will become less youth leader-centric. This will have two profound effects. First, we will be able to be more honest with ourselves and others about our own doubts, failures and fears. We will be able to see them as just as valuable in our spiritual journey as our successes and certainties. Youth leaders will be able to ask for help and admit they are finding something difficult whilst our young people will breath a sigh of relief that they are not the only ones struggling with a particular issue. Who knows, they may even talk with you about it. I wonder how many youth leaders we might have been able to save from failed marriages and lost faith, from burning out or cracking up, if we have given them a context where they were able to share their struggles honestly. Of course this demands a high level of responsibility: there are areas of our lives that should remain confidential to ourselves and those to whom we have made ourselves accountable: sharing your marriage crisis with a bunch of thirteen year olds is clearly inappropriate.

Second, we will find freedom to let young people put their faith on the line and take on responsibilities and leadership. And by that I mean, taking more of a risk that letting the youth group take the collection in the morning service (as welcome a chance as it is for them to stretch their legs). Three years ago in my home town, we began to develop a cell-based work where young people's focus for spiritual growth was a small group of six or seven meeting weekly, led not by youth leaders, but by young people who were sometimes only a year or two older. My own prejudices about the wisdom of this were shattered by what we

saw happen. Both the young people in the group and the young people leading it, grew more in faith than I had given them credit for, and certainly more than they would have listening to weekly talks from me. I discovered from that experience that youth work is less about the have and the have-nots (I have faith wisdom and knowledge, you don't) and more about what we can discover and learn together.

Imagine a small church where there is no youth leader and no youth meetings, just a handful of teenagers who help lead the Sunday School during the Sunday service. I guess what I'm asking myself is this. What if that church is doing more 'youth ministry' by encouraging those young people to lead and stretch their faith, than the church down the road where there is an action-packed programme of meetings, outings and camps. I'm not suggesting the young people in the first church would be perfect, or that the youth ministry in the second has no value, just that questions like this force me to reconsider what effective youth ministry might really look like.

3. Our work will become less theology-centric. We'd probably deny it until the day we die, but much of our youth work is focused on giving young people information and knowledge about Christian beliefs, rather than on who they are becoming. I think we've got it the wrong way round. Theology should be the framework to make sense of our experience and questions. But if we have no experience and aren't asking any questions, what use have we for theology? No

wonder most young people are bored by what we try and teach them. I'm not suggesting that our creed doesn't matter. By focusing on the spiritual journey we are sharing together, theology becomes more relevant than ever.

I also think stories will take on a new significance. Concentrating in our teaching, as we do, on Jesus and the early church, and on our own faith today, we have managed to forget two thousand years of Christians who have taken this same journey. We need to start telling these stories again, inspiring and challenging our young people with the rich resources of our Christian history. Can you imagine a group of fifteen year olds caught up in the story of St Francis of Assisi? Believe me, I've seen it happen, and it's extraordinarily powerful.

So why don't more of us take the plunge and change the way we work? Well, here's the rub. To change in this way is to admit we have got it wrong. And that hurts. It's one thing to admit a lack of skill (youth leaders are the first to tell you they're rubbish at administration); it's quite another to admit to a deeper weakness. So to get to where we need to be, we have first to face ourselves and admit that the way we have been working hasn't been working. I imagine all of us will find this difficult.

What's more, when our focus is on sharing our spiritual journey, we have to be prepared to share our personal failings and weaknesses with others, including young people. For those who have hidden their dwindling faith behind a flurry of

programme and activities, this invokes fear and uncertainty. Will the young people reject me when they see I am not the all-conquering hero but instead struggling with the same issues as them? And, put bluntly, will the church fire me, or at least lose faith in me, when they see the real 'me'? I have a feeling many youth leaders are struggling with their faith and their practice of the presence of God far more than they would want others to know. (What a relief though, to be able to share our true selves and throw ourselves on the grace and understanding of our brothers and sisters in Christ).

To change also involves taking a risk. After all, I'm not claiming that youth work from this new perspective would have any fewer problems (different ones, maybe) or be without its share of failure. And it's not always easy to take risks as a church youth leader when you often need to go on bended knee to the church leadership to buy a couple of youth resources, let alone propose a radical shift in youth ministry.

Perhaps I could stop here and make a plea to churches and especially church ministers to give a little slack to your youth leaders and let them experiment a little. Maybe some of our ideas and new ways of working with young people will fail, but better to step out in faith than stay where we are. That way, failure is inevitable sometime. It's hard, especially if you're a paid youth leader. We want to succeed and for the church to think we're doing a good job. Heck, let's be honest,

we want you to like us and think we're good at what we do. The problem is that that pressure means we are less likely to try new things. We need you, as our leaders, to give us permission to try new things and maybe even fail. If you don't give us the push to do that, we probably won't ever risk it, in case we offend you and the rest of the church. And if we never take any risks, if we never step out from the realm of what we know into the realm of faith, then what have we become?

I think we also fear, perhaps rightly, that somehow these changes in emphasis might compromise the very foundations of our faith. It's especially unsettling for those of us who are evangelicals. We already feel threatened enough by what's happening in the 'world', so that the prospect of challenges from within is almost too much. We are torn between accepting these ideas which resonate with us at a deep level, and fear of ending up in some new age nothingness where commitment and truth are sacrificed on the alter of experience and feeling. I understand those thoughts and fears completely, because I have felt them myself. And whilst I believe I am suggesting deep and profound shifts in our thinking, I am not casting off the basis of my faith. (Although fear is a powerful emotion and has been used by the Devil throughout history to keep Christians immobilised.)

Whatever you may make of these thoughts, I encourage you to reflect much more on the practice of your youth ministry and give God the space and invitation

to speak. If you have read this far, you have probably felt a spark or a connection between my thoughts and your own journey (that, or you're gathering more evidence for your letter of outrage at this post modern muse). I certainly wish I had learnt the practice of reflection and evaluation a good many years ago. As a conclusion to this letter, and a starting point for that reflection, perhaps I can leave you with some questions you might like to ask yourself.

1. What is more important in my youth work, what I achieve or who I am becoming?
2. What gets more of my attention and energy: the youth programme or the young people?
3. Am I prepared to admit to young people there is a dark side to my life?
4. Am I prepared to risk failure or do I play it safe?

As I stated when I started this letter, what I write is to myself more than anyone.

I think of Jesus talking to the rich young ruler and the different and difficult path he offers him: give up everything you own and come and follow me. Sadly, it was too much for him and he couldn't take the risk of such a dramatic change.

Even though he was clearly seeking answers to some deep spiritual questions, I've always been very judgemental of that young man, wondering how he could have turned down such an opportunity. But now I understand what he must have felt. To risk everything is impossibly daunting and, if I'm completely honest, I'm not sure if I could have done what Jesus was asking either.

Now I find myself with much in common with that man, as Jesus challenges me to change so much about the way I have worked as a youth worker for the past 15 years. It's painfully difficult to make such a choice.

Jesus' response to the rich young ruler gives me great comfort. It says, simply, that Jesus looked at him and loved him. I like to think that as you and I wrestle with some of these issues, He does exactly the same for us.