

4/1/2004

Christian schools work is in crisis. Scratch that. I mean, the Christian schools work I do is in crisis. Let's not bring anyone else into this, unless they invite themselves.

The kind of evangelical schools work I've done for in UK secondary schools for the past 20 years, hasn't changed for....the past twenty years. Transport a schools worker from the early 80's in to a classroom today and they would barely take a moment to acclimatise. I have a sneaking suspicion that the same lesson plan on 'Rules' that we were taught back then from the 'old hands' is still being passed on and used today.

Here's the problem (or here's my problem with myself):

Almost no one is doing work in schools with those over 16. We've ended up concentrating on younger and younger year groups because it's easier. Funny stories, simplistic explanations: these things go better with 12 years old than philosophical 17 year olds. Our work is like a funnel, but not in the way we normally use that illustration. 100 Year 7's becomes 10 Year 11's.

We've never ever got to grips with education vs. evangelism. It's the dark shadow in the closet of schools work. To the churches we talked evangelism. To the Head Teachers we talked education. We prayed the two would never meet. We never talked, prayed and worked through what our rationale was for what we were doing. name one book, leaflet or anything that we ever

produced anywhere across the UK which dealt with this subject. Put them against the stack of books full of assembly ideas. See what I mean?

We got sidetracked by mentoring. The golden buzz word of the 90's. More money than we ever dreamed of was available from government and councils if we concentrated on mentoring. We did. We adjusted our focus to concentrate on work which was much more palatable for schools. The 90's was bliss as far as controversy was concerned. Everyone loved us. We did nothing to upset or offend.

We didn't know how to meet the changing culture of postmodernism. Our work was basically proclamation, with a response at an out of school event. Our model of evangelism fitted into the way schools work. We used RE lessons and assemblies to preach the word, along with some cool jokes and stories. When the culture changed, we didn't know how to develop a new model of working. For a while we thought it might be mentoring, after all it's all about relationships. In the end, at least it kept us busy so we didn't have to face the hard questions we knew were coming.

Church got youth leaders in a big way. Youth leaders look after kids in their church, but during the day they are all at school. Youth leaders started doing schools work - after all, what else are you going to do between the hours of 9 and 3.30. We were threatened by this. If youth leaders did more schools work, what would be do. Moving from evangelism into a more professional role in schools (social inclusion and mentoring) was a way to find our sense of worth and purpose again.

We also got threatened by the raft of new youth work qualifications that arrived in the 90's. Although there might be a few odd modules on schools work, there wasn't much on schools work. It was another subtle pressure towards educational professionalisation.

We lowered our sights because we weren't seeing the kind of results we wanted. We talked more and more about sowing seeds rather than seeing immediate results. Fair point. But you can have too many seeds. There has to be a harvest sometime or you have to question what kind of seed you're sowing with.

The image I have is off a razor. If you wet shave, you'll know what I mean. In theory you're supposed to use a razor blade what, maybe twice or three times. But we all know you can hack with the same old blade for a month when it comes to the push. It's a little sore and there might be a little blood, but hey, it works. That's what our work felt like. Whatever sharpness we felt in the 80's had been blunted by the turn of the century. Not that we didn't see some results, just with a lot more effort and hassle.

Well, it's taken us nearly two years to even admit that this is where we are. Coming to terms with this has been incredibly painful. It's taken the group of us at LCET a long time to come clean about what we're really thinking and feeling...and to talk openly with each other and God. But we have. September 2003 we stopped the style of schools work I've been doing here for 10 years and for a lot longer elsewhere. We have spent the last term trying to work out

what our input into schools should look like. Actually we have given ourselves two years to work this through. It's that kind of challenge.

Tomorrow we meet as a team to talk about the first term of doing it differently. To evaluate and reflect. To ask some tough questions of ourselves. I'll let you know what happens.