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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

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Lessons in Love: Youth Work on the Road to Emmaus

Many churches are acutely aware of their weakness in the area of work with young people. Steve Croft encourages them not to feel that this can only be done by professionals, but also by motivated and supported Christian adults. In an exploration of the Emmaus story he identifies three key needs applicable to today's young people – accepting friendships, teaching that engages and challenges, and the opportunity to recognise and respond to Jesus Christ.

Introduction

The primary motivation and method of Christian youth work is love. Neither the desire to protect young people growing up from a 'hostile' society around them; nor the desire to provide a complete range of programmes for all ages at the local church; nor the desire to see the world converted are sufficient motivation. Personal maturity (however defined) in the young people themselves is a good but inadequate goal for the church or Christian leaders. They will always want to work with the hope, prayer and expectation that some young people will come to know Christ for themselves whatever the context of the work being done. Models of learning taken from formal or informal education are little more than gongs and cymbals as tools of Christian youth work if the love itself is lacking. The primary call, challenge and method of Christian work with young people is Christian love: concerned for the other's well being, patient, long-suffering, not manipulative, the love which draws alongside, befriends and welcomes and guides. The kind of love in fact which, the Christian youth worker knows, God has demonstrated in Christ for us and for the world.

Parental limitations

Among its many lessons, the parable of the father and two sons in Luke 15 demonstrates that there are limits to what can be achieved through the love of a parent alone. We are shown a father whose love for his sons is unconditional and generous to the point of folly. The younger brother seeks only to escape that love at the earliest opportunity. The elder's relationship with his father deteriorates on his side to one of obedience and of work. With both, the father is long-suffering, gracious and patient: watching out for the younger; welcoming him home with tears, going outside to the elder, begging him to rejoin the party. After the younger brother has left home, however, even the father has come to the end of his resources. **There**

is nothing more he can do but watch and, we assume, pray. His second chance with the younger son comes about only through a series of co-incidences. Had it not been for the famine in the far country he might never have returned home.

In my own (unspectacular) life story and in the lives of others I see the same moments arising. There came a time during my early adolescence when my parents could do very little beyond what they had already done to draw me towards a Christian faith or right pathways, however loving and supportive they had been. Other adults were needed in those crucial years of my life for a number of roles. I needed, and I was unremarkable in this, adults who were able to draw alongside me offering friendship and a listening ear and uncritical judgement. Older friends were able to create opportunities to learn at the right pace and the occasional challenge. Seniors facilitated friendships amongst my peers and who could and would give lots of time. In the main, that support came for me in the shape of adult members of a local church who took on the task of being volunteer youth leaders without a great deal of training, experience, expertise or support. Without them, it might have been many years and many costly mistakes later before I encountered my own version of a famine in the land and was drawn home. It might never have happened at all.

As an amateur and often stumbling leader of youth groups as a lay person and as a curate and vicar I have frequently found myself playing that role for others at a similar point in their lives, always part of an informal team but with each individual playing a vital part. For all the different skills I have acquired over the years through formal and informal learning, the most important element remains a Christian love which seeks to draw alongside young people as they pass through this critical time. My own two sons, aged twelve and fourteen, stand on the threshold of that period of their own lives now when they need the same care, help and guidance which I was given and which I covet for them but which I cannot provide because I am also their father. My two daughters, aged ten and eight, will be at that place before very long.

Qualifications for leadership

Much is being made at present of the need to provide sound training for youth leaders at every level, and rightly so. Much is made of the desirability of churches employing trained and skilled people to lead their inreach and outreach work with teenagers. Again, this is a good development. Yet we need to recognise that for the vast majority of churches the employment of a trained and skilled professional to lead this ministry is a dream so distant that it will never be realised. The practice may become almost normal in large, wealthy evangelical churches in the South East of England. But the vast majority of smaller churches and larger churches in UPA parishes will simply not have the resources to move in this direction – nor could we train enough workers if the money was found. Other models beside that of the skilled professional are needed for the majority of situations. The picture of the unrecognised friend who draws alongside the two wandering disciples on the road to Emmaus provides us with such a model for work with young people by volunteers in the local church with little training but with a great deal of Christian love.

Growing faith

In recent years the church nationally has devoted a great deal of energy and resources to reflecting on the way in which adults come to faith and grow in faith. There has been genuine co-ordination between those whose concern is mission, those with expertise in education and those responsible for the church's liturgy. The co-operation of these different expertises has resourced a need experienced and articulated by a substantial proportion of local churches. The result has been resources such as Emmaus and Alpha, the report *On the Way*,¹ and Robert Warren's Board of Mission publication *Building Missionary Congregations*.² In the resurgent catechumenate movement and the new services of baptism, welcome and initiation we see evidence that the Church of England in particular is in danger of having a well thought out, co-ordinated and effective strategy in terms of the ways in which adults come to faith.

The core concept in all of this reflection on adult catechesis is that coming to faith is best thought of as a process which takes place over time: an accompanied journey. How much of this thinking about the faith journey of adults is relevant to Christian work amongst young people, either within or outside the church? My sense is that a great deal is transferable, in different ways, for those working with young people within the life of the local congregation and those engaging with teenagers beyond its reach. A possible reading of the story of the Emmaus road from the perspective of those working with young people 'within' the church and outside it would be as follows.

Emmaus journey

The most striking feature of the encounter on the Emmaus road is the way in which Luke tells the story of the resurrection. So much of the time we read the text as an isolated account – as just one of the resurrection appearances – and fail to see it as an integral part of Luke's gospel and the way in which he shapes his message. If the details are not fresh in your mind turn to the end of Luke's gospel and read again how this most wonderful of storytellers reveals the resurrection of Christ.

When do we first encounter the risen Jesus? The women go to the tomb with spices and find the stone rolled away; they encounter two men in dazzling clothes who give them a message for the apostles which they run and tell. As readers of the gospel, we know what has happened and that it is the fulfilment of scripture, but we have yet to glimpse the risen Christ. The eleven do not believe the women: 'these words seemed to them an idle tale'.³ However, Peter gets up and runs to the tomb. He sees the linen cloths but he does not see Jesus, and neither do we. We leave Peter returning home, 'amazed at what had happened'.⁴

1 *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation*, Church House Publishing, London 1995.

2 R. Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations*, Board of Mission of the General Synod of the Church of England, Church House Publishing, London 1995.

3 Luke 24:11.

4 Luke 24:12.

The first time we encounter the risen Christ in Luke is in the unrecognised figure who draws alongside two unknown and otherwise unimportant disciples as they travel in the wrong direction away from Jerusalem and towards Emmaus. One of them is named for us by the gospel writer. The other is left nameless, almost certainly so that readers are able to place themselves into the story. Luke is surely saying something vital here about the priorities of the risen Christ. Earlier in the gospel, in Luke 15, we have had three powerful stories about Jesus' passion for the lost (to use Bill Hybel's phrase). A shepherd has a hundred sheep, he loses one and leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness whilst he searches for what is lost, then brings it home rejoicing and throws a party. A woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She lights a lamp and searches the whole house until she finds that which is lost. When it is found she too calls together friends and neighbours saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost'.⁵ A father has two sons. He loses one and stays at home, watching and waiting for his return. When the son comes home he celebrates with a party and with much rejoicing, 'For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'⁶

In the story of the Emmaus road, the risen Christ models precisely the love and concern for the lost which we see in the Lukan parables of the sheep, the coin and the lost son. The risen Jesus leaves the eleven disciples in Jerusalem and he goes out on the road and searches for the two who are on the point of leaving the community, disillusioned and disappointed. Hours are spent on the first Easter day in the company of those who are wandering away from faith and love. The gospel is ambiguous about whether the Lord appeared to Simon before or after the Emmaus road encounter;⁷ yet the fact that one account is told before the other (or, more probably, instead of the other) is a pointer to Luke's understanding of Jesus' priorities.

It's not too far from Luke's portrayal of the risen Christ caring for the lost to the role and motivation of the volunteer or full-time youth worker in the context of the local church. Those whose primary call is to work beyond the boundaries of the congregation – with young people in schools, youth clubs or drop in centres – are going to the places where Christ would go to befriend, to draw alongside and to listen. Those who seek to get to know young people who have grown up within the family of the church as they enter their teenage years will find themselves very often drawing alongside those whose primary direction and pull is away from the Christian community. They are working with that tender and fragile group who have been part of the family of faith but who are just beginning to walk away.

Emmaus method

We move from motives to methods. Jesus does not appear to the vulnerable disciples travelling in the wrong direction in a blinding flash on the road. They are not confronted by the risen Lord in triumph who sends them straight back to

5 Luke 15:9.

6 Luke 15:24, 32.

7 Luke 24:34.

Jerusalem. Most of the resurrection appearances, in fact, are rather gentle and quiet affairs. The Lord is simply there: in the garden, by the lakeside cooking breakfast, in the corner of the room unnoticed until he speaks. It's worth asking why the risen Christ does not make himself known in a more dramatic way.

The example he gives us is one which preserves the dignity, humanity and freedom of choice of those he is dealing with. It is the very opposite of a 'blunderbuss' or 'sock it to them' approach to either education or evangelism. Rather we see a progression in which careful listening and drawing alongside arouses the curiosity of the travellers and helps to remove their grief and questions which are barriers to learning and understanding. This, in turn, is followed by the opportunity, at the right time, for careful and systematic instruction not with a view to imparting facts only but also a perspective, an understanding and a frame for those facts. All of this is done with great grace. I am continually struck by that moment in the story when they come near the village which is their destination and 'he walked ahead as if he were going on'.⁸ Jesus' purposes in his encounter with these two disciples that day, we can fairly say, have not yet been accomplished. Yet at this vital juncture in the encounter he ensures that the dialogue only continues on the disciples' own terms. We have here a similar picture to that in Revelation 3:20 where Christ is pictured not as the gatecrasher forcing his way into the life even of the Christian, but as the stranger knocking upon the door, graciously waiting to be admitted.

This moment of graciousness is followed in the meal with a moment of revelation in the breaking of the bread. In that moment, as a result of all of the other moments on the way, their eyes are opened and they recognise him. Again, Jesus grants to them just enough and no more. Of their own accord they turn round and rejoin the rest of the disciples in Jerusalem, joining their testimony of the risen Christ to that of the whole community. While they are gathered there, Jesus stands among them. Again the sense is one of a gentle and gracious revelation. There are no physical phenomena described, simply Christ's words of peace and reassurance. The disciples' fear is evident. Jesus speaks words to address that fear directly. He takes the whole group of disciples through the same process that he has demonstrated with Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus road. First, he reveals his identity to them and sets about establishing their relationship. Then, he teaches from the Scriptures, and opens their minds to understand them. The final act of the drama is the commission of the disciples by Jesus to be his witnesses, and with it comes the promise of the Holy Spirit and the withdrawal of Jesus into heaven after blessing them.

Again, it is not difficult to draw lessons from Jesus' example for work with young people both within and outside the church. Occasionally models of Christian youth work based around an 'in-your-face' style of evangelism are held up by different organisations as effective. However, the bulk of experience in recent years would suggest that a steady, relational approach is actually essential and that more up-front approaches are effective only where ongoing relationships are already present.

8 Luke 24:28.

The model of the unknown stranger drawing alongside the two travellers fits well. It is appropriate both to the situation of the detached youth worker wanting to know where to begin with young people she can see on street corners and to that of the volunteer youth leader in the local church anxious to do something to hold onto those who are now too old for Sunday School. The aim in both cases has to be the building of relationships through perceptive questions and, primarily, through listening. In either context the youth worker needs to be alert to and sometimes to create contexts in which that listening and building of relationships can begin and continue. Six mile walks to local villages don't always appeal! Relationships will need to be built both between what will hopefully be a small team of leaders and the young people and also amongst the group themselves.

Part of the conversation along the Emmaus road is about disillusionment and disappointment with religious leaders (even with Jesus himself). Part of the conversation with young people will involve listening to the same disillusionment and disappointment with religious and other figures in their lives, including parents. Giving permission in different ways for this kind of conversation to take place in confidence is a key element in effective accompanying of this spiritual journey, particularly with young people who come from families at the centre of a local church. We learn far more in the Emmaus road narrative about what the disciples said to Jesus than about Christ's words to them. To evoke hope in the midst of disappointment and grief is also part of any evangelistic dialogue: it is altogether a more difficult challenge in the context of conversations with teenagers. Most of us share our fears more readily than our seeds of hope for the future.

Journeying in understanding

At an appropriate time in the journey, Jesus' role changes from being that of listener and friend building a relationship, to that of teacher: 'Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures'.⁹ There will be some youth leaders who are able to see young people through that transition: who will be able to befriend as well as to teach. Others though may simply be good at befriending and the teaching and learning may be left to another context.

For myself, the primary factor in growing to faith as a teenager was undoubtedly being held within a network of relationships of one or two adult leaders in the congregation and a small group of young people. However, I have a very clear memory of what seemed a random encounter with a student teacher in an RE lesson when I was around fifteen years old and in the third form at secondary school. I only remember one lesson he taught out of what must have been a series of half a dozen or so. The theme was that of a simple presentation of the evidence for the resurrection. Twenty-six years later I can still recall clearly not so much the lesson itself or the face or name of the student teacher but the journey home on the bus reading the small booklet which was distributed at the end of the lesson and the sense of excitement within me. For the first time in my life the Christian

9 Luke 24:27.

faith was engaging my mind as well as my time on Sundays in churchy things. An intellectual search was beginning, whilst I was being held within the network of peers and adults on the accompanied journey of faith.

Teaching and learning with young people in the context of church youth groups is, I have found, often a difficult business. Motivation to learn will often be quite low. It's hard to draw teenagers away from other activities in order to engage in bible study or debate or to listen to presentations. The gestation process before a spiritual birth can last several years. But the opportunity for that teaching and learning about faith and the things of faith does need to be there. Teaching from the Scriptures and especially about Christ is essential somewhere in the diet of the Church based youth group. Even if there has been plenty of opportunity to learn bible stories in Sunday School, every young person needs the chance to begin to think about faith in a more detached and critical way as they grow older, in order to be able to make it their own.

For young people who are very much outside the churches where there may be little if any foundation of Christian teaching or understanding, it will be much more difficult to find the place and the opportunity for Christian learning. Personal conversation may be the chief means. Taking a group to see an imaginative presentation of the faith may be the spark that begins a search which can be continued through reading, conversation or through a small group thinking about issues together.

In my own story, that growing to faith was not yet complete. Looking back, I can see that I was on the way; I had good companions on the journey, my intellectual curiosity was awakened and I was finding solid reasons to believe. Because all of that was taking place, I found myself as the only young person from my own parish on a Diocesan youth weekend when I was sixteen years old and in my O-Level year at school. I had previously had very little contact with either the leaders or the other members of the party. I remember little about the substance of the weekend or the teaching content or any of the relationships formed. But I do remember still the service of Holy Communion on the Sunday morning in the chapel of Barrowby House with the picture window overlooking Wharfedale. There was an element of challenge to surrender to Christ. I sang the hymn 'Living Lord' for what I think was the first time. And in the breaking of the bread I too came to recognise Christ as Saviour and Lord. There was a moment of revelation and of regeneration: everything came together. I came back knowing for the first time and in a personal way that I was a Christian (and, incidentally, thinking no one else was, at least for a while) and actively wanting to witness to that faith.

When Jesus walked with Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus Road there was a time when all that was relevant in the tradition for them to understand who Jesus was had been told them and still they did not 'get it'. But dinner came, and, warmed by the presence of the stranger and quickened by his teaching from the Scriptures, they recognised him in the breaking of the bread and their lives were transformed.

Journeying together into God's presence

Working with young people is about more than teaching and befriending and welcoming. There need to be times also of worship and opportunity of encounter with God which are not contrived with an evangelistic purpose but genuinely grow from what a particular group is experiencing at that time. For many young people with a church background, those times of worship will be particularly meaningful in the context of a temporary community on a residential weekend away or youth pilgrimage. What is experienced there cannot be separated from the continuous befriending which has been a feature of the work through the year; nor from the consistent teaching but is an equal and vital element in seeing young men and women come to their own living and personal faith. Often, these experiences will be followed by an even greater desire to learn and to grow in faith and for Bible Study and group learning.

Those working with young people outside the churches may find that, occasionally, these experiences of encountering Christ may happen at an earlier stage along the journey. A dramatic 'conversion' experience may precede any instruction about the Christian faith and, occasionally with adults and young people, any meaningful belonging to a Christian community. When this happens there may be the temptation to leave the business of nurture and teaching more directly to the Holy Spirit. This is generally a mistake. Unless a sudden and dramatic conversion of a young person or an adult is followed up both by the support of a Christian community and the opportunity for systematic teaching, firm foundations of faith are not laid. When trouble or persecutions come or the riches and cares of this world grow up around the new faith, its life is dried up or choked.

Conclusion

Working with young people within the life of the churches is neither difficult nor complicated. Those who take on this ministry will benefit from some training, but more vital is ongoing support and learning. The first essential element in this work, Christian adults prepared to walk alongside, befriend, listen and support young people is not difficult to provide in most local churches. The second essential element is appropriate teaching, dialogue and discussion about Jesus. This may well be provided by those same adults. Other input is available through wider forums through small groups, if not provided by a single church then by a group of churches working together and through summer camps. The third essential element in the accompanying of young people on a journey towards faith is the provision of worship in which Christ can be recognised and owned as Saviour and Lord. This may be possible within some churches, but diocesan events and larger festivals provide an ideal context for these celebrations of faith.

The fruit of Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the Emmaus road is two lives redirected and two added to the number of witnesses to the resurrection. Over to you – and to your churches.

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