

Workshop 5C: Connecting with young people on the edge of Church

This session will ask the questions regarding what Church means to young people today and what do young people on the edge of Church actually need from us as the Youth Ministry community. Our assumption is that they are best served by being drawn in to the group and community involvement that we lead and participate in. But is that a fair assumption? Panel members were:

Chris Duthie-Jung has spent many years working in ministry with young Catholics and recently he completed his doctoral studies focusing on the Catholic identity of Gen Y New Zealanders. He currently works as Director of the National Centre for Religious Studies, within the Catholic Institute of Aotearoa NZ (TCI). He is married to Veronika and lives in Lower Hutt with their three children – Ben, Johannes and Anna.

Kathleen Field is a mother of four young adults and Coordinator of Youth and Young Adult Ministry for the Diocese of Palmerston North. Her experience in youth ministry, tertiary chaplaincy and as a parent, lead her to daily ask the question how can we, the church, best serve the needs of young people?

Shane Coleman has worked with young people for most of his life. Shane is the Director of the Marist Brothers Alternative Education Programme. He has an MA in Political Studies and is an Associate of Trinity Guild Hall London (Speech and Drama).

Delphina Soti has volunteered and worked for the Society of St Vincent de Paul in various roles for the last fourteen years including having the role of National youth manager. She is passionate about creating platforms for young people to be engaged in making a difference in the community. She currently is employed as the Operations Manager for the Vinnies Auckland Metro Council.

Kathleen Field

Introduction:

Kathleen Field has been involved with youth ministry since 2004. She was the Youth Minister for Wanganui, worked in tertiary chaplaincy and has been about 5 years in her current role as Co-Ordinator for Palmerston North. Kathleen is married to Rick with four children. The topic is meeting with young people on the edge of the church. Like to think that our ministry does that in various ways. What does mean Church mean to young people today? To my daughters this might mean attending school mass or school community. It might mean tradition. It might mean something that others are interested in but not me. Tradition is not necessarily seen as a positive thing. To some it is seen as something controlling and old.

What do they need from us as youth ministers?

What do we need in the youth ministry community? A network is something really important that we have to offer. We have a body of knowledge and a toolkit of skills, events, programmes, activities and a network. We have Professionalism and professional standards. We need an update on our national vision. We need our current bishops to have a look at this with us and make a fresh statement, like what they have done for Catholic education.

Is drawing young people in to what we do the best thing for them? What are you drawing them into?

Del Soti

Introduction:

My grandmother was a Samoan born in New Zealand. I grew up in Samoa, attending tertiary studies in Australia and New Zealand. I come from a highly religious family, attending services was compulsory, part of culture. When you say the word Church I run. Culture was externally forced on me. Overseas tertiary study gave space to nurture what I thought was important. Then I came back to a leadership role in the Church. My role allows me to choose what to do and what not to do. I lead the Vinnies programme comprising 1500 young people every year and several young adult groups. We understand church as a community that nurtures others, but some understand church as a building. When you have a conversation about church it is not what comes off the tip of your tongue.

What do young people need from us?

Get out there, get young people mobilized in service work. Young people regardless of whether they are on the margins or not need affirmation. They need faith to be nurtured and supported. We ended up doing prison ministries – ministering to young people, men and women, and leading a Catholic service with them. These people want us to sit down and listen to their story. We need to affirm people wherever they're at. We led bible study, weekly gatherings and a church service. Really hard juggle. Talking about Jesus was one way in but what was on top was something else. We need to nurture their faith where they are at. What is important is flexibility – meeting people, building relationship. Youth ministry is really hard work. You have got to be good at reading people and understanding where they're at.

Shane Coleman

Introduction

My current job is as Principal of Marist Brothers Alternative Education Centre on North Shore. I've previously been involved with the Edmund Rice Network and have worked with young people here in New Zealand, East Timor and Africa. My faith journey and formation is based around religious orders; Champagnat family movement, Josephite and Mercy too. The vision of the charism of Edmund Rice, Marists and Josephites are spiritual traditions that form and shape people.

What do young people need from us?

95% of the young people I work with do not attend Mass. They would socially say they are Catholic, would tick Catholic on the census form. They strongly identify with social issues and social justice. They want to get out there and change the world. They want to see change in the world and use charism as a tool to do that. Young people like to do things. It's all about relationship.

Breaking bread and sharing a cup for them is breaking BBQ sausages and sharing a drink of cordial – not going to Mass. What is Church for them? It's boring, old people, the priest doesn't know what we're on about. But these young people are more spiritual and more in touch with their faith. Edmund Rice run camps for young people on the margins. Their relationships grow from out of the programme. These friendships grow. A little criticism is that sometimes they can become a little cult like – it's all about Edmund – not about God or Jesus. There is a challenge in that too.

Chris Duthie-Jung

My mother runs Pleroma, which was established to meet the needs of a counselling trust. It is now a publisher and importer of Catholic stuff. Throughout my childhood my parent's commitment made a big difference to me. Their faith deeply impacted me. My parents were involved in charismatic renewal, gave house etc away to run counselling trust and run shop for that. Being exposed to that level of commitment impacted me. We always had interesting people at home who needed help. Didn't have negative situations arise. Left Central Hawkes Bay. Tertiary chaplaincy had a huge impact on me. I first became involved in youth ministry when at Massey University. I spent four years at Holy Cross Seminary. I liked theology. Liked getting in around our understanding. I was Diocesan Youth Director in Wellington for a while. I am not a practitioner now. Still leading a medium youth group in Wellington because my kids are in it. I needed to start the group in my own parish. Probably the kids that come to my youth group aren't really in the scope of this workshop.

What do young people need from us?

Most young people are on the fringe of church. How many in schools are involved in another way in church? Not many. Maybe we are interpreting church wrong. What is the fringe of the church today? Other way to look at it, when we say fringes is: what do we mean by Church? This is a really good question. These are the issues we need to grapple with. Who actually could claim to be on the fringe of the church today? I think "transition" is the word of the moment. Everything is in transition. Church is in transition. Old models are not really servicing us very well. Those models put people on the fringe. The parish model gathered around a community – much like a community gathered around a butcher – is less relevant. Other models are what we need to think about, this is what we're doing. If it's just your youth group that are not on the fringe then think again. 12 typologies of young people made by UK researchers – which of these are on the fringe, and which are 'in'? Right now there are 12 completely different descriptions of what it might mean to be in Catholic youth ministry. Keep these on the table.

Feedback

On the Board are three statements that UK researchers found when they asked the question “How do you define being a Catholic?”

Seeing myself as a child of God is important to me

Seeing others unknown to me as my brothers and sisters is important to me

Being part of the practising Catholic community is important to me

[Source: www.cymfed.org.uk]

Catholic understanding of faith involves all three of these. A well-balanced Catholic will understand all of these are really important. Lots of people don't see being part of a community as important. If personal, justice, community is the basis for understanding what it means to be Catholic, shouldn't this be how we're teaching.

They use those then to define who sat where and came up with 12 typologies. Some Catholic young people are down here.

When we have a conversation about what is Catholic do we get caught up about going to Mass on Sunday? Do we say that if you don't go to Mass on Sunday then you're on the edge? It is a question we need to keep asking. It becomes a matter of those who employ us that determine what happens about going to Church on Sunday.

What really is the edge? Why are we asking the question, why does it matter? Are we all on the edge? What makes a Catholic identity? Who claims this identity and on what basis? Finding our identity through Christ Jesus the Father, then seeing everybody else as brothers and sisters.

How do you define being a Catholic? Are we generally in agreement that these three things are important? Being part of practising Catholic community. How long are these communities going to survive without a priest? Most blue rinse have moved on. They haven't died but they are letting the young people come through and lead in the liturgy. It's time for the young to be in the front – not behind us.

What makes you Catholic?

- I did have a very strong faith in God. I became Catholic 9 or 10 years ago. This is the place you come to belong to the Catholic Church. I love the community. I am constantly amazed by the fact that I find going to Mass a real challenge. The community is not what I experience at Mass – it is what comes from my work, my ministry and my life. At Mass I feel insulted, condescended – there is no room in the structure to be creative, to have music that people would like. It's so dreadful. It is not that anybody is bad, it is just that the restrictions mean people can't express their faith. We can't blame the priests, it is about structure that kills the spirit that is seen outside of the church. I find community outside the Church rather than within it.
- A Diocesan response. There is a lot more elasticity in the liturgy than what we ever used to have. Hard to find. Why don't we use it? My experience is that it is usually about systems, rosters and who is in charge of the music. There is a wonderful quote in the Bishop's Education statement. One of the best services that a school can do is to encourage young people to connect to parishes. The driver for this is to wake up parishes. If churches have young people then parishes will become alive. Is that the chicken before the eggs?

- If you have a great parish where young people are coming, my experience is that most young people aren't made to feel welcome. Young people need to feel engaged. Language like "Brothers and Sisters of Christ" turns them off. How do you build bridges?
- As a parent do I need to sign a permission slip for a young person to live out their faith? If we want to use the parish van for service do I go and have a conversation explaining that this is church too? This is what the gospel is about. Advocating. The Church is so alive on the outside but not inside the church. The reality for some of our young people is that they are on the margin. This is who are. Why do they gravitate to this? The work of Vinnies is Church work. 85% want to belong to a collective and they are all on the margins. Others don't think that it is church. Only 10% within Vinnies would not be on the edge of Church.
- Defining the people who are in the church would provide some lines where you are working from. What is church? If you need an identity pin. We need an anchor point – loosely these three points are the elements – if one is missing then we are missing a bit chunk of what we are about. Unity is the key. We need to define a group to know where the edges are.
- Nothing about universal here. Where does universal fit in there? The very definition, lots we could say isn't there. It is basic. Lots of youth say it doesn't feel universal. We sing "come as you are" and yet when people come as they are if they aren't dressed properly they are rejected, shunned and that they aren't welcome. We preach about diversity and welcome but do we live this? A good community is inclusive and universal.
- If there is centrality it is focused on the Eucharist. Once young people understand what is happening they come into that sacrament in a much deeper way. It is something to do with understanding with a theological understanding of what we are doing on a Sunday and what we are doing in our community. Faith is a life journey. In the development of your relationship with Jesus that would be your understanding of Jesus too. You are still part of the Church. People in parishes encountering young people who they don't understand doesn't help. Is it one of our roles to broker that? To work with a parish to help them understand where youth are coming from?
- It is challenging for young people to live sacramentally. What we do on Sunday is also what we live out Monday to Saturday. Welcoming everyone is important.
- Going back to identifying as to whether we are Catholic or not? In my experience if someone finds out I'm Catholic or that I was raised Catholic or my grandmother was Catholic it is a label that they place on me. Much the same as homosexuality is a label. Oh I've got a friend who is gay... Oh I've got a friend who is Catholic ... The first thing you want to do is eliminate the conflict. As a positive buy in the person wanting to belong. We want to get away from conflict and we want to belong to something. Ninety-five percent of people tick the box because they want to belong to something. Being Catholic is a label which comes with controversy. People do actually want to buy in and don't want to be against you even if they don't want to take on the label themselves. There are many people who may not be "for you" and what you are doing but they aren't against it either.
- Young people have deep theological questions but not the forum or space to ask the questions they want answers to. Often we won't engage in the conversation because we are worried about being politically correct. The Church is teaching us this so that's what our response must be. There is no room for this. There is no flexibility. Some would say that the Catholic Church is anti-homosexual. It's not but we don't have the space to learn and engage about what this means for Catholics in Society. If I am Catholic and my friend is gay then I don't like the Catholic Church because it says my friend is not welcome. This is a real challenge for youth ministry. We need to be able to portray the Catholic teaching in a way that people can engage. Even the

people that might be brave enough to ask won't engage because they are afraid or don't know. We have a lot of young people in our community who would say same sex marriage is good. Often we don't have the formation to be able to engage in those discussions either. Parents don't know why we believe something. We are encountering a generation where all the answers are on the internet and if you can't give them the answer straight away then they'll find it elsewhere. Parishes have lost the ability to engage. I couldn't have this discussion with my parents. They know what the church teaches but don't know why. In our parents' generation there has been no drop-off in Catholic understanding of their faith over the last century. They never DID understand their faith. We are the first generation that are saying that we must understand it. If you don't understand it then you have permission to leave. Now people are dropping out. We haven't got worse. In fact the calling is that we must increase it. We need faith and reason to stay connected.

- My husband teaches Year 11/12 RE. This includes a unit on Real presence. In a survey of how many students believed in his class 100% said that they didn't believe in real presence. Faced with having to explain that in some way, shape or form. They didn't understand what real presence is. Most Catholics would have a pretty weird understanding of this. We are being asked to explain theology in a way that young people understand.
- We can be really negative about stuff that doesn't really matter too much. The stuff that people learned resonates with them over their lifetime. All my mates don't go to church but now they have kids they want their kids to go to Catholic school. They probably tick the Catholic box on the census. They are better people because of it. They understand God, presence and justice. Maybe it's not so bad.

What do they want from us?

- Not a bunch of rules. They want to be able to reflect on their own journey. They want to be present and build a relationship. They want to share food. As a young person I was fortunate to have in my home parish some Marist Brothers and Franciscan Sisters who would come and visit our family home and who would want to drive around South Auckland and visit families and share food. How many of us are prepared to be with young people in their home and community. Just be with them. The danger is that we have fixed perceptions. Let go of some of the things we grew up knowing. Through community be willing to journey along the side of young people. It is that simple
- Identity is important. What you value. We have fixed perceptions. I have to let go of some of the things that I grew up knowing. We have shared vision of the three things on the board – through community we can journey with young people.
- Isn't that the revolution that we are seeing with the Pope? Don't worry about much else and walk with people. It is not an easy thing to do – just be there. Bishop Pat said it last night ... we are there for people.
- Fringes and edges are in the context of what Roby was talking about this morning. Often we focus on bringing young people to theological understanding of things but for what purpose if some of their basic needs aren't being met? In our role as leaders and disciples of Christ how are we meeting the needs of some of these people? These people might not yet have an identity. We can't forget about these people. How are we actually meeting the needs of those young people?
- Like a shepherd taking on the smell of the sheep, getting in there and getting dirty. We need to be fixated on people, not on structure. Relationship is what Jesus did. The gift of being, of presence.

Closing comments:

Pope Francis to Priests:

As a Catholic we must focus on the people on margins of the Church.

In terms of gospel, wherever we are, we are the Church. Work with who we have.

Don't focus on structure. Instead focus on grace affirmation

Jesus formed his ministry around relationship, walking, eating with people. There is often talk about presence. It's a great gift – be present to the people you walk with.

Bishop Pat: Be prepared to explain your faith when asked and then live so that you are asked often.