

Beyond the youth group:

*Youth ministry & the whole
church*



A London Baptist Association Guide



Beyond the Youth group: Youth ministry and whole church

A recurring theme among youth leaders and workers, church leaders and parents is how youth ministry relates to and is part of the wider church body.

This issue is expressed in different ways, through questions focussed around the support of leaders, or the lack of volunteers and sometimes through more direct issues of integration and ownership. The latter may be questions such as “how do we get our age 17+ young people into the congregation” or “can our youth club mix with our Sunday youth group?”. All over London and throughout the UK churches are grappling with these questions. Many are concerned for the future of the Church (or their church).

What is the relationship between youth ministry and the whole church?

Whose responsibility is youth work?

And how did we end up here?

This paper is an attempt to address these questions. These are big issues, and in facing up to them more questions may be raised than answers given. Of course in some places these things aren't an issue – youthwork is very much part of the church and growth is happening. Cultural factors also need to be taken in to account. The aim is to put the issue on the map. Please feel free to get in touch with your responses.

Scripture encourages us to hand the faith on to the next generation. The people of Israel were encouraged to teach their children the stories of God. That is the call on us as we seek to be the Body of Christ in a changing world.



Current models of youth ministry and the church

Many churches in the UK today are using an “inherited educational” approach to youth ministry. Growing from the Sunday School movement of the late nineteenth century it is formed around the idea of “classes” which are age related. It mirrors the school system; often to the extent that people move groups (“go up”) in September when they change school class.

Pete Ward charts the history of UK church youthwork in *Growing up Evangelical*. Here he states:

“The Sunday School was an influence upon the development of youth fellowship work because it set the pattern for a separate gathering for children to receive religious instruction”¹.

The key here is that it was a *separate* gathering.

Over the last two hundred years church youthwork has evolved into a specialist area. The focus of the work has been to educate or work with young people as a distinct group, separately from the adult congregation. The age range of the groups has changed over the years. The upper age for “graduation” in to adult church has risen, and the development of “youth culture” since the 1950’s has heightened the desire for a discrete gathering of teens. Writing about work with 11’s-14’s Williams & Stephenson suggest:

‘In the church ‘youth culture’ has led to an emphasis on youthwork. This is good – but if it means that young people are always apart from the adult congregation, it can cause problems later’²

The separate *youth group* approach has seen some great success stories. But from the start there have also been issues around integration. Large Sunday School works did not always mean large adult congregations in the following years. In 1878 the London Baptist Association was concerned with youth and childrens work. They held a conference: *The Young People of our Churches and Congregations, our duty towards them. How shall we best discharge it* . Like today part of the issue was “bridging” youthwork into the “main” church:

“ *With a band of 4,714 teachers, instructing 58,270 scholars, may not further enquiry be urged - are the churches augmenting from this source as numerously as might be expected?*”³

The separation of adult congregation from the young people has created a distance both physically and culturally⁴.

In recent years the growth of the Family Service and other initiatives have been steps to try and rectify this gap. But essentially, many work with a model that looks like this:

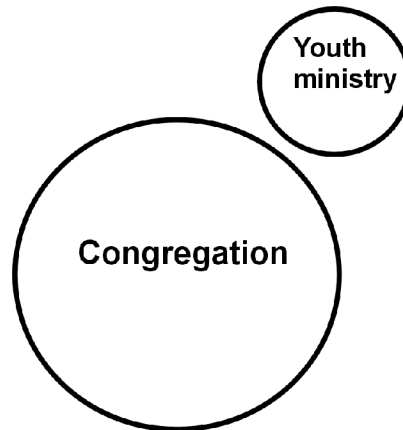
¹ Pete Ward *Growing up Evangelical: Youthwork and the making of a subculture* (London, SPCK, 1996), p24

² Williams and Stephenson: *Pretty Much everything you need to know about working with 11’s-14’s* (Scripture Union, 2004) p48

³ W.C.Johnson *Encounter in London* (London Baptist Association, 1965)

⁴ See Andy Hickford *Essential Youth: Why the Church needs young people* (Carlisle, Authentic Media, 2003)

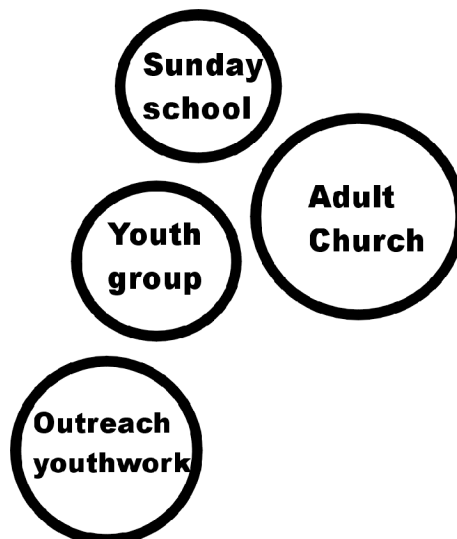
THE ONE EARED "MICKEY MOUSE MODEL OF YOUTH MINISTRY"



(Diagram1)

(from Dean and Foster *The Godbearing Life* p31)

Or for a larger church with more "programmes"



(diagram 2)

Here the adult church, Sunday School, youth group and any outreach youthwork are all separate entities. Of course the leaders of the groups may be members of the adult church, but essentially they are separate units. What happens in the youth group, or outreach youthwork often has little connection to the adult church (who often know little about what is happening). Obviously there are variations on this; sometimes the youth group is seen as part of the Sunday School, or sometimes the outreach youthwork is linked more closely with the youth group work. Generally, however this is not untypical of the picture of church life for many churches.

Weaknesses of the existing models

While no model is perfect, as has already been indicated there are particular problems with the models outlined above.

Practically, the results can be a feeling of isolation for the workers, difficulty in recruiting volunteers for youth ministry, and children failing to graduate in to the youth groups, yet alone from the youth groups into the adult congregation. Where there is a paid staff member for youthwork (youth pastor, youth worker etc.) this can help ease the tensions, although in some cases it makes it even worse!

Theologically there are also weaknesses with this model. Kenda Creasy Dean expresses it well:

“Despite our best intentions, none of us can incarnate Jesus’ promise to young people to be with them always, which is the reason youth ministry is the *church’s* ministry, not just that of specialists who can ‘relate’ to young people. The mandate to ‘be there’ for young people belongs to the *Christian community* not just any individual or group of individuals”⁵.

It is vital to remember that while there may be cultural or social differences between adults and teenagers theologically such a division cannot be made ⁶.

The danger of a separate youth ministry can also be seen in the discipleship and faith development of the young people themselves. Research suggests that interaction with Christian adults is a key factor in building durable faith.:

“In the long run the teenagers in our churches will be affected by significant experiences with adults much more than by the mountain top youth-group experiences that we spend so much time creating”⁷

It is also through being part of the wider worshipping community that young people learn the historic practices of the Christian faith ⁸, and gain from the experience of those who have gone before.

There are also mission issues raised by many of the models currently being employed. Many churches bemoan the fact that strong uniformed youth organisations or open youth clubs do not connect with their church youth groups, or lead to discipleship. As illustrated above (Diagram 2) any outreach youthwork into the local community is often another separate entity to even the church’s Sunday or discipleship youth groups. It appears to neither come from nor lead to a community of faith.

Some attempts at “bridging” the gaps through events, courses such as youth Alpha had proved successful. But for many the cultural jump from an open youth club to a traditional church service is too big to make.

Some have argued that the model of a separate youth or childrens work seems to go against Scripture. Clearly, as with many of our church practices that are part of our inherited tradition, we need to be careful how we apply the Bible, and not argue from silence. It is naïve to simply imitate the early church in a world that has changed vastly. Never the less it has been suggested that there is not “a youth body of Christ. Or an adult body of Christ. There should just be the body of Christ”⁹.

For Paul, being “in Christ” broke down many of the divisions in the society of his time (Ephesians 2v14). How does that apply across the generations?

Could it be true that “evangelical churches have honoured divisions which have no basis in either Scripture or common sense”? That “the so called ‘generation gap... has been used as an excuse for age segregation, but Scripture speaks of no such thing?”¹⁰

⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean: *Practising Passion* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2004), p91

⁶ Wesley Black in Mark Senter (ed): *Four Views of Youth ministry and the church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p44

⁷ Mark DeVries *Family Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) p90

⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean, op cit, p37

⁹ Phil Rankin *Bought into a lie* at

http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/community_building/lie.php? (accessed 04/07/2005)

¹⁰ Chris Shlect: *A critique of youth ministries* at <http://www.soulcare.org/Education/Youth%20Ministry%20Critique.html> (accessed 01/07/2005)

Alternative models

Is there a better way?

Can we move beyond the segregated youth group model of youth ministry?

From a US perspective it's been suggested that:

“for all their merits (and there are many) youth groups remain notoriously unreliable for the formation of *faith*”¹¹

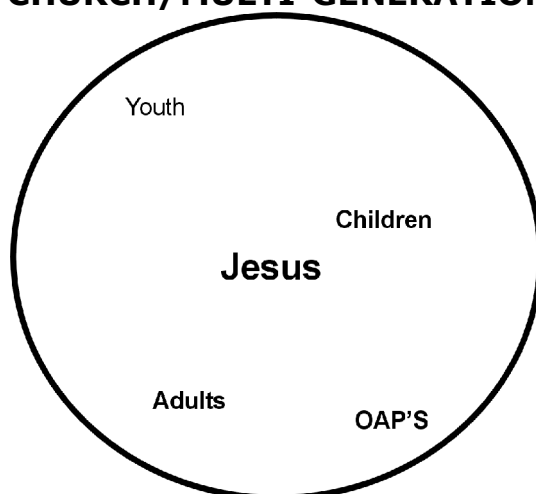
If that's true what else can be done?

And what of outreach youthwork – the vital work of taking the gospel to the thousands upon thousands of young people who know little or nothing about Jesus? How does that fit into congregational life?

One thing seems clear: we can no longer use a “one size fits all” approach. In suggesting possible models it needs to be remembered that these are only examples, and any model needs to be developed and owned by each local church.

The models outlined here are a mixture of what has been observed in practice, ecclesiological and theological reflection, and other people's thoughts! Mark Senter's “Four views of youth ministry and the church”¹² is a good place to go to reflect further on these issues.

WHOLE CHURCH/MULTI-GENERATION MODEL



This model is as much about a change of focus and *attitude* as it is about practical changes. It suggests that we define church with Jesus at the centre. The groups and activities that take place all come within the overall encompassing of the church.

In practice this model is about seeing all ages, groups and sub-groups in the church as part of the whole. Intergenerational relationships are encouraged and promoted, perhaps by social events, all age services or small groups. It is a model that requires careful listening, acceptance and a willingness to hear the voices of all ages and stages.

For youth ministry this model takes seriously the notion that youth ministry is the ministry of the *whole* church to the young people. The change of attitude is worked out through language use, priorities and timing as much as structure.

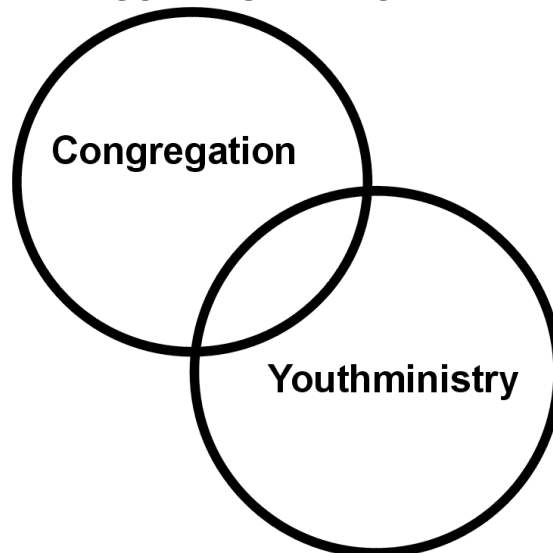
There are dangers with this model, however, in that it can become inward looking, rather than missional. We focus on “our” young people rather than the wider

¹¹ Kenda Creasy Dean: *Practising Passion* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2004), p26

¹² Mark Senter (ed): *Four Views of Youth ministry and the church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001)

community. It can also fail to differentiate between the needs (real and felt) of different ages and stages by lumping everyone in all together (how does Titus 2 apply here?). It can also result in a “lowest common denominator” approach that tries to please everyone and ends up wide of the mark (this has been a criticism of many “family service” approaches).

CONNECTED MODEL



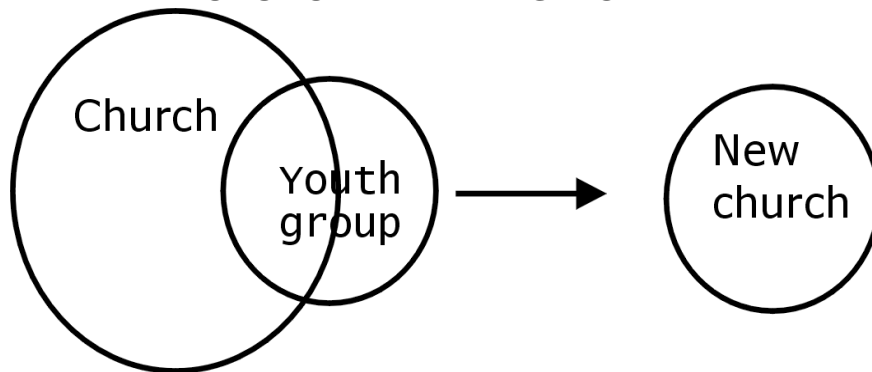
This model takes seriously the cultural and developmental needs of young people, but ensures connection with the wider adult congregation. This connection could be through mentoring, prayer partners, encouraging young people to participate and lead worship, regular information sharing about the youth ministry, meals, socials etc.

It might be that young people still have their own groups or space to be apart, but they are never in concept or practice entirely separate. Perhaps the adult congregation and the childrens and youth groups follow the same curriculum which can then be discussed in families of small groups. Perhaps the senior minister or leaders make being with the young people a priority.

It might mean opening all the church's ministries up for young people's involvement and ownership. Or allowing them to attend church (members) meetings or become associate members.

Once again there are weaknesses as the balance between separation and involvement is a difficult one to maintain. The danger of forgetting mission is also present in this model.

CHURCH PLANTING MODEL



Mark Senter III has proposed what is perhaps the most radical of all models – that youth ministry could lead to new churches being planted. He suggests: “it is time to stop thinking of youth ministry as a lifetime commitment, and begin viewing youth ministry as giving birth to a biblically and culturally relevant church that will, in time, give birth to additional churches in response to the needs of future generations”¹³

In many ways a church planting approach seems highly appropriate for outreach youthwork. For example a DJ workshop for young people could become a cell group which becomes the nucleus of a new expression of church (which may or may not be part of a wider church – see below).

This would solve the difficulty many churches have in bringing young people from successful youth clubs, detached or other outreach work into existing church structures. It might be controversial but it may not be unreasonable to suggest that many of our inherited ways of meeting and being church are a long way removed from the experiences and needs of urban young people (there are many experiments to incarnate church and worship in the emerging postmodern culture)¹⁴. Indeed it has been suggested that “its not that young people don’t want to become Christians. Its that the church can’t handle them when they do”¹⁵. A church planting approach removes some of the barriers.

For Senter, however, this seems to more about birthing through church youth groups than church planting through outreach youth ministry. For his approach the youth pastor, volunteer youth leaders and young people become the core of the new church. This solves the issue of integration after high school!¹⁶ This seems unrealistic in the current UK context, but is worth considering.

Clearly the weakness of this model is that rather than addressing the issue of separation, it exaggerates it further. This would only be of benefit as part of a strategic missional approach, where new churches are formed not merely on the basis of age, but as the first generation church in an emerging culture¹⁷.

¹³ Mark Senter (ed): *Four Views of Youth ministry and the church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p125

¹⁴ See for example Graham Cray: *Youth Congregations and the emerging church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002).

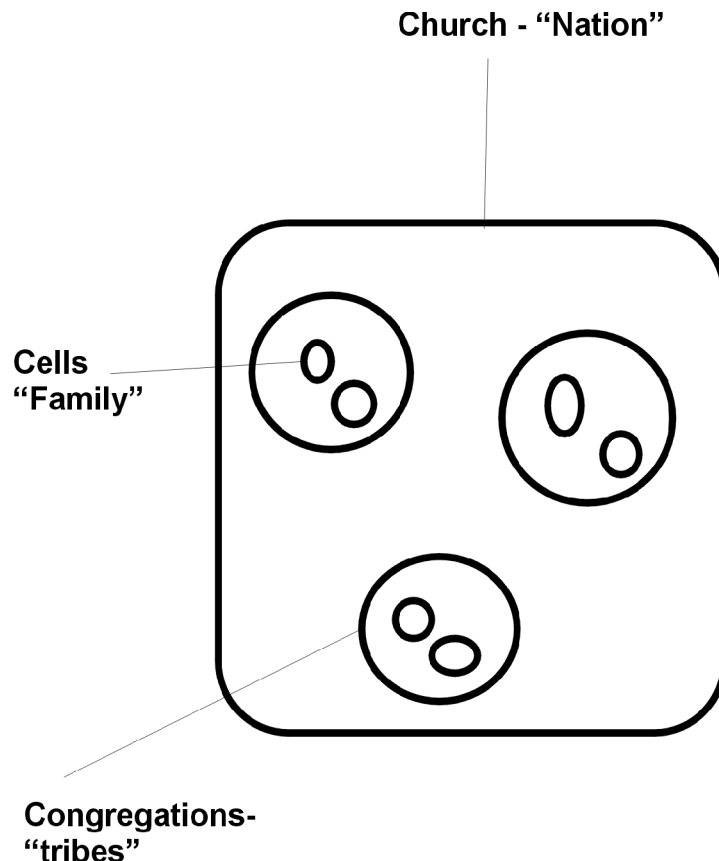
For ongoing discussion and news see <http://www.emergingchurch.info>

¹⁵ Ward, quoted in Graham Cray :*Youth Congregations and the emerging church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p6

¹⁶ Mark Senter (ed): *Four Views of Youth ministry and the church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p114

¹⁷ See Graham Cray: *Youth Congregations and the emerging church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p16ff

“NATION – TRIBES – FAMILY”



The final model draws together some of the strands from the previous models. Roger Ellis of Revelation Church has suggested an approach which sees church as nation, tribes and families.¹⁸

Here the church is the nation within which there could be various congregations. The congregations (tribes) are either geographic or demographic/cultural. Each congregation is made up of small "cell groups" (8-12 people).

In this model youth ministry can happen at various levels. At the basic level are youth cell groups. Young people can then be part of a congregation based on their location (geographic e.g. Kings Cross), or a youth congregation (demographic). If a church planting approach is followed any "daughter" churches or groups planted by outreach youthwork could remain part of the wider whole, while keeping their own "flavour". This model recognises the need to a variety of approaches and styles, without the separation. Unity is about relationship, vision and values more than meeting together for a "service".

Like all models there are weaknesses here. In many ways this model could end up failing to address the problem of the separation of youth ministry. Being part of the "nation" could all too easily become a notional rather than a practical experience.

¹⁸ Roger Ellis, Lecture to Spurgeon College Church Planting Class, 1998 (unpublished)

Where do we go from here?

The issues we are considering here have come from churches and youth leaders on the ground. The lack of volunteers for youth ministry, the issues of integration, of reaching and keeping teenagers are real.

The shift in culture, usually called modernity to postmodernity is seen most evidently in the younger generations. Can churches live between or embrace more than one culture or worldview? In many ways the idea of a separate youth or childrens ministry could be described as part of a worldview influenced by modernity. It suggests that rather than being organic, the body of Christ, church could be thought of like a machine. If one part, here the youth ministry, seems to be failing the mechanic's answer is to isolate and fix, rather than see the problem as part of the whole.¹⁹

These youth ministry issues are really church issues. Asking questions about youth ministry more often than not forces us to face questions about how we "do" church.

Whatever model of working is chosen here are some questions that need to be asked:

- ★ What in church life needs to be done in separate age groups and what should/could be done together?
- ★ How much does my church see youth ministry as a "ministry of the whole church to the young people in our community"?
- ★ Does work with young people and children flow from the life of the church or is it a separate "programme"?
- ★ Whose responsibility is the faith development of children and young people?
- ★ Are we willing to support parents in their difficult task?
- ★ Are we willing to radically change our forms of worship and ways of being to reach a new generation OR are we willing to allow new expressions of church to be planted? (or both)
- ★ How do I (honestly) view young people? Where does my heart need to change?

Getting started

It may not be appropriate to jump straight into changing your model of youth ministry. There are, however, steps that can be taken to help our churches' own youth ministry, to make the shift from youth ministry being an add on programme to a ministry of the whole church.

Here are a few ideas:

- ◆ Allow young people to have a voice at church members meetings
- ◆ Develop a prayer partner scheme, across the generations
- ◆ Use the same curriculum and themes for all ages
- ◆ Have meals, socials, games nights, dances or whatever is appropriate to encourage all age interaction

¹⁹ Mark DeVries: *Family Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), p43

- ◆ The leadership or pastor could attend the youth groups once a term
- ◆ See youth leaders as key church leaders, as valuable as home group leaders or deacons. Perhaps throw them a meal!
- ◆ Have a parents evening/session for your youth group
- ◆ Find materials to help train parents and for them to share faith within their families
- ◆ Allow young people to really participate and shape worship – and not just for a special “youth service”
- ◆ Stop wanting the young people from the community come to the service and allow the group to have its own expressions of worship and sharing the gospel

The list could go on – but we need to start where we are!

Obviously moving beyond the youth group has implications for child protection – you’re no longer just seeing it as the responsibility of one or two leaders. But that is not something which needs to be a problem. The Baptist Union’s publication “Safe to Grow” is essential reading in this area.

Conclusion

We’ve been using a youth group, youth fellowship, Sunday School model as the primary model for youth ministry for many years. Open youth clubs and uniform groups have been in that mix too. As we work out what God is calling us to in these days, “post-Christendom”²⁰, perhaps it’s time to see youthwork as the call of the whole church.

“The church’s task is to constantly evaluate and re-imagine its shape to include young people as integral to every expression of its life”²¹.

Perhaps it’s time to go beyond the youth group!

Mike Yaconelli, the founder of the massive Youth Specialties ministry in the USA put it this way:

“Youth group is good.

But there’s a better good.

It’s called *church*”²²

²⁰ See Stuart Murray: *Church after Christendom* (Carlisle: Parternoster, 2005)

²¹ Michael Volland: *Christian Youthwork? What for?*, in *Guidelines* Sept-Dec 2005 (Oxford, Bible Reading Fellowship)

²² Mike Yaconelli: *A better idea the youth ministry* at www.youthspecialties.com/articles/Yaconelli/idea.php? (accessed 25/07/03)

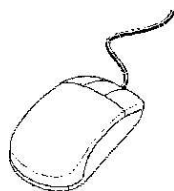
Resources

If you want to think further about these issues the following may be of help!

Books

Most of these can be obtained from local Christian book stores – or try www.amazon.co.uk .

- Mark DeVries *Family Based Youth Ministry* IVP, 2004
G. Cray *Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship*, Grove Books, 1998
G. Cray *Youth Congregations and the emerging church*, Grove Books, 2002
K.C. Dean *Practising Passion*, Erdmans, 2004
K.C. Dean & R. Foster *The Godbearing Life*, Upper Room Books, 1998
A. Hickford *Essential Youth: Why the Church needs young people*, Authentic Media, 2003
D. Hilborn & M. Bird *God and the generations*, Paternoster 2002
P. Mountstephen & K. Martin *Body Beautiful?* Grove Books, 2004
Mark Senter (ed): *Four Views of Youth ministry and the church*, Youth Specialties / Zondervan, 2001
P. Ward *Youth Culture and the gospel*, Marshall Pickering, 1992
P. Ward *Youthwork and the mission of God*, SPCK, 1997
P. Ward *Growing up evangelical*, SPCK, 1996
T. Jones *Postmodern Youth ministry*, Youth Specialties/Zondervan 2001
T. Williams and J. Stephenson *Pretty Much everything you need to know about working with 11's-14's*, Scripture Union, 2004



Web-based Resources

www.lbayouth.org – LBA's youthwork site with extensive links!

www.youthspecialties.com – Youth Specialties

www.emergingchurch.info – Emerging church stories and discussion

www.youthwork.co.uk – Youthwork magazine site

<http://www.sonlifeafrica.com/model/index.htm> - Commitment based model

<http://www.sonlifeafrica.com/article04.htm> - Mission approach to youth ministry

www.youthpastor.com – ideas and reflections

“Blogs” – personal “weblogs” – reflections & discussions – all link further!

Youthblog: <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/youthblog/>

Lev's blog : <http://levesons.blogspot.com>

Jonny Baker: <http://jonnybaker.blogs.com>