



—Bringing young people— —through the storm—

Most good children's and youth work is born out of chaos.

It may be the messy games, creative crafts, sleep-deprived residential or unexpected question just as you are locking up. It feels like these last 18 months have taken away all of our familiar tools and left us with the chaos – should we try and restore what we did, or aim to redevelop with something new?

Our conventional wisdom has been thrown out of the window. In previous years, children's workers developed strategies for using play to meet with God huddled round the activity table, and youth workers ran football teams or music groups to build community. CYM (The Institute

for Children, Youth & Mission) has spent 20+ years training youth workers to recognise that the conduit for discipleship and evangelism is the messy, chaotic relationships we have with young people. When you can't meet face-to-face it has at times felt like God's voice has frozen, like the church Zoom connection. So what *has* been working?

In the last year we've seen some amazing examples of children, youth and family work (CYF) evolving to create the most creative responses to ministering in lockdown. Linda, a Children's Ministry student in Leicestershire, has become locally famous for her front-garden teddy displays, giving people an excuse to get out of the house and walk round to see the latest story and

join in conversations over the garden fence.

Let's go outside

The teddies are one example of moving CYF work outside the church building, and I hope this is a trend which will continue. *Muddy Church* resources families and small groups to find God in their local woods; youth workers are rediscovering the art of detached youth work – hanging round on streets and public spaces with a purpose; churches are putting up *Messy Church* tepees in their car park and running Bible studies with takeaway coffee in the park.

This echoes so much of where we see God speaking in Scripture:

building memorial cairns on the road to remind Israel where God was at work; battling prophets of Baal on the mountaintop; seeing God and his Kingdom through a farmer sowing seed, growing a vine, a shepherd protecting his sheep and so on. Of course we live in a different world now but there is little doubt that the deep stillness of the outdoors thinly veils the presence of God.

Locked in

One of the most significant impacts of successive lockdowns has been the loss of face-to-face groups. We already read about the economic and educational impact of Covid, but it will take time to know the cost to children and young people's social development and the mental health challenges many of all ages have faced – and we should perhaps also make links to the spiritual impact of having to self-isolate on your faith journey.

John Westerhoff, in his classic book *Will Our Children Have Faith* generalised that the faith of young teenagers is a corporate one – *we believe* in God; *we are leaving* the church, and so on. That's why you often see groups of young people coming to faith or getting baptised together. Many youth workers (and churches) have seen attendance drop at online sessions as children and young people are exhausted after hours of online education, but also I wonder if some of this is that they are not doing their discipleship and other groups *together*.

The final impact of isolation is the loss of the informal space. At CYM we often use the analogy of Jesus meeting the disciples on the Emmaus Road after his resurrection. While he did teach

from the mountain, we also read that he walked alongside two of the disciples, asking questions to help them explore what has just happened. The *being with* of CYF work is massively significant. In fact, I think it is why many young people leave church when they become adults – they are no longer *with* each other at church. Instead, they are expected to simply watch other people do their faith at the front.

Think small

Dan, a Baptist youth worker in Stockton-on-Tees, spoke at the Baptist Assembly in May about his dismay when the young people stopped attending his online sessions – it's the common ministry anxiety of doing the wrong thing or not working hard enough and it's your fault they're not coming. Significantly, he chose to focus on the few who *did* attend rather than only worrying about those who did not. This is a challenge for all of us in our CYF work that we feel we need to attract the crowds, fill our buildings, and pull them in, whereas perhaps equipping them to go out becomes a more fruitful model. We need to focus on discipling those we have - as *they* are in school while *we* are not.

The Families of God

The final aspect that was coming to the fore before lockdown, but has been highlighted during the pandemic, is the need to support families and households in their spiritual journey. We might see our church children or young people for a few hours a week, perhaps, but they see each other all the time.

Many children's work teams in particular have become adept at

providing resources for families to do together this year – activity packs, discussion questions, craft activities and so on – but so often we hear that parents don't know how to support their teenage children's faith. At the Baptist Assembly, Rachel Turner's book *It Takes a Church to Raise a Parent* was recommended to us. Rachel notes that churches need to provide parents and carers with core skills to disciple their children, and then share stories of each family interpreting those skills to their particular family context.

Going forward I think we need to train, enable and encourage (extended) families to live out their meandering Christian lives together, to focus on finding God in the chaotic relationships at home, outside and even in church if we can renovate our practices well enough.



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