

Sharing faith with a new generation

As we consider Bishop Jonathan's vision to reach the emerging generation, we look at how we're engaging with teenagers now

BISHOP Jonathan has told us his top priority is offering life-changing encounters with Jesus to children, young people and young adults.

Reaching a new generation with the gospel is something that all our churches would love to do. But how well are we already reaching and discipling teenagers in our local communities?

Traditionally, churches have reached those aged 11 to 18 by running church youth groups – ranging from purely social groups to weekly Bible studies and prayer. Many offer the chance to be part of a choir, learning the Christian faith by singing during services. We can look back and see how our own faith developed in such groups.

Now teenagers might be editing the parish website, operating the PA system or live-streaming the service as a way of giving them a role to play in our churches.

Some churches also appoint paid or volunteer youth leaders, who can build relationships with young people and nurture their faith. In some cases, those leaders also run groups for children and families.

'Many young people are desperate for a sense of belonging'

Dom DeBoo, is currently children, youth and families minister at **St Jude's, Southsea**, but is about to take on a new role as youth and community project lead in **North Gosport**. He runs a range of youth activities, including Bible studies, socials, and specific groups for boys and girls. He believes a paid youth worker is important for a parish that wants to move this work forward.

"If your tap's broken you call a

plumber, and if your roof's leaking you call a roofer," he said. "You hope the specialist will offer you more than you could do yourself, which is why they are worth the investment. It's the same with youth work. The youth worker brings a unique understanding and perspective that will help you to engage. While it's not a guarantee of success, it's no coincidence that the churches with the most progressive youth ministries have paid youth workers.

"The most important thing you can do for a young person is help them understand their identity in Christ. This is about the way you make them feel valued, accepted and part of something bigger, with all their quirks. It's about how you help them connect with others, form genuine and meaningful relationships, and give them the space to discover themselves.

"Once you build genuine relationships of trust and warmth, the

teaching you share will have so much more impact. Young people are facing huge problems with feeling isolated and struggling to find genuine acceptance. Many are desperate for what churches can provide – a sense of community and belonging. Even small churches can provide sanctuary and security that is so desperately craved."

Tanya Simpson, youth leader at **St Mary's Church, Portchester**, believes it's crucial to engage with young people on their terms – find out what they're interested in first. She runs two youth groups on a Friday night at Portchester Parish Hall – 'Connect' for those aged nine to 12, and 'Momentum' for those aged 13 and over.

"You have to do stuff that interests them, that will be relevant to their age group," she said. "As well as the games and craft, we might have a discussion about TV or the media, or hear from a speaker about drugs. Then we might offer a Christian perspective on that. Not everyone is a churchgoer, so there is no point starting with the Bible first."

The parish offers monthly events to which the young people can bring the rest of their families, such as barbecues and games nights. This helps church leaders get to know the teenagers' parents too.

Ursula Pearce, whose daughter Imogen, aged 16, enjoys the weekly Momentum group said: "We're not regular church attenders, but it's good for her to meet with others. She's just about to take GCSEs, so is deciding about things like faith, whether she wants to take confirmation classes, and what worship style she prefers."

And Emma Capps, whose children Zoe, 14, and Ashby, 11, are part of the youth groups, said: "They really feel at home in the groups, and feel they can bring friends. They also do a 'youth takeover' on some Sundays, which encourages the parents to see their children taking part in services."



Top: Tanya Simpson with teenagers at St Mary's, Portchester; centre: The Group with No Name at Bishop's Waltham; bottom: tie-dyeing with teenagers

Lewis Jones is youth worker at **All Saints Church, Denmead**, where up to a dozen 11-18 year olds meet during Sunday morning services, and also bake cakes for the congregation once a month.

He recommends that churches should pray, make a start, and hold

consistent events for young people.

"Every church and community is different and what works well for others may not work well for you," he said. "Start with prayer, build a small team, train your team with safeguarding, and be there! Young people need a space to listen to