

How to start youth work from scratch



Heather Powney, our children, youth and families officer, explains how churches with no young people can start to reach them

IMAGINE walking into your church and seeing young people worshipping passionately, asking honest questions about faith, and forming friendships that inspire them to follow Jesus. That's the heartbeat of youth ministry.

But it doesn't happen by accident - it begins when someone says "yes" to reaching the next generation. According to Youthscape's 'Translating God' project, today's young people are navigating faith in a complex, pluralistic culture - many with no exposure to Christianity.

Scripture Union's 'Reaching the 95' campaign shows that 95 per cent of young people in England and Wales aren't connected to a local church. Yet research like Theos Think Tank's *Talking Jesus* report reveals that many are spiritually curious and open to exploring questions about God. This is a huge opportunity for the Church to respond with compassion and intentionality.

Starting a youth ministry may feel daunting, but you don't need a big budget or polished programme. You just need a heart for young people and the courage to begin. Here's how you can start:

1. Pray with Purpose

Ask God to show you His heart for young people. Pray for eyes to see them with purpose and value. When the disciples tried to shoo children

away from Jesus, He was indignant and said: "Let the little children come to me" (Mark 10: 14). That same heart still beats for young people today.

2. Do Something - Start Now

Don't wait for perfect conditions. Start small. Gather a few volunteers, set a time and place, and invite young people in. Ask the young people what they'd like to see and build from there. Make sure that the young people are seen, heard, and loved.

3. Clarify the Vision

As your ministry begins to take shape, define your "why." A clear vision helps you stay focused and unified. Ask foundational questions:

- What's our ultimate goal?
- How do we disciple young people?
- What role do families and the wider church play?

4. Know Your Context

Every community is different. Understand the lives and challenges young people face - whether it's mental health, identity, or loneliness. Research from Youthscape and the Mental Health Foundation shows that anxiety and belonging are major issues today. Know your context and let this shape your response.

5. Build a Team

Youth ministry is a team effort. Recruit volunteers who care, show

up, and are growing in faith. Invest in them - encourage, equip, and empower them to lead well.

6. Start Small and Build Deep

Don't worry about numbers. A small, faithful group can have lasting impact. Focus on authentic relationships and discipleship, not entertainment. Jesus started with 12 - start with who you have.

7. Share the Vision Widely

For youth ministry to thrive, the whole church must catch the vision. Share stories, celebrate small wins, and invite others to pray and support the work.

Final Thought

You don't have to be perfect - you just have to begin. Create a vision, take that first step, and trust that God will grow what you plant. The next generation needs to know Jesus sees them, loves them, and has a purpose for their lives. Maybe He's calling you to help them discover that truth?

To support you, the first cohort of Launchpad Youthscape training starts this September in our diocese. And keep an eye out for our upcoming diocesan training in youthwork.

If you'd like support with Children, Youth, and Families work in your parish, I'd love to help - please get in touch. All the details are on www.portsmouth.anglican.org/youth