



The Church of Scotland

God's Own Country

A Practical Resource for Rural Churches

Youth Outreach



YOUTH OUTREACH

Youth Work in a Rural Setting

Introduction

For each generation the Christian Church has to find new ways of sharing the Gospel. It's a characteristic of youth that we don't just want to do things the way our parents did, whether it's tastes in music or life-style choices. Things keep moving on, and for an organisation where tradition is important particular challenges arise. In this section you'll find examples of youth work from different parts of the country, and from different denominations: the common thread is that there's no common thread! Each venture has looked at the character and needs of the young folk of their community, and responded in an appropriate way. Using what is available locally is important, and what also emerges from experience is the need to gather – to enable young people to go to regional or national events where they can share their youth culture as a generation together, an experience which compliments the close friendships of the small groups who meet together in rural areas.

If you are looking for youth work ideas, let these articles help you to think 'out of the box' - particularly the denominational box. Working together and sharing successful strategies from our rich and diverse Christian life in Scotland will support and encourage our young people and build bridges between traditions.

A Strategy for Young People in a Rural Context

Steve Mallon

'Young people in rural areas face particular barriers in relation to provision of transport and housing, access to employment, training and education, as well as the opportunity to express their views and be directly involved in matters that affect them in their communities.'

Rural Youth Network, 2007

I've been working with young people from rural areas for a long time. They often talk about the issues raised in the statement above, but alongside those, they talk about the real advantages of living in small towns and villages: The sense of belonging, of people knowing your name, of being missed if you don't show up at church. These can all have their down sides but the positives always seem to outweigh them.

A key issue for young people, however, is the general lack of things to do and people their own age to do things with. It's hard to be one of the few 16 year olds in your village. It's harder still being the only person under 65 in your local church! Often young people I work with simply talk about being bored. There's nothing to do. There's nowhere to go. Young people from other types of community contexts might say the same thing, but for the rural teenager it happens to be true!

Many churches I visit in rural areas bemoan the fact that there are so few young people around; they fret about the young people who leave to find work, or go to university and they worry about trying to get enough leaders to work with young people. Rarely do I visit a rural church and find them in good spirits about their work with young people.

Opportunities Revealed by Community Audit

I visited a church recently in a small rural town. As in all such conversations I tried to get a sense of the rhythm of the community. Where do the young people hang out? Where do they go to school? Do they leave when they go on to university or when they are ready to find work? Do they return when they are older and ready to settle down and build a family? In this particular situation, it became clear that the key time of the day for that church to make contact with young people was at around 4.00pm. Why? Because at that point the school buses dropped off the young people from the many schools they attend well outside the confines of their community. The church had already realised that this was an important time in the day. What they needed now was some way of making contact with the young people as they stepped off those buses, and then somewhere for those young people to go that would help them to develop a relationship with the church.

On another visit to a small church in a very rural setting, I asked the same questions and in this case the answer was that children and young people were passing by the church building every day, on their way (by and large on foot) to and from school. That conversation opened up the possibilities of the church running a breakfast club or an after-school homework club.

These are just two examples of the kind of reflection on patterns of community life that rural churches can and should engage in to work more strategically with young people in their communities. There is no doubt that policy on youth matters has by and large been set – in most spheres – by people who live in large towns and cities, and the urban agenda is one that dominates peoples' thinking. For young people in rural communities we all need to do better and try harder to reach out to them and make them a higher priority.

I've visited many rural churches where the priority – perhaps out of necessity – has become repair of the old organ or some other building-related issue. Preserving the past has become more important than looking at present needs. There is no doubt that there is massive potential in tourism for many of our rural charges, but young people and effective work with them should not be squeezed out because it's easier to fix a building and greet tourists for half an hour than it is to work with local young people day in and day out.

Finding a Strategy

When we were researching the issues and ideas that would underpin the Kirk's Strategy for Young People we deliberately went to rural parishes. We split the responses into those coming from rural towns and those in much smaller settings. Here are some of the findings from that study:

A very large percentage of the rural churches that took part in the study said that the reason they were involved in working with young people was because they were 'the church of tomorrow'. Any endeavour that is aimed at our own survival will surely fail. The famous proverb suggests that where there is no vision the people perish (Proverbs 29:18), and to see youth work as a means of survival is one indicator of a general lack of vision. We need to work with young people for their sakes, not for ours; to care for them out of love and a desire to share the gospel with them.

There was a general recognition that the church was still at the centre of the village's or town's life and that this presented an enormous opportunity that churches in cities might not have.

There were some churches that said they didn't have many young people and some that said they struggled to get leaders. These factors are common to churches in all kinds of location in Scotland.

On a more positive note, many churches talked of trying new types of work – for example using internet cafes or new types of clubs, or moving things away from Sundays and doing them mid-week. Some churches speak of using email as a way of keeping connected to young people who leave home for work or to go on to further or higher education.

There were also hints that churches are starting to work ecumenically with other congregations in their communities to meet the needs of young people.

Many churches talk of drawing young people into a greater involvement in the life of their congregation, and one spoke of having a young person on "the Nominations Committee who feels she can speak for the others in her age bracket and put forward their ideas and concerns. She also acts as an advocate for the younger members of Sunday School. Therefore the young people feel appreciated and know they will be listened to and their opinions valued." This is a good example of a local church finding ways to make young people feel valued and more involved.

Encourage Involvement

These responses, along with the all the others from around the country, led us to agree the following set of key strategic statements for our work with young people:

- > Every young person matters.
- > We want to introduce young people to Jesus Christ.
- > We want to give young people a good experience in the Church.
- > We will treat young people with respect.
- > We will listen to young people and give them a voice in the church and community.
- > We will give young people opportunities to be fully involved in the ministry of the local church.

These are straightforward statements and they are clearly connected to the evidence we collected from the churches in rural and other areas. The young people in your church need to know that they matter. That's not something you can expect them to assume!

As congregations, the work that we do clearly needs to be distinctly Christian in its nature. It's fine for us to offer safe places for young people in our communities, but if they never get a sense of what lies behind what we are doing then is that the best we can do for them? Perhaps we need to remember that the Gospel is good news for young people. Many of these statements talk about how we empower young people to take up places in the body of Christ and how they can move from there to have a positive impact on their local communities and beyond.

Think National, Think Global

Another strategic idea for churches in rural settings to consider is that we are all linked together in a wider denomination or the wider Christian family in Scotland. While that might not matter to those of us who are so familiar with the denomination that it has become the equivalent of an old auntie, gathering dust in a corner, it can be significant for young people. Getting your young people involved in national events, organised by the Church, is of vital importance for the young people who take part – particularly from rural areas.

I have lost count of the times when young people have told me that they feel like they are the only person aged under 100 in their local churches and just how encouraging it is for them to be part of an event or process that brings them together with other young people who are involved in the Kirk. The Youth Representatives at the Church of Scotland's General Assembly, the Impact Mission teams, the Crossover Festival, the National Youth Assembly, organised pilgrimages to Israel and Palestine – these are just some of the options that young people from rural settings can take up. In doing so, they will get a bigger vision of their church and a bigger vision for their own lives. In turn this can have a positive impact on the local church when they return to it full of enthusiasm and challenging questions.

Good Resources

Another key initiative that works well in any setting is the Cosycoffeehouse. This is a coffee house kit in a box. The idea is that you use your church building to provide a regular place for young people to come along and hang out. They get to buy fairly traded tea, coffee or hot chocolate and on each table are specially-designed menu cards that aim to stimulate conversation about important issues relating to life and faith. If a coffee house raises more money than it spends the young people are encouraged to distribute profits to projects in the developing world and in their local communities. This gives the whole process an ethical and practical dimension. The Cosycoffeehouse kit contains all you need to get going – mugs, t-shirts, aprons as well as the menu cards. It could be a good way for a rural church – or a group of churches – to begin to reach out to young people.

Like urban churches before them, rural churches need to find the confidence to speak up more and make their voices heard. They need to encourage their central church structures to make more resources available to them to enable them to face their particular challenges and meet their particular needs. In doing so, I hope that more of our rural churches will work with young people to remove the barriers mentioned at the beginning of this article so that they can experience a better quality of life; in the process of doing this they will be introduced to Jesus Christ, and to a vibrant and dynamic church at the heart of their communities.

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Rural Youth Work with Small Numbers

Rob Whiteman

The Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) is organised as congregations, dioceses (7) and Province (Scotland) and the Church's youth work follows the same pattern. In the rural and remote parts of Scotland the sheer lack of numbers brings pressures particularly on young people. One such example is the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles which runs from Cumbrae to the Butt of Lewis and is thus geographically large. Some of the congregations, however, are very small; indeed, the total membership of the diocese is smaller than the Episcopal membership in several towns in Scotland. The Bishop sees his role not as an administrator but as a Missionary travelling with and to his people. In a number of congregations there may be only one young person or one family of young people but that does not mean that there is no option for Youth Work. The approach is to focus on what is possible by bringing people together, either virtually or actually, to share. This is done through the work of a diocesan youth officer and chaplain, sometimes one person, and almost all in a voluntary capacity, under the authority of the Bishop. The diocesan Youth officers meet together to arrange inter-diocesan and provincial work in a Provincial Youth Network. The Network also has two young people from each diocese so that the young people themselves form the majority in the committee that makes the decisions on strategy, priorities and budgets for Youth Work in the SEC.

Summer Camps

The SEC Youth Network has run an annual camp in August for well over a decade. It has become so successful that two weeks are now held to meet demand without sacrificing the features that make it so special. Over the years it has become obvious that the Youth Weeks have a particular value for those in small churches and those in rural and remote areas. They have performed a particular and valuable function for those who are the only, or one of very few young people in their church. The camps have shown them that they are not alone; there are others in a similar situation, so the camp is not just about the week itself. They form the basis of a much wider interaction throughout the year. In a number of dioceses the Diocesan Network arranges weekends that include visits to small churches that have few or no young people as part of a wider weekend. In this way the experience of young people in the church has been widely shared. These are often attended by young people from outwith the diocese who have met through the Youth Weeks.

Keeping in Touch

For the young people themselves, the camps have become the root of social networks that flourish through texts, emails, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other websites. In some years reunions have been held to bring people together from all over Scotland. The success of the camps is not just in the weeks themselves; possibly their greatest value lies in what happens outwith the weeks in terms of social interaction. The weeks provide a huge fillip to young people's faith but the contacts carried on throughout the year are what sustains it.

This is not the end of the process however, as part of the philosophy of the Network has been to develop its own leadership. In rural areas this has been very successful with a number of the younger leaders emerging from all over Scotland – Oban, Kelso, Arbroath, Moray, Lewis. Furthermore events outside the Youth Weeks have been held in rural areas including a number of 'Down on the Farm' events in rural Aberdeenshire, run by local leaders bringing young people together from across Scotland.

Personal Stories

An SEC Youth Week Delegate reflects:

“I was asked on the last day how long it would take me to travel home. I feel that the reply – seven hours – stunned one or two people. However, travelling from the Isle of Lewis to Perth, a journey involving two buses and a three hour ferry journey, is a hassle gladly suffered under the circumstances. The congregation I attend is small to the extent that I am one of only two young people, a situation which will change for the worse when I leave for university in four months’ time. The Youth Week provides an excellent opportunity to meet other young Christians, and to explore our common faith together.

The atmosphere was almost unique. It was that rare atmosphere which conveys the feeling of a deep spiritual presence, and I wonder if it was something resident in the buildings there or, as I suspect, something which came about through the gathering of so many young people eager to share their spiritual experiences. I still have friends whom I met nearly six years ago at the first such event I attended, and I am certainly considering returning as a leader in years to come, or rather hoping for the opportunity.

Quite apart from my eagerness to return each year, I am equally eager to stay in touch with some of the great personalities I have met there. This mainly takes place via email, with the occasional phone call breaking the silence induced by the various communication barriers involved in living in a remote corner of rural Scotland. Although actually meeting any of them in person is a rare occurrence, the odd time when I do is often the highlight of the year for me, especially when returning to the camp itself – which has an influence far beyond the two weeks of the year during which it takes place.”

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A Missing Generation

Susan Andrew

“So you’re one of the few who came back to Caithness then?” asked a local gentleman who had approached me after a youth presentation I’d given in a small village called Reay. To appreciate the significance of this statement you have to realise that there is a huge generation missing from rural Caithness, especially in the churches. At the age of 18, the majority head for the city for further study. Only years later and with the thought of settling down and having a family somewhere quiet would the option of coming back to Caithness pop into their heads. I am an exception to this rule. After completing University in Edinburgh, I came home to the small town of Wick and now am employed as the full-time youth worker for the church I grew up in – Pulteneytown Parish Church.

Knowing the Benefits

It is a great privilege to be a servant of Christ in the place that offered so much to me in terms of spiritual nurture and development during my youth. After coming up through the Sunday school, I attended the Sunday night Youth Group which offered a varied programme of quizzes, speakers, games and bible studies. Sunday night was the highlight of my week. The Youth Group provided a comfortable, safe, fun atmosphere which was a refreshing change after the difficulties and pressure of school, where it felt like you were the only Christian! Although not everyone in the Youth Group were committed Christians, there was an understanding of what was expected. The leaders taught us the truths of the Bible in a fun and challenging way and the youth members treated the room and leaders with respect. The youth group today has 30 members and although they are from different years in High School, the group gel well because of an annual away weekend in February.

I attended the very first away weekend to Alltnacriche in Aviemore. Our weekend away is now in its 10th year! The first year consisted of 15 teenagers and five adults. I remember feeling so excited about the prospect of going away and getting to do all the adventurous activities the programme promised. There was skiing, snow-bobbing, swimming, ice-skating and an assault course, plus it’s every teenage girl’s dream to sleep in a dorm with your friends and chat until the small hours of the morning! We had four spiritual/lifestyle talks over the weekend as well as attending the local church in Aviemore. It was a great time to be rid of distractions or peer pressure from friends and just to hear more about God and spend time in his presence for a whole weekend. Since that first year the group has grown and we take 30 young people and 10 leaders away with us. However, the experience is very different now that I’m a leader! It is still a powerful weekend and this year we had 11 of the 30 young people sign up for ‘Going Deeper’ classes after the weekend was over. God is good!

Use the Resources You Have

Another outreach event I attended when I was young was the annual Summer Holiday Club that Pulteneytown Parish Church ran. 170 children enjoyed an amazing week crammed with activities, teaching, videos, singing, outdoor pursuits and of course juice and biscuits! The Holiday Club is open to primary school aged children so once too old for that, I moved on to 'Breakout', the teenage version of Holiday Club run in the evenings. It was at Breakout that I became a Christian – after being brought up through the church I finally came to understand what the gospel message meant for me personally. It was during one of the evening talks that the true impact of what Jesus' death on the cross meant hit me and I couldn't help but cry and pray to God to forgive my sin. Other teenagers have felt God speak to them through this mission week, which is extraordinary as it attracts about 70 teenagers, most of whom have never set foot in a church before. When I became a leader of Breakout I realised how dependent on God the leaders truly are. The great thing about Breakout is that even though we are not based in a city with access to resources, we use what we have. We take the group fishing on boats around the harbour, we go out in fields quad biking, we have bonfires on our beautiful beaches and we play wide-games in the forests nearby. We are able to do all this because of the promise in God's word: "God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19) God helps us to use what we have and to build on that. The leader's enthusiasm to work with young people and their obvious relationship with God makes Breakout a really special event and I think all the young people attending can see that, as I did when I was a member.

Finding Confidence

There are so many youth-orientated activities going on in Pulteneytown Parish Church which would never have been successful without God and a faithful core group of people. A verse that has stayed with me is 1 Timothy 12: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity." Young people are often looked down upon and seen as a problem to be solved, but the Church should see their potential and their gifts; after all, Joseph, David and Mary were all young when God used them in miraculous ways! I came to see God's love for me through my experience of my local church as I was growing up. They accepted me and used my gifts in the church. Now, as a youth worker, I am in turn encouraging my youths to feel accepted and to use their gifts, such as the youth praise band we are setting up, as well as nurturing their spiritual needs with the 'Going Deeper' classes. Youth work is often hard, pioneering work but at least as I develop it at Pulteneytown Parish I know I'm building on a good foundation which was laid down when I was younger.

In answer to the gentleman's question, *"So you're one of the few who came back to Caithness then?"* I would have to say, *"Yes, and it's because there is a lot more work God wants done here!"*

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What can we do?

Ewen Munro

Church folk in Oban were concerned for the young people of the town who spent a lot of time hanging about the streets. A few people gathered monthly to pray for a vision of how to develop a project, where to find people with the right talents and how to find financial partners. Meantime visits were paid to youth work schemes around Scotland – many in very different contexts, but with lessons to teach and advice to give. At an early stage, partnership emerged as the best way forward, and out of the kind of close links enjoyed in a rural community came a willingness to meet and develop a strategy which involved the local High School, the Police, The Social Work Department, local businesses, the Leisure Centre and all the church denominations. From this came H2O, an unashamedly Christian youth work charity constituted in 2003 to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the young people of Oban and surrounding areas. With at least two full time youth workers and a team of volunteers, we meet with young people of high school age but are keen to stretch our definition to include primary age children.

Part of the High School

We now have an enviable relationship with the local high school and consider that we are blessed in this as the school authorities have welcomed our youth workers with open arms and they have free access throughout the school during the school day. This hasn't happened overnight, or even since 2003, as we are frequently humbled when we realise from conversations that what we are doing now (and seeing the fruits of) is a result of fervent prayer for generations. Speaking to older members of our congregations, we frequently hear them saying apologetically that they never would have believed that they would ever see what is happening now, even though they prayed for it all those years ago.

A Business Model

The structure of H2O is made up of an overseeing Board of 12 'hands on' Directors and it is formally constituted as a limited company. The Directors are local men and women, many are parents, some professional, others in business, who bring their many skills and talents to the table.

Five teams feed into and report to the Board:

- > Youth
- > Prayer
- > Events (local and national)
- > Business (planning, funding applications, line management of staff)
- > Local Fundraising

There is a selection of denominations represented on the actual Board, but all the churches in the area are involved in some capacity, especially amongst our volunteer base on whom we rely heavily for activities. They are crucial to the work and share a wide range of skills and talents. We have our visionary characters but these are complemented by a hard core of people who are able to work with the wacky ideas and try to put them in place. Our business folk have an aptitude for successfully seeking funding sponsors – which is great, because they seem to enjoy it and the rest of us can't really be bothered with that sort of thing.

We have two full time Christian youth workers plus at present a youth work trainee on secondment from Youth For Christ.

Partnership working is crucial to our work and here is a sample of our current partners:

Strathclyde Police, Scottish Rocks, Stramash, Alpha Scotland, Oban High School, Westward Quest, Scotland Against Drugs, Play Sport, Girls on the Move, Fusions and SSC.

We have a big advantage over many areas as we only have one high school which serves a large catchment of rural Argyll including several of the Inner Hebridean islands. This means that it is relatively straightforward to make contact with all the young people of the area by meeting them in the High School.

We have a loose target of apportioning the youth workers' time as High School 60%, Church 20% and Street/Community 20%, and in practice we are able to keep close to these guide figures.

Benefits for the Churches

The whole work is underpinned by prayer and a monthly Prayer Supper is organised which also delivers much needed fellowship and allows real-time updates to be given to supporters. One of the benefits of this isn't related to youth work at all, but as all the churches in the town are actively involved in the work inevitably friendships across the churches are made and fellowship deepened. We have found that H2O becomes a trial ground for activities which folk maybe haven't explored before and they can come and try it or see it in action in a non-threatening way. This has given confidence to go back to their own churches and try out different methods with boldness, having seen it in practice. An example of this is the prayer times where we have spent time together in a number of different styles of shared and individual prayer.

Looking back, the story of H2O is much like the proverbial runaway snowball going downhill, gathering pace, but instead of falling apart when it got too big we have been careful to shed or evolve areas which clearly were not part of the core work; we have had the courage to postpone other items until the time is right or we have the resources to deal with them. Much of what we do has evolved from a desperate need which was obvious, to a planned delivery of youth work to meet developing needs in the area. Some requests have come in from outlying areas and we have been able to respond with support and activities. Feedback from the Police and Social work has been positive and encouraging.

Questions for Discussion

- > What new ideas did you find encouraging in this section?
- > Which young people in your congregation at present, could you draw into practical involvement in church life?
- > What activities would attract younger children to enable you to 'grow' young people in church?
- > Do you know how to access help and advice from your denomination?
- > Do you have a support worker or staff member from any of the Christian churches in the area whom you could consult?
- > See the How to Use this Pack section for Resources information.