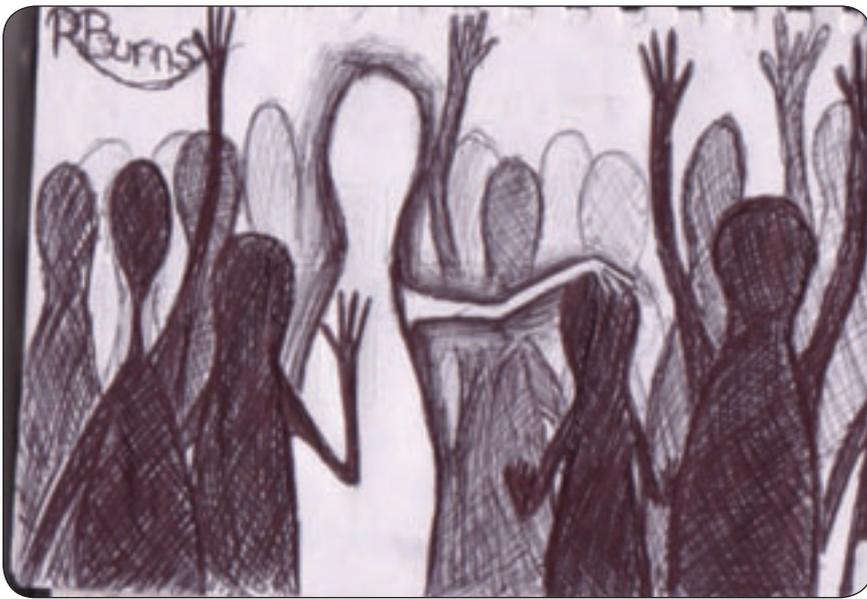


Unreached or unreachable?



James Grier writes about his pioneering work as Pastor of a Youth Church in Exeter aimed at reaching young people with no connection with church

Is it just me, or has Messy Church become the new Alpha? Everywhere I go I hear about another Messy Church starting up reaching children and families. (If you've never heard of Messy Church, it's well worth googling, if you've never heard of Google, I'm afraid I can't help!) I think Messy Church is amazing; one of the churches I'm involved with has 80 adults and children coming each month, who wouldn't otherwise come near it. Yet the danger is that people adopt it as the latest package. They take it off the shelf and use it as the answer to reaching children. I'd love to say I have one for reaching youth, but I'm afraid there just isn't one. Also even if there was one, I wouldn't be recommending it. I believe that reaching young people is not about a secret formula or model, it is about some profound challenges to church and how we do it. It's about seeking God's will for your church's unique mission to young people.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is James Grier. I was appointed 4 1/2 years ago to pioneer a Youth Church in Exeter reaching youth with no connection with church and probably no interest in church.

So we moved down from Birmingham with a fantastic brief and the backing of the Church of England to create a new expression of church focussed on unchurched youth. I want to share with you something of our journey. If you're anything like me, you'll skim it to see what you can glean and apply in your context, but I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint. My hope is to stimulate your thinking, your faith and your courage to see what is right for you, not to offer you a way of doing things.

Untouched generation

As a key part of our outreach, we go and talk to youth in Exeter city centre. Our aim is to not just to talk but to end up praying and sharing a sense of what God reveals for them. We've been doing this for about four years and probably spoken to about 500 young people. Staggeringly, I'd

say less than a dozen have been rude. Even those who don't want to talk are friendly. We normally say that we're starting a new church focussed on young people and ask whether they have ever been to church. Many say that they haven't other than weddings and funerals or with primary school. Whether the experience was positive or more usually boring, on the whole it bears no relation to their lives. I'm sure that if we were approaching older people, there would be a greater strength of feeling about church and usually negative. These young people have no real understanding or experience of Christian faith. I'm increasingly convinced that outreach to young people today is about our becoming missionaries to an unreached generation.

What does it mean to be a missionary?

Early on we felt, through prayer, that the youth church should be called Unlimited because it expressed something of how we felt this church should be. As a new church, we



had no corporate history of past failure and disappointment (although it hasn't taken long to create one). We wanted to commit to staying unlimited by this. We want to be a church that is always open to God and expectant, basing beliefs on his truth not our experience. We aim to be a church unlimited in our openness to youth and expectations of them – labelling them with God's perspective rather than unhelpful and negative labels. Finally we want to be a church unlimited by unhelpful culture and tradition.

Missionaries of the past took as much colonial culture and church tradition as Christian faith to the people they went to. We need to rediscover the essentials of Christian faith for a generation in many ways oblivious to the 'God-story.' So easily we seek to convert them to our church culture rather than create a God culture. Alternatively, people lead others to faith and then expect them to convert to church as it is, as part of their conversion. Just as the *Book of Common Prayer*, robes and traditional rural churches with spires were from a different world for African tribes in the past, how much of our churches is alien to youth today? Even where we are aware of this, it can be hard to know what to do.

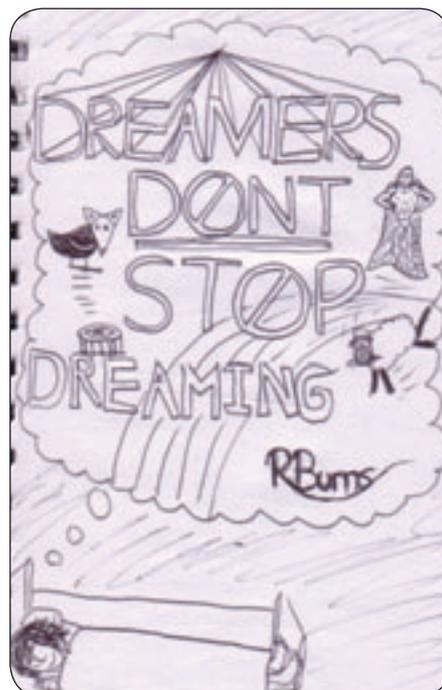
In a bid to avoid creating church in our shape, rather than that of the youth we hoped to lead into faith, we avoided doing much of church for the first few years. We deliberately shyed away from offering an experience of meeting together as church to the young people with whom we first began to connect with. I wanted to avoid sung worship, until we could discover the style that would work

for the youth we were reaching. We were still creating a culture but it was quite an empty one! When our first few young people came to faith (two of them – in two years!), we began meeting on a Sunday monthly. Now we meet weekly for a 'service' as well as doing outreach and people are beginning to come to it. It's very relaxed and informal, not very cool or radical but real and honest. We are also committed to trying to ensure that it is influenced by any youth that become part of who we are.

Church needs to be all age

Youth need church that is real and where they can be themselves, whilst also being challenged and changed as followers of Jesus. So often, in spite of what I've written above, when young people become Christians they are expected to do church in the way of previous generations. This isn't right. On the other hand I don't believe we can have a true church made up of youth alone. Church can't just be made up of people of similar disposition, taste or age. We need to be taken beyond ourselves.

Church needs to be all age and people need it to be all age. On a very real practical level young people need people of all ages involved in their lives, especially in a time when broken families are increasing prevalent. They need other generations to learn from and be inspired by. Young people need spiritual parents and grandparents. They also need just to see a 'normal'



family of parents and children interacting together.

I came here thinking that creating a church with a clear purpose of reaching youth and being accessible to youth and yet welcoming all ages, was the dream scenario. It's in fact a minefield. Other churches are suspicious of a 'youth church'. Several aren't sure whether it's theologically acceptable. The honest amongst them also admit that they fear it will steal their youth. Others say it is destined to either grow into an adult church or leave young people churchless as they grow out of it. All these things are concerns that need to be addressed.

Our greater problem has been working out what we do as Christian youth want to join us. They might well bring fringe mates and as a result change the whole 'feel' to that of a church youth group. They would also be leaving other churches to come to us, possibly seeing us as a current attractive fad. Yet in our trying to avoid of this, some fringe young people from another church have fallen between us and that church. We didn't want to steal and assumed they were committed Christian youth, now we realise they weren't and we have in effect failed them. We've also suffered from a lack of team because either people want to see what things look like as they develop before getting involved, or they don't quite get what we're about because it's still too embryonic!

Don't despise the small things

Many times I've been tempted to cut the corner on our vision. We exist for non-church youth and they are our missional focus. We could so easily have gone for a quick win and picked up a good core of dechurched youth and created a critical mass to work from. Or we could have joined up with an existing group to kick start things. Yet we have consistently felt God calling us to stay obedient to our call and continue doing what we do whether we see fruit or not. So four years in, we still have weeks with no youth. We have prayed quite directly with hundreds of youth on the streets. Some of them have been quite overwhelmed by the prayer.

continued on page 14 »



continued from page 13

We have studiously avoided playing on any emotional vulnerability this creates and so have put all the onus on them for any response.

Time and again they say they want to know more and we never see them again. Youth can be infuriatingly apathetic or just incapable of remembering what time we meet or where. Some youth seem to make two steps forward and three back. Some are engaging with faith but put up an amazingly convincing appearance of complete disinterest. Our numbers are often embarrassingly small. At times, we have looked at the bald facts of numbers and commitment of those youth we work with and wondered whether we are deluding ourselves.

We aren't here to look good but to answer God's call

Yet we are not here to build a mega church or look good, we're here to follow God's call, go out to those who might never hear of him otherwise and sow seeds. We trust him for the fruit. We also have to look at making disciples, not quick converts. Many of these youth are very emotionally needy and we need to invest in the whole of them as people not just their conversion, or even prior to their conversion.

Often, I think I have more questions than answers, but I know God's called us to this work and we're sticking at it no matter what!

Also, whenever I'm on the brink of despair God has that amazing way of reassuring us. Last Sunday, midway through my writing this, a friend visited our afternoon service and bumped into some youth on the street. She commented on them and we joked that she hadn't invited them in. She promptly went and did so (much to my shame!). They came in. One interrupted all the way through our time together, with great and not so great questions! At the end, we offered to pray for her and she was really keen. Some of the team prayed and then my wife asked if she had more questions. She said, 'No – that was amazing!'

I've no idea whether we'll see her again, but I know God met her and pray that he'll continue to do so. In the meantime, we carry on knowing we're where we're meant to be and, as long as we seek to be obedient, the effect of the work is really down

about the writer

The Revd James Grier leads Unlimited Youth Church in Exeter with his wife Liz. They have two boys Josh and Toby who also think they lead the church! Alongside Unlimited, James is Exeter Diocese's Youth Church Advisor. He also helps out at Soul Survivor festivals and is known to do the odd seminar or two.

How Ross's faith has developed through his art

The drawings illustrating James Grier's article are by 14-year old Ross Burns, a pupil at Bosworth Community College in Leicestershire.

'These pictures were drawn at Soul Survivor. If I heard a line that really appealed to me in a song or a sermon or a prayer, or experienced God and what He was saying to me, I would try and do a drawing of my interpretation of what it means to me. It is a relaxing way to develop your faith and it has really helped me. I found it to be a good way to get closer to God', he says.

Ross worships at Holy Trinity Church, Leicester and lists his interests as cello, guitar, art, athletics and tennis.

PLAYING AT BEING CHURCH



'Far too often we can look at the culture of young people and see the failings of it, whilst ignoring the glimmers of God within it. We spend too much time decrying what is wrong rather than celebrating what is God. I want to suggest that a positive hopeful stance to culture is a viable life-giving alternative . . .'

Ben Edson writes

I enjoy watching skateboarders. In particular I enjoy the imaginative way that they view urban architecture. I see a bench as a place to sit; they view it either as an obstacle to jump off or to slide along. I see some stairs and view them as a way to move from one level to another; for them they are a place where they will play for many hours. I often rush through the urban environment, whereas the skateboard will take note of its complexities, its nuances and enjoy playing within it.

As we reflect on church for young people I think that the first thing that we must allow our young people to do is to play in their culture. There can be a tendency to encourage young people to rush through their culture into one that we think will be better for them. This must be resisted. By rushing them through they are not given the time or permission to create culturally indigenous expressions of church as they default to our models, models