

# Young People and Churchyards

## Introduction



### Background

The concept behind 'Young People and Churchyards' began in May 2005 when one of the churches in the diocese felt it needed to close because of the issues they were facing with young people gathering around the church. This created a significant amount of media interest due to concerns in society at large about the behaviour of young people and what sort of society we are becoming.

We felt it was important to establish the extent of the problem within the diocese, and after undertaking some basic research we became aware that whilst the majority of churches do not experience any real problems, there was a significant number of churches who do. Those who fell into this category indicated that they would value some support and guidance, not simply on just how to move young people on but also how to work constructively with young people who gather around their buildings.

### Important points

The diocese recognises that the problems that you face in your parish are real and can cause great anxiety – you have to live there and we recognise that. We also know that working with young people is not easy, but before the issues can be addressed, it is necessary to reflect on the following points:

1. The vast majority of young people are essentially a joy to work with and want to make a positive contribution to society – 73% of 16-24 year olds are involved in volunteering.
2. We need as a society to be careful about how we depict young people. Whilst it is important that certain behaviour is challenged its important that we avoid going overboard.
3. We as a church are called to minister to all members of society in particular the vulnerable. Young People gathering in churchyards can therefore be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat.

This pack simply provides examples of practical ideas and general principles that you can adopt, and contains contact details for partners that you can work with.

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## Resolving Youth Nuisance at St Luke's Benchill

St Luke's has suffered a sustained level of youth nuisance over a number of years. It falls into three main types. Minor nuisance, like children climbing on the roof, moderate nuisance in terms of vandalism for example writing on walls and other surfaces and damaging property like benches and light fittings and serious crime as in burglary and attempted break ins. To give you some idea of the incidence of the problem we have had 91 incidents since we started keeping a record in February 2003, of which a third are burglary or attempted burglary.

Having the vicarage, curates house and church hall on the same site as the church is a benefit in as much as it means there is usually someone around to deal with trouble when it occurs, but the level of nuisance especially for the residents can be very stressful.

We have tackled the problem in different ways with the three different levels. For low level nuisance we have built strong relationships with our local primary schools and despite the fact none of them are church schools they both have school assemblies in church at least once a year and one school comes in termly. The church also gave each family in both local primary schools a Storykeepers Video for Christmas last year. When we do have problems we work closely with the local housing association who have a neighbourhood warden service.

At the medium level we have had a couple of quite serious riots with large numbers of drunk 12 to 16 year olds climbing on the building, doing serious damage and graffitng. There is a street drinking exclusion zone round the church which means that we can tell young people that they are welcome to sit around the church as long as they are not drinking and we warn them of the legal penalties if they are and encourage them to move on. In the last major disturbance the police made a number of arrests and had sufficient evidence to charge one of the young people. When I discussed whether to press charges with the police, they said that the girl would only receive a caution she admitted to doing it, but would go to court if she denied it. I agreed with the police that I would not press charges if the girl admitted to what she had done and came with her mother to see me and then cleared up the mess that had been made over the week-end by her and her friends. This proved a very effective strategy. The mother was very shocked to discover that her daughter had been vandalising the church and was very grateful to me for not pressing charges. I had the opportunity to tell the girl what effect her and her friends' actions had had on me and the church and to tell her how much the repairs would cost. The mother was then very supportive in encouraging the girl to do the cleaning up. Since then we have had no more incidents of this kind. It was also very helpful to me as having met the girl I no longer feel she and her friends are monsters and I feel I have created a constructive relationship between myself, the girl, and her mother.

The high level problems associated with burglary have been addressed in two ways. Firstly I organised a multi-disciplinary meeting with the police, local counsellors, local housing association, local youth agencies, commercial tenants who use the church site, the church wardens, the archdeacon and the diocesan property secretary. This proved extremely helpful and enabled us to put a plan together that covered policing, increasing the level of detached youth work in the area and helped us access funds to increase the security of the building.

Together these strategies have significantly reduced the number of incidents this year compared to last year.

## The Team Parish of Ashton

### Our setting

The Team Parish of Ashton is comprised of four churches which are all, to some degree or another, gathering points for groups of young (and not so young) people. These gatherings occasionally lead to damage to the church buildings, but more usually only result in noise and dropped litter. They are often perceived by members of the congregation to be more of a "problem" than they are in reality. The parish is ethnically diverse and there are areas of significant social deprivation.

### Our involvement with young people

In March 2004, a local youth was stabbed near to St James' Church. His friends were shocked by this event and three teenage girls came to the Vicarage because they wanted someone to talk to. The following week they came to a Sunday evening youth group which had just been set up for teenagers who already come to our Team churches. Soon around twelve 11-17 year olds (who have had little/no previous church contact) were coming regularly on Sunday evenings. We realised that we needed to make additional provision for them because they had very different needs to the "church" teenagers. If we didn't we knew that they would not stay around and we would lose a significant opportunity. The area in which they live is a socially deprived, multi-ethnic area and these young people encounter daily the kind of hardships prevalent in this type of area. They spend their time hanging around on the streets; their home lives are complex as few have both parents living with them; they experience a range of problems including physical abuse, criminal records, self-harming, anger, underage sexual activity, alcohol abuse, truanting from school.

We tried to involve the Youth Services and other local bodies to help with these young people, but they weren't interested/didn't have the resources. So in May 2004, we started to meet fortnightly after school in a room attached to St James Church to cook a meal and eat together. Soon we moved to meeting weekly – and we now meet in the Vicarage for supper each Thursday. We survive financially by asking a 50p contribution from the young people and subsidising this from our (small) youthwork budget – it costs us between £5 and £10 a week to cook for up to 12 people.

In Spring 2005, we got a grant from the Church Evangelism Fund and took this group on an activity weekend at Edale. The aim of this was to help build their confidence and to do some team building.

### The outcomes

- We have noticed that the young people who come ask a lot of questions about Christianity and church. Cooking and eating together has given us an informal setting in which to answer their questions.
- We have three adult leaders who work alongside me and although none of them had previous experience with "non church" young people, they have enjoyed being involved.
- We have found that in this "church" environment we see little of the "bad behaviour" that these young people show in other settings.
- Through these young people, we have also started to be in contact with their families and also some of the young Asian men who hang around on the streets. These are all contacts who are completely new to the local church.

- One of the group is now involved in planning our Deanery Youth Worship events and all the group will come along to these events – although none of them come to local church services.
- There does seem to have been a reduction in vandalism around St James Church.
- The leaders have been drawn into the lives of these young people and we have been alongside in some very difficult personal situations that they have faced. This has been personally challenging but it has been a privilege to be invited into their lives.
- We have seen that it is important to form some level of relationships with those who use our churchyards. When people identify the building with people they know, they show it much more respect.

### **The future**

Encouraged by the success of this group and the readiness that these young people have shown to be involved in some way in the life of the church, we hope to find funding to have a youthwork student placed in the parish.

## Vigilance > Engagement > Confidence

### Vigilance

When I arrived in this parish following a lengthy interregnum I made it my business to get the PCC to install various security measures over and above those which the Diocese provides. Clearance of trees, dusk to dawn lighting, installation of gates, fences in trouble spots, repair to walls and a host of other initiatives have all be undertaken. In addition, whenever I found youths in the yard or in places which they ought not to be, I simply contacted the local police - not once, but every ten minutes. This was important when I arrived. Being robust about what I was prepared to live with required sending out a strong message which quickly got around the area. With two small boys I am not prepared to negotiate with their personal feelings of security in and around their own home. Indeed on one occasion I had five or six hooded youths in the garden causing problems underneath their bedroom window - not at all pleasant but I was able to deal with it by applying the second prong of my battle plan...

### Engagement

Whilst I have been in Tottington I have made it my business to get right outside of the gathered Church and to engage with the local community. As the Vicar I - as all Church of England clergy do - have a unique opportunity in virtue of our position to link in with all in our parish. This is especially so through the Offices, but also by getting in to the local schools, factories and other workplaces, and pubs and clubs in the Village. The Church here is intimately bound up in the life of the wider community. I know vandals and people that one might be slightly wary of because I have actually baptised their baby or buried their grandmother, or seen them in the pub and said hello, and have been seen to be relevant, open and approachable. In ten years I have had only two windows broken in Church and no other problems of that nature - watch this space!!!

On numerous occasions we have had gangs of 30 youngsters drinking in the yard. I have gone out, said hello, recognised more than 80% of them, listened to their funny or sarcastic remarks, and they have left. Outside the local store I was confronted by 15 teenagers all in hoods and mostly drunk. I said hello and they swarmed on me like bees around a honey pot. All they wanted to do was to chat - one girl about her parents' marriage problems, and others about things that teenagers want to talk about. A two-minute visit to the shop took about 45 minutes. These '*thuggish hoodies*' then quite remarkably said "Bye Vicar". Their appearance was wholly misleading. I can think of other times as well when a simple, open 'hello' or nod of the head has led to an engagement which then ripples through the village. And to do that requires the third prong which is...

### Confidence

It would be wrong of me to suggest that I have the confidence that makes me swim through these experiences - it is draining, stressful and at times nerve-racking. Dealing with conflict situations and defusing them is not easy. Honing skills like sometimes going out in slippers to talk, or using body language that avoids eye contact, or even being apologetic for having to ask people to move on has worked. I am always seen as an authority figure - I do not need to exercise it at times such as these. It is not easy to engage with the local community and lay yourself open and say "I'm your Vicar - who are you?". When the Vicarage was besieged by hoodies I felt physically drained. But I met one of those hoodies in the Village only a few months ago. He knew I had recognised him from that evening when so much distress had been caused. I said hello and asked how his mother and brother were. It was a confident re-engagement. That is possible I guess because I confidently think that 99% of the people that I have had dealings with are basically okay. Most of them are willing to talk - maybe they find the clergyman mildly intriguing - and my body language is always open and receptive. But like I say, there is a cost to this approach and sometimes it is understandable why with accumulated stress, tiredness and real fatigue, not engaging is an attractive option. But then our Lord never did say it was going to be easy.

## **Young People and Churchyards: Case Studies for small group use**

### **Case Study 1**

A small group of young people have begun to gather regularly around the church building. The group are not causing any damage to the fabric of the building but are leaving various items of litter when they disperse. They are quite loud amongst themselves but are not abusive. However, members of the congregation are 'feeling' threatened when they leave church meetings.

What strategies could you employ in this situation?

### **Case Study 2**

Young people are regularly running around on your church roof. When you ask them to come down they ignore you. In this situation both the young people and the church building are at risk.

How could you approach the situation?

### **Case Study 3**

Small groups of young people are using the graveyard of the church on Friday evenings for binge drinking and associated activities. People who regularly visit the graveyard are complaining about the mess and lack of respect these activities produce. You recognise the young people from the local area and are aware that they attend local schools.

What action could you take?

# **Making Contact with Young People**

## General Principles & Guidelines

**Each situation and context is different when working with young people. Not all of these guidelines are universally applicable; you will need to exercise judgement about what is appropriate.**

1. Approach with respect
2. Body language (non verbal communications)
3. Short and regular contact (incremental)
4. Remembering names
5. Learn something important about the young person
6. Negotiated boundaries
7. Choice is important for young people
8. Know provision for young people in your area
9. Have a reason to approach (questionnaire, handout etc.)
10. Try providing drinks for young people
11. Assess the risk before approaching young people
12. Work which is instigated should not be done alone
13. Partnership
14. Involve congregation in praying for young people in your area

## Young People & Churchyards - Contacts List

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