

Walking alongside young people

Challenges and opportunities for faith communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Background

This report outlines the findings of a two-year Big Lottery-funded research project designed to study the role of faith communities in promoting the social inclusion of young people in North East England. The project was undertaken as a partnership between the Churches' Regional Commission in the North East and Durham University. We use the term 'faith communities' to refer to people with a shared religious faith who meet together for the purpose of worship ('worshipping congregations'). The focus on 'social inclusion' covers the process of helping young people to develop skills in participation and working together and fostering a sense of belonging to a group that is part of wider society. In this research, although our primary focus is on social inclusion in a broad sense, we also explore aspects of the inclusion of young people in faith communities, recognising that this is an integral part of the work of many of the faith communities we studied. Indeed, inclusion in a faith community may be a starting point for inclusion in wider society.

2. Rationale

Faith communities have a long tradition of community work and social action. Some of the earliest youth groups and clubs have their origins in faith-based organisations, such as the Jewish Association of Youth Clubs and Young Women's Christian Association, which still exist today. Yet from the mid-twentieth century, as the welfare state developed and youth work became more secularised, the work of faith communities with young people was less prominent. However, the work still continues, much of it relatively invisible, and has developed into a range of activities and projects with varying degrees of affiliation to a faith community. There is a growing recognition on the part of government that faith communities have a significant role to play in promoting neighbourhood regeneration and tackling social exclusion and ethnic and religious tensions. While there have been several recent studies of faith-based social action, including a survey conducted in the North East, there has been little systematic study of work with young people. This study aimed to examine the range of work taking place across the different faith communities in North East England.

3. Approach and methods

The study had a specific focus on two case study areas: parts of the boroughs of Gateshead and Middlesbrough. The research was designed to have an action element (to influence practice and policy during the course of the project) and to include some elements of participation by young people. The methods used included: networking and information-gathering; visits to and observations at places of worship, faith-linked youth projects and activities; holding workshops and a conference; training and supporting young people to undertake interviews with their peers; making a DVD; and conducting interviews with 45 young people, 32 paid workers and volunteers who worked with young people and 20 faith leaders. The faith affiliations of participants included: Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian (Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Ecumenical partnership, Methodist, Quaker, Salvation Army, Evangelical, Pentecostal), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh.

4. Types of faith-linked youth activities and projects

Our findings suggest there is a rich variety of activities organised by or linked to faith communities in the North East. We have called these 'faith-linked' and categorised them as follows:

- 4.1 **Activities for young people within places of worship** – this includes worship itself, educational activities and young people's decision-making.
- 4.2 **Outreach activities** – this includes work in schools, sports activities and one-off events that are rooted in sharing faith values.
- 4.3 **Activities in faith-linked youth projects open to all young people** – this includes projects and activities with varying degrees of faith affiliation open to all young people.
- 4.4 **Activities with young people in broader society with a faith dimension** – this includes youth activities in statutory and non faith-linked voluntary organisations where issues of faith are merged into cross-cultural work (often in black and minority ethnic projects and community cohesion activities) and/or where youth workers with a faith affiliation are negotiating their faith in practice.

5. Perspectives of young people

Young people participating in the research reported wanting to be listened to and treated with respect. Many young people were keen to play a more active role in their own faith communities (if they had a faith affiliation) and/or in the particular youth groups to which they belonged. Participation in faith-based youth councils or forums was valued by some, although it was recognised that these may actively involve only a few young people and should not be used as the sole means of listening to and engaging with young people. Young people especially valued creative and informal approaches, which enabled them to have a say during the course of activities and projects. They preferred activities that gave them a sense of ownership and appreciated adults who were supportive, respectful and able to offer advice without judging them. They were less keen on traditional forms of worship, 'rote learning' and being subjected to patronising attitudes.

6. Perspectives of those working with young people

The paid workers and volunteers working with young people demonstrated high levels of commitment, often expressed in terms of vocation or 'calling'. They found themselves negotiating a number of challenges in the work, often having to act as mediators between young people and parents or other adult members of faith communities. Many were very reflective about the role of their own faith and how they could or should use this in working with young people. Some had professional youth work qualifications; many were relatively unsupported and working with little supervision. These workers with young people took on a number of roles in their work, including: communicating the message of their faith or converting young people, educating, protecting, advocating for and alongside young people, caring for and about young people and providing a role model for young people.

7. Perspectives of faith leaders

Faith leaders had very diverse attitudes towards and understandings of faith-linked work with young people. Some were very committed to working with young people and would themselves offer activities or one-to-one advice, as well as managing youth projects. Others were less aware of the possibilities and could not easily see a role for creative work with young people. Faith leaders reported playing a variety of roles in relation to young people, including: enabling young people's spiritual growth and offering religious guidance; advising young people on family, spiritual or moral matters; nurturing young people; protecting young people from harmful outside influences; preserving the religious heritage through education; and managing faith-linked work with young people.

8. Conclusions

Faith communities in North East England are undertaking a wide range of work with young people. Some of this work is scarcely visible to those who are not part of the faith community itself – such as the involvement of young people in religious services, faith-based youth forums, youth groups or classes within places of worship. Other activities may be in the form of projects, which have outside funding and are regarded as part of relatively 'mainstream' youth provision, open to all young people. Taken as a whole, this work is making a significant contribution to promoting young people's social inclusion both within faith communities and in broader society.

Some of the general outcomes of faith-linked youth activities and projects that could be said to contribute to young people's social inclusion are:

- young people feeling a sense of belonging to a faith community;
- young people developing the capacity to reflect critically on the role of faith in their lives;
- young people developing as citizens through exercising their rights and developing their skills to participate in decisions within their faith community, within faith-based youth activities and projects and outside these settings;
- young people having fun together, making friends with peers and gaining mutual support.

Some faith-linked projects that have a more specialist focus (often employing paid workers and receiving funding from a range of sources) demonstrate more specific outcomes, linked to the central government agenda for tackling social exclusion with an emphasis on inclusion of young people through education and the labour market, for example:

- Young people accessing school, training and education;
- Young people gaining jobs or qualifications;
- Young people successfully coping with life transitions (such as pregnancy or starting their own home) and moving towards independence;
- Young people developing self-esteem, confidence and feeling part of a community.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Listening to young people

Faith communities that are currently involved with or planning work with young people should find ways of listening to young people's views about the kinds of roles they wish to play in the faith community and the activities that young people want. Young people recommend that creative and informal methods are the best way to achieve this, rather than adult-led formal structures. This may include youth-led forums, youth councils and other embedded systems for enabling young people's voices to be heard, alongside informal consultation and creative ways of enabling young people to have their say during the course of informal activities.

9.2 Reflecting on the purpose of working with young people

It is important to recognise that members of faith communities may have diverse attitudes towards and motivations for working with young people. In setting up youth activities it will be helpful to discuss and clarify the main purposes of the work, which may include proselytising, nurturing young people's faith, enabling critical reflection on the role of faith in young people's lives, offering support to young people during difficult periods and empowering young people to play a greater role in the faith community, youth project or in society more generally.

9.3 Reflecting on how to develop work with young people

All faith communities should keep under review the extent to which they currently engage with young people both within and outside their places of worship, considering what barriers there might be in terms of attitudes and structures and how these can be overcome. Given young people's preferences for informal styles of working based on a youth work model that encourages and values participation, consideration might be given as to how such informal educational approaches can be further developed and supported.

9.4 Managing and supporting work with young people

Faith communities should ensure that those managing work with young people make adequate and realistic demands on their workers and offer structured support and supervision, with space for reflection and learning. Organisations need to balance the different agendas often present in work with young people and develop their own understanding of how these might best be managed in their specific circumstances (rather than just leaving this to the workers).

9.5 Ensuring access to education, training and dialogical opportunities for those working with young people

Workers and volunteers will benefit from accessing education and training opportunities that directly address their needs. Given that their faith influences their practice in complex ways, there is a need for those working with young people to reflect on how their faith relates to their work, as well as to develop expertise and skills in working with young people. This can be achieved in a number of ways, and efforts should be made to develop more opportunities for this process through:

- 9.5.1 **Local, regional and national networks** to support those working with young people, both within and across faiths;
- 9.5.2 **Sharing of ideas and resources** between youth workers and faith leaders to help learn from each other how to improve their work;
- 9.5.2 **Publicising existing relevant short courses**, workshops and seminars that might be relevant for those undertaking faith-linked work with young people, and developing new programmes to fill gaps in knowledge and skills.

9.6 Creating opportunities and spaces for mutual learning

Workers (whether within or from outside the faith community) and faith leaders need to create spaces where different individuals, groups and organisations can listen to and learn from each other, ensuring that the views of those who are normally marginalised in decision-making processes are listened to especially carefully. Areas where this learning can make a particular contribution include:

- 9.6.1 **Building relationships between generations:** Young people and older people need to get to know each other by spending time together and being willing to see things from each other's perspective.
- 9.6.2 **Building relationships between young people from different backgrounds:** All those working with young people should consider the benefits of developing activities which encourage young people to learn from each other and learn how to get on with each other.
- 9.6.3 **Building relationships between those working with young people:** Faith communities and those who work with young people (whether within or outside faith communities) should consider who else may be working with young people in their area, and whether or not they can develop some form of partnership to share resources or build dialogue and mutual understanding.
- 9.6.4 **Building relationships between statutory agencies and faith-linked work with young people:** Policy makers and statutory officers need to create opportunities for young people and those involved in faith-linked work with young people to engage in dialogue with them in line with the guidelines offered by the Local Government Association. This can usefully be supported with funding.

9.7 Further research

Our findings suggest that faith-linked work can make a significant contribution to developing the social inclusion of young people in broader society, but the nature and extent of this work is patchy and fragmented, with great differences within and between faiths. This research adds to a growing literature in the field of faith-linked work with young people through its coverage of key issues across faiths and from the perspectives of a range of participants (young people, workers with young people and faith leaders). Inevitably, more questions have been raised than answered. Further in-depth research might focus on the following areas:

- 9.7.1 **Analysing the complex motivations**, roles and experiences of the youth worker in faith-linked settings;
- 9.7.2 **Studying theory and practice in relation to purposes**, expectations and attitudes towards work with young people across faith communities;

- 9.7.3 Exploring methods for evaluating the impact of work with young people** in broader society (to include faith-based, outreach and inter-faith encounters);
- 9.7.4 Carrying out comparative work with other areas of Britain** to share practice and enrich faith-based youth provision in the North East;
- 9.7.5 Identifying frameworks for sharing appropriate good practice** at grassroots level in faith communities.

Additional resources

A copy of the DVD, *Where's the faith in youth?*, with accompanying worksheets, can be obtained from CRC-NE or Durham University (for addresses, see back cover). If you want further information, support and resources, you may find the following sources useful:

Those wishing to develop activities that build communication between different faiths can find free resources, including guides for young people and practitioners, from both www.diversityanddialogue.org.uk and www.interfaith.org.uk. Other organisations provide resources aimed at specific faiths, such as the Frontier Youth Trust, www.fyt.org.uk, the Muslim Youth Work Foundation, www.muslimyouthworkfoundation.org.uk, Hindu Youth UK, www.hinduyouthuk.org

Further information on youth work, including a guide to the role of spiritual development in youth work, is available from the National Youth Agency, www.nya.org.uk

Policy documents detailing government guidelines on work with faith communities can be found by searching for 'faith community' on www.lga.gov.uk and www.direct.gov.uk

Research-based articles debating the place of faith within youth work, including its historical role in Britain, can be found on www.infed.org.uk. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also published several relevant studies, summaries of which can be found by searching on www.jrf.org.uk

Resources for developing your own work: The Church Urban Fund, www.cuf.org.uk and Faithworks, www.faithworks.info, are both organisations operating from a Christian point of view, but have resources which may also be useful to other faith communities, including guides to developing your own project, measuring its impact and getting involved in statutory decision-making processes. Other faith tradition sites which include useful resources include www.quaker.org.uk



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Copies of the full report and DVD can be obtained from Durham University or CRC-NE, or from their websites.

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