



The gap between the Church and young people seems to be getting wider and wider. In the first part of his exclusive new series, pioneering youth ministry legend **Jonny Baker** encourages us to reimagine our youth work, and to take the lead in reinterpreting the Church for our time

My life's trajectory took an unexpected turn 20 years ago. My whole thinking and approach to youth ministry turned around almost overnight. I am currently directing a training course for pioneers with the Church Mission Society - by pioneers I mean those who are starting something new in mission beyond the edges of where the Church currently is active. I would not be doing this if it wasn't for that moment.

At the time I was working for Youth For Christ in Bath, job-sharing with my wife Jenny doing the usual mix of outreach events, schools work, city-wide youth celebrations, and generally encouraging the Church to be passionate about supporting work with young people in any way it could.

Here's what happened: a friend recommended I read a book. Yes, it was that simple! That friend was Pete Ward and the book in question was *Christianity Rediscovered* by Vincent Donovan. Donovan was a Catholic priest who travelled as a missionary to Africa to share the gospel with the Masai, a nomadic tribal people. When he arrived he found a mission compound with a school and hospital to which people from the tribe would come for education and health care. The education included learning about Jesus Christ. But he quickly figured out that this model of mission had not led to Masai becoming disciples. They just went back to their tribes and simply carried on as before.

The book opens with him writing a letter to his bishop saying that things aren't working, so he is going to try a new approach. The approach is simple: go to the Masai in their

tribal groups week by week and have conversations with them about God and share the gospel. The challenge of the gospel moving across cultures is huge. He wrestles with how to make connections and find resonances with the gospel and Masai culture, language, symbols, and spirituality. He has to let go of many of his Western assumptions on the way but finds that God is present in the encounters helping him to do what all youth workers have to do - make it up as he goes along! Both he and the Masai end up changed by the encounters in ways neither expected. As a result new Christian communities are birthed in some of the groups with authentically Masai expressions of church, Masai leadership, and worship that seems to truly reflect the culture of the Masai.

Here's a simple way I've come to think about the process that Donovan went through that led to him pioneering something new. He went as a missionary because he was called by God and was told a founding story by the religious community he was part of which caught his heart and imagination to travel thousands of miles across the world. Presumably that story was about the founders of his missionary order, the Spiritans, and their radical commitment to evangelising like the apostles in the early Church as recorded in the book of Acts. What he finds when he arrives is that there is a gap between the founding story and the reality he experiences. There is a big distance between the mission compound culture and what he understood evangelising to be about. It's that gap which creates the energy for change - it's driven by a mix of frustration and by an entrepreneurial desire to innovate in the gap, all inspired by the Spirit.

The questions he faces lead him to go back to the gospel story to find resources which resonate with the challenge to create change and pioneer something new. In a moving description of his first encounter with

the Masai he draws on scriptural stories such as Abraham and Jesus who were nomadic to help connect with the Masai's experience. And his methods are very related to how he understood the apostle Paul's missionary methods.

Out of that innovation the founding story is revitalised and a new reality is created - it's a refounding process. The new reality for Vincent was bringing to birth authentically Masai church communities. While this sounds like an exciting journey it also is nearly always a painful and misunderstood one, involving a 'struggle through Gethsemane'. For Donovan, he was misunderstood for what were seen as unorthodox methods and theology.

It is highly influential, subversive and strategic to be in youth ministry

I suspect every innovation in youth ministry could be mapped onto this process, and I was gripped by the book at the time because I recognised exactly the same issue with young people we were working with at the time outside of churches. The church was like the mission compound providing religious goods and services expecting people to come and be changed to follow Christ. But the invisible part of the equation was that the gospel was wrapped up in language, clothes and culture that was foreign to them. They no more wanted to become like us than did the people of the Masai. So what would it mean to do what Donovan had done and pioneer by crossing a culture to share the gospel with young people in their space, language and world, to grow authentic expressions of church? I have been on that quest with many others ever since.

I was in Leeds recently with some pioneer students from the CMS course on a ReSource weekend. On these weekends we visit and learn from mission projects making a difference in their communities. Simon Hall told the story of being a youth worker in a Baptist church and building friendships with young people who were not part of church. There

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was a big Goth scene at the time, and a band he was in was asked to support The Sisters of Mercy. The gig was on a Sunday night, and clashed with the Baptist church youth group. When the church discovered they were going to play at the gig rather than worship at youth group there was trouble and he was told that they were beyond saving! This was a gap experience that created energy for change and led to the birth of a creative youth church in Leeds grown in the soil of that youth culture.

Similarly Streetspace, a missional youth work network, saw a gap between young people at risk and churches - and began by creating church on the edge with young people. John Wheatley is running a Streetspace project and training with us on the pioneer course doing an MA. John grew up in a Baptist church. He had good Bible teaching for years through which the stories of Jesus and the gospel soaked into his imagination and he learned to own them for himself. Having grown up in the Church he then wanted to explore ministry and signed up to train with the Centre for Youth Ministry. At that stage he imagined himself in some sort of ministry role - leading, preaching and doing the usual church thing. However, he met Richard Passmore at CYM, a meeting which radically shifted the direction he was heading in.

I asked John about the gap between his experience and reality that created the energy for change in his life. He said: 'I had a dawning realisation that all the youth workers, including me, were working with middle class young people in the hope that they would join the ranks of middle class Church.

On the other hand, my experience of Jesus' life that I had soaked in seemed to be about the poor and those on the margins. That was the gap and in many ways it is still that gap that drives me to this day. CYM was the space in which I was able to reflect on it and actually do something about it.'

There were two gospel stories which really got under John's skin: the story of the rich young ruler with the simple exhortation to go and sell your possessions and give money to the poor, and the passage in the Sermon on the Mount about going the extra mile. Reading Vincent Donovan, Shane Claiborne and Rob Bell proved to be further catalysts for action. At CYM Richard had suggested that a way to respond to this growing desire to do something about the gap might be as simple as finding a dark place and going to shine there. At the time John was in a place that didn't seem that deprived so simply got out the national deprivation statistics and an estate in Weston Super Mare was one place that was high on deprivation. That was the dark place to which he moved and now lives in an attempt to shine. He is attempting to create a new reality where the gospel is lived out in that community.

He and his colleagues spend their evenings meeting young people in the local park which has a play area, space for football, a band stand and is not far from shops. It creates an environment for young people to spend time. So John's journey from his front door to shops is where a lot of the relational work happens! They are growing community in the spaces young people choose to hang out in and by living geographically in the same place they are encountering young people in their everyday goings-on which provide space for deeper community and understanding.

When John began in youth ministry he didn't know of groups who felt called to the margins. If there, they were invisible. So he is excited to be part of Streetspace, which supports this kind of youth ministry. I think it's a good example of pioneer youth ministry. Surely there are many other youth workers who, if given a bit more permission, could do youth work that leads to a new expression of church with groups of young people currently unlikely to come inside the four walls of church or youth groups.

Have you experienced a gap which might create the energy for mission where you are? What are the resources in the gospel that might lead you on this adventure? How do you imagine things could be different? I have noticed for years now that youth ministry is the back door for renewing the Church. What you see in youth ministry you tend to see the Church picking up on ten years later. So

it is highly influential, subversive and strategic to be in youth ministry. You can trace the Church's current resurgence of interest in mission, pioneering and a cross-cultural approach directly to the practice being developed in youth ministry back then. Many of the pioneers I train are either working with young people or have youth work in their background.

The quotation I have seen the most from Vincent Donovan's book comes in the introduction where he reflects on the challenges of ministry with young people in America, having returned from the mission with the Masai. It's a wonderful challenge:

'In working with young people do not try to call them back to where they were. And do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful a place as that might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before.'

NEXT MONTH:

Jonny explores how 'not fitting in' can be a spiritual gift when it comes to breaking new ground with young people, and talks to a well-respected youth project leader about his experiences as a pioneer.

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