

building a youth strategy

Following on from our article on why a strategy is important (see *Developing a youth strategy*), this article is designed to guide you through the actual process of starting to build a youth strategy for your church.

Vision seeking takes time

There can be a real temptation to want to develop a new, exciting vision and strategy overnight so we can get on with seeing new things take place. However, if we are to do this well, and in a way that keeps everyone on board with where we're headed, we need to be realistic about the time it will take.

It is important to give time and consideration to several issues as we start to build the strategy.

Jesus-centred

It is vital we remember that the church is the body of Christ, his physical body on earth, so we need to make sure that above all we spend time seeking God for what he would want us to do in our community. It can be very tempting to do all the thinking and planning ourselves and then ask God to bless it. If we are to see real life-transformations then we need to turn this around and start with God.

Our starting point should be to commit the whole vision seeking process to God, asking for his wisdom and guidance throughout. Encourage the whole church to get involved in this, whether this is through small groups praying together, the

church having a day of praying and fasting, or whatever suits your church's way of drawing from God. It is essential that we put ourselves clearly under the authority of God and his will.

Who is involved?

It is easier for people to own a vision that they have been a part of forming, so if we want the whole church to actively own the vision and not just nod their head to it, then we need to have the whole church involved from the start.

Too often churches abdicate responsibility for the youth work to a few enthusiastic youth leaders, or the employed youth worker, and expect them to get on with the task on their behalf.

This can have the effect of permanently sidelining the young people to an optional add-on activity to the life of the church, rather than seeing the church's ministry to young people as being an essential ingredient to the health and growth of the church. If we are to see healthy integration of the generations in our churches then we all need to take responsibility for how we disciple the different generations. Ask anyone what is wrong with the youth today and they will give you their opinion, often without hesitation, so it's not that they are not interested, most just feel like their opinion is not wanted. But imagine what the church would be like if everyone had been seeking God, talking about



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what he might be wanting the church to do with young people in the community, and then seeing this seeking and these discussions flavoured in the final strategy that emerges. There's ownership, and so they are likely to keep on praying for the strategy to be realised. They are also likely to want to help out in practical ways and will be more open to the idea of being inclusive of young people, even when it might affect their own experiences of church.

Don't miss out the young people

It is vitally important that we include young people connected to the church (and maybe even those who are disconnected), in the process. Their opinions are going to be really important. As you start to discern the direction God is going, you might, perhaps, sense a group of young people in the community that he wants you to work with. If so, see if you can get their opinions on what interests them, what their views of church are, what their passions are. This reality check is essential for the strategy to be effective.

For the young people already in the church, this opportunity to comment and seek God may be very revealing as they offer insights and ideas that adults may never see. It also helps for them to feel like they are valued and respected, as well as the sense of satisfaction that they are actively contributing to the life of the church and not just consuming what is put on for them.

Create a steering group

There needs to be a small group of people who can work on bringing the thoughts, ideas and inspirations together. Creating some kind of steering group helps to make sure that the vision seeking process keeps up momentum.

It doesn't want to be too big a group but it is important that it includes a cross-section of influential people in the church as a whole, and not just a group of youth leaders. Consider having the church leader on the group, a parent, a church warden or elder and a couple of young people. A



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good mix will bring wider perspective and also when there is agreement, it is more likely that God is at the centre as it won't always be easy to get agreement! Encourage this group to keep talking about the process to others, so that the church keeps this at the front of their minds.

Good questions to be asking

What are the current issues and challenges?

As we look at what already goes on for young people in our

community what are the challenges? What are the concerns? We need to spend time considering the reality of the situation we are in.

What are our strengths and weaknesses?

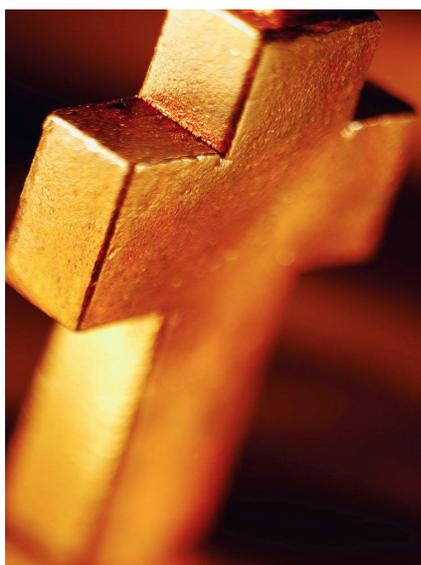
What are the strengths and weaknesses of the church's ministry to young people? What resources are available? What are the areas that need developing in order to be more effective? Take some time inviting comment and compiling these lists.

What might be God-given opportunities?

Look for where God is at work already. What are the natural links that you have with young people? Where does God seem to be moving?

Bringing it all together

The steering group needs to gather all this together and ask God what direction he is trying to lead them in. Once they have a sense of what this might be, take it back to all those who were consulted initially, for feedback and comment and pray corporately again. Hold lightly to what is forming so that God can continue to shape it. When there is general consensus that this may be the will of God, go for it!



It is essential to keep asking God for his vision