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## Securing the future through residential ministry

In this article I want to suggest there are ways we could revolutionise the long-term quality of discipleship of Christians in the British Church. With nearly twenty years of organising residential experiences you will not be surprised by how I think this can be achieved!

Whilst the church service is the activity that generally consumes most energy and resources within the life of churches, I'm far from convinced that on its own it is the best way we can support people to be disciples of Jesus Christ, let alone develop leaders. I think many church leaders would agree if they were honest, but changing the established pattern is no easy task. Is there a better way?

### Developing disciples

I believe the impact of consumerism has been widely overlooked by British Christians. Its effect on our culture is so overwhelming we fail to notice its influence on our values, beliefs and behaviour. It has become the dominant metanarrative by which we understand our world. So much so we become immune to its all-pervading power.

'If there is any overarching metanarrative that purports to explain reality... it is surely the narrative of the free market economy. In the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient, human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed... Most of us have this so thoroughly "our story" that we are hardly aware of its influence.'

S. White, *A New Story to Live By*, Transmission, 1998

Pervasive consumerism makes it hard for Christians to believe there is a radically different narrative by which we can live our lives. The conspicuous absence of credible alternative lifestyles makes it almost impossible to think that it is plausible to live differently.

This is particularly the case for young people who want to find acceptance and identity as they move into adulthood. If no plausible models of Christian living can be seen, then it is not surprising that young people do not choose to live a radical Christian lifestyle.

A residential event provides the possibility for young people to observe up close and personal the way in which it is possible to live as a Christian. The dorm group structure, which is the fundamental building block of every CPAS Venture, enables young people to not only hear the good news of Jesus Christ but see it put into practice over a week by someone they usually grow to respect and admire. This demonstration of the Christian faith helps young people see that living the Christian faith is possible in the context of a world full of people whose values and beliefs are largely divergent.

Much was written towards the end of the last century about how current models of church life do not sustain the spiritual needs of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Apart from the developments of the emerging church movement it seems that little has changed in our implementation of

<sup>1</sup>See: *The Church Beyond the Congregation*, J Thwaites, Paternoster; *The Post-Evangelical*, Dave Tomlinson, Triangle; *A Churchless Faith*, Alan Jamieson, SPCK; *McDonaldization of the Church*, John Drane, DLT; *We Must Stop Meeting Like This*, Meic Pearse and Chris Matthews, Kingsway.



discipleship, worship and evangelism in the wider Church.

Most models of learning and discipleship seem firmly rooted in Victorian models of public meetings. This seems in contrast to what we know about how Jesus developed his disciples. In addition many of us might also be able to affirm that our most transformational educational experiences have either been through the example of someone else who has inspired us or by us actually getting involved in practical applications of our faith.

'He [Jesus] gathered around him a large informal group of men and women ranging from the famous twelve apostles to a wide variety of more or less interested 'followers'. He drew these people into a shared experience that challenged their values. His teaching was largely informal — like his fascinating use of parable. In them Jesus threw the responsibility for learning back into the control of his hearers: "Those who have ears to hear let them hear". Even his more formal teaching had an enigmatic quality which has bewildered those seeking formal concepts and thought-out philosophies.'

*Informal Education – A Christian Perspective* by J. W. Ellis in *Using Informal Education*, T. Jeffs and M. Smith (eds.), Buckingham, Open University Press, 1990.

### **Proclaiming the good news through what we do and say**

Our experience at CPAS has been that residential ministry creates very effective opportunities for the good news of Jesus to be proclaimed. I don't think there should be any surprise that the Alpha course seems to owe much of its origins to the talk scheme developed for some of the very first Christian camps (Iwerne etc.) from which CPAS Ventures evolved. Also the residential element of an Alpha course often seems to be one of its key components. The inclusion of a residential element within evangelistic proclamation can provide additional levels of integrity as people can see that what we preach matches how we live. But of course that's not without its challenges! Making our proclamation holistic works too in a society that demands to see reality in our message

'...unless there is something about church, or Christians, or Christian faith that intrigues, provokes or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If our churches cannot convey a sense of "reality" then all our truth will count for nothing. Unless someone wants to hear, there's no point in shouting louder. Churches need to become provocative, arresting places which make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more.'

*The Provocative Church*, G. Tomlin, SPCK, 2002.

### **Growing leaders**

On a residential event it is possible for people to develop the foundation of skills and character needed to be an effective Christian leader. The testimony of David Watson never ceases to inspire me that there is no more formative place to develop as a young Christian leader than on a Christian residential.

'I learned, until it became second nature, how to lead a person to Christ, how to answer common questions, how to follow up a convert, how to lead a group Bible study, how to prepare and give a talk, how to pray, how to write an encouraging letter, how to know God's guidance, how to overcome temptation, and also most important, how to laugh and have fun as a Christian. All this was constantly being modelled by those who were much more mature in the faith.'

*You Are My God*, D Watson, Hodder and Stoughton, 1983.

It would be easy to dismiss the type of training as just 'learning by doing' but that would be a simplistic analysis of the tried and tested model that's been developed. There's space on a residential event to develop a strong theoretical framework which can then be applied by seeing more mature leaders in action. This in turn is further developed by the way in which supportive feedback is given as leadership is first exercised. Residential ministry provides the space for this to happen that just doesn't seem to be so readily available in weekly ministry.

Residential ministry comes in all shapes and sizes (over-nighters, weekends, weeks and longer). Our own Ventures have been running for over 50 years and the fundamental building blocks of the dorm group and our development of leaders has been our unique emphasis. It's enabled us to provide residential events that:

- Make living the Christian life a plausible proposal for young people.
- Make proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ a highly meaningful holistic experience.
- Have effectively developed leaders for the wider church.

If you haven't already, would you consider making residential ministry (in whatever shape) a key component of the year-round life of your church?

For further details of the CPAS Venture holidays go to [www.ventures.org.uk](http://www.ventures.org.uk).

