

February 2014

investing in the leadership potential of young people

One way of thinking of leadership is as a spiritual gift. It can be given to any Christian at any time in their lives. What do we do when God chooses to give it to a teenager? He's been doing this since the time of Samuel, Esther, Jeremiah and the disciples and doesn't seem to have stopped.

I asked three young people, all aged 17, to reflect on how they discovered their leadership gifting, how they have grown in it and the challenges that young people can face in leadership. All three of them are involved in leading a monthly town-wide youth service in Leamington Spa called 'First Sunday', a worship service for young people led entirely by young people.

Timmy

'Having grown up in the church my whole life, my first real position of true Christian leadership came when I started leading worship at my church. I led worship with my older sister at our youth group and she, along with my youth workers and mentors (plus God's provision of my own guitar) really encouraged me to pursue worship leading. By the age of 15 I was leading worship in church regularly, in charge of the worship ministry at First Sunday and loving the privilege of leading others to an encounter with God.

'In my view, I think the one thing that holds young people back from Christian leadership is a lack of assurance of their identity in Christ. That is why it is vital for young people to be rooted in a church and a youth group where they can be mentored and disciplined towards a solid

understanding of who they are in Christ and what they are called to do. With this comes an inner confidence and passion to lead others towards him.

'I believe that as Christian leaders we are first called to be obedient in the private place and from that we will see encounters in the public place as we lead.

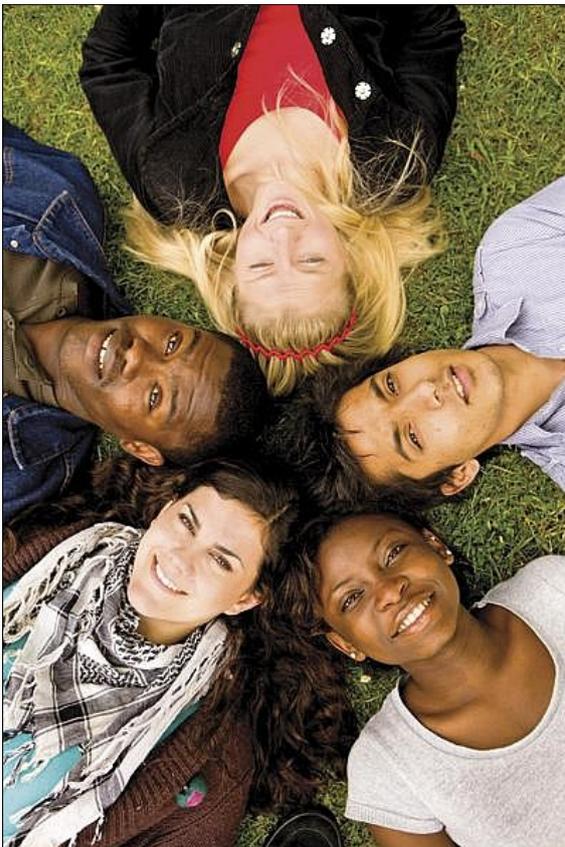
'The best thing by far about being a Christian leader is seeing the kingdom grow! As a worship leader especially, it's such a great honour and encouragement to see others meet Jesus.'



Miriam

'I have always been fully involved in church life as a young person but formally took a leadership role aged 16 in organising socials for my church youth group and at First Sunday. Before this I had been wary of making a commitment to a leadership role because I felt I would be constantly out of my depth and forced to do scary things like sermons. However 1 Corinthians 12 ('a body has many parts') was a reminder that I can use the skills I have to glorify God, and if that is organising quizzes and music nights, then that is what I should do and it has been such a joy.

'What has encouraged me the most was the opportunity to have regular mentor meetings as part of doing the *Growing Leaders – Youth Edition* course. I think this is an excellent way to invest in young people and help them to feel valued within the church. Without my mentor I don't think I would have been able to work through aspects holding me back in my leadership, such as the fear of failure (a fear that seems to be increasingly prevalent amongst young people) or taken on the challenge of setting up a Christian Union at my school (I am thrilled to say it has now been running for just over a year).



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James

'Since a fairly young age I have enjoyed taking control of situations and trying to make the outcome as positive as possible. However, I only properly stumbled upon leadership as an idea and philosophy when I was invited to *Growing Leaders – Youth Edition*. This course started my journey as a leader. I am now leading First Sunday. This gave me a safe environment to develop my leadership. Firstly, in small ways, by getting involved in set-up, but now I am helping to plan each service, regularly leading and have preached at a service too.

'The most useful thing in developing leadership skills, for me, was the opportunity to develop and begin to learn the skills required by actually taking part in leadership. The safe environment First Sunday provided was optimum for me to make lots of mistakes and to learn. The absence of an opportunity like this, to ease your way into leadership, is often what holds young people back. No one wants to dive straight from the ten metre board. The biggest thing youth leaders can do is to provide an environment where young people are leading, without realising it.

'The best thing about leading for me is the spiritual and emotional maturity it breeds. By being put in leadership positions, I find I am more likely to serve God as willingly as possible.'

Lessons to learn

Here are three different young people with different leadership abilities. Timmy is a worship leader, Miriam a community builder and James a strategist. God uses them in different ways and they have grown uniquely.

The reality is that for each of them they probably experienced leadership before they knew it, as



James points out, and this was because people invested in them. First Sunday has given them a fantastic opportunity to stretch their leadership, but there doesn't have to be a special youth-based event; this can happen in any local church setting.

I think there are five insights we can draw from their experiences to help us develop young people as leaders:

1. Give opportunity

Clearly they had been invested in long before they realised they were leaders. Giving opportunity to try different leadership tasks is how someone can start to realise their potential.

2. Spot the potential

Each of them had a youth leader or similar who spotted the leader in them and encouraged them to get training and to grow their gift.

3. Grow the gift

Once their leadership gift was identified, they were given opportunity to try out the gift and grow in it. We need to give space for people to try things, to make mistakes and to grow.

4. Mentor them

Mentors have been extremely useful in building their confidence, helping them see that, yes, God might be wanting to use them in this way, and giving them the courage to step out for him.

5. Disciple them

We must ensure that we are discipling young people well and that they know they are primarily children of God, loved and cherished by him. As with all leaders, the foundation to their leadership is the relationship they have with Jesus. Helping them to nurture this relationship enables them to lead safely and advance the kingdom.

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At the heart of Thrive Youth Ministries is the desire to get alongside churches and those involved in youth ministry, to inspire, equip and encourage them to be more effective in reaching out and discipling young people.

Thrive's vision is to:

- Build on existing, good youth work.
- Help churches reach more young people.
- Train and equip leaders to be effective.
- Mentor youth ministers.
- Create a website for all youth ministry needs.
- See more young people come to faith in Jesus.

Questions to consider:

- What hinders you from investing in young people in leadership? What are your fears?
- Which young person can you see leadership potential in?
- What can you do to give young people opportunities to try out leadership gifts?

