

A GROWTH MINDSET IN A CHANGING MARKET

BY PAUL PETERSON

The General Synod Report on Youth and Children's Ministry ([GSf 2161](#)) released in February 2020 made for pretty depressing reading.

For instance, we're told that the number of under 16s reported in Average Child Sunday attendance returns has decreased by 20% over the last five years, in several dioceses around 70% of parishes have no under 16s in their churches on a typical Sunday, and in 2018 Sunday attendance for 0-16s nationally in the Church of England dropped below 100,000 for the first time ever.

Sunday attendance stats obviously don't give a full picture, but they still reflect the scale of the challenge facing us as we engage with young people. Meanwhile in one of CPAS' core ministries, the number of young people attending Ventures (holidays for 8-18 year olds) has been marginally declining year on year. The Covid pandemic has of course presented significant further challenges.

As leaders on Ventures or in parishes, it would be easy to despair, to be discouraged and to lose heart. Yet, the gospel we proclaim is clearly one of hope, continuing vision and growth. Whether you start from the parable of the mustard seed, the great commission or Pentecost, the vision and narrative is one of increase.

I clearly remember Bishop Mike Hill on his arrival in Bristol Diocese in 2006, telling his clergy, 'I didn't come here to preside over decline, but to see growth.' Whilst fine words and vision casting don't guarantee growth, they certainly have a key part to play.

For the last seven years I've had the privilege of combining roles serving in a parish and overseeing a series of CPAS Ventures. God has given me a longing to see young people coming to know Christ and growing in

him. Throughout that time I've been asking the question as to what it might mean for myself and colleagues to live out a growth mindset. This has specific challenges in a Ventures setting where a team comes together for a short period of time, and whilst maintaining a core membership, looks different year by year.

What helps us communicate and live out what we believe to be a God given vision for growth when some of the surrounding data point towards decline? I'm writing mainly from the Ventures standpoint, but you can make the links to other environments.

A BELIEF IN THE PRODUCT

I use the word product hesitantly, but what we have to offer at a Venture is eminently marketable. I made a commitment to Christ on a Venture at the age of 16, and my experience ever since (39 years if you're wondering) is that the Ventures model works – it plays a key part in changing people's lives.

Most Venture models have at their heart three key



dimensions.

1. **Evangelism** Presenting the good news of Jesus and allowing people space to respond
2. **Discipleship** Equipping young people to discover their true identity in Christ and develop in their outworking of that relationship
3. **Leadership development** Investing, spotting potential and providing opportunities in a safe space for young people to have a go.

This model works – it's not perfect, but God uses it to grow his Church. Young people come to faith, others grow in faith and outworking it; slight bias here, but Ventures are **the** best environment for young leaders to learn and develop. We need to ensure that our leaders get that and buy into it.

THE GROWTH MINDSET

The learning theory by this name was developed by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck (Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Random House), but in this context I'm purely focussing on an attitude of the mind which says we can and should grow. I'm not going to be moulded by the evidence of decline, but by the possibility of growth. Any strategic decisions are guided by that belief, even if sometimes that might mean pruning to create space for further growth in the future.

In the Haslemere Venture context, we've historically worked with 13-18 year olds. But five or six years ago, some of our leaders were asking us to consider planting new Ventures for younger members. After a period of prayer, reflection and consultation we saw the potential.

There was a clear need – our leaders would bring younger members with them.

It could serve as a feeder holiday for our older Ventures, but be run at a different point in the year.

What an opportunity to involve our older teens in junior leader roles!

Of course there were dangers – overstretching our current team; losing focus on our core ministry – but with a growth mindset, a belief in our product, and a strong core team, it set us off on an exciting journey. In 2019 due to varied school half term dates, we ran two younger Ventures.

Then in 2020 we were reverting to one to enable us to consolidate further, but with a mind towards two again in the future as and when we had the capacity. Then of course the pandemic hit and we had to rethink our plans for development. We're having to rebuild again from a lower base, but we're undeterred and continue to believe, pray and work for further growth in the years ahead.

We acknowledge we're in a unique position, with several Ventures running under the same banner, but the principles can apply in a myriad of different situations as we dream and step out in faith.

SAY IT, SAY IT AND SAY IT AGAIN

If I believe that an emphasis on evangelism, discipleship and leadership development is fundamental to our Ventures' vision, I have a responsibility to communicate that to everyone who will listen. If I truly believe that God's heart is for growth in our engagement with young people – likewise. In an environment where the team changes year on year, new groups engage with us and others move on, that can be challenging. Team meetings, written communications, visuals, one-to-one conversations – the possibilities are endless. I'd rather over-communicate than have people miss what we stand for.

WHOLE TEAM BUY IN

I could believe in a product, hold a growth mindset and bang on about something ad nauseum, but it would get me nowhere if others didn't share or catch the vision. A vision imposed from top down rarely achieves anything of significance. Whether in the church setting, in Ventures or other forms of leadership, shared ownership is key. Open communication and much wrestling in prayer helps create a much wider buy in. Yet shared ownership takes time.



Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations model (Diffusion of Innovations, Free Press) identified five groups of people when it comes to adopting new ideas or technologies – innovators, the early adopters, the early majority, the late majority and the laggards.

What's true for technology is true for gaining buy in with vision. You can't wait for everyone to come on board, so perhaps the challenge is recognising when you've got enough people on board to really take something forward.

This was played out before my eyes in the re-ordering process for our parish church, where much patience and determination was needed by the core leadership team before the project could really push ahead. It wasn't until the project was completed that the majority of those Everett rather disparagingly termed 'laggards', acknowledged the benefits of the beautifully re-ordered building. Even in the face of opposition and setbacks the core leadership held firm to the course they firmly believed God had called them on. Through their leadership, the faith of others has been built up.

GOD'S HEART

All of this makes no sense whatsoever unless we've allowed God to shape us and give us a sense of his heart and vision. Nehemiah, Moses, Paul et al began their ministries in less than promising circumstances, but God did something incredible in them which enabled them to live out a vision and work against the tide.

As one person wrote: 'Break my heart for what breaks yours, everything I am for your kingdom's cause.'



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where does God call me to adopt a growth mindset? How am I actively seeking to communicate that?
2. Where is the cliff edge between healthy vision casting and blind optimism?
3. What is God teaching me about developing shared vision in ministry? What are the next steps?



Could you, or someone you know, lead on a Venture or Falcon this year? Watch our new leaders [video](#) to find out more about what it's like to be a leader on one of our holidays. Visit ventures.org.uk/volunteer to apply.