

CALLING YOUNG PEOPLE

BY EMMA SYKES

Sparked by a recent experience at church, I want to offer a different angle on encouraging young people's calling and begin with calling in childhood.

A few Sundays ago I attended the all-age service in my local church and I was surprised and encouraged in the way children were meaningfully involved in the service. There was not only a young person who read one of the Bible readings for that Sunday, as you might more familiarly see, but all the children were encouraged to come and gather around and pray for the visiting Bishop who happened to be there that morning.

As the service progressed, the most moving moment was listening to the worship group sing 'This is the air I breathe' as we gathered around for communion, and the voice that was heard most clearly was the small primary-aged girl singing her heart out in the worship band. The service concluded with a 10-year-old girl praying for us with clarity and confidence as we left.

As I walked out of church that morning I was reflecting on what the future held for these gifted children, how was God shaping their lives, speaking to them and through them to others? And a more sobering thought, would they continue to feel nourished, cherished and enabled by the church as they continued to discern God's calling in their lives or would they drift away as they entered teenage years as so many do?

This, I want to suggest, is an important question for church leaders to consider as we think about God's call on the lives of young people. Recent research from the Talking Jesus project shows that, surprisingly, 40% of practising Christians (those who say they attend church

on a monthly basis, pray and read/listen to the Bible weekly) came to faith between 0-4 years old, 16% came to faith between the ages of 5-10 and 20% between the ages of 11-18. After that, the numbers drop dramatically (for more information go to <http://talkingjesus.org/mapping-practising-christians>).

This indicates that childhood and teenage years are a rich time, a time when children and young teens are open and are actively engaging with the Christian faith and therefore are potentially more receptive to understanding that God has a major part to play when making decisions in life.

Research also shows that the biggest influencers on a child's faith are parents, followed by church leaders,



Christian friends, church youth leaders, followed by Sunday school leaders (from Care for the Family's, Faith in our Families research report). However, only 50% of children who were brought up in Christian homes will continue with faith into adulthood.

So what can we do as leaders to encourage them at this stage of life so that there is more chance of them continuing to grow as mature disciples who are seeking God's call on their lives as they enter into young adulthood?

1. DON'T DAMPEN ENTHUSIASM

We know very little about Jesus' early childhood years but we do know that at the age of 12 he couldn't help but be drawn to the temple and the teaching of the Torah on the family's annual trip to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival (Luke 2: 41-52). His parents find him sitting in the temple courts listening and asking questions. 'Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers' (v47). However, his parents were astonished, not because of what Jesus was saying but because they thought they had lost him (a very natural parental response!). Jesus' calling was evident from an early age, a call that his parents failed to see initially.

We need to observe and listen to children in our churches carefully, give them space to ask questions, encourage them in their natural curiosity and take them seriously, and help them to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

We also need to encourage parents and carers to do the same, equip them so that they see calling as an integral part of Christian discipleship and to nurture faith in the home. Being a follower of Christ means listening to where he leads and shaping our decisions and lives for his kingdom purposes, for all ages.

2. REAL AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

By giving children real and meaningful roles in church, it demonstrates that they are an important part of church family. Their presence matters and they are more likely to stay involved as they get older if they know they are an integral part of worshipping life.

Being involved meaningfully also means that they are given a voice into the decision-making of the church. How are their voices heard on PCC? If you have a vision day for the church, how accessible is it for children and young people? The wider church can learn as much from children as they learn from others. 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these...' (Mark 10:14)

Furthermore, in terms of discerning calling, having a go at different roles in church and being encouraged to participate, are important ways to learn about our gifts, skills and talents. This is the case for children as much as it is for adults.

3. PRAY FOR AND LISTEN TO ALL ASPECTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

I was listening to a youth worker recently speak passionately about hearing and making space for all teenagers in church. She said how we often get them up and pray for them when they are heading off to university or going out on some exciting mission trip but what about praying for the ordinary things of life? When they have SATS, for their hobbies and interests, for God to help them to witness to him in school and to their friends?

Sometimes we are in danger in our churches of only highlighting the out of the ordinary things, and for those who don't have a calling to work in a church, or for a Christian organisation, or some other 'worthy cause', they may assume that God has not spoken to them.

We need to help people see that God shapes and speaks in all aspects of life, to witness to the glory of his name.

If we can get these foundations right in childhood then we are giving children a good base to keep discerning God's will for their lives into young adulthood and beyond.



FOR REFLECTION

- How do I enable children to be encouraged and nurtured in the church and equip parents and carers at home to do the same?
- How do I help children to participate in meaningful ways in church life?
- How do I listen and pray for all aspects of children's lives, both publically and privately?