

The Changes in the Nature of Schools Work Over the past half century

Kenny Wilson

From Visit to Presence

One of the benefits of some years of experience in youth and schools work is that it gives some perspective. I can look back over these last 25 years or so and see how things have changed, grown, developed and, in a few cases, atrophied. One of the limits of that perspective is that it will always be shaped by the limits of my experience. Given that limitation here are some thoughts about how I have seen the youth work in schools, and schools work ministries, change and develop in the past quarter of a century.

From National Organisation to Local Projects.

When I first began my full time youth ministry back in the early 80's there were just a few national organisations whose staff and associates did much of the schools work across the UK: *Scripture Union* and *Youth For Christ* were the two main ones at that time. Scripture Union's work depended upon a host of school teachers across the land who ran regular, usually lunch time, activities which mainly catered for the Christian clientele with the schools. That clientele were mainly young people who went to church youth groups and had a living faith. The work of an SU worker was to travel across often vast distances or populations and connect these groups and teaching staff, bringing them together for training and encouragement and introducing them to any new [usually SU] resources that would help them in their roles. Further to that, SU also ran holiday and residential activities aimed at young leaders in these schools to encourage them also. There were special, regionally based, events like New Year House Parties and Summer Camps that engendered a further care of those young people in their schools. Even in the late 70's SU in England and Wales had only a dozen or so schools staff who tried to cover all the state schools across the land. In Scotland where SU was much more of a household name, and where schools groups were not called Christian Union groups but Scripture Union groups, the SU staff > school ratio was much, much higher. Added to their regular visits and camps, SU staff occasionally ran weeks where their staff would congregate in one school and run a week of activities of a Christian nature. This was usually just an annual event for SU.

For Youth For Christ however such schools weeks were a much more regular part of their work and in some cases became a kind of defining statement of what they were about because, whereas Scripture Union's main focus was on the nurture of young Christians and the enabling of them to reach out to their peers, Youth For Christ' focus was much more directly evangelistic in outcome. Whilst many YFC and SU staff did quite similar things; things which are still done today, such as taking assemblies and classroom lessons [usually in the RE department], YFC were also much more likely to organise an additional end of week concert, sometimes held in the school or in a local church, where an overt gospel message and appeal would be undertaken. Whatever the relative strengths of these two organisations, both were mainly visitors to these schools with no organisation focussing on having a staff presence on site; that was mainly provided by the teachers.

However in the 70's and 80's both these national organisations began to go through a period of change. Alongside their existing national teams directed from headquarters they also began to develop local work. For YFC this took the form of developing more local 'centres' run by their own directors and which were increasingly funded through the relationships between the national organisation and the local evangelical communities. For SU this change brought about the appointment of local workers [those staff whose remit was much more localised than their regional colleagues]. In the 90's, as the emphasis on servant leadership became more prevalent, YFC began to increasingly focus on their local centres, and in planting new ones, and in the decade from the mid nineties to the mid 'noughties', their local centres doubled in number. Their national and local profiles became interdependent.

The 'rise of the local' emphasis however was not simply due to national organisations localising, new organisations came on to the scene that quickly rose to significance. New local organisations like *Oxford Youth Works*, founded new ways of doing youth work, particularly youth work in schools, which was groundbreaking. Other organisations that had been primarily established to be local, like *Solent Christian Trust*, soon found a national niche and became rebranded as *Damaris*. The changes that happened in these years therefore saw a quiet revolution towards an emphasis on the local work whether founded by national or local agencies.

From Christian Nurture to Outreach.

Though almost all Christian youth work has some kind of nurture agenda it would be fair to say that 25 years ago nurture, looking after the young Christians who went to UK schools, was the highest agenda. Interestingly enough as church attendance began to wane, particularly in an increasingly multi-cultural and secularising England, it led to some rethinking of Christian ministry all across the board. It didn't take a genius or a prophet of doom to see that nurture was not enough and that, if we were to see a future generation that had a living vibrant faith, something would need to change. That change was initially one of focus and then of action. It was the change from thinking mainly about nurture to thinking mainly about outreach. 'Reaching the unreached' was the avowed aim of new organisations such as Oxford Youth Works and to do so they started a new style of youth work that was to change the landscape of much that called itself, Christian Youth Work. That new style was, and is, called *relational youth work* [RYW]. It worked on a simple understanding and a even simpler premise: that Christian and the Christian church had all but lost contact in any significant way with the young people of the UK and that if we were going to begin to reconnect in any meaningful way we had to first start by forming relationships with these young people. The work was based upon the premise that the gospel is very powerful when shared by a friend to a friend. However, having lost that continuing relationship with the new generation, we'd have to earn the right to share the good news; we simply couldn't go in there and proclaim it cold.

By the mid to late 80's the unreached population were unreached for a reason: they'd lost all interest in church because it had lost all interest in them.

It had ceased to be relevant to their lives and as such had simply dropped off their radar. Many missionaries, theologians and post modern thinkers told the same story; that putting the Christian faith back on their radar was not going to be an easy thing and that it would require different approaches to the outreach of the past. The search for a better way came through some new thinking and some seminal research. The new thinking came in the form of a long lost theology: the theology of *the incarnation*. The main understanding of this theology was that God's best plan to reach out to mankind was not to surround the earth with massive speakers and shout 'repent' to the quaking earthlings below, not was it to coerce people to know their maker. It was to send someone, a very special someone, to live amongst us who would explain to us what God was like, that God loved us and to show us what a God centred life might look like. The challenge then was to find a way of doing this; of becoming a Christian presence in the lives of young people, most of whom did not even know one single Christian. That new way became known as Relational Youth Work.

From Vicarious Outreach to Adult Led Mission.

At the same time that this change of thinking was taking place in the UK we became aware of some rather interesting research that had emerged from the USA. Some years before Jay Kessler, then the head man in Youth for Christ in the USA, had been speaking at a large number of huge evangelistic youth rallies and had noticed that that the young people at the rallies had a 'sameness' to them. To investigate this further he commissioned some research which turned out to be seminal in our understanding of how outreach did and did not work.

Imagine if you will three categories of young people. Category A are Christian young people. Category B are those young people who look like and are friends of category A but who, although they share many of the same moral values, do not yet know of Jesus. Category C are those young people who have little or no connection with either the A's or the B's and who had no meaningful understanding of Jesus. What Jay Kessler's further research discovered was that A kids were capable of reaching out to B kids and, with a bit of help from a gifted evangelist, helping them come to faith. The next party of the strategy was therefore a simple one; teach the B kids to reach out to the C kids. However, despite many attempts to do this, Kessler and the YFC teams found that B kids were culturally unable to reach C kids, and after conversion they sided with A kids and became the AB group. The C kids were just too culturally different to relate to. Kessler's question then became '*Who can reach the C kids?*'

Within the UK, the strategy for outreach was much the same: teach, train and encourage the A kids to reach their friends and then move on to helping train teach and encourage the B kids to reach the C kids. The UK discovered the same problem: the B kids did not really want to reach out to the C kids because they were too different. By the time the 80's rolled around a rough estimate of our own UK youth population approximated that the A kids were about 4% of the population, the B kids were perhaps another 15% and so the

C kids, those that had no significant contact with a Christian or understanding of Christ, numbered about 80%. The question remained 'Who will reach the C kids?' The answer, and it was one that Young Life in the USA had hit on in the post war years was that it would take an interested caring adult to enter the lives of the C kids for any significant progress to be made and that vicarious outreach: training others to do it, was not enough. When relational youth work was pioneered in the early 80's it was unaware of the US research but it began to make small but significant inroads into seeing young people come to faith. When the US research became known it helped to make theoretical sense of why relational youth work works and added to the new theological, incarnational, understanding it helped ground this new style of youth work . So it was that by the mid 90's outreach had not only taken over the prime place in focus, the kind of outreach had changed too.

From Packaged to Responsive

Long before the new millennium turned it was becoming more and more common for head-teachers across the UK, particularly those in secondary schools, to say 'Thanks but No Thanks' to the old methods of Christian involvement in schools and the church's previously open invitation, to come in and take assemblies for example, was waning. Partly this was because the face of Britain was changing; becoming more multi cultural but also becoming more obviously humanistic in it's attempt to sweep all faith involvement outside the school. This meant that the previous traditional 'packaged' Christian schools work, seen by many as a branch of the church's arm, also declined. Fewer English schools, where humanism and multiculturalism was more advanced, were open to the idea of having a Christian Union on the premises. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, where Christian influence remained stronger, this trend took longer to appear. However only last month I talked with a Scottish church based youth worker whose minister had just been told that the school was revising it's policy with regards to church input and even very traditional Christian events like Easter Assemblies would no longer be required. 'Thanks but no thanks' was arriving there too and traditional, packaged Christian youth work was in the decline. What has taken its place however is certainly not in decline; quite the opposite in fact. Instead of asking 'Can we come in and do our thing?' or even assuming that Christians have a right to be in schools, youth workers began to ask a different question: 'How can we help the young people in your school?'

No one who is even remotely connected to education can be unaware of the changes that have happened across the UK in recent years. The arrival of local management of schools, of regular HMIE inspections, of the publication of comparative league tables, have combined to create an atmosphere of stress in education. Teachers, knowing that their success or failure will be nationally advertised through the league tables, feel under increasing stress. Pupils too feel under stress from the increasing emphasis on exams both national and pre-exam exams too and the drive to ensure that more and more pupils go into further and higher education only increases that stress. Furthermore hardly a month has gone by in recent years where one Government department, 'quango' or piece of research doesn't come up with

yet another suggestion to change the system and these changes have caused no end of adjustment, re-adjustment and the increased administrative paperwork. This atmosphere of continuous scrutiny has brought about almost constant change for head teachers who in turn have to pass these changes on to their staff. Schools are under stress.

So, when a youth worker comes along and says 'How can we help you?' and once the head teacher recovers their composure and picks themselves up off the floor, a better kind of change happens. The question leads to conversations and as trust is gradually earned we find Christian youth workers, changing focus from their own perceived need to the expressed needs of the school community, doing all sorts of things in schools to benefit the pupils and so benefit the schools. Some organisations like Luton Christian Education Trust now have more than 12 workers doing therapeutic work with young people in Luton schools, running self esteem groups and anger management classes which, by benefitting the young people also, benefit the school. Other schools have found that having a youth worker on the campus at lunch times, getting to know the pupils and taking an interest in their lives, provides a welcome adult presence; one that works in an informal rather than formal way. Other schools find Christian youth workers running breakfast clubs and after school clubs all of which contribute to the welfare of the school pupils. It also allows schools to tick the 'this is how we relate to the wider community' box when it comes to these HMIE inspections. By being responsive to the needs of the young people in the schools Christian youth work is now a major presence on so many school campuses and this presence has led to significant change for many young people. This change has also given a higher profile to Christian youth work as it has moved from small group work such as CU's to having an all school presence, working with a broad spectrum of people across the entire school population.

From Gifted Amateur to Professional

Since Oxford Youth Works, building upon its reputation as the source of relational youth work, began its first attempt to create a professional training course for Christian youth workers back in 1987 a sea change has come over the Christian youth work scene. Up until that time there were but a handful of Christian youth workers across the land who had any kind of youth work qualification and even fewer who had been able to bring their faith openly into play as part of that qualification. All that has now changed. Each year more and more people train to be Christian youth workers with degrees that give credence to both the faith based and statutory aspects of youth work. Degree courses in youth work and applied theology, such as the one at the *International Christian College* in Scotland, are now regarded by their accreditation body as 'radical' but with radical being seen in a very positive and innovative way by the accrediting institutions. England, now has several training courses either of a denominational or interdenominational nature. Having recently completed a sabbatical tour of some of the best Christian youth work projects across the UK, [this is the authors plug for his forthcoming book!] I am aware that there are still many gifted people out there doing a fantastic job who have no youth work qualification but increasingly, as the

world looks for qualification as well as experience, the trend is to have people in the field who have both theological and youth work training. Whilst qualification does not mean gifted it is probably fair to say that a gifted, trained and qualified youth worker may offer more to Christian churches and agencies than someone with gift but no qualification.

From Agency Based to Church Based youth workers.

One of the things that was immediately obvious to me even before I began my sabbatical visits across the UK was that Christian youth work had moved from being mainly agency based to becoming much more church based. That's not to say that there is not a plethora of really excellent agency work across the country; there is, as my sabbatical research discovered. It's just that the balance has changed. Partly this change has come about because churches, realising that their congregations lacked young people and programmes for young people, started to employ youth workers but partly it has come about because forward looking and growing churches have begun to take on more of a role in serving their communities rather than just themselves. Once such church based appointments are made it does not take long before a servant hearted church starts to see their youth workers working in schools, because that's where most young people are for most of the daylight hours. Church based youth workers have therefore joined the ranks of the agency youth workers and created a situation where the largest employer of youth workers in England and Wales is the Christian community. That is an astonishing statistic and is perhaps the single biggest change that has happened in UK youth work in the past half century. This trend of serving youth and community has even changed the youth work training courses many of whom now have an additional 'community work' emphasis to add to the existing youth work emphasis of training courses because it's well nigh impossible to do quality youth work without impacting the wider community where that work happens. Together, church based and agency based youth work is altering the face of the UK and in many ways is leading the way. For example the only place in the UK which presently runs a course on 'Youth Work in Schools' is ICC; they are leading the way not just in Christian spheres of youth work but *in the nation*.

From Temporary to Semi Permanent

When I first started out in full time youth work, organisations like SU had a revolving door employment policy. They employed teachers to do schools work and gave them a four year contract at the end of which most went back into teaching. This allowed the teachers to not be too out of education before moving back in. By the 80's all that had begun to change. More and more organisations began to realise that this kind of temporary style of schools work often led to seeing staff, who had built up considerable skills during their time in schools ministry, then being lost to the 'profession'. But to be truthful, at that time, no one in the UK really thought of youth work as a 'profession' and certainly not as a long term one.

I recall my times teaching at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, on part of their Pastoral Ministry course, where the clientele were keen young men and women studying for the Anglican ministry. Most knew that for the first couple of years their time as a curate would involve them in a fair degree of youth and children's ministry work and oversight. For many this was an exciting prospect because they'd enjoyed their CYFA experiences and so they were keen to now be delivering, rather than just receiving, that work. However almost all understood that youth work was something that they'd do before going on to the 'real' work: working with adults. Perhaps alone, in the 60's and 70's Christian scene, Frontier Youth Trust did not have this attitude. Many of their staff had studied youth work in secular institutions and were working in statutory youth work but with a passionate Christian ethos. Wonderful FYT staff like Jim Punton and Michael Eastman were an immense influence on my own 'ministry' aspirations because their training had given them some completely different, refreshing and thoroughly theological attitudes to working with and for young people. But such long term people were a tiny minority. In the main, youth work was something that was done until we moved on to working with adults.

All that has changed. It's not just FYT that now have long term youth workers; almost every training institution and Christian agency across the land now has long term youth workers on staff and many of them, as their experience is brought into use, are running some of the best youth work in the land. This professionalisation has also brought about a change in attitude for those in youth work because previously, for those who knew that there was no future in youth work, there was no point in up-skilling or further training. Now with Christian youth work being an increasingly established profession there is both a desire and a need for those of us in that profession to keep on learning and growing in that profession. As schools change the need for training to work in schools will become essential and in response to that trend, in the very near future, there will soon even be a separate qualification for those wishing to work in schools based youth work.

I used the expression 'semi-permanent' to describe this change because a curse has come upon our nation as of late which has severely diluted the quality of youth work available to young people. It is the curse of short term funding. More and more, as we have seen education constantly destabilised, we have also seen the same thing happen to youth work. Some years ago Chelsea FC had a manager named Claudio Ranieri who was given the nickname 'tinker-man' because of his propensity to change a winning side. Much to the delight of the other Premiership teams, and to their supporters, Chelsea suffered from that tinkering and sadly both education and youth work have suffered from the same disease: tinkering. Instead of having solid central base of funding, more and more funding streams have been tinkered with. What seems incredible to me is that instead of looking at 'what works' and then trying to export that, change has come about in the most haphazard and destabilising way. I was at a youth work conference recently where I heard someone say that he thought that statutory youth work was now part of the problem and not part of the answer in young people's lives. His assertion was that in this destabilised world where more and more young people are seeing

the fragmentation of their families the very last thing they needed were youth workers who were only around for a short time. That's what short term funding is doing to youth work: only allowing youth workers to be around for a short time.

Fortunately many Christian agencies and churches have seen the folly of this short term trend and more and more are employing their youth workers on a semi permanent rather than temporary [short term funding] basis. Because of this kind of long term vision wise Christian employers are beginning to see real growth as more and more young people have someone they can rely on to 'be there'. This culture of 'being there' brings me back neatly to where I began: 'presence' and presence is only of lasting value if it is long term. Even for those engaged in short term ministries, like residential activities, understand this. They know that their influence is only temporary and it is best when worked alongside those who come with and go back with the young people that come to their centres. Long term ministry is what we are called to. Christ has called us to follow and, to my knowledge, he placed no time limit on that. So, if we are to be Christ to the young people of our nation, and if we are to aim *high*, then our commitment to these young people needs to be as God's is: lasting; lasting through the hard times and the lean times as well as the fruitful ones.

Schools are where young people in the UK spend most of their 'working' lives and, even when they are not at school, many are thinking about it and preparing for the next day's work. An increasing number of Christian youth workers now understand this and so have dedicated themselves to become a significant presence in those schools so that young people can have someone there who cares about them as people and not just about them as pupils. We have moved, and are continuing to move, from being visitors on these campuses to being a visible and welcome presence on them. We have moved from being primarily concerned with the nurture of our own to a more God centred attitude for the care of all young people. We have moved from delivering just packaged youth programmes to responsive, diverse and transforming programmes and all this has happened in not much more than 25 years. It's like a revolution in schools ministry. Long live the revolution!

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