

Starting from scratch is possible!



Chris Curtis considers how there is hope for churches with no youth work or young people.

Many churches find themselves without youth work – or even without young people. They feel stuck. What does it take to keep the few young people you have or even attract new teenagers from the community? It turns out it might be more possible than you imagine.

Royston is a small market town with a parish church right on the high street. When I visit in the spring of last year, it's bustling with life. I'm there to meet the vicar, Heidi, an impressively energetic and pastoral presence in the town. But despite a creative programme for children both on Sundays and midweek, the church remains largely empty of young people. In theory of course, children have a habit of becoming teenagers, so you'd expect a few years of children's work to turn into a youth group – but, like so many churches, that has eluded them. Young people disappear somewhere in the transition to secondary, numbers dwindle and the possibility of starting a group remains elusive.

As past youth work becomes a distant memory to those in the church who've been there long enough to remember, confidence drains away too. Even if we did do something, would they want to come?

Heidi doesn't see things that way – at least there's part of her not yet willing to accept it. Two years ago, she joined a group of 10 clergy on a programme called LaunchPad run by Youthscape (for more about Youthscape and their programmes, see www.youthscape.co.uk/launchpad), to think about what could be done. It turned out to be the beginning of something extraordinary.

The first step is for the church – clergy and congregation – to acknowledge the problem, and the pain, of young people being missing from the life of the 'AAWchurch'. An early step for Heidi was to agree that, from that day, every PCC or church meeting would have young people as an agenda item. If there was nothing to discuss, then that part of the meeting is given over to prayer for young people. It's a powerful way to remind everyone of the challenge.

Next, despite the limitations (lack of volunteers, funds, venues, contacts... it's an imposing list) the clergy on the Youthscape course explore three options. We call them *Build Up*, *Build Out* and *Build In*. If you're starting from scratch, one of these is the way forward.

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Up is making better plans to help children transition into a youth group. Often that means starting 'youth work' in a new group while they're still in Year 6.

Out is working with the few young people you might have, even if it's just two or three, and connecting with their friends, growing out from those very small beginnings.

In is a missional approach. Getting into the places where young people are every day, making contact in a local school, for example.

Youthscape works with the church leader to understand which is the best option and offer some practical models to get started. It's not always easy, but it's a joy to see more than three-quarters of churches who participate in the programme begin youth work. Confidence returns.

Young people, it seems, don't need churches to be trendy, just welcoming and loving.

Something small is better than nothing at all. And with prayer, these groups can often grow into something unexpectedly life-giving.

Of course, lots of help is needed – What kind of content works? What training do those leading it need? But these are problems that come from growth! Doing nothing at all is a far bigger problem.

For Heidi, over the months of the course, an idea began to emerge. It centred on the older primary children still connected to the church. If history repeated itself, they'd begin to disappear as they approached secondary age. So they decided to start youth group for those 10 and above. Five or six might come at most. Nervously they planned to meet just once a month, and they persuaded a coffee shop on the high street to let them use a section to hold the group. Hot chocolate laced with marshmallows was in plentiful supply. The first Sunday eight turned up, then a few more in the following months. The young people were enthusiastic and more open to exploring faith than anyone had dared imagine. Six months on, the church has started what had seemed an impossibility: a youth group!

A few weeks ago, the young people decided it was time to give their coffee shop youth group a name – and it fits perfectly: St Costa's.