

What Youth Think



Churches Together in St Albans working with Step ran a forum on What Youth Think at the Vineyard on 29th November 2023. The forum was attended by over 50 people from different churches and looked at how different youth today is from previous generations and the scale of the challenges they face.

Youth Input

Step had gone into schools to interview young people and their responses were edited together in answer to three main questions. Below are transcripts.

How is your generation different from how your parents were when they were young?

We are more open to things. We are more accepting, I feel. We are more open to change; we strive more for change. There are more protests involving us. They didn't try to change anything. Things they weren't happy about - they just stayed quiet. We try to strive for that change because at the end of the day it's going to be us who are going to live for longer and be part of this world 50 years later.

When our parents were younger, they were a bit more enclosed. We are a lot more now surrounded by a lot of different diverse views and faiths, so it's quite different growing up in a very opinionated world. Being surrounded by a lot of different views especially growing up it was harder trying to find what best suits your opinions.

I think this generation interacts more with technology because they didn't have it in those days! Because young people have so much information at their hands, they tend to have their own opinions already and the older generation, they were sort of listening to their parents, listening to what they'd been told. But we haven't been raised like that because we know a lot of things that perhaps the older generation didn't know at our age.

With the introduction of technology and social media, I feel like we as a generation are able to access more information and as a result form more of our own opinions. Because of the way we've been growing up we are open-minded people. We are forced to see this spectrum and, by default, we are happy to listen to what everyone else has to say. They are very closed-minded and it's very, very difficult to try and communicate with people like that.

We need everyone to be included. I always talk to my mum. She's like: "if you started to make a new friend and you found they were homophobic, could they still be friends with them?" and every single time I say no, because then my best friend couldn't be around them because they wouldn't accept them and that's not OK with me.

What do the older generations not understand about youth?

There's a lot of social expectations when it comes to social media, so now we have access to a lot of opinions and a lot of different beliefs. Growing up like our parents did in predominantly Catholic homes, it was easier for them to stick to their faith because that was all they knew. But now, being involved with social media we are constantly bombarded with different faiths. It really encourages you to drive away from one faith. I think it's important to explore other beliefs as well. So that you know that if you've found God that's the right decision.

Need to know that we are trying our best. The world's changing faster than it ever has before and there's a judgement on people struggling with faith. We are working out our own journey for ourselves. It's our life. We are supposed to be experiencing it on our own. You can help support and guide us, but you can't tell us what to do.

I want them to know that we're trying. We can't force ourselves to go to church or believe in God.

People have changed, the world has changed, technology has changed. The way we see things is way more different because of the globalised world, everything is more complicated. So, there are more problems involving globalisation. People don't realise that things have changed, and we have to change with them. We can't be rigid to something that was happening 40 years ago.

Leave for uni, leave for anything...we make mistakes...there's no one to help us. Shouldn't be a feeling of guilt when you're struggling with the church.

I want the older generation to know that now, being very influenced by social media, especially younger children, it's quite hard to find faith in between those lines. So being surrounded and influenced by a lot of media and just opinions in general it's difficult to know where you stand.

As a generation we've grown up where it's OK to be gay, to be trans and to be different and I don't think the churches have quite caught up to that.

(they) say that young people are so stuck in the way they think and stuck in their habits. I think it's the exact opposite.

What do you think of church?

I think it's nice to have a space where people of one ideology come together and talk about it.

I think church is a really good place for children to go to, especially children who want to get a different outlook on life cause faith isn't something you get from your parents - it's something you learn on your own.

I think church is a very reflective and personal space to be going to when you need God.

There shouldn't be a lot of pressure for the younger generation to be going to church straight away because faith is obviously a journey, so I think it's hard to find a good relationship with God if you're forcing yourself to go to church.

I think it's pretty inclusive for all ages and abilities. It's really enjoyable as well - like that's what makes it enjoyable as well- how inclusive it is.

I like to feel like it's welcoming and you feel like you're part of a community because you all have shared values.

Generally, well most of the time, it's very much teaching led and their own thoughts and a lot of the time they don't really get to ask the youth what they think and what they want to do in Sunday church.

(it's) centred to an older and older audience so that a lot of these things doesn't make sense to me, so I don't really take anything away from Mass

I don't think the entire form of Mass is outdated; I just think there's quite a few parts that cater more towards the older audience.

Yes, I think it's a bit less personal - reciting - going to church and reciting the same prayers. In a sense it's a lot less direct and like I need to do this - it's a bit less reflective.

My favourite thing about church is the kids. I do young church all the time and I find it so fun. That's what I love about helping on the 267 events. It's like seeing kids. Sometimes it's their first time, their first experience of church and Jesus and that sort of thing and I think it's magical and they say like the sweetest stuff and it's filled with like beautiful innocence. But then the older ones are sometimes the most difficult. The way they think about things is also amazing. Like the last time someone asked me "if God is so good then why is there evil?" And I was like - see that's the question isn't it! So, I love that about church!

I think church is a very pressurizing environment and I think that's both a good thing and a bad thing. You first start going to church because your parents have taken you and you want to be so badly accepted into this community like your parents have been and you also want to live up to the standard of faith that everybody else in the church has so it's often quite difficult, especially when you're at such a young age when you're trying so hard to be included and understand. But I also think it's nice to be held to that standard by the church because you can always be better.

I think things like this, you know taking the first step, you know: the older generation reaching out to the younger generation to hear what they have to say. Also, any laid-back hangout kind of thing, because that way people could make friends with other people like them. And then when they actually go to church in itself, they will have someone to go with and it won't be such an intimidating affair.

This input was discussed in small groups around tables.

Some overall points:

- Overwhelmed by social media, technology, a multiplicity of views and beliefs
- See older generations as narrow minded
- Much wrong in the world that has been let slip.
- Trying hard under pressure
- Need older generation to be more inclusive
- Pressure to attend is counter-productive
- No input into church
- Services don't relate well to youth

Expert Input

Chris Birch-Evans looked at Facts and Stats

Youth predominately use mobiles to go online. Covid hit them hard and changed them into a generation that go out much less and now socialise whilst gaming. Mental health issues are on the increase and the health service can't keep up. Youth also worry that the NHS cannot give their parents what they need.

Youth struggle with their gender identity. 55% are "nones" – people of no faith. They see the older models of church as over-protective, simplistic and judgemental. Jesus is not the only way, they say. Church is a hard place for doubters.

Chris showed some striking statistics and graphs from Youthscape's translating-god.com. To see some of these visit the website (link below). We need to ask youth "what do you need?" Answering society's needs is key to the church growth and engagement.

Claire Banham: Substance and Stories

Claire shared how her own daughter's difficulties had led her to set up The Haven to help young people with anxiety issues, given that the NHS is so overwhelmed. We experienced a moving video testimony from a student who did a KWS course at her school and then went on to attend a Haven drop-in that was run in Harpenden. Haven is in 12 schools and has several local after-school incarnations too. All are run by Christians. They will soon be running a Haven drop-in at Verso (formally known as Vineyard) church

Declan Linnane, Head of Nicholas Breakspear School

Young people are confused by church and ignored – not asked to do anything. Having three different readings at Mass is hard to get your head around. In a school lesson you would take a deeper look at just one text. Declan gave a saddening account of how he encouraged one student to get involved only to find him ignored by nearly all clergy.

Panel Discussion

There was a panel discussion with some fantastic contributions from Mike Palin from 267 and Michael Hunter from Younglife.

There was a good deal of informal discussion and networking.

We have a long way to go, but God is on the move!

Links

- Churches Together: www.ctstalbans.org.uk
- Step: <https://www.stepschoolswork.org.uk/>
- The Haven: <https://www.thehaven.uk/>
- 267 Project: <https://the267project.com/>
- Younglife: <https://younglife.org/>
- Article referred to by Chris: <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/translating-god/home>
- Warm invitation to the 13th Jan illuminate event <https://illuminateyouth.co.uk>

Thanks

A very big thank you to

- The youth for being so open and honest.
- Chris & Amy and the team from Step.
- Declan, Claire, Mike & Michael.
- The Vineyard for the excellent venue and practical help.
- Many people who helped with hospitality, registration and technology.
- Everybody for coming.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 15:57

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