

## 20s-30s in the Church Today: A Personal Reflection

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It is rather obvious that when people are in their 20s, enormous life changes take place, not least, starting a career, potentially getting married, starting a family, gaining financial independence and if you're lucky, getting on the housing ladder. 40% of young people now go to university and at some point during their 20s they will emerge from this to the working world – an enormous change that is perhaps not being significantly recognised by the church as a stage where young adults can easily cease church attendance, and where help is needed to make that transition.

Churches in university towns usually cater extremely well for students and are ready and waiting to pick up new students when they arrive in fresher's week. Many employ specific student workers. Church youth groups have often prepared their young people for going to university and stressed the importance of finding a good church, joining the CU and meeting other Christians. There are many books available for Christian young people starting university and summer festivals like Soul Survivor often provide the opportunity to network with those already at university, for example with Fusion representatives<sup>1</sup>, thus ensuring that new freshers have some inroads into potential Churches before they even arrive and some friendly faces to reassure them and make sure they don't go 'off the rails' in those first few weeks. Not only are churches in university towns usually well prepared to help students make the transition from school or gap year to university, but the universities themselves offer a huge range of support to young adults through this transition, ranging from welfare support, to college reps, to financial advice, housing advice and so on.

The point of all this is that the support on offer from churches for those making the transition from school to university is usually not lacking. In contrast however what are churches doing to help young adults make the transition at the other end of university into working life? Will, 24, who graduated two years ago said this, "*When I arrived at my church I asked if there was anything specific for 20s to 30s and was surprised/shocked when I heard there was nothing. Maybe university churches need to warn students about this.*" Many young Christians will have been actively involved in churches, Christian Unions and usually enjoyed strong networks of friends. On leaving university, though, this can often disappear very quickly, especially if the young person moves to a new area, goes on a post university gap year or returns home to their parents. I suspect, therefore, that this is a crucial time when many young people may well drift from church going or simply cease going all together. The question, then, is what are churches going to do to address this?

I am 24 and write as someone who graduated 2 years ago and moved to London to begin work. I had been actively involved in my church at university for 3 years, leading a small group, helping with Sunday school and serving on the welcome team. Moreover I had enjoyed the fellowship and support of a fantastic group of friends and dedicated student workers at that church. On moving to London, although I moved in with friends, I rapidly found myself feeling incredibly lost in an enormous city and greatly missing the strong support networks that a student church had offered. I was fortunate that my church at university had offered some advice on making the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.soulsurvivor.com/uk/links/index.html>

university to working life transition; particularly helpful was a resource booklet suggesting a range of excellent churches scattered across London. It was to this I turned to identify a local church in the area I had moved to, which I promptly tried out. I was fortunate that this church was well aware that September often provides an influx of fresh faced graduates and they wasted no time in welcoming me. In two weeks I was signed up to a small group, introduced to others in their 20s and 30s, invited to socials and within a couple of months was encouraged to get involved in the youth work. Such was the welcome and support that this new church offered, there was no danger of me drifting from church going.

Sadly, though, my experience is not shared by every graduate. I witnessed many friends spend months deliberating over which church they wanted to join, often not feeling that they were particularly welcomed or catered for in the churches they visited. Especially in bigger churches, it was particularly easy for them to remain anonymous and to not feel welcomed or recognised by anyone – in direct contrast to the eager CU reps waiting to welcome them when they arrived at university and the endless offer of free lunches from student churches. Meanwhile, they were finding starting work daunting, finding it hard to make new friends, missing old friends and struggling to make sense of what life was supposed to now look like post university. For many they simply drifted for a while – or at worst, felt the church had let them down and was failing to value them and recognise their needs as a young adult.

What can churches do about this? I would suggest that the first step is to simply be aware that the transition from university to working life is often extremely daunting and hard to make and that young people need support during this time, just as they did when they started university. Churches can help students prepare for this transition in the first place by offering advice, perhaps from those who have gone through the experience, and by recommending good churches people can join in the areas they are moving to. If they have contacts there already, they could link people up with them before they even arrive. September is often a time when new graduates arrive and thus churches should be aware of this, perhaps even designating a few people to be on the look out for new graduates, specifically ready to welcome them, invite them to socials, home groups and introduce them to others. Often welcome teams will already be doing this, but it might be helpful to have people specifically prepared to address the needs new graduates may have in making this transition. Churches could even consider offering a series of talks or a short course on making the transition from university to working life, perhaps looking at questions like money and time management, making career choices, building supportive friendships and how to adapt to working life.

As mentioned many young people will have enjoyed strong and supportive friendship groups at university. If young people move to a new area, this can often at the very least diminish as people scatter to new areas. Churches need to be ready to help young people meet people their own age and quickly get involved in new friendship groups if they want to help ensure that they don't get 'lost' at this stage and cease church attendance. Ben, 30, who experienced the university to post university transition twice (after undergraduate study and then later after post graduate study) said this: *"I think the hardest thing to deal with is the loss of identity. University provides such a sense of community and the feeling of belonging to and being cared for by something outside of yourself is usually much weaker in the 'real' world, or at*

*least it takes a lot longer to develop that sense. I think the church could help students to understand that it's OK to find it hard to settle into a post-uni community, that there are good reasons why it's hard and that it's not based on personal inadequacy."*

Katie, 24, who graduated two years ago, said this, *"I had a lot of anxiety when moving out of university into the real world. What I valued most at this time was COMMUNITY – a small group of close people who would pray and support me at this time of transition. Who showed me LOVE and VALUE regardless of my job position."* An excellent way churches can offer this need for community is by having house groups that particularly cater for this age group. Not only will this provide spiritual support and encouragement during a turbulent time, but it will also provide the support of other people going through a similar life stage and the opportunity to make good friendships. This is certainly not to imply that the church should just be a social club for people in their 20s, but the reality for many at this age is that they may not have family living near by, they may well be single or not yet married and therefore it can actually be quite a lonely time. Thus the support of good friendship groups will probably be more important and needed than at other stages in life. Churches need to recognise that this is not a bad thing and actively seek to promote and encourage such friendships to form. Surely this is part of encouraging the church to be the family community that it should be.

Whether they have gone to university or not, many people in their 20s are very mobile, moving jobs, going on gap years and moving to new areas. At any of these points, it could be easy to stop attending church, or to drift for several months, if not years, before finding a new church. Leaving university and starting work may be a key moving point to look out for, but churches need to be aware of the often constant mobility of young adults at this stage and be prepared to address their needs. Networking people in their 20s with churches in the new area they are moving to may well be helpful every time they move on, or at the very least, providing suggestions of good churches to attend. Once a person has moved to the new area, it might be helpful for someone at their previous church to contact them, ask them how they are doing and encourage them to find a good church – thus supporting them from a distance through the transition period. Will, mentioned earlier, is just about to move and said this, *"I think having links/Christian friends in a new city makes such a difference. I'm about to move to York, it's so good knowing about a few of the churches, knowing a couple of people who go to one or two. It just means that in my first few weeks I will have someone to encourage me along to church and who'll probably ask me in a few weeks if I've found a place to settle."*

Of course, in writing this I am aware that 60% will not go to university at all and this group is probably one whose needs the church is particularly failing to address. While churches often have youth and student ministries, there is often little on offer for those who don't go to university. Furthermore, if the 20s and 30s group is predominantly made up of those who have gone to university, those who haven't may well feel isolated. Often talks and sermons may assume that people are graduates, even through simple phrases such as, "Many will have found at university..." Such phrases and assumptions in churches can quickly make those who have not attended university feel isolated. Perhaps too we need to reconsider how we might do home

groups for this group. Are we assuming that everyone will be comfortable with an in-depth intellectual bible study? Do we assume too much prior knowledge of the Bible? Do we even assume that people will be comfortable reading out loud? These points may seem minor, yet we may just find that some small and subtle changes can make a difference to attracting and keeping this group in church.

Increasingly, another new phenomenon churches need to recognise is the issue of those returning home post university<sup>2</sup> and those choosing to stay at home during university - 20% now live at home during their university years<sup>3</sup>. Top up fees, student debts, the increased cost of living not to mention difficulties finding jobs in the economic crisis have all contributed to this. The Office for National Statistics reported that 6 in 10 men and 4 in 10 women aged 20-24 were still living with their parents.<sup>4</sup> Those staying at home during university will often still have excellent opportunities to get involved in student activities offered by churches, but for many returning home post university can be a lonely and difficult time, particularly if the return home is out of necessity rather than preference. Some may return to churches attended prior to university, others may have become Christians at university and need to identify a church in their local area to join. Are churches on the lookout for these people? Willing to offer them support as they look for jobs, face the possible frustrations of living at home again and try to figure out what to do with the rest of their lives? Many may return home unsure of what it is they want to do - are churches offering support as young adults try and discern what their calling might be or how God might want them to use their gifts and abilities?

What can we conclude from this? Many believe that the 20s are the best years of your life with financial freedom, lack of commitments and responsibilities and an active social life. Although the 20s can be an exciting time full of opportunities, the reality for many is that the transitions one has to make during this time can also be daunting and overwhelming and that the pressures can be hard.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps then, if the church is not to lose people during this time, it needs to be better equipped to help people make these transitions, to welcome them, to offer them spiritual encouragement, the social support of good friendship groups and to recognise more clearly the challenges they face.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/jan/12/familyandrelationships.graduates>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.studentastic.co.uk/AdvantagesOfLivingHomeDuringUniversity.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-512779/Boomerang-kids-hit-parents-pocket-home-university.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2180552.stm>