

20-30 Vision
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Sarah is a 29 year old marketing analyst living in East London. She attends a local church where she is involved in the youth work and a midweek home group. She is bright, attractive, outgoing and single. She is happy at work, has a bustling social life and is a popular member of her church family. But some Sunday evenings Sarah travels into London to go to a big church with some friends, and this has caused a discussion in the elders meeting: Is Sarah 'man-hunting' on Sunday evenings? Should it be discouraged? Is Sarah suffering from being the only 20 something without kids in their congregation? Is Sarah going to walk out the door one day and never come back? Is there something more the church could be doing for Sarah?

This scenario, not untypical in our churches today, is part of a much larger issue. When considering how the church relates to 20-30's, Sarah's story is only a drop in the ocean. What about the young Bangladeshi restaurant workers who play football on the field opposite the church every Sunday afternoon? What about the self-professed atheist graduates who run a book group round the corner? What about those in the church who married straight out of college and have young children who keep them up at night? What about those who have never left the youth group or their parents home even though they are working full-time? Suddenly the conspicuous absence or silence of 20-30's in many of our churches should cause us to act.

Research carried out recently by Innovista and the UK Evangelical Alliance revealed that 96% of church leaders place increasing the number of 16-30 year olds in their churches as either a priority or the top priority in their churches. Yet despite this only 11% of church leaders feel 'well-resourced' to do this. Jason Lane, Innovista's Executive Director, writes: "*16-30 year olds represent one of the greatest mission challenges of our day. The rapid-rate life change that accompanies these years creates openness as young people figure out what they will give their lives to. Offering this generation credible opportunities to follow Jesus is a 'must do'*"

Innovista is currently carrying out some research into how to resource church leaders to work effectively with this critical missing generation in the church. There are of course already several good resources available. Recognising the need to address this age group, the Evangelical Alliance has launched 2 new resources in the last three years that are proving particularly helpful and relevant to 20s and 30s. *Slipstream* provides leadership resources, aimed at younger leaders, and seeks to encourage, equip and network leaders across the denominations and generations. *Friday Night Theology* (FNT) is a short email that provides an evangelistic comment on an event of the week. The aim of FNT is to enable people to bring their faith into conversations they may have over the course of the weekend, for example in the pub or the coffee shop, and to help them make connections between world events and their faith.

Other organisations we are aware of that are helping to meet the needs of this age group include the UCCF resource *bethinking.org*, bringing together a range of resources to help people understand, defend and communicate the Christian faith. The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) also provide weekly emails, particularly focusing on helping people to connect with culture.

In my work though over the last 18 years with this age-group, I have identified three key challenges consistently raised by all sorts of 20-30's which churches should consider to engage effectively with this generation gap.

Sunday-Monday challenge

The period of life during which we are in our 20-30's is arguably the most exhilarating. It is usually during these two decades that we face a raft of life-stage experiences: leaving home, leaving university, finding work, dating and marrying, having children, buying a house, enjoying financial independence, discovering the world. 20-30's from all sorts of backgrounds need to have a great deal of drive and energy to help them face these changes and challenges as part of their quest to realise their identity and vocation. This should be the time of life when Christians and non-Christians are most receptive to hearing the radical call to follow Jesus wholeheartedly, whatever the cost. And yet often the church, instead of calling people to active discipleship often presents what it perceives to be a more palatable version of the gospel, but which is often so watered down that it is particularly unappetising. However Christ and cross-centred our evangelistic preaching, we also need to present 20-30's with the challenge of the Lordship of Jesus, the mustard seed Kingdom conspiracy, and the salt and light mission Jesus calls us too. 20-30's are often switched on to issues of ecology, contemporary culture, vocation, ethics, and social transformation and they need to hear how the gospel impacts the way they approach the rest of their week and the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately what 20-30's often hear in church is not encouragement to take huge steps in their faith, but to take on huge responsibilities within the church. Churches can all too easily channel the drive, energy and enthusiasm of the 20-30's into church-based activities – helping with the cleaning rota, youthwork or music – or all three. Instead of inspiring our young adults for discipleship, we often cause them to burn out and lose all heart for discipleship and the church. What could be character-building, can also become soul-destroying.

Tim Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church comments that as a pastor he was taught how to make people busy working in the churches.¹ Speaking on the Evangelical Alliance's new Square Mile resource, which aims to help churches develop a bigger picture of God's mission, he explains how this often meant taking people out of effective mission in other areas of their lives – at work, in the community or in their families. Mark Greene from the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, gives an example of a teacher who was being prayed for in a service as he was commissioned for the role of Sunday School teacher. This man broke down in tears as he realised that prayer and support was offered only for the one hour in his week he spoke to churched kids, not the 40 hours he taught non-churched kids. When we don't teach people that the Christian faith is to be practiced 24/7, then life and faith can quickly become distant relatives, and burnout can easily result. Rather than pouring pressure on busy people, we need to be in the business of empowering Christians to live for Christ in every area of their lives.

¹ See Square Mile DVD, Chapter 3, (www.eauk.org/squaremile)

History-Future challenge

One of the main criticisms of the church in the 20-30's is that it is outdated. Traditionalism can be a major roadblock for 20-30's engaging in church. We must make a distinction here between traditionalism and tradition. Christian Historian Jaroslav Pelikan described the difference as: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."² We must hold on to the tradition of evangelicalism with its commitment to the authority of scripture, the need for personal repentance, its focus on the centrality of the cross and our activism.³ However when alongside our right instinct to hold on to the gospel and the historic teaching of the church, we also enforce the culturally relative ways in which that teaching was expressed in the past, we effectively hold onto the baby and the bathwater. For a church to move forward and be accessible to today's generation, we may need to change the water.

A recent advertising campaign for Hovis bread shows a boy being sent to the corner shop to get some bread. As he travels back with his trusty loaf, he is transported through some of the key moments in 20th century British history. The message is that Hovis has been with us through thick and thin (excuse the pun) and can also be relied upon into the future. It is especially in difficult times such as the current economic crisis that we need to be able to look backwards to the good things in the past and carry them forward into the future. Teaching Bible truths is vital, but we also need some creative thinking to show how the Bible speaks to every culture and generation. Personally I like to connect Bible truths to current films and current affairs. I like to sing a mix of classic hymns and the latest festival worship music. I like to use modern technology and the latest gadgets as I quote from ancient commentators and modern celebrities. As 20-30's are struggling to find their niche, the church can provide an environment that does not pigeon-hole them into being outmoded social outcasts, but frees them to explore how they can face the future with God and the church.

I-we challenge

As 20-30's grapple with the question: 'What am I going to do with *my* life', there often remains a residue of the quest for self-identity begun in their teenage years. But at some point during this journey, they will usually reconnect with the first-person plural pronoun 'we'. The search for a spouse, a family unit, friends and church community is a universally strong pull. The church could be the place that helps them form those new adult networks that will last a lifetime, but many 20-30's feel isolated in our churches – they don't fit into the two obvious groupings of youth or families. Moreover the church is asking them to 'not fit in' at work as they stand up for their faith.

² *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (1986) Yale U. Press,

³ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

There is also a further problem that the question 20-30's often bring to church is 'What can this church do for *me*?' In other words, while 20's-30's are looking for community, they often do so out of individualistic, even selfish motives. Most people I talk to choose churches in terms of the warm welcome, the quality of the sermon, and the enjoyment of the worship songs. There are strong biblical injunctions for a church to provide good teaching, worship and hospitality, however the mindset many of us have in rating a church is less led by a sense of community, than it is by a sense of consumerism.

When a person looks to have their spiritual needs met in a particular church, it sets up a relationship of church as "service provider" and the attendee as "client." Members of the congregation feel they have every right to complain about the music not being up to scratch, or getting nothing out of the sermon, or about the lack of facilities. Churches themselves sometimes accept this role of "service provider" as they advertise themselves: come to our friendly services where you will find great teaching and lively worship." We need to recognise that we are not church-users, or church-goers but we are the church. The church is a community – the church is us. We need to stop asking what can I get out of this church, but what can I give to this church. In our individualistic society there is often little opportunity for genuine community and so if the church can live up to our calling as the body of Christ, God's family, rather than focusing on the event of the Sunday service we have a lot to offer.

In one church I attended, there was a small number of 20-30's and the house-groups fought to adopt them into their midweek activities. I have a lot of sympathy with their reasons as the Bible teaches that we as the people of God are called to demonstrate the multicultural, multigenerational, multi-class composition of God's kingdom. But while the Sunday services were beginning to achieve this, there was also a growing acknowledgment that different life-stages struggle with specific issues that can best be helped through specialized age-specific groups. So along with the effective senior citizens work, toddlers groups and youth outreach, we also started a home-group solely for 20-30's. Over the course of two years that group grew from a small handful to a crowded houseful. Key to that success was the open house feel – we invited a local football team and atheist bookworms as well as the newlyweds in the church and over-aged youth group members. Bible studies were, as you can imagine, lively, with a particular focus on how they impacted issues connected with work, family, and community. And there was a good helping of creative social highlights that ranged from Salsa-dancing to beach-volleyball.

The 20-30s group became an entry point into the church family, although it brought the church new challenges. The church was noisier and the friendship groups were so strong that units developed and were perceived to be cliques. But there was also a healthy pool of volunteers to help with the youthwork, as well as take on new community initiatives and workplace ministry. And there was also a growing feeling that the church was a place the 20-30's really belonged. Many received practical help moving house, redecorating, hospitality and friendship before they showed any interest in the gospel. And some of the seekers and sceptics after belonging to the group for a while eventually came to believe too.

The three factors that I have described – the search for destiny, direction and community, are not restricted to 20-30's. However they are issues that are particularly acute to that age bracket as they begin to make their mark on the world. The church, more than any other social network, employment facility or club, should be leading the way in helping 20-30's find their feet and their faith.

