

Report from the Evangelical Alliance Council Meeting, 16th September 2009
Council Symposium, The 18-30 Mission: A Missing Generation

Introduction

On the 16th September 2009 the Evangelical Alliance Council met to discuss the 'Missing Generation' of 18-30s in our churches in Britain today. In August, a survey was carried out of over 800 young people at the Momentum festival, which was fed into the day and prompted many of the discussions. The aim of the day was to learn from each other and to emerge with a sense of clarity that would lead to action from everyone present. Research carried out by Innovista found that 96% of church leaders think that increasing the number of 16-30 year olds in their church is either more important or as important as any other top priority. Yet despite this, only 11% of the same church leaders felt 'well resourced' to do this in terms of people, training and tools. Clearly then, work is needed in this area.

A Symposium document was sent to all Council members in advance of the meeting. This included some statistics on 18-30s in general and on their attitudes to church, a vision for 20s and 30s, which highlighted that young people are looking for destiny, direction and community, a personal reflection of being a 20 something in the church today, and a theological reflection entitled *A Theology of the Generations*.

Statistics on this age group indicate that the numbers attending church are rapidly declining. However, the larger the church the greater the proportion of those in their 20s attending. Over half of those in their 20s going to church attend churches in London and they tend to attend churches with congregations of 200+. Of course, many of those in their 20s will never have had any contact with church, whereas older people are more likely to have experienced church at some point.

Plenary Address

Mike Pilavachi, from Soul Survivor, gave the plenary address, drawing on his considerable experience working with young people. He stressed the importance of listening to what 20 somethings are saying, but highlighted three issues that he believes are relevant to this age group that need to be addressed, namely a culture of consumerism, individualism and entitlement. All of this mitigates a culture of commitment to community and also means that people in this age group struggle to commit to careers and relationships. Krish Kandiah highlighted in his paper, *20-30 vision*, "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.'"

Mike suggested that there is a sense in which in the youth group young people are cocooned and looked after; as they emerge into their 20s that same support is not there and therefore it is easy to lose people at this stage. Mike stressed that young people often feel they are not listened to, not understood, feel they are not provided with resources to live this life and feel they are not empowered. He also highlighted the pain this age group feel: in contrast to the exuberance of young people at Soul Survivor, at Momentum every time there is ministry time, huge pain and angst emerges with this group. Mike concluded that we need to correct 20s but find ways of

gently and lovingly challenging some of the things that are coming out of the culture of consumerism, individualism and entitlement. We need to integrate them into the whole church and this might mean we have to give them some sort of special treatment. As Mike put it, 'Our arm is damaged and needs bandaging until its better.' This isn't about pandering to consumerism, but raising up disciples.

Momentum Survey

After Mike's address, Miles Giljam, the Alliance's Head of Communications, presented some of the findings from the Momentum survey. While aware that this survey was of a select group of people, some interesting results emerged. The results showed this group were charismatic, read the Bible often, supported women in leadership and most believed homosexuals should be celibate. 1 in 5 were young earth creationists. People tended to say that they loved their church, with half attending weekly and 38% more than once a week. However only 30% consider themselves leaders, suggesting a lack of empowerment. A strong emphasis on good preaching came through; this was seen as more important than good worship. However, there was an overall sense of this generation being 'me focused' with a desire for good community and excellent preaching and worship – they were less concerned about their church being mission orientated or a place where they could invite their friends. The survey also suggested that while they have high standards, they often fail to live out their convictions. Later it was also recognised that this generation is often passionate about issues such as poverty and global justice, which should be encouraged.

Miles pointed out that while focus on student ministries is good, we also need to be considering what to do about the 60% that don't go to university and remember that this is a mobile group, making huge life changes with the challenges those present. People rarely change their beliefs and practices after 25 and therefore ministry to this age group does have a high impact. Justin Thacker, Head of Theology, in his paper *A Theology of the Generations*, "Are we doing absolutely everything we can to win these people for Christ?" At the same time though, we need to be asking, "Is our accommodation compromising the gospel itself?"

Panel Response

Three people responded to the presentations: Gavin Calver (Youth for Christ), Tim Rudge (UCCF) and Jason Lane (Innovista). Key points from their responses included that we need to be doing more to empower this age group, giving them responsibility but equipping them on the way and that we need to allow for style changing even though the substance remains the same. We need to be doing more to engage and respond to culture, and also need to be aware that adolescence is starting younger and carrying on later. Therefore we need to start mentoring from a younger age and also be teaching apologetics from a younger age – this prepares young people to deal with the culture around them. It was observed that church is often seen as 'for me' or 'for mission' – it's an either/or rather than a both/and. We need to be developing church for them, but also church that includes mission. The question was also raised as to whether lack of secure leaders was also part of the problem, and that more needs to take place in theological education to develop confident leaders.

Council members then had a time to respond to the panel. Some of the points raised included whether professionalising youth work is causing the church to miss out on lay volunteers and the relationships they can provide for young people. Often youth workers are quite young, lacking experience and provide a brother/sister figure to young people, when what is needed is really a parent/grandparent figure. The church needs to be offering greater support to parents and have a greater model of parenting young people. The importance of getting young people doing mission was stressed and that part of discipleship is to get young people out there doing things and empowering them while supporting them.

Seminar Discussions

After lunch, 7 seminars were held to allow for deeper discussion.

Role of Agencies: We need to create more creative partnerships and the question was asked as to whether agencies should be doing more about the 93% that don't go to church. Agencies need to give young people a range of ways to learn, and can plant seeds which hopefully churches will grasp. There's a need with this generation for agencies to be talking seriously about sexuality.

Fresh Expressions of Spirituality and Church: Discussion focused on the new café style churches. Offering an eclectic mix of creative ways to engage is good and offering lots of different ways to opt in and opt out can be helpful. Fresh expressions are often accused of 'watering down the gospel', 'diluting' and 'selling out,' hence a biblical reflection on methodology is needed, signposting to resources and finally communicating the urgency about the need to connect with this age range. The Alliance could provide this.

Reaching the Unchurched: With this group there's a real need for sacrificial and incarnational ministry. Particularly with poorer communities, there is a poverty of aspiration and hope and churches need to be prepared to deal with this. Change is most likely to come from the margins in, rather than the centre out. Running events doesn't always work; what matters more is building genuine, authentic relationships. The importance of authenticity was also stressed in Justin Thacker's paper, where the question was asked, "Have we by the way we behave and speak compromised ourselves and the ethical integrity to which we are called and so compromised the medium if not the message? The words that come out of mouth may well be those of grace, but if our actions betray them, they mean very little."

Student Track: Each point of transition heightens the risk of dropout so there is a need to create more effective discipleship pathways. There was debate about the role of the CU versus the local church. It was noted that there is a problem with competing Christian campus ministries, that there is space for 'creative conflict' but that it is important that each learnt to speak well of one another. Relationships need rebuilding each year with new intakes.

Gender: The question was raised as to why the church is not attracting more men and whether we have failed to represent the full person of Jesus, feminising the church. At the same time though, women in leadership are often required to lead in a 'male' way.

It was recognised that people outside the church are used to equality, when they come into it, church culture can seem very alien. Discussion included consideration of how men and women can lead together, that more training together needs to happen together, emphasising the strengths that both bring rather than saying that everyone can do the same. The question was asked as to whether women have to work harder to prove themselves? We need more balance in the church – where there is balance, gender becomes less of an issue.

Developing/ Mentoring: We need to create a culture in which we are all being disciplined by each other. Mentoring was described as skills training as well as character training. It's like being a 'spiritual father/mother' – women find this easier than men do but there's a real need for men to do this. Peer to peer can be a powerful way of mentoring although values can be helpfully learnt from older people. Points to note include making sure we are making disciples and not dependants and that mentoring is not about controlling.

New Technology: Concerns were raised about new technology, in particular that it can cause the breakdown of normal face to face relationships and community, people are not interacting with the real world, it has greatly increased the problem of pornography and access is very easy, often meaning parents have little control over what their children are looking at. There is also the danger of 'information overload' making people suspicious of new information. However, new technology does present great opportunities for mission, which should be encouraged. The question was raised as to whether Christians can start to shape the internet culture instead of always playing catch-up. There is also a need for some theological work to be done on the universals/ big issues behind the medium of the internet that is driving it forward.

Case Studies

Following the seminar discussions, 3 case studies were presented considering three different issues. Ness Wilson, Open Heaven Church, Loughborough, spoke about student focused churches, pointing out that only 2% of students are actively involved in church at university. Churches in university towns need to step up; students are one of most unreached but most open people groups. Appointing student workers is a good way to do this. 1 to 1 discipleship works well with this group and students need teaching a robust theology of suffering, values of commitment and responsibility. Working with university authorities and offering to serve them works well – as a long term relationship is built, more opportunities emerge to reach students.

Dave Stroud spoke about his experience of setting up Christ Church in Central London. In this church, 85% are in the 18-30 age range. Alpha has been a massive investment and life groups are meeting not so much in people's houses, but in bars and cafes where people are working. Key points highlighted included: be prepared to take risks, recognise there is a move of God going on amongst 20s in central London, enable people to do what they are doing day to day with whole life discipleship and focus on good preaching with practical application.

Jonathan Edwards then spoke of the Baptist Church's experience with this age group. Amongst Baptist Churches, the community of 20s is very small, but they are seeking to

address this, inviting 20s onto the Baptist Union Council, and working at consulting with people in their 20s. Jonathan asked whether young people have been disappointed with the church? They were promised excitement, that they were going to be history makers and instead they've found church to just be comfortable and polite. Jonathan stressed that young people are looking for authenticity, need to feel loved and treated as adults.

World Café

Following on from the case study presentations, everyone had a chance to contribute to 3 questions around small group table discussions. The questions posed were: What should youth agencies be considering as they prepare young people for adulthood? Can churches and the agencies that focus on the 18-30s age group better collaborate to rise to the challenge? And Has the Evangelical Alliance got a contribution to make in supporting the Church in responding to the 18-30s challenge?

In response to the first question, answers included that youth agencies need to be doing more to prepare young people for the whole of life, that we need to be doing more to identify cultural norms for young people and speak into them and that agencies could be doing more to support parents. We need to have more of a vision for young people influencing different spheres in society and make sure that we are not just entertaining young people but providing something with substance. There is more work to be done asking questions about identity and vocation and intentionally engaging with those questions at every stage. Susannah Clark's *Personal Reflection* also raised this point, "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?" It was also suggested that there may be a need to set up an agency specifically for people in their 20s – although there are several student agencies, there is not currently one for 20s in general.

Responding to how churches and agencies can better collaborate on this issue, suggestions included that was a need to be more aware of each other's expertise, drawing on this and networking. They can also collaborate on research to learn more about young people. Agencies need to listen to what really works in churches and churches need to listen to what agencies have to offer. There may be a problem at the moment of a competitive spirit rather than a Kingdom focus. Agencies offering gap year placements with churches can be useful when young people are placed with leaders who can empower and develop them. Another way to do this is to run training programmes. It was suggested that more churches should have young people on their councils and so on with opportunities to contribute to the leadership team. It was recognised that cross generational mentoring presents challenges, but that we need to be doing more to enable this to happen, linking younger people with older people in our churches. Churches could also appoint specific 20s workers and both agencies and churches could work more closely with universities. Finally, when people relocate in this age group, churches and youth agencies could collaborate to help them find new churches – this was a point also made in Susannah Clark's *Personal Reflection*.

When asked what the Evangelical Alliance can do to support the church in responding to this issue, it was recognised that hosting this day was an important first start and

that these kind of conversations need to continue to happen regionally as well as nationally – the Alliance can play a role in facilitating this. For example, we could do a road trip, bringing churches together in different areas to talk through these issues – encourage this conversation in a wider context – regional/local symposium. It was suggested that it would be helpful for the Alliance to continue surveying more young people, broadening the survey carried out at Momentum to increase our data and understanding about this age group. It is the Alliance's intention to do this. It would also be helpful to have more people in this age group on council. It may be a relief for many church leaders that the Alliance are raising the issue and offering to listen to them and support them and we can educate them in how to respond. The Alliance could have a role to play in sharing stories, particularly examples of good practice and experiments that might inspire other churches; positive ways forward need presenting along with the challenges. Given that there are few agencies working specifically with this group. Do we need to encourage current youth agencies to expand their remit to encompass people in their 20s? The Alliance online church search could provide more information, so people can identify churches with a 20s programme

Conclusions

Steve Clifford, the Alliance's General Director, concluded the day, observing that a number of outcomes had been raised already that the Alliance leadership would be taking seriously. In particular, it is important that we create space for young people to develop and lead, whilst listening well to what they are saying and taking off the filter of our own interpretation.