



Are we doing young people a service or disservice? And does local church youth ministry work? A response to Pam Mellstrom

Ian Maxwell

Pam Mellstrom has a great deal of experience in youth work having been involved for over 15 years, working within the context of a local church ministry as well as in community-based youth work. She now has responsibility for student learning and development for those intending to become youth work practitioners. This lends an especial weight to the questions she raises in her seminar: Are we doing young people a service or disservice? And, does local church youth ministry work?

In many parts of the country, youth work based on the local church still exists, but it is no longer as straightforward as it once was. Congregations who have finances available or who are working in partnership with other congregations, will often make employing a youth worker a priority. Pam Mellstrom insists, however, that basic questions now need to be asked: for example: What is the purpose of a church youth worker? Is it to mentor and bring up Christian leaders? Is it to offer facilities for younger age groups? Is a youth worker expected to run the Bible Class, young people's work or offer social education? Furthermore, is the aim of youth work to draw local young people into attendance at church? In many areas of the towns and cities in Scotland it is becoming increasingly difficult to bring those initially nurtured in youth outreach into the congregation itself. So, is the way forward to set up specialised nurture courses, or to work in local secondary schools? In terms of the young people themselves, Pam continues, how do we model approaches to coping with the fears,

doubts and uncertainties which they have to cope with, the problems they have to face, and give them the tools to think through the difficult situations they might find themselves in?

Pam then describes the local youth work project she was associated with in Linlithgow. As this progressed, the project succeeded in building bridges, strong bridges, with the young people of the town. While church and community in the town remained quite separate cultures, there was some success in engaging local youth from the town.

The key importance of Pam Mellstrom's questions¹ lies in their depth of insight and their growing urgency. These questions arise, not from reflection for its own sake, but out of the actuality of youth work in Scotland today. Those active in church youth work now face the challenge of holding together the role expected of them by the church community *and* the imperatives of mission among young people who have no knowledge of Christian faith. At the same time, the cultural distance between the church and the surrounding community appears to be widening. Pam's searching questions are a response to this. Her conclusion is this: that 'a fundamental cultural mind-shift is required about what it is that we want to see happening in work with youth.'

¹ Wes White refers back to these questions in Dialogue II.