

Church of Ireland Youth Department Report

Proposer: Mr Andrew Watson

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As a member of CIYD's Central Board, it gives me great pleasure to propose this report at Synod – it's my first time doing so, so please go easy on me.

In between this speech and the seconder's, we will be showing you all a short video of some testimonies from young people across the island at this year's CIYD National Youth Forum, which took place in Newry in January. These are powerful stories of God really moving in young people's lives and they highlight the essential place youth ministry has in the life of the Church.

I myself have been a full-time youth worker since 2018, and as someone who came from a non-Christian family, I can't overestimate the impact Sunday School leaders, youth fellowship leaders and many others had on my journey of faith.

Stories like mine – someone from a non-Christian family who started coming to church as a teenager – are becoming increasingly common of late. Many social commentators have observed what's being referred to as a 'vibe-shift' in the cultural posture towards faith, particularly amongst younger people. There is an increased warmth and openness to faith, which has led many to develop a vibrant and passionate faith; and crucially, many of these young people are coming from non-Christian homes, so discipleship is not happening at home – it's happening in peer groups and in youth ministries.

In my context – a medium-sized congregation where we regularly see around 70 young people throughout the week – we have had about seven or eight new young people start regularly attending church in the past year, and we've given about a dozen young people their first Bibles. And to reiterate, these are not young people coming forward for Confirmation yet, they aren't coming with their families – they're young people who have an encounter with God (often at some youth ministry event), they ask their parents to leave them to church on Sunday mornings, and they ask us for a Bible because they want to start reading it.

This is a story that is being repeated up and down the country, and is now backed up by recent research from the Bible Society – their *Quiet Revival* report – which shows that where in 2018 just 4 per cent of 18-24 year olds regularly attended church, that number is now up to 16 per cent. Gen-Z are much more likely to be spiritually open, searching for community, purpose and answers in a world that looks increasingly hopeless, confused and chaotic. The good news is that they are finding these things in the Church.

CIYD recently released the findings of its Youth Ministry Audit Survey; it was conducted in 2024 to find updated numbers and information about young people and youth work in parishes and dioceses across Ireland.

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The survey received an encouraging 64 per cent response rate. If the data collected is representative of all parishes, it is estimated that over 15,000 young people are served by youth ministry across the Church of Ireland as a whole – a number which increases to 25,000 when the work of uniformed youth organisations within our parishes is included.

However, a clear challenge to us all here today is the significant drop in the number of parishes which are offering youth work. This can likely be attributed to the 44 per cent reduction in the number of volunteers since the last CIYD audit survey in 2008.

The young people are still there, the workload hasn't decreased, young people are more willing than ever to engage with the Church, but the volunteers are simply not there. As a wise man once said, "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few".

You're probably very familiar with this problem, and by means of next steps I would recommend "praying to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers in his harvest field" (which I'm sure you're doing already), and also talking to your local Diocesan Youth Officer, availing of their expertise, as well the expertise of Simon and Luke at CIYD.

CIYD exists to equip, empower and engage, and to see young people become disciples and for them to make disciples; we are here to help you in this, because I know that the church leaders amongst you have very full plates already, and I'm loath to pile on more pressure and burden.

However, our job is to pass on the faith to the next generation, as it was passed on to us by our forebearers. Youth ministry needs continual advocacy, diocesan support and of course, financial investment. Money, used well, is able to put gifted and skilled people into key roles where they can change the landscape of faith in Ireland; but I'm afraid the days of employing part-time youth workers for £22,000 a year pro-rata are behind us. If we want youth workers to stay long enough that they can raise up volunteers, develop a programme, create a culture of discipleship for young people, it's going to take money.

I recognise that everybody is asking for money and that it is a limited resource; I recognise that I'm the youth worker saying youth ministry is very important; however, I also recognise – as I hope you do – that the stories and statistics tell of a generation of young people who are more open than ever to the faith; and so, House of Bishops, Allocations Committee members, all those with influence, now is the time for action.

Finally, I want to take a moment to say a really sincere thank you to everyone here who is involved with or who supports youth ministry, whether that be with your money, your time, your energy or your prayer.

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CIYD know that there is huge dedication in each and every diocese – whether you are paid staff, clergy or volunteers, thank you. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous – he sees what you’re doing for him and you are storing up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

As I conclude I want to say as a reminder to us all, that it is vital that we use our material and immaterial resources to advance the Kingdom, and if young people are the easiest mission field at the minute, it’s on us to take that opportunity and run with it.

Thank you for your time and attention.

I commend this report to you today and ask for you to kindly receive it.

I am standing here today, as are many of you – because I was disciplined faithfully by dedicated workers and volunteers who wanted to see my faith in Jesus come alive and we need to remember that our calling is to pass on the faith to the next generation, and we have a current generation that are more open than previous generations and they need faithfully disciplined.

As I conclude I want to say as a reminder to us all, it is vital that we do everything we can to direct young people towards Jesus and to help them develop their faith and provide opportunities, and not barriers.

We must talk to our children and young people about what it means to be made in the image of God for a purpose, to actively seek to form a Christian worldview within them, and teach and model that true joy comes from a life dedicated to following Jesus – picking up our cross and following him.