

'You hold in your hand a very important book! Internationally, a growing debate about youth ministry has surfaced, questioning the whole endeavour itself. Looking at denominational reports and sociological studies, many of us have begun wondering if youth ministry has failed. Nick Shepherd has offered an exciting and important response. In *Faith Generation*, Shepherd shows that youth ministry does indeed have an important element to play in faith formation and one that can be deeply transformational. This book will inspire, stretch and enlighten any pastor, youth worker or parent who gives it the time it deserves.'

Andrew Root, Olson Baalson Associate Professor of Youth and Family Ministry, Luther Seminary, USA, and author of Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker

'This book should be essential reading for all concerned with the future of the Church. Drawing on his extensive experience as both a practitioner and researcher in youth ministry, Nick Shepherd highlights the challenge for the Church of faith transmission in a way which inspires and gives hope. Illuminated by direct quotations from many young people, the book offers a window into their faith and is enriched by the case studies of two very contrasting situations: suburban church and urban outreach project. Nick offers a fresh approach to youth ministry that focuses on practices of identity, plausibility and reliability. This offers a new way to reframe work with children and young people and will be a valuable text for churches as well as those of us working in theological education with children, youth workers and clergy.'

The Revd Dr Sally Nash, Director, Midlands Institute for Children, Youth and Mission at St John's School of Mission, Nottingham, and Associate Minister at Hodge Hill Church, Birmingham

'*Faith Generation* is an important and timely contribution to the current debate around young people and the Church. This book makes it clear that most talk about youth ministry starts in the wrong place. It is a mistake to talk only about what the Church does or what youth leaders do. Youth ministry cannot just be about the next new programme for evangelism or discipleship or the next worship event that will renew the faith of young people. Nick Shepherd turns this way of thinking on its head and asks how young people are themselves active in making their own faith. This way of thinking is desperately needed because it puts young people at the centre of the way the Church thinks about ministry, mission and worship. By looking at young people as active participants in ministry, he develops ground-breaking new perspectives that everyone who cares about young people and the Church really needs to know about.'

Professor Pete Ward, Professorial Fellow in Ecclesiology and Ethnography, St John's College/Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University

‘Everyone knows the Church faces a huge challenge to communicate the Christian faith to younger people. Nick Shepherd has a lifetime of experience in youth work and educating youth workers, and is uniquely placed to write *Faith Generation*. Thankfully, this isn’t a book that just tells us a problem, it gives us helpful ways to begin to reverse the decline. A must-read for every church leader.’

Canon Mark Russell, Chief Executive, Church Army

‘Nick Shepherd’s *Faith Generation: Retaining Young People and Growing the Church* is essential reading for all who are interested in nurturing young Christians, bringing young people to faith, working in Christian youth work or who work in schools. It is also essential reading for anyone interested in growing the Church and the vital task of renewal and reform.

‘With a masterly grasp of the history and theology of Christians working with young people, this book, emerging from a doctoral thesis, is never heavy. Close study of two young people’s projects and careful listening to, and ample quotation from, young people bring a lightness of touch that makes this an easy read but one that stimulates a great deal of thought. Using the device of *choice, sense* and *use*, Shepherd examines the way in which young people make faith decisions, experience God and perceive faith as part of crafting their lives. Helpful questions at the end of each chapter make this an ideal text for a church school faith group, chaplains, governors or, even better, joint work between youth workers, clergy and church school staff and governors.

‘From my own school leadership angle, this book has challenged me to think about the extent to which faith development in school is approached coherently with the nurture (or otherwise) young Christians, and young people generally, receive in their families and in the wider Church. To what extent is there “reasonable porousness” between these areas of a young person’s life? *Faith Generation* raises the question of the extent to which we, in church schools, can offer young people “plausibility shelters” as they explore belief in a situation of church decline.’

Fr Richard Peers, Director of Education, Diocese of Liverpool

‘*Faith Generation* is a hugely helpful overview of the latest research and thinking around youth ministry in the UK. In this bold book, Shepherd tackles head on the decline besetting the Church, and provides fascinating reflections on the possible historical, social and cultural causes. No longer can we rest on our laurels and hope in vain for a reversal of the decline; we must learn, as *Faith Generation* so robustly demonstrates, to cultivate faith with young people who have no prior experience of church at all. Shepherd places youth ministry high up on the agenda of the Church, and is a powerful advocate for the relationship between church growth and thriving youth work. *Faith Generation* is a rallying cry to the Church to remember once again the importance of youth ministry, and offers insightful solutions, backed by in-depth research, about how to put this into practice.’

*Phoebe Thompson, Head of Research, Youthscape,
and a former editor of Youthwork Magazine*

FAITH GENERATION

*Retaining young people and
growing the Church*



Nick Shepherd



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*In memory of Tom Conway,
an example of faith for any generation*

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Introduction

The urgent need for faith generation

It was just before the start of a youth group session I was helping to lead that the profound comment came. I was chatting with one of the girls in the group about the ups and downs of her week at school. I can't now recall the exact events, but it had been one of those weeks where she had felt her faith was under pressure. There had been arguments in a religious education (RE) class about religion being a problem in the world – a point that the teacher had asked her to defend. There was a friend confiding in her about a situation that was tough to handle because, as the friend acknowledged, since she was a Christian she knew she would listen to her! Then just before coming to the group there had been a fall-out with parents about a night out that had gone on later than expected. Then came the phrase that struck me and has stuck with me ever since: 'You know, Nick, I am *trying to be a Christian*.'

I had been involved in youth ministry at this point for about ten years and knew full well that young people needed to be active in owning and forming their own faith, but there was something that caught my imagination in this moment. Two things fell into place in my understanding of the role and purpose of youth ministry, which began the journey to this book. The first was that I probably did not appreciate fully the experience and task of 'trying to be Christian' that this young woman and her contemporaries have – the complexities and challenge of holding and expressing faith in an environment that was either hostile or indifferent; the ways in which being a Christian also, though, drew her into being someone who could be relied on; the ways in which the dimensions of all this activity of being Christian are hidden or hard to express when conflicts over commitment or behaviour

come to the fore. The second thought followed obviously from this. Does youth ministry actually help young people trying to be Christian – and if so, how?

This book presents an account of the experiences of young people trying to be Christian and a model of youth ministry built upon understanding faith in this generation. Such an approach is vital if we are to address the pressing need of helping children and young people form faith, faith that will be sustained and sustain them in the world in which they live. In many parts of the world, including the UK, we have a decline in faith generation. Christian faith is falling and failing for young people.

The need to address this issue is one of the headline conclusions from the Church of England's recent study into church growth. The *From Anecdote to Evidence* report in 2014 concluded that if we want our churches to be healthy and growing places, we could do much worse than begin with a focused attention on our work with children and young people. If we are serious about investing in 'focal ministries' that support the life of communities of faith, this research also suggests that the most fruitful investment we can make is to employ, or at the very least deploy, someone to coordinate this task.

There is an urgent need to focus on children, young people and their parents and a challenge to identify how the church can best invest in people, programmes and strategies which will encourage young people actively to continue exploring faith.¹

These insights in growth and children and youth ministry came from the Church Growth Research Programme,² summarized in *From Anecdote to Evidence*. This work found that almost half of Anglican churches had fewer than five young people under 16. Churches with no young people at all are also more likely to be in decline. Conversely, churches with young people are twice as likely to be growing churches, and where they employ a children

¹ *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011–13* (London: The Church of England, 2014), 24.

² <www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk>.

or youth worker they are half as likely as other churches to be in decline. In comparison with other appointments a church can make, this suggests that employing someone in this role is the most effective lay appointment a church can make in terms of growth. While the data drawn on for the report can only show an *association* between growth and children and youth work, it does provide significant evidence to back up the call for prioritizing this area of church life.

This is an argument that many involved in Christian youth work and ministries have been pressing for some time and it is good to finally have some evidence to back up the anecdotal accounts of the importance of this area of mission and ministry. Like all good researchers the authors of *From Anecdote to Evidence* take great care not to overstate the implication that if a church does focus on youth and children's work, growth will naturally follow. They are also cautious about stating that this focus is the cause of growth, as opposed to a sign of growth being managed well. I understand this caution, but wish to argue here that not only is there a link between children and youth ministry and growth, there is a relationship. We see health and growth in a church because attention to ministry and mission with children and young people (if done well) causes this.

To support my case I will draw on research of my own, undertaken over a number of years with young people and their youth leaders, into what difference youth ministry might make for young people 'trying to be Christians'. In conducting this I spent three years talking with young people about their experiences of being Christian and observing and discussing with them the youth ministry projects in which they participated. This close-up research on actual practice offers evidence of its own into what works in youth ministry. By looking at the detail of the activities that this ministry involves, and by asking young people how this relates to their experience of being Christian, we move closer to identifying the causes of growth connected with youth ministry suggested by the *From Anecdote to Evidence* research. Looking at this detail gives a greater insight into why this ministry makes a difference, shows what it does for the young people who participate in this provision

and highlights its important role in shaping healthy church life. As we move through the examples of the youth ministry projects I researched, there will also be benefit in thinking about the actual practice you might be engaged in, or be able to observe. Some insights may resonate and others may not. The critical issue is to try to discern not only what we can do, but also why this is important. If we can identify clear principles, these then help to inform practice in a variety of contexts. This is the aim of this book – to identify what the challenges are for faith generation and to outline a model of youth ministry to address these.

It is clear both from *From Anecdote to Evidence*, and from wider work at the moment, that in speaking of work with children and young people we cannot focus only on the older age group, namely, teenagers. Since it was this group that was the focus of my research it is the area that I can strongly evidence here. However, from what the young people themselves say, backed up by writing focused on the importance of children and family ministry, many of my conclusions have broader applicability. I will, though, be focusing on work with young people, which I argue has a particular importance in considering faith formation.

By the end of the book I hope to have made a case that the urgent action on work with children, young people and their parents called for in *From Anecdote to Evidence* is necessary and achievable. My main point will be that we need to take action because faith formation in our contemporary context doesn't just 'happen' – it needs to be stimulated and supported. This is the main thrust of describing this activity as *faith generation*. This approach is perhaps obvious in the context of mission – in the ways in which we might seek to engage and encourage young people outside the Church to enquire and explore about what being Christians might mean. My contention is that this is equally true for young people who have been 'brought up to believe'. This means looking more closely at what it is actually like for these young people in the journey towards young adulthood and asking the question, 'What do we need to do as communities of faith to help provide the conditions and catalyst for faith generation?' From this we can begin to piece together some strategies that

might help foster faith generation. I will also argue that when we do this, it not only has an impact on young people themselves but also acts as a stimulus for growth within church communities and for the local church within its community. This then is a 'why-how-to' book – we first need to understand *why* we need to focus our action in this area and what impact we are looking for, before we proceed to consider *how to* do this.

I will begin by looking in closer detail at the trends and influences that lie behind the findings presented in *From Anecdote to Evidence*. While it is encouraging to know that there are signs of growth, it is important to read these against the context of decline, particularly that of young people's participation in church. This decline has been continual for some time and this then is our first 'why' question. Why is this decline happening and what are the reasons for this?

Central will be the idea that the eventuality of future generations forming and expressing a vibrant Christian faith is no longer a 'natural process'. It does not happen automatically, even where parents and others are supportive and active in wanting to raise their children in the faith they hold. The passing on of faith from one generation to the next has always required an active engagement in telling the story and helping young people grow into their own understanding, yet in our situation of decline this is increasingly problematic – the Church is experiencing a 'general failure in passing on faith from one generation to the next'.³ Understanding this helps to identify what is different in the places where we see growth and the links this has to the focused youth work and ministry happening in these contexts. From this understanding we will have greater insight into what can be gained from investing in and enhancing our work among children and young people.

Before looking at the impact that youth work and ministry has for young people 'trying to be Christian', it is important to identify what I mean by this activity. What are we talking about

³ A. Crockett and D. Voas, 'Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th-Century Britain', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 4 (2006), 567–84; David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005), 11–28.

when we encourage churches to engage in this activity as a focused ministry? What does it look like and whom does it involve? This overview is mainly to help situate the insights and experiences of the young people I talked to and is not meant to be a comprehensive review of youth work and ministry. Such an overview would undoubtedly be helpful as we seek to invest in growing this area of activity, but it is not provided here! Important parameters, though, do need to be set around the basis of this work – youth ministry – as providing *distinct learning*, *intentional relationships* and *formative practices* for young people trying to be Christian. These are not the only ways to define this activity, but are the ones that I think are most pertinent to the issue of faith generation, which is my focus here.⁴

The two opening chapters set the scene for exploring faith generation, for looking at why youth ministry is an important activity in supporting young people in forming and expressing faith. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I explore how young people's participation in youth ministry helps enable them to form and express faith. Essentially I argue that for young people there are three key challenges to faith formation that they must identify and address. These challenges are *making the implausible choice*, *making coherent sense* and *making reliable use* of faith. These phrases capture the crucial dimensions of forming faith in our contemporary context as young people experience this task.

To act towards faith generation, youth ministry needs to bolster and boost this activity. The requirement of choosing to believe, and the continuing implications of this for young people, is a powerful social pressure on their identity, whether a young person has been brought up to believe or has been brought into belief later in life. The capacity of youth ministry to help in this choice, and to facilitate ongoing choice, is the first factor in addressing decline. Youth ministry must play a role in helping to make faith plausible in the modern world and helping young people to establish their own Christian presence.

⁴ See Sally Nash and Jo Whitehead, eds, *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

Young people too need to make sense of God in their own way in their own world. This may be obvious to those of us who feel we have a handle on it, but on reflection it perhaps shouldn't be. When young people talk about their experience of God – in fact their need for an experience of God – they tell us all something crucial about the pressure of holding faith in what can be termed a secular age. When young people tell us of the struggles they have in making sense of this God in the face of the cynicism of others and the scepticism created by the trials of life, they express this as a challenge to their sense of identity. Youth ministry plays a valuable part in setting the space for making sense of faith as an issue of identity as well as understanding. Done well, this can also help communities of faith share in this task and take direction from insights.

As young people begin to demonstrate to themselves that the life of faith is useful, and that their lives might be useful to God in his world, we see the importance of focusing intentionally on faith generation. As adults we may feel that teenage faith in God is a little too self-focused. Yet this is what might well be needed for many young people – someone to give something extra to their sense of self. We may feel that the shape of young people's spirituality is often a little self-indulgent. However, surely our faith does have to be useful to us. Being Christian ought to help lead us towards an abundant life, a meaningful life and a sense of a fulfilled life. If we start by listening to how being Christian helps young people negotiate their immediate needs in seeking this fullness of life, we can then seek to engage in deeper conversations about what a deeper life of discipleship might look like. Conversely, we may find that such a life is already richly present, but we are not accustomed to recognizing it because it looks different from the discipleship of adult believers. The activities of youth ministry can provide a challenging environment for young people to nudge forward a wider sense of engagement in life, as disciples, to test and deepen the reliability of their faith.

These activities are all crucial for the task of faith generation in the context in which we live, and they form the basis of the model of faith generation I outline in Chapter 6. Faith generation

Introduction

requires action to address the plausibility, identity and reliability of faith in a secular age. Engaging in youth ministry shaped by these principles and practices is the way in which we can take urgent action to stem and reverse decline. This in itself is sufficient argument for a greater focus on this activity within our churches. Yet the effect of this faith generation is not limited to young people alone. Focused work on faith generation among children and young people has a direct impact on the church communities of which they are a part and on the communities where we are seeking to make connections. This impact underscores why this work should be prioritized if we wish to see growth in the context of decline. This, as I will conclude in Chapter 7, can be achieved in any church context, whether it has a small base to start from or a more extensive approach to youth ministry already.

1

Decline, growth and signposts for change

In Britain institutional religion now has a half-life of one generation, to borrow the terminology of radioactive decay. The generation now in middle age has produced children who are only half as likely as they are to attend church, to identify themselves as belonging to a denomination, or to say that belief is important to them. (David Voas¹)

In 2014 the Church of England produced a significant report outlining three years' worth of research into church growth entitled *From Anecdote to Evidence*. The aim of the report was to provide a clearer understanding of where growth might be occurring, and the factors that support this. While specific to Anglican expressions and initiatives, given an observable trend in other research that indicates decline is now punctuated with signs of growth,² this evidence is helpful in determining the focus for continued action and reflection on the health and growth of the Church in England.

The report presents a buoyant picture where growth is observable in 18 per cent of churches and over half are also now seen as relatively stable. A dose of realism is apparent in that 27 per cent of churches are in decline and there are some general trends that should still give cause for concern. Case studies in the research show that growth is not confined to a particular tradition but

¹ David Voas, 'Children and Youth Ministry and Church Growth', *Praxis* 1, no. 1 (2014): 3–8 (3).

² Peter Brierley, *The Tide Is Running Out* (London: Christian Research, 2001); Peter Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing: What the 2005 English Church Census Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2006).

