

Presidential Address Diocesan Synod March 9 2024

Hands up if you can trace your engagement with church and faith back to your college or university years, between around 18 and 21. Thank you.

Now hands up if you can trace your engagement with church and faith back to your teenage years, to experiences, encounters, that you had during the years when you were secondary school age. Thank you.

Now hands up if you can trace your engagement with church and faith back to your primary school years, 4/5 to 10/11. Thank you.

Now hands up if you can trace your engagement back to pre-school, to the first three or four years of your life.

Thank you. Now everyone who has put their hands up put them up again together. Thank you. Now everyone who has not put their hand up, put them up.

So. What do you notice?

Research in 2017 suggested that 40 per cent of practicing UK Christians came to faith by the age of 5. 16% came to faith by the age of 10 and 19 per cent between the age of 11-18. So three quarters of those in our churches today came to faith as a child or young person.

So let's drill down a little more. When you think about how you set out on this journey, for how many of you was the key thing, the absolutely key thing, Sunday School? RE at school?

Ok, so for how many of you was the key thing a person – let's start with parent or grandparent? Teacher at school? Vicar or youth worker?

That may have been a bit of a crude set of distinctions, but the point is clear, most of us began our journey of faith as youngsters, and what has really made the difference to our starting out on the road of faith is people, people, you could say, like us.

So let me ask another question. As well as the journey of faith, what about the whole process of growing up – for whom was there one or two, or a few, key adults in our lives who made a real difference to us, adults other than our parents – maybe the vicar, or a teacher at school, or the youth group leader, our best friends' parents, or the Scout leader – someone whom we just felt was important to us and helped us, even just by being there, in our growing up.

People matter for young people today just the same as they did for us, for faith and for growing up. And crucially I imagine what we most remember when we were growing up is that there were these key adults who simply were there for us, listened to us and believed in us. Be with. Listen to. Believe in.

We are called to be such people to young people today. It is about relationships. And that is true if we are accompanying youngsters on a journey

of faith, or we are accompanying them on the journey of growing up in this complicated world. Be with. Listen to. Believe in.

My suspicion is that for many adult Christians today, while we can remember key people in our lives, both for our faith and for just growing up, we now find that the gap between us and youngsters today, certainly after primary school age, seems to have become just so big that we are not sure how to make contact. And then the whole safeguarding situation has made that feel just so complicated. So, just to say to that, if we do the training so we understand the issues and our responsibility, and the procedures are in place, then that is absolutely manageable. Yes we need to stay alert, but it does not stop us being engaged.

Yet the experience of young people today is much more complicated than it was when most of us were growing up. I know that from my own children. But I also know that relationships with key adults are just as key, be that teachers, clergy, parents of friends, and young adult friends.

So as church people, we have a role we can play in our young people's lives, not just in introducing them to the Christian faith, but to help them in their processes of growing up, of learning to be who they are in a complicated and stressful world. Be with. Listen to. Believe.

For the past 5 years or so

I have had the privilege of convening a group of county leaders who are engaged in supporting young people one way or another, ranging from the

Community Foundation to the Police, to SCC, Community Matters, Community Action Suffolk, the Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance, the Department of Work and Pensions, the Suffolk Lieutenancy and so forth. We meet to stay in touch, to stay joined up so that more work supporting young people in our county is actually connected and we can try to spot the gaps.

When we started we commissioned some research to listen to young people of Suffolk. You may remember this. A couple of key points came out of this for me. First, that young people want to be involved in the decision-making processes that affect them. That means, at the simplest level, it is not up to us to decide what would be good for them. It is up to us to listen to young people and work with them to design programmes, projects, events and so forth with them.

And secondly, what they really wanted then, and want still, are safe places to meet with each other, places they have had a hand in designing, and where there are adults in the background, ready to give support and advice, and ensuring the youngsters safety. Not elaborate expensive programmes. Safe spaces to be. Be with. Listen to. Believe in.

Those two key findings have stayed with me. The second one we have made a good deal of progress in addressing, creating safe spaces, including in our churches. The first one others have made progress in but we have a distance to go as a diocese. The young people's cry, "not about us without us", rings in my ears. Where do we really listen to young people?

I was ecstatic that we managed to have two teenagers involved in the interviews for the new Director of Mission and Ministry, but that is unusual, and we certainly are not good at including youngsters in our governance and planning. We are having a Synod on engaging with young people without a young person in sight. So this is an area I do hope we can work on, and when we look at this in groups, I hope we can ask, how do we listen to young people? How can the church support young people to better understand the world around them, and understand the power of their own voice?

I am encouraged by the examples of churches in Suffolk, creating safe spaces for youngsters and then not organising some elaborate programme for them but listening to them, sitting with their questions, and especially having the confidence not to feel they need to answer them. Be with. Listen to. Believe in.

Shortly we're hearing from three people from around the diocese who are running projects, reaching out to the children and young people in their communities. They have listened and will continue to listen to youngsters in these projects. Otherwise they won't work.

Chris Davey from Framlingham will be talking about his 'Sing Praise' initiative.

Pam Tonks from Long Melford who will be talking about the variety of ministries they're offering.

James Beckitt from Red Lodge who will be talking about his work with young people.

There are other projects in the pipeline for our diocese including a new 'Music, Ministry and Mission' initiative which I am delighted is being planned – and Chris Davey's work in Framlingham is a taste of this. The project will use musical opportunities to bring young people together, recognising that for many, including many of us, that taste of faith came through music and particularly singing. That's also why choirs are so important, and some of the most significant young people's work in this diocese happens through robed church choirs.

There are national programmes that we are part of too. Growing Faith is a national church movement that exists to put children, young people and families instinctively at the heart of all the mission and ministry of the Church by shifting the culture of the Church of England. It comes from the vision set by the House of Bishops and endorsed by General Synod in 2019 and involves churches, schools and households working together to help children, young people and families experience life in all its fullness. I am delighted that Mission and Ministry and Education departments are working together on this. We would love every child and young person living in our diocese to have the opportunity not just to hear about faith through their local church or school, but to get to know people of faith who will pay attention to them, and listen to them. I know this is going on in many many places across Suffolk, and I want to encourage all who are contributing to this work.

Flourish is another programme that is just being developed nationally, to support schools developing worshipping communities. This is in the pilot stage, with dioceses being asked to express interest, which we are doing.

So we may be those called to be alongside youngsters of whatever ages to accompany them on the journey of faith. We may be those called to accompany them on the journey of growing up. Or both. Whatever it is, and whether that's a couple of us looking out for the kids in our village, or whether it is a group working on a particular project with youngsters, let's have the confidence and the trust to let the children and young people guide us. Paying attention to them. Learning from them. And quietly sharing our wisdom and experience, of life and of God. Let what helped many of us guide us: Be with. Listen to. Believe in.