

Reaching and keeping tweenagers

How do you keep your 'tweenagers' when "Two-thirds of 10 year olds in church will leave in their next two years"? This is one of many findings in Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers (Peter Brierley, Reaching and keeping tweenagers, London: Christian Research, 2002, www.christian-research.org.uk) a fascinating survey into how 2,000 age 10s-14s think and what makes them tick. It may help leaders understand who their Sunday School children are turning into! But how well does Youth Emmaus respond to key elements of the tweenage mindset identified in this survey?

Trusting relationships are key to tweenage life, primarily family, with parents first and a special place for grandparents - but church leaders only sixth out of 17. However, to tweenagers, 'family' is "any person or group whom you love or care about deeply, or who love or care about you deeply" (p.31). Youth Emmaus responds through the Emmaus principles: "walking with them on their journey ... good companions, faithfully witnessing to the gospel and showing Christ's love by the way we deal with people" (Youth Emmaus handbook, p.xii). Happily, older leaders are a definite asset as tweenagers can relate to them like grandparents! Also, because tweenagers see family as the top source of their values (not EastEnders, surprisingly the media comes bottom of the list!) the four Youth Emmaus sessions on Christian lifestyle will press the right buttons.

Tweenagers love doing things together. Teen-magazine or DVD formats have their place, but Youth Emmaus is about doing things. It mixes a wide variety of activity, interaction, exploration, discussion, making things, using actions and symbols for prayer and reflection - not forgetting video and music!

Tweenagers are fascinated by Heaven, God, Jesus, and praying. They are "not against the Christian faith, it is the church they find difficulty relating to" (Reaching and keeping tweenagers, p.135). Youth Emmaus sensibly occupies its first five sessions on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and prayer, while later looking at the church engagingly not institutionally, asking members what they think the priorities are and what sort of church they would design, always focusing on church as the relational Body of Christ.

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