

The Church in the Life of Youth and Youth in the Life of the Church

Contents

I. BELONGING TO THE CHURCH

II. WHO ARE THE YOUTH?

III. THE REALITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

IV. YOUTH IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH AND CHURCH IN THE
LIFE OF YOUTH

V. YOUTH AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

VI. DIALOGUING WITH YOUTH

A. *Resources for youth*: Exploring a new methodology

B. Feedback from youth on the resource materials

C. The role of faith in the life of youth

D. The role of the Church

E. Ecumenical awareness of youth

VII. WORKING WITH YOUTH—RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Collaboration

B. Formation

C. Participation

D. Advocacy

As part of its ninth mandate, the Joint Working Group (JWG) has sought to reflect more deeply about the reality of young people as part of the body of Christ, the Church. Our approach has been to seek to understand more fully how youth respond to the call of Christ and how youth belong, or discover the need to belong, to the church family.

I. Belonging to the Church

“Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” (1 Tim. 4:12)

1. Inspired by the words of the Apostle Paul to the young Timothy, the JWG recognizes that the Church is called to play an essential role in the life of young people, while the role and contribution of youth in the life of the Church must also be recognized and encouraged as an essential part of our Christian identity. Young people are one of the most dynamic sections of any society, and are at a fascinating stage of life. It is also a stage when nurtured development, guidance and formation are important, and even necessary. It is essential, as an integral part of the mission of the Church, to find suitable and creative ways to lead young people to Jesus Christ, the only One who has words of eternal life (cf. John 6:68).

2. The JWG agrees with Pope John Paul II when he affirmed:

What is needed today is a church which knows how to respond to the expectations of young people. Jesus wants to enter into dialogue with them and, through his body, which is the Church, to propose the possibility of a choice, which will require a commitment of their lives. As Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus, so the Church must become the traveling companion of young people.¹

3. We also understand that youth are fully part of the body of Christ, the Church, and have a significant role to play in today’s world:

We need the vision and the courage of young people for the necessary changes. We see how young people lead processes of democratization and peace in many countries today. The young people of today are witnesses and agents for peace even when they become victims of violence and terror like in Norway this summer. We have to acknowledge that we have not always been good at honoring and fostering the contributions young people can make in our religious communities. We elders standing here need to work together for peace between generations and to give young people throughout the world real hope for the future.²

4. All the churches are faced with the same reality: if young people are absent, the vitality of the Church is at stake. Yet our churches face vastly different experiences in youth participation, from parts of the developed

1. Pope John Paul II, World Youth Day 1995, Philippines.

2. Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC General Secretary, Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World, 27 October 2011, Assisi.

world, where young people have often become disassociated from the life of the institutional church, to other regions where young people form an increasingly large part of the church family. Indeed, young people comprise a significant presence in the contemporary church, and globally are one of the largest demographic groups among Christians.

5. Accordingly, we wish to stimulate discussion on how the Church can configure its life to appeal to young people, and to ensure that there are opportunities for them to experience and understand the richness of the Christian faith. While it is frequently (and correctly) said that young people are the church of tomorrow, we also wish to affirm and reflect upon their place and role in today's church.

II. Who Are the Youth?

6. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines "youth" as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24. Young people, according to this definition, currently number 1.2 billion, accounting for approximately 18 percent of the global population,³ a substantial demographic group. Such an age range, however, covers a period of enormous growth in physical development and maturity, and it is helpful to distinguish between teenagers (13-19) and young adults (20-24), since the sociological, psychological and physical contexts that they face differ substantially. For many churches, however, those regarded as youth cannot be determined by a uniform reference to their age, but rather by their dynamic contribution in particular cultural contexts. What constitutes youth in one culture may be significantly different in another. Most youth ministries across different churches worldwide therefore also differ, although it is common to cater to youth in general across the ages of 18-35 years.

III. The Reality Facing Young People Today

"Test everything; hold fast to what is good." (1 Thess. 5:21)

7. All would agree that the contemporary world presents many challenges to young people. The JWG wishes to suggest, however, that these very challenges also can be seen as opportunities to relate to youth, and to speak to them of the value and advantages of a life of faith in fidelity to Christ.

8. The first challenge is the pressure of an increasingly global society, which places high expectations on young people, which demands high

3. www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wyr10/Brief%20demographic.pdf.

levels of skill, efficiency and competitiveness, and in which education is fundamental. The pressure towards academic achievement that is linked to employment prospects has become a serious concern for many young people, while many others are struggling even to have access to education—a struggle made more difficult by poverty, political instability, violence and conflict.

9. Second, the very diversity of human culture, with its global accessibility, brings along with it the risk of feeding an individualistic approach to life. This may be aggravated by a lack of appropriate role models and sources of authority, and even an abundance of negative examples. The family is not always able to provide the appropriate support and guidance which are so essential to young people in their discernment as they mature.

10. The JWG invites the churches to be aware of the consequences of these pressures, and the inevitable frustrations to which they can give rise. As youth are influenced by patterns of living that challenge older generations, youth also fear that their voice is not valued or is not being heard.

11. Another reality that must be acknowledged is the social context affecting contemporary youth. It is important to take serious note of the proliferation of information and communication technologies that have had a considerable impact on the lives of young people. These technologies especially have affected their interests, priorities, passions and lifestyles. For example, new social networking technologies have changed the perspective and understanding of young persons on many issues, but especially with respect to human relationships, even to the extent that personal and direct relationships are at times replaced by virtual contacts.

12. Nevertheless, the JWG invites the churches to reflect on positive opportunities provided by these new technologies. If given the opportunity, young people often exhibit great interest in contributing to society and to the life of the Church. With their vast knowledge of information technologies, they have the means to harness the potential inherent in those media. Many young people have developed remarkable, creative communication skills, enabling them to link up, network and collaborate. This means that there is an impressive sense of global solidarity among young people today, and a passion for empowering themselves to mobilize into action. Youth is dynamic; its preference is for participatory and action-oriented programmes and events. They aspire to put their acquired learning and training into practice, especially at the service of the poor and voiceless.

13. Moreover, the contemporary world encourages young people to develop a sense of independent action. Young people dare to make decisions on their own, they yearn to get the most out of life, and they are open to new experiences. Importantly—and surprisingly for some observers—a great number of young people continue to search for personal spiritual experiences. They have a deep longing for a personal relationship with God. The JWG challenges the churches to ask whether they truly give young people an opportunity to cultivate their relationship with God and personal spiritual development, as well as community experience and involvement.

IV. Youth in the Life of the Church and Church in the Life of Youth

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ...” (1Cor.12: 5a)

14. The JWG suggest that the challenges outlined above also have an impact on the way that youth participate in the Church.

Their heightened influence in society demands of them [young people] a proportionately active apostolate. Happily, their natural qualities fit them for this activity. As they become more conscious of their own personality, they are impelled by a zest for life and abounding energies to assume their own responsibility, and they yearn to play their part in social and cultural life. If this zeal is imbued with the spirit of Christ and is inspired by obedience to and love for the shepherds of the Church, it can be expected to be very fruitful. They themselves ought to become the prime and direct apostles of youth, exercising the apostolate among themselves and through themselves and reckoning with the social environment in which they live.⁴

15. A number of young people continue to engage in the life of the church through worship and liturgy, parochial/congregational activity, and participation in various youth organizations and movements. Many others, however, remain passive or cease to involve themselves in any church-related activities. Both groups can feel that the church lives in a culture that is unresponsive to their aspirations and modes of expression. This can lead to an uneasiness and sense of distance from the life of the Church.

16. We should neither ignore nor avoid addressing this increasing uneasiness, isolation, and indeed frustration with the church that is sometimes expressed by young people. The church may seem irrelevant to them and may appear unable to inspire trust. The churches sometimes

4. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, n. 12.

fail to demonstrate how young people can play a tangible role in their lives—a role that young people expect to be offered if they are invited to participate. One of the most important issues for churches to reflect on is how to avoid the perception that the contribution of young people is undervalued. For many young people, the difficult realities of the world in which they live—where injustice, conflict, unemployment and so many other issues seem to prevail—challenge their belonging to the church. If the Church is seen as a catalyst for change, a hope for justice and peace expressed in the good news of God’s kingdom, then such realities can be considered an opportunity to strengthen the faith of young people.

17. Thus, we invite the churches to seek to understand and respond to the complex reality experienced by youth, to be open to their needs and expectations as a key for developing, maintaining and nurturing their belonging to the Church. We also invite the churches to give young people the opportunity to identify substantial contributions, roles and responsibilities within the church that will enable them to gain confidence and to feel trusted.

18. In creating these opportunities, the churches must bear in mind the dynamic of the Church as described by the Apostle Paul, who points to the importance of every member in it. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (Rom. 12:4-6a). While young persons in the church have their own particular and important function, they must also be helped to recognize that other members also have their own contributions to make. Undoubtedly, “we do not want to create for the youth a special separate division in the church, since they are part of the one family of the church.”⁵

19. It is helpful to acknowledge that, in the history of the church, there have been young people who have been good examples, and whose impact has been widely recognized for their outstanding contribution to the church. We think, for example, of Saint Francis of Assisi, who, we read, “was a young man when he surrendered his life to God. His passion for the goodness of creation and example of radical daring for peace show the significance of faith and the courage of young people. What Francis accomplished as a young man in his twenties is a salutary reminder to us

5. His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV, 4th JWG Plenary Session, Saidnaya, Syria, October 2010.

of the important role that young people need to and can play both in the faith communities and in wider society.”⁶

20. In the early church of the second century, Bishop Eleutherios was 22 years of age when he was martyred in Valona Illyria, today Albania. St. Therese of Lisieux, who was canonized by the Catholic Church and officially named as “Doctor of the Church,” was only 24 years old when she died in 1897. These and others are models who demonstrate how the contributions of youth to the Church can be real and substantial.

V. Youth and Christian Unity

“That they may all be one...” (John 17:21)

21. In reflecting on the role of youth in promoting Christian unity, the JWG also invites the churches to develop new ways of engaging young people in the work of ecumenism.

22. As disciples of Christ themselves, youth share in the church’s mission. Young people have played a crucial role in shaping the development of the modern ecumenical movement, and they continue to play a role in the search for the unity willed by Christ for the church in the third millennium.

23. Among the earliest ecumenical institutions, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, and gathered young men and women together across the lines of the divided churches. The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), founded in 1895, and the local Student Christian Movement (SCM) similarly gathered university students together. For generations, these organizations provided the training ground for future ecumenical leadership. Under the leadership of John Mott, one of the early pioneers of ecumenism, the WSCF and the English SCM were pivotal in shaping the direction of the 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference into something more ecclesial in nature, which in turn ignited the modern ecumenical movement.

24. In recent years, the Ecumenical Global Gathering for Students and Youth in 1993 sought to continue the role of young people in promoting ecumenism. In early 2000, the Ecumenical Asia Students and Youth Network (EASY Net) was formed to strengthen the ecumenical network and initiatives in the region. On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, global Christian

6. Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC General Secretary. 27 October 2011. Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World. Assisi.

youth organizations were involved in common action with other Christian student and youth organizations at regional and local levels. The World Youth Days, started in 1985 with John Paul II's invitation to Catholic youth "to announce to everyone that only in the death and resurrection of Christ we can find salvation and redemption," also recognizes the role of youth in promoting ecumenism.

25. Today, undeniably, there is increasing interest in and desire to increase youth participation in the life of the Church and the ecumenical movement. Yet at the same time, there may be a growing sense of frustration about the way that churches engage with young people. Thus, we challenge churches to reflect on their perceptions of youth. The way that we understand youth involvement and engagement can reveal a generational gap. At times young people are even seen to be a problem, and they can feel ignored within their churches. At times, they perceive that they are treated with condescension, as an audience, as passive recipients, or as targets, rather than as potential partners. We invite the churches to respond to the call by The Revd Samuel Kobia, former WCC general secretary, to establish a positive perspective on youth:

The time has come, when we must not only open opportunities to young people for their ecumenical growth and leadership, but where we must learn from the innovative and dynamic models of ecumenical relationships that youth can teach us. As an ecumenical and intergenerational family, we need to humble ourselves and to listen to young people. It was with young people that the ecumenical movement was born. It is young people's passion and insight today that will ensure the relevance and vitality of it. Without young people our ecumenical family is incomplete. At this time we need to nurture meaningful relationships and shared leadership between the generations. Young people need to know that they are important partners and that we are open to learning from their ecumenical experience.⁷

26. The WCC-ECHOS Commission on Youth was created in 2007 to encourage young adults to become more active in the life of the churches and the ecumenical movement. We call upon our member churches to consider how, in a similar way, their ecumenical engagement can offer young people the sense that their contribution is heard and valued, and that their ideas and enthusiasms are making a real difference in the work of Christian unity.

7. The Rev. Samuel Kobia, ninth WCC assembly, Porto Alegre, 2006

VI. Dialoguing with Youth

A. Resources for youth: Exploring a new methodology

27. Bearing in mind that the topics of ecumenical reception and the spiritual roots of ecumenism have been the focus of the JWG's ninth mandate, the study about youth has explored ways to seek a deep connection with these wider issues. Our aim has not been to compose a document solely about youth, but also to open a channel of communication with young people through specific resources that can be used in different places and churches.

28. As a starting point, the JWG prepared a six page document titled *Resources for Youth*, to be tested among young people on a worldwide level.⁸The growing awareness of decreasing youth participation in church life in the developed world was an important factor in developing the materials. Youth's believing without belonging is one of the biggest challenges for all churches. The intention of the document was not to carry out a theoretical analysis of the reasons behind this situation, but rather to encourage a dialogue with young people themselves.

29. The three areas explored by the *Resources for Youth* are: 1) believing (faith); 2) belonging to the Church (baptism); and 3) living one's faith (discipleship). Each area was dealt with from three different perspectives: the word of God, the early Christian witnesses, and the church today. There was no intention to create a new catechism, but rather to provide a template that might be used by different churches in various contexts. The resources were prepared with the intention to test them in group encounters or sessions focusing on the three areas. While each encounter would have a formal structure, creativity and fresh insights were encouraged. Different methodologies were put forward (including bibliodrama, brainstorming, story-telling, picture analysis, and film). An evaluation form was provided to obtain feedback.

30. The resource materials were tested among Christian students' groups, parish and congregational groups, as well as in schools. Members of the ECHOS Commission and young leaders from different parts of the world, including America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, also reviewed and tested the materials. The JWG is very grateful for the generous and honest responses received.

8. The resource is available on the website of the WCC: www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/the-wcc-and-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/youth-in-the-ecumenical-movement.html.

B. Feedback from youth on the resource materials

31. The responses we received addressed a number of issues: the role of faith in the lives of young people; explored what it means to belong to the Christian tradition; considered the role of the Church; and examined the interaction with Christians from different traditions. Even though there was little familiarity with the Church Fathers, the use of these texts did not prove to be a real obstacle. While no particular concern was expressed regarding the content, some respondents, however, expressed difficulty in identifying with certain aspects of different ecclesial traditions.

32. It is important, however, to underline that *Resources for Youth* is intended as a starting point, and that the JWG encourages churches which may like to use this material to develop suitable reflections and emphases suitable for their own Christian traditions. Nevertheless, the youth involved in the consultation considered the resource materials to be useful and interesting tools.

33. While the *Resources for Youth* treated issues, such as faith, conversion and discipleship, that are not commonly associated with young people, the feedback shows a surprising interest in and readiness to speak out about these topics. Naturally, opinions and experiences differed.

C. The role of faith in the life of youth

34. The feedback contained important insights about the significant role that faith plays in the life of young people, and the way that faith provides spiritual support to their overall well-being. The responses we received affirmed that young people find that faith helps them to distinguish between good and evil, gives them guidance in their solitude, and enables them to experience the existence of God. Some young people responded that it would not be possible to exist without faith because it gives them a sense of meaning and purpose, and helps them to overcome obstacles in their lives. Faith was seen by the majority of youth responding as a source of direction, strength, and courage. It was also described as giving a sense of solidarity, confidence, rest and space for protest, compassion and love, comfort, and a way of dealing with life. Some young people believe that they are led to faith by everyday problems and trials; others by Sunday worship, their relationship with other Christian believers or moments of prayer. Some youth feel challenged by how to put faith into practice and wonder whether it is possible to live a Christian life in the professional workplace.

D. The role of the church

35. While faith was identified as a very important issue in many young people's lives, the question of the relevance of church membership for youth provides much thought for reflection. For many of our respondents, the recognition of the importance of faith did not entail automatically becoming active in a church. Some young people expressed eagerness to be part of the Christian tradition, while others felt they could live their Christian faith without the church.

36. While some young people do not believe that the church has a significant role to play in nurturing their faith, others appreciated the pastoral care offered by the church at various levels. Some expressed regret that they do not receive enough support from the Christian community. Nonetheless, the church appears to be a constant reminder of questions of faith even to those who do not practice their faith regularly.

37. In a relativistic world, it can be difficult for youth to understand where truth lies, not only in matters of ethics and universal values, but also in other matters of faith and beliefs. This is particularly complicated in the pluralistic setting in which all our churches live. Some question the authority and the moral teaching of church leaders. The responses we received generally affirmed, however, that the church is called upon and expected to play an active role in modern society.

E. Ecumenical awareness of youth

38. The feedback shows that while young people are very open to interaction with the various Christian traditions, in general there is little awareness of ecumenism in the wider life of the church, or of the role that young people can play in this area. Therefore, the JWG believes it is important for churches to consider how they can involve young people more in their ecumenical strategies, so that they move from a merely peaceful coexistence with other Christians to a conscious effort to promote Christian unity.

VII. Working with Youth—Recommendations

39. We recognize that each new generation of Christians inherits the burden of past divisions. We invite our parent bodies to promote initiatives seeking to build cooperation and exchange among young people from different churches. The JWG wishes to highlight four areas in particular in which the parent bodies might wish to concentrate their

efforts and pursue common initiatives to encourage youth involvement in the ecumenical movement: collaboration, formation, participation and advocacy.

A. Collaboration

- We invite churches to develop clearly directed and purposeful cooperation with existing Christian youth networks on a regular basis. Although institutional support for specific events is much appreciated, it is just as important to establish partnerships with existing bodies for ecumenical work.

- We commend the ECHOS commission on youth as a useful instrument for developing ecumenism in the 21st century. In doing so, we are aware that ECHOS must include representation of regional and international ecumenical youth networks.

- We encourage an emphasis on the ecumenical dimension in the context of youth events. International youth gatherings also could provide a fruitful opportunity for a common ecumenical commitment. In this context, it is worth mentioning the ecumenical event that was jointly organized by the International Young Catholic Students (IYCS) in collaboration with ECHOS during the World Youth Day (WYD) in Madrid, 2011. It also is important to repeat such experiences at a local level.

B. Formation

- We encourage churches to provide suitable ecumenical educators and to develop resource materials for the ecumenical formation of young people.

- We recommend prayerful reading of the sacred scriptures in common as well as the opportunity to discover afresh the Christian witness of the first centuries, helping young people to develop a sense of belonging to the body of Christ.

- We call the churches to evaluate and renew themselves through the lens of the critique offered by young people.

C. Participation

- We recommend that churches invite Christian youth networks to adapt, plan and implement the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the local level on a regular basis. In the area of spiritual ecumenism, in particular, the challenge is to make use of the creativity and contribution of new generations.

- We encourage opportunities for networking between Christian movements at all levels, from the grassroots to the global, and for building friendships with Christians of other traditions.

D. Advocacy

- We urge parent bodies to exercise common advocacy on youth issues such as education and employment; and to enable youth to be agents of peace and justice.

40. We entrust this reflection to the churches in their efforts to promote Christian unity. It is an ardent appeal that reflects the aspiration of the young people of our churches, who long for meaning in their lives. We are convinced that a personal encounter with Jesus Christ will enable them to say: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).