

A Letter from Emma

Why do you like working with young people? This is a question I hear a lot in my role as the young people's worker at St John's and St Luke's. And we've all heard the quote, 'Never work with children or animals' that was coined by the American actor and comedian W C Fields. So when I was asked to write something for the magazine this month, I thought I would share with you all the reasons that I LOVE working with teenagers! I am aware that teenagers have the potential to make adults anxious. They just do! Spot a group of teenagers on the street and most adults get suspicious; seeing one skateboarding with a large number of piercings and blue hair, people can even become fearful. Adult anxiety of young people is ancient, even biblical. As Mark Yaconelli points out in his book, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, the only scene we're given from Jesus' adolescence is when the young Messiah sneaks away from his family and hides out in Jerusalem! When his mother finds him in the temple she asks Jesus why he has treated them like this and tells him they have been searching for him with 'great anxiety'. So it turns out that even the teenage Prince of Peace can make adults worry! There are many reasons why adults get anxious around teens. Young people fiddle with things and won't sit still; they laugh at things we don't find remotely funny; they dare to ask questions that we've never thought of like "Why do we have to go to church when Jesus never did?" They are unpredictable, conforming one day, and then swimming against the tide another; They can disarm you with a throw away comment: 'D'you know that colour doesn't suit you'; they are full of energy and can make us feel tired; they are fiercely independent one minute and yet show a child-like dependency the next; we've never heard of the bands they talk about and even their language is sometimes different to ours. Who knew the words, 'Emma, you're the goat!' were a compliment?! 4 And no, just because I'm a youth worker doesn't mean all these thoughts go away! I think youth make most youth leaders worry too! But, being with young people also makes your heart sing in a way that being with adults doesn't: they have an honesty and authenticity that is often hard to find in adults; they are playful and being around them makes you feel like a child again; they can burn with passion for something that they are interested in and will remain committed to it despite every setback possible; they will ask the questions that nobody else would dare to ask and that help you to see possibilities and directions that you never thought of before; they can be open to sharing their lives with you because they haven't yet learnt to hide things, and their conversations can energise you just by listening to them. So yes, teenagers can be difficult, unpredictable and messy! But I firmly believe that we can learn from them in all sorts of contexts, just as we expect them to learn from us. The recent 'Youth Takeover Service' at St John's proved that. There are also instances in the bible when God used teenagers. Paul chose Timothy, in all likelihood a teenager, to be his apprentice; to be the one who would convey the gospel to others. What was it about Timothy I wonder? We're told he came from a good family but I wonder what else Paul saw in him? Was it some of that passion, that commitment, even that curious mix of independence and dependency that made him someone God could use in a big way? And let's also not forget that God chose a teenager to be the mother of Jesus! God asked a teenager to bring salvation into the world; the whole future of creation hung on the answer of a teenage girl! And yet, who else but a teenager would agree to such a plan?

Emma