

YOUTH MATTERS

Appendix B of the Report of the Council of Social Responsibility to the Methodist Conference, 2004

Introduction

The Autumn Soul conference is the largest gathering of young people within the Methodist Church and gave an ideal opportunity to survey the views of some young people of our church. Working with Rev. John Alderdice who is researching church membership a questionnaire was produced which was given to all the young people on the Saturday morning prior to the first session.

The questionnaire focused on these areas:

- The concerns and worries of the young people

- Symptoms of depression and low self esteem

- Their perceptions of the church responsibility for social issues.

The young people were asked who they would talk to when worried and whether they felt that the bible teaching they had received had helped their decision making.

They were also asked if they felt the church had a role in responding to social issues and to mark the five most important topics out of a list of 27 social issues.

Results

There were 189 responses from young people aged 11 to 20 years, 67% female and 73% from Northern Ireland.

When asked to identify what they worried about (figure 1) problems relating to school and examination caused the greatest worries (>65%). Friendships and relationships were the next highest cause of worry but more than 50% of young people were worried about their faith and Christian beliefs.

Career, health and money caused significant concerns while less than 10% were worried by drugs, paramilitaries, physical and sexual abuse.

When asked about who they talked to about their worries (figure 2) it was found that as teenagers grow older they are less likely to talk to their parents, (29% of 17-20 years compared to 60% of the 11-13 year olds.) 77% of young people relied on their friends for advice but many relied on church youth workers. In the older age group young people were more likely to talk to the youth workers than their parents.

90% of young people said that the bible teaching they had received had helped guide them in the choices they make.

FIGURE 1 The areas of worry in your life during the past year

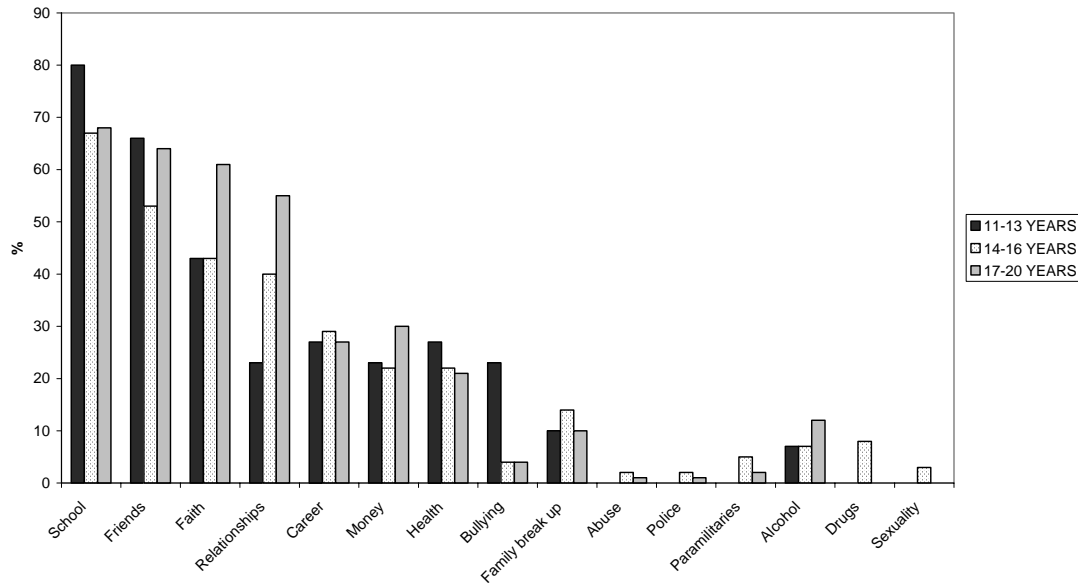
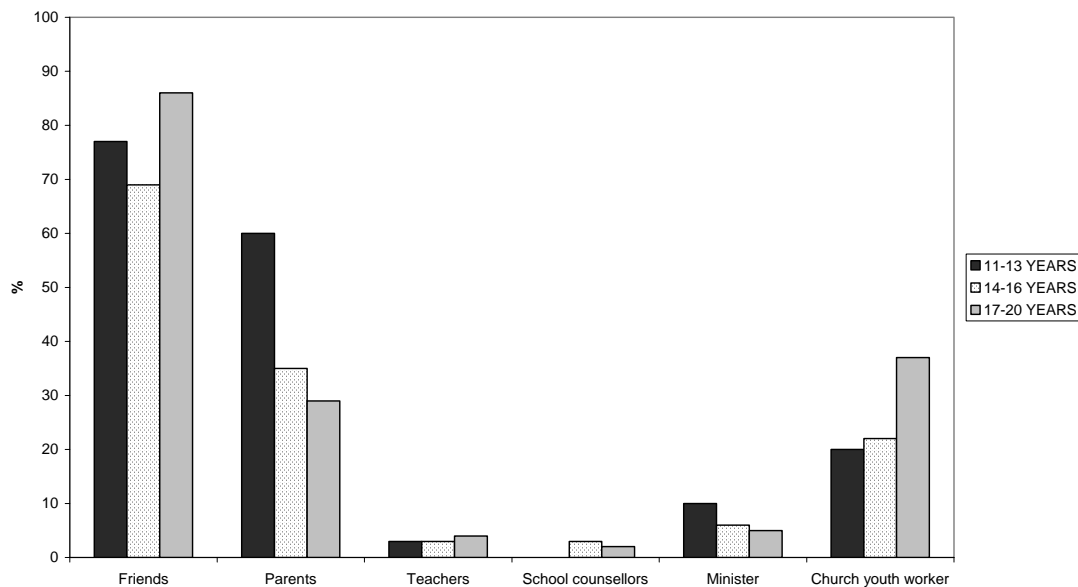


FIGURE 2 When you are worried who do you talk to?



To assess the levels of depression experienced the following questions were asked.

“Over the past year have you felt sad, blue, unhappy or “down in the dumps” almost every day for more than two weeks?” which is regarded as a strong indication of clinical depression. 16% said yes.

“Over the past year have you felt tired, with little energy, and unable to concentrate almost every day for more than two weeks?” 34% answered yes. This may be regarded as the result of too many late nights but it can indicate depression and stress.

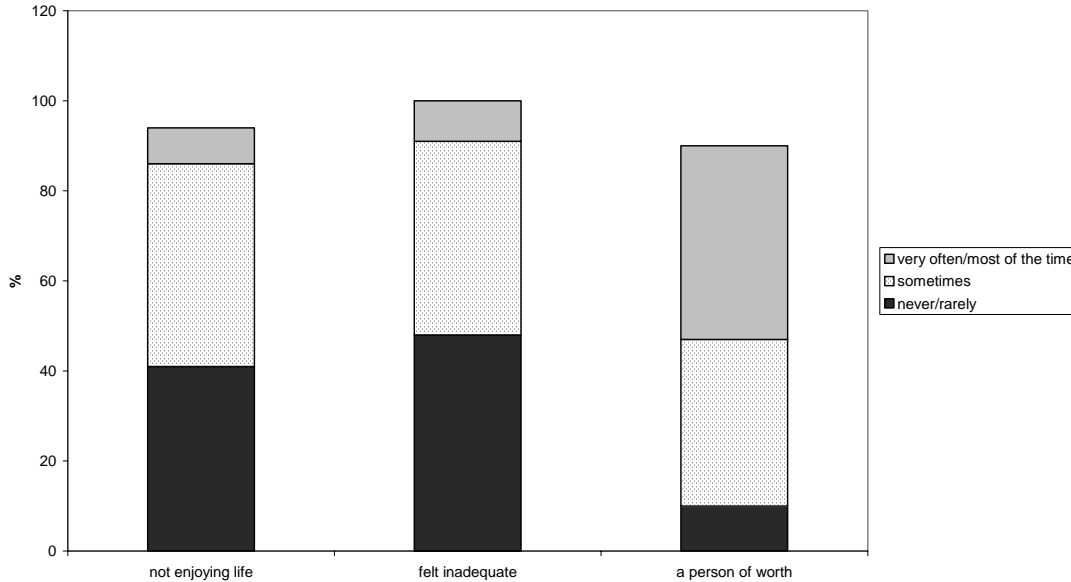
The young people were also asked to rate how often they felt...

- that they were not enjoying life and things they were involved in?
- inadequate, like a failure and that nobody likes you anymore?

- they were a person of worth, at least as good as other people?

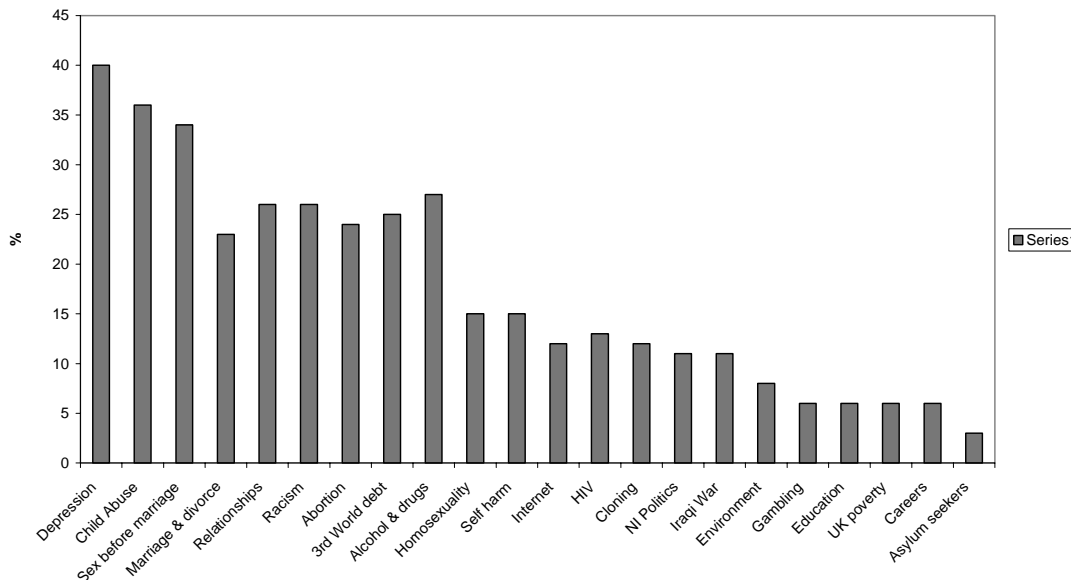
They had the choice of answers: never/ rarely/ sometimes / very often/ most of the time. There was a small percentage, 9% who were not enjoying life, feeling inadequate and of less worth (figure 3).

FIGURE 3



80% felt that the church has a responsibility to comment on social issues. They were asked to indicate which five of the given issues they considered to be most important for the church. The most common issues identified were those relating to personal wellbeing and relationships, racism, abortion, third world debt and alcohol and drugs, (figure 4).

FIGURE 4 The most important issues for the church



Discussion

The results of this small study may confirm what was already known but it also shows how relevant church life is to these young people. The young people attending Autumn Soul are not representative of all the young people attending youth activities in our churches or those in our community but they represent the church's most important link with teenagers today. Young

people will turn first to their friends for advice and to talk through problems. Peer pressure is a very strong driving force affecting the choices young people make. As a church we have a role in helping Christian young people become secure in their own beliefs so that instead of being influenced by their peers they can exert a positive influence on others. Within our church we can encourage and strengthen our young people by making space for them to contribute to the life of the church. We need to place value on the children and young people in our churches rather than on the activities we run for them.

Health education

Church youth workers have many opportunities to help young people at times of difficulty and problems. In the later teenage years they are more likely to talk to them than their parents.

Young people receive most of their health education with regard to alcohol and drug misuse and sexual health in schools. In a survey of 11-16 years old children in Northern Ireland 11% were sexually active. Northern Ireland has one of the highest incidences of births to teenage mothers in Europe, 1700 births/year. Much sex education centres on risk reduction by use of condoms with regard to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy despite the fact that the incidence of STIs and teenage pregnancy has continued to rise in England and Wales since the Health of the Nation and Teenage Pregnancy Strategies were implemented.

We do not want our young people to accept second best and the church should be prepared to take an active role in health promotion. Young people should not be sold short and should be encouraged to save sex for marriage. This is the only guarantee against unwanted pregnancy and STIs.

The Northern Executive of the Council has recently sent a response to the consultation document on Sexual Health Promotion in Northern Ireland. Concern was expressed that the message to young people was safe sex and condoms rather than abstinence and saved sex for committed relationships. This study supports the belief that the church has a role in the education of young people and that they will rely on the church for guidance.

In this study young people ranked health as much a worry as money or career choices. In our society children are becoming unhealthier due to reduced exercise and increased obesity. Youth organisations provide games and activities that give children an opportunity to exercise outside school hours and especially during the winter months.

The Council would suggest that research is carried out in the incoming year to see how we can encourage healthy lifestyles and provide health education in church-based youth activities and explore ways that this could form the basis of worthwhile outreach activity.

Discipleship of Young People

Laying good foundations of bible teaching to pre-school and primary school children is important for young people as they apply bible teaching and principles to lifestyle and choices in teenage life. Our commission is to make disciples of our Christian young people. Rather than seeing discipleship in terms of what we know about God and the way we live we need to see it in terms of Jesus' value system. When young people take on Christ-centred values their behaviour will be based on that value system, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in.

In partnership with DYCW, CSR will continue to explore ways of developing disciple-based peer-led youth work.

Social Witness

It may be difficult to draw conclusions about these results but this study highlights those areas most important to young people. Depression, suicide and child abuse were rated as the most important issues for the church today.

Low self esteem can lead to self harming, alcohol and drug misuse and suicide. The proportion of young people reporting low self esteem in this survey was small and as part of our Christian belief we have the knowledge that each of us is loved by God. This is a message that many young people who are dealing with hurts and self doubt need to hear and we should seek to build confidence and self awareness in our youth work.

Our churches have introduced child protection policies and this has changed the way many youth activities are run. This may explain why it was seen as so important to the young people. However I would also suggest that a young person who has been abused or sexually assaulted is likely to confide in a friend first. The reaction of the friend will influence whether the person will report the abuse to parents or other adults. *The Council would suggest that children should know that they should not keep secrets if a friend is being abused and this should form part of child protection implementation.*

The young people see the social witness of the church as important and their opinions need to be heard by the church. The Council on Social Responsibility has acknowledged the need to have younger members on Council but the present policy has had limited success. *The Council recommends that two young people less than 26 years old serve as members on the Northern and Southern Executives each year.*

When papers are being researched consideration should be given to the impact of the issues of young people.