

Everything Has Changed

A version of this article first appeared in the October 2006 issue of Youthwork magazine.

Five years on from the 9/11 atrocities, we live in a very different world. But what does this mean for youth ministry, and how do we need to adapt? John Allan addresses five areas of challenge for youth workers, and suggests ways in which we can respond to the defining issue of the decade.

I remember when I first heard about 9/11. I'd just come in from school, and switched on the TV. I stood transfixed in disbelief as I watched the endless replays of the doomed airliner flying into the Twin Towers. Then the telephone rang. It was another youth worker. We discussed what was happening. 'One thing's for sure,' she said to me. 'Things will never be the same again. Including youth work.'

And so it has proved. Five years on, we're in a remarkably altered world. So maybe it's time to take stock of what's changed - not just in the world out there, but also in the job we're doing with young people. For young people have been affected more than other sectors of the population. In the USA, a study of high school students who were not directly exposed to the attacks showed that approximately 10% reported 'clinically significant levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms' three months after the attacks. This included 'chronic feelings of loss of control, hope and optimism, feeling 'superalert' or 'on guard' and feeling pessimistic about the likelihood of world peace and their future well-being'.

Nor is it over yet; just last year the Liberty Disaster Relief Fund gave \$8.72m to help non-profit organisations deal with post-9/11 psychological distress amongst American teenagers. The US Red Cross has developed a package of school lessons and youth group material, Facing Fear, to help young people cope with what they perceive as a growing problem that won't be ending any time soon.

America may be a pointer to our own future. How are British teenagers coping with the impact of the London bombings, and the revelation of the foiled aircraft plot this summer? The more terrorism becomes a fact of life, the more the mindset of young people becomes affected by it. Ask any long-serving youth worker from Northern Ireland.

Then there's also the fact that teenagers are in the frontline of world terrorism. Three of the four London suicide bombers were a youth leader from Leeds, and two of his youth group. Teenagers become terrorists. Take, for example, Saajid Badat, the quiet-spoken Liverpool supporter who left a good Gloucester grammar school with four A-levels, and is now serving a thirteen-year sentence for training to become a suicide bomber. Or Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, under sentence of death for his terror activities - a Wanstead boy of whom his former economics tutor said, 'I'm horrified. The chap we knew was a good all round, solid and very supportive pupil.'

When Israeli security forces arrested a Fatah Tanzim terrorist cell in Nablus last year, just before it carried out a suicide attack, they found that several boys of 15 and 16 were involved. And most of them had been recruited by a 17-year-old. But it isn't just in organised political movements that teenagers are turning to terror; earlier this year, New Jersey police charged four teenagers with 'terrorism' after discovering a plot to kill 'dozens' of staff and students at their school. The attack was scheduled for the anniversary of the Columbine massacre - as was a similar plot in Missouri, where two 17-year-olds were arrested just in time. Meanwhile, in Detroit, an 18-year-old has been jailed after police found in his bedroom an AK-47, pipe bombs, a Nazi flag, printed materials about Adolf Hitler, and a schematic diagram of his school.

News stories like these reinforce the lesson that we're living in an unpredictable, dangerous world, in which it's only sensible to treat strangers with deep suspicion. It hasn't helped relationships between the Muslim community in Britain and the rest of us. Which creates another problem for youth workers - yet again, teen-agers are at the sharp end of this. 30% of British Asians, most of them Muslim, are under 15.
Challenging times

So where are the big challenges to us? How must our youth work change to meet the challenge of a new world of sudden bombs and security alerts? I think there are five key areas.

1) The rise of terrorism has brought a new mood among young people.

One of the most prestigious youth surveys of the last year has been the 'GenWorld' global study of 13-18 year olds, which analysed six 'seismic shifts' in teen culture worldwide. Its conclusion was that 9/11 was a watershed: 'Seemingly overnight the world changed from one filled with the optimism and endless possibility of the Internet boom to a dark and anxious place threatened by global war and international terror.' Only 14% of the 3332 young people they interviewed, in 13 countries, agreed that 'the world is becoming a better place'. 62% named terrorism as a major cause for worry. Only 20% valued 'adventure and risk' as a guiding principle in their lives. This new caution and pessimism is a big change. And yet the survey points out that today's teens haven't become fearful, closeted individuals. 'Fear has not made these teens ready to run and hide. Instead, it's turned them into fighters. The pessimism of Gen X and exuberant self-reliance of early Gen Y has given way to a new ethos: self-activism. The number-one attitude of teens polled was 'I would fight for a cause I believe in.'

What cause would they fight for? Generally, it's nothing idealistic; only 11% have political ambitions, and most have no interest in women's rights, racism, or civil rights. Instead, say the researchers, they are fired by 'personal, tangible results advancing teens' goals in life': 'Consequently, it's no mistake that Harry Potter has captured the imagination of this generation. His story speaks deeply to teens who are not looking for grand heroics but for real-world courage, determination and skill to succeed by their wits in a dark, foreboding world.'

What it adds up to, then, is an intensification of the 'what's in it for me' tendency among young people, an obsession with personal survival and success, a growing concern with getting it right for me and those closest to me, whatever happens to the rest of the world. This isn't good news for racial harmony across British society.

2) Youth workers may need to deal with new stresses among young people.

What effect does the rise of terrorism, and the scare stories in the media, have upon young people? What strategies do they adopt for coping?

Since 9/11, counsellors have identified four typical responses. One is humour - turning the fears into a joke. That's not bad, but it harbours two dangers: first, the humour doesn't always remove the dread, it just keeps on reliving it; and second, making jokes about people can fix them in your mind as stereotypes, rather than prompting you to understand what's really going on.

Then there's anger and the desire for revenge - common among those who have had a brush with disaster, perhaps by involvement in a terrorist outrage, or the loss of a family member through terrorism. There can be alarm caused by over-exposure to horrific newspaper stories and (even worse) urban myths and rumours, and knee-jerk reactions ('send them all home', 'let's go and bomb their countries') adopted because, well, you have to have some kind of opinion to help you cope with a bewildering situation, and in the absence of careful thinking a dramatic opinion provides an easy stance to adopt.

How do we address these reactions in young people, and turn them in a more adult, thoughtful, Christ like direction? How can we empower them to see the realities more clearly, articulate what they are thinking, and relate the Bible to it? It's an important question; for in many social crises of the past, we haven't succeeded in doing so. And young Christians have unthinkingly supported causes and movements which have been deeply unchristian.

3) There are problems for young Asian Muslims in Britain in particular.

Whether you are working with an Asian group, or just helping teenagers of other ethnic backgrounds to relate to Asians at school, you need to be aware of their difficult situation. For one thing, Muslim attitudes towards the terrorist developments of the last five years have been confused and sometimes ambivalent. There's no question that the majority of the Muslim community oppose the terrorists. MP Shaheed Malik, for instance, says bluntly of the 9/11 killers, 'It's my Islamic belief that these people are sinners and will go to hell.' Yet there's widespread anger that Britain and America seem to be supporting policies which disadvantage Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, and Israel. And Muslims frequently feel that they are treated as second-class citizens of Britain.

Says young Muslim Shalim Farouk, 'There are many young people who feel humiliated by how the police treat them in this country. Many develop extreme views but they are afraid to express them. They are vulnerable and can be manipulated by those with evil thoughts. There are more young people like that around than the government know. They need to find a more gentle way to reach out to them.'

A Police Authorities leaflet promises that 'you should not be stopped or searched just because of: your age, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion or faith'. But Home Office minister Hazel Blears stated that Muslims should accept as 'reality' that they would be stopped and searched more often than others. Young Muslims feel frustrated to be targeted by the police and demonised by the media. Do they belong in Britain or not? Small wonder if some conclude that they don't; and maybe that's why one-half of young UK Asians claim they feel no allegiance to Britain as their country. A staggering 45% of those recently surveyed by Channel Four claimed that 9/11 was really a Jewish-American conspiracy.

Actor Imran Ali believes there are three reasons that young Muslims are attracted to extremism: disillusionment, low self-esteem and peer pressure. 'You see these guys wearing traditional Islamic dress - they would not have been seen dead in it five years ago,' he says. 'It's got nothing to do with religion. It's got everything to do with fashion... It's the in-thing.' 'What exacerbates these problems,' adds Shareefa Fulat, of the Muslim Youth Helpline, 'is that there are no support services, or support from within the [Muslim] community, for people struggling with resolving their identities. There are huge cultural and generational differences within the community which also play a role.'

And so this year four Muslim youth organisations have set up 'Radical Middle Way', an anti-extremist movement which has sponsored a multi-venue 'Imams Tour', drawing 25,000 young Muslims to UK concert halls to hear internationally-respected, youth-friendly Islamic leaders preach against the violence. It's slowly making an impact. But the conflicting voices within Islam itself leave many young Muslims completely confused.

4) Christian young people now need to be helped to struggle with big issues.

Is terrorism ever justified? What drives people to these lengths? Have we really done enough to make ethnic minorities feel at home in our society? When the Jews of Germany experienced the terrible pogrom of Kristallnacht in 1938, Dietrich Bonhoeffer told his students, 'Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants.' In other words, you can't be a Christian without caring for the outsider. Otherwise prejudice and oppression follow.

And prejudice is plentifully evident in some youth groups. As one worker recently commented to the Youthwork forum, 'Young people are confused about the issue and often find it difficult to contextualise what they think or believe. Many are born into and grow up within a 'racist' or 'prejudiced' type environment. Therefore particular views are seeded into their lives from a social and or cultural perspective, rather than owned personal views from first hand experience.'

Many teenage Christians have never really tested out their views about terrorism and other cultures. Confused second-hand ideas about asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, and British boys dying in remote Middle Eastern wars may shape their responses. And they almost certainly won't have the information they need to make an informed judgment. Media generalisations about 'Muslims' need to be qualified by an understanding of the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite, and the way in which Wahabbism (the viewpoint that lies behind the terrorism) is no more centrally Muslim than Jehovah's Witnesses are orthodox Christians. But intellectual information isn't the key thing. What young people need to grasp, most importantly, is some sense of how it feels to be young and Muslim in Britain today. Otherwise how can teenagers explain their own faith in intelligible terms to Muslim friends at Sixth Form College? Will they even have any Muslim friends? And if they don't, how will the next generation of British Muslims ever understand the claims of Jesus Christ?

The Internet can help here: there are many British 'young Muslim' websites with discussion forums where you can eavesdrop on conversations and gain a feel for their way of thinking and perceiving the world. But why just do it electronically? Are there ways in which your group can be helped to interact with young Muslims locally, and build mutual friendship and respect? After all, if anybody's going to build bridges between different communities in our society, and tear down the walls of suspicion - shouldn't it be the Christians?

5) In the aftermath of 9/11, young people have a chance to be a challenging model for the rest of the church.

It's easier for teenagers to take risks in reaching out across the divide. The young have less to lose, and fewer fixed attitudes to unlearn. It's happened before in history. When the bewildered African slaves on board the Amistad found themselves imprisoned in nineteenth-century America, it was the young Christians from Yale who befriended them, championed their cause, and eventually won their freedom. When in the 1960s older evangelicals would have nothing to do with the Civil Rights movement, young Christians like Jim Wallis took initiatives which helped to change the laws, and eventually changed the church.

Could it be the young people in our churches who defuse the growing tensions, spread caring and understanding in place of the hatred fostered by the terrorists, and correct the twisted, warped view of Christianity which so many in the ethnic minorities have mistaken for the real thing?

Young people can be peacemakers. And five years after 9/11, it's time for them to do it again.