

A man with a beard is shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the right. A hand is resting on his right shoulder. The image is overlaid with several vertical bars of varying heights and colors, including a prominent light blue bar that runs through the center. The background is a dark, textured blue.

YOUNG PEOPLE - WORTH THE INVESTMENT

By Kristie Woodward
Community Plus Coordinator

I've recently come on board the Australian Mission Centre staff as the Community Plus Coordinator in Victoria. Whilst working in an official capacity as a youth minister for the first time, this environment isn't new to me. My husband and I have been professional teachers for the past 15 years and, prior to that, he also worked as a youth/young adult minister for this church. Between us, we have mentored hundreds of young people through some of the most difficult years of their lives. I really enjoy the challenges and rewards of spending time with young people. Along with these experiences comes an inescapable insight into the issues of being a young person, particularly in this time in history.

There is an undeniable Mental health crisis occurring in this generation of young people. In July this year, The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported from the National Mental Health Survey, that 39 percent of 16-24 year olds are experiencing mental ill health. Patrick McGorry explained in an August ABC News article; "These are varying illnesses that leave young people unable to attend school, form friendships or take part in important teenage milestones, with many being so ill that they desperately need medical care, but can't get it" and "now, the most common cause of death in young people is suicide". Self-image and identity, social disconnection due to pandemic lockdowns, concerns about the future (in terms of climate or financial stability), discrimination on the basis of gender, race or cultural background; these are some of the contributing factors of this decline. Think about it in this way; at least one young person you know is likely to have, or have had, anxiety and/or depression. It may be very well masked, only becoming evident with noticeable self-harming or other forms of 'unusual' behaviour ranging from withdrawing to psychotic episodes. This is a devastating reality. Despite it seeming an 'easier' option, there is absolutely no benefit to minimising or ignoring the issue.

On a personal level, I believe it's crucial that we make ourselves available to young people and create open pathways for sharing. The space I've created in my private singing studio, for example, may well be the one place my students go to feel comfortable enough with another person that they can be their authentic selves. I appreciate that it's not always straightforward. I've heard a great analogy of interacting with teens; it's like a delicate dance. We must tread very carefully- not push too far, not engage too little, take control, give over control, push, pull, bend back, bend forward, all while trying our hardest not stomp on toes. Nevertheless, if

we can manage the delicate dance, we will be the reliable, trustworthy adults that young people want in their lives.

As a church, I believe we've missed a lot of opportunities to help in this area- consequently, there's currently a significant disconnect between our young people and congregations. It would be beneficial to accept that, in contrast to previous generations, the majority of young people are no longer interested in attending (let alone leading) congregations, participating in service type activities, or spending significant portions of their weekend in relatively unfulfilling ways. Rather, they are desperately wanting to connect and form deeper friendships with other youth and trusted mentors who 'get' their issues and support them.

So, as a church, what can we do to help support young people?

1) Support their social and spiritual development by providing them with safe, inclusive spaces to connect with each other. Encourage the young people in your area to join a local Youth Group or go to the Community Plus online gatherings.

2) Educate young people with the tools to live a spiritually healthy life, so that they know how to bathe in spirit and rejuvenate themselves regularly. Community Plus will be presenting two Young Adult retreats early in 2023, with the focus on Spirituality. Encourage the young people in your area to attend.

3) Reassess our corporate and individual capacities to give financially. Consider opportunities for your congregation (or individually) to support the Community Plus program- you could provide a camp or retreat experience for someone who might not otherwise attend. Become a regular donor to a charity supporting youth mental health.

Undeniably, it is with a blind faith that we invest our time, energy and finances in young people. When we choose to invest in young people, we do so without ever really knowing the level of return. It sometimes pays off, but sometimes, it does not. If we change the attitude in which we approach investment in young people, acting with generosity and without expectation of return, we are much more likely to see a positive impact in their lives.