

The Value of Doing a Residential

Nigel Chapman CA

Introduction

Taking a group of young people away can be a bit of a nightmare. There is so much to organise, from making sure they are well fed or keeping them safe from harm, trying to give them enough to do, to making it possible for them to have their own creative space. Yet in spite of all the necessary intricate preparation and paper work involved these days, including DBS checks, programme plans, risk assessments and making sure everything is safe and watertight, it is still worth doing as there is a great deal to be gained from taking groups away on residential activities.

This is not a quick fix paper on holiday programme ideas or a checklist of things that should be done before you go, but notes and observations on the *value* of doing them and the developments that a residential can generate in young people. Here we consider the positive contribution that can be made to the life of a young person, a contribution that can have a profound and lifelong effect.

In 1968 I went away for a weekend to Malham Youth Hostel in the Yorkshire Dales with school. It was a field trip looking at the limestone geology of the area. As a 9 or 10 year old child, I doubt if I appreciated that. As far as I was concerned it was a weekend away from home. I was filled with enthusiasm and excitement. It was a new experience, I had been let off the leash of parental control and I wanted to make the most of this occasion. Indeed it has remained an experience that I will never forget for a lifetime.

Those who organise such activities for children and young people are all too familiar with excitable children. Consequently, their planning often takes into account the desire to provide the possibilities of new experiences and an adventurous time away, with the need to ensure structure, safety, purpose and value. Hopefully this is also done with the desire to provide the young people with a positive happy atmosphere.

However, my memories of that weekend are not at all positive. It not only rained for just about the whole weekend and I was considerably wet and cold for the duration, but I hated it and more to the point I hated one particular teacher. Unaware of what stress he was under, or that perhaps he was feeling the weight of responsibility for a group of grubby school children, I became his 'Achilles Heel'. I irritated him, and 45 years later I remember all too clearly the severity of the violence he metered out on the first evening as he dragged me off a top bunk bed by my hair, slapped me a few times, winded me and then gave a brutal and humiliating shouting at in front of the other boys in my class. He was no doubt teaching me a lesson in 'respect', although I remember it to be a lesson in fear.

Young people expect a time away with a group to be different, adventurous, fun and for the moment. It is unlikely that they will think of this time as anything other than an opportunity to have a good time, try new things, be entertained and even to be silly! They do not think about long term effects or about possible outcomes and personal developments, curricular, spiritual or otherwise.

Yet the reality is that the value of going away goes far beyond the immediacy of the trip. It can instil both positive and negative memories and feelings for a lifetime. A positive experience may indeed bring back good memories and achieve a value that goes beyond what they have learnt or been taught. A bad experience may become a blockage where they may ring fence themselves and construct a personal safety barrier to keep out any infiltration by adults, teachers, evangelists, bullies or zealots alike. They may even become suspicious of adults with a passion.

Therefore in terms of the Church's work with young people, a residential activity can influence a young life forever, that we need to be very clear that residential are an important and significant instrument in Youth Worker's tool box. Residential work has the opportunity to provide a positive and lasting value in the development of young people. Consequently we need to understand that leaders and youth workers have a great deal of moral, physical and spiritual responsibility.

The Rise and Fall of Relationship

In contrast to the experience with school, in 1970 aged 12, I went on an all boys Pathfinder Camp to Criccieth in Wales. It had a structured pseudo-paramilitary regime with an early morning 'Raleigh Call' with exercises, tent inspection and a certain amount of duties. This was mixed together with team games, daily outings, and eventful evening meetings of Gospel presentations. The experience changed my life, and I have wonderful and thankful memories of this, and of many subsequent Pathfinder Camps throughout my teenage years.

The difference between my two experiences is first and foremost to do with relationship. The teacher from school was policing a group of children, and even forcing them into doing exactly what he wanted when he wanted. The relationship was strictly teacher - pupil as a controlling association with no room for friendship. The model at Pathfinder Camp hinged on good relationship. Leaders were there chiefly to befriend and care, to get alongside and to have time to 'be' as well as 'do'. It was not just to teach the Bible and do various activities; they were in essence by-products. Without the development of relationship the words and activities would have been very shallow. Although I have not met any of the leaders of that camp in over four decades, I still remember many names and would want to count them as friends. That is a tribute to the level of relationship and community that was created in just 12 days.

The most significant contribution residential work makes to the overall development of young people is in the formation and maintenance of relationships and the most significant contribution that is made to those relationships is going to be time. Time to build relationship in the first place, for it is the quality of relationship that will underpin everything else. There is the potential for the creation of a temporary community that perhaps gives us a taste of what it means to be a New Testament Community. It can be a time of great creativity where there is time to eat together, play together, achieve together, and even work together to resolve conflict. There can be time to think together and to worship and pray together. We should never underestimate the power of relationship and that therefore demands from us an investment of time.

In one year a youth worker may be able to invest around 100 hours in contact time. They can in that time build relationships through doing any number of activities and even help to develop faith and Christian knowledge through teaching slots or gospel presentations. A youth group typically meets for around two hours per week over a year of at most 45 weeks, less if only meeting during the school term times and a lot less in some cases where groups perhaps meet only once a fortnight or where young people don't attend on a regular weekly basis. In rural situations groups may only meet once a month. Even after a year the relationships can be fairly shallow and superficial because it is always going to be disjointed.

Compare this with just one week on a residential, where over 100 concentrated hours can be invested. (168 to be exact including sleep)! Furthermore, because one is living in community, albeit a transitory one, there is a significantly different nature to the level and depth of relationship that can develop. More time for instance can be spent in conversations or small group activities. More time can be spent in teamwork situations, creative activity, and in worship. Even inactivity can have a quality about it. Indeed it can be the making of new relationships where we can begin to understand better the pressures and hopes and dreams they face at school or home or in their own community. They too may begin to understand something of the adult world and its responsibilities. Here then relationships take on new levels of response, trust and respect.

Relationship can also play a vital role in their developing sense of self worth and personal value, their sense of belonging to a group, or to the church, and to faith. Relationships help them make sense of their own lives relative to other factors such as home, school friendships and society. They can test out theories and beliefs, even subconsciously within the safety of a group setting. They can also contribute a great deal to the exploration of spiritual issues, especially if they are included as contributors rather than just receivers of spiritual insight. Relationships give context and help develop social skills that are an important component in the journey to adulthood.

However, there is also the potential for getting it wrong and for difficult relationships. Today more than ever it appears children and young people are often suspicious of adult motives. At a Falcon Camp in the summer of 2003, a number of young people on the camp acted with indifference toward leaders. This may have been because they were away from their familiar surroundings and in a new situation with adults they didn't know. In some cases in spite of efforts to create 'friendships' and spend time in conversation, the response to leaders was one of a lack of trust and subsequently lack of response and complicity. This may say more about their own home or social situation, but it may also be symptomatic of the way in which adults can have a tendency to manipulate relationships, and in some extreme cases, to stage-manage them for their own ends.

David Howell comments: *"Residential experiences have been formative for me at many levels but looking back I can see certain points where the strength of temporary community, absence of 'home' structures and domination of strong leadership exploited a situation where little else was achieved beyond the short-term manipulation of children's hearts and minds".* ('Perspectives' Winter 2001/2002).

Young people naturally begin to put their trust in leaders, especially if they are dynamic and fun to be with, but it is all too easy to abuse this trust and to control situations beyond reasonable care, even into bullying. For example, in getting them to join in things they feel uncomfortable with, such as sports, rock climbing or caving or even something as innocuous

as a compulsory walk up a hillside. Yes, certain levels of achievement can be made, and fears perhaps got over, but without great care it can also be at the expense of trust and can for the child affirm their lack of self-esteem. I once took a group of inner-city children up a short but very steep forest hill in the Lake District. One boy lagged behind for much of the walk and I and others endeavoured to encourage him up the hill until out of frustration it became a battle of wits to get him to the end of the walk. I thought he would enjoy the view and having achieved something he had never done before and he would of course be so grateful to us for pushing him so hard. When we got to the top he was almost in tears, out of breath having an asthma attack and worse still being jeered at by the rest of the group for being "fat and useless". He probably remembers me like I remember my teacher in Malham.

`Spiritual Abuse' is another obvious danger that can undermine good relationships, whereby Gospel presentations can almost become sessions in brainwashing or where leaders fall over themselves in hot pursuit of a young soul to save. I have witnessed well intentioned Youth Pastors and preachers in a frenzy of statements such as: "Are you sure you're going to heaven?" "Come on I'll wait just a little longer, this is your last chance to give your life to Christ". "You could be run over by a bus and die on your way home, then where will you be?" and even "If you do not speak in tongues you have not received the Holy Spirit, so your faith must be weak". Apart from being a matter of theological contention, such statements are an abuse of the relationship and trust that young people put in adults. It can be a manipulation of the vulnerable inquisitive mind. Poor teaching or controlling techniques can leave young people confused, frightened and feeling worthless. The agenda of those who do this to young people is often caught up in their own selfish pride as an evangelist as well as a lack of experience. It is right that young people can be challenged to consider their own life in relation to Christ but `scalp evangelism' is built on propagandist techniques that treat relationships as if they have been manufactured only for the moment of conversion. For that reason alone it is a deceitful betrayal of the relationship and one that belittles the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In such cases Young people can either be manipulated to the point of spiritual blindness, or they may see the relationship as transparent. They are more likely to reject the Gospel, if only because they do not want to be like *them* and associate such bad practice with Christianity as a whole.

Another problem may come when young people compare their spiritual life with others or with leaders, concluding that they are not as good as someone else, perhaps because they have not received a certain 'Spiritual Gift', or they feel untouched by the Holy Spirit because they must be a worse person. Leaders need to be aware that these misconceptions creep in where teaching is biased in certain directions or where care has not been exercised, or where there is a lack of follow up or open discussion. The Youth Alpha Holy Spirit away day is one such possibility if not handled sensitively and correctly.

Howell considers that "*Residentials should look like church - only better*" and goes on to quote Mike Riddell - Godzone "*Companions often change your direction. Never by manipulating or moralising, but by the sincerity of their friendship and the wisdom of their words*".

In the Acts of the Apostles we read about an emerging early Christian community and a sense of belonging to a new worshipping community that will be made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The communication is verbal, visual, physical and spiritual. It is essentially an account of developing relationships and understanding of God's intervention and revelation through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit working through the Apostles. Peter was no preacher at first, but he had a story to tell. He not only told that story, he also lived that story and he lived his life in relationship with Jesus Christ who was central to that story. As people heard for themselves and saw the power invested in the words and deeds of the apostles and the followers, other people realised they could have a personal relationship with the risen Christ and become a part of this new community. Daily people were added to the number of believers, not because they had a faith like Peter, or because they fully understood, but because they saw a powerful and real relationship with Jesus and were given the opportunity to have that for themselves. They began to belong, because they chose to belong. No doubt many who heard Peter and the other Apostles went away unconvinced, sceptical or oblivious to what was happening. Peter however was faithful to the story and left them to make their own decisions. Relationship and companionship were critical components of his Evangelism.

The Ethiopian in Acts 8 was 'witnessed' to by Philip simply explaining scripture in a one to one encounter. It was the Ethiopian who asked to be baptised, Philip didn't force such a decision. It may have been a fleeting encounter, but there was no manipulation on the part of Philip.

Riddle's statement: the *"sincerity of friendship and wisdom of their words"* is indeed something that ought to be grasped in residential youth work.

Influence of the Environment

According to Sr Hilary, Education Officer at the Order of the Holy Paraclete convent - Sneaton Castle, while relationships strongly influence young people, so can an encounter with an environment. A place or a space can for instance, create a defining spiritual moment in the development of personal faith. This of course is very subjective. What is for one a holy or spiritual place may not necessarily be for viewed like that by another.

Sneaton Castle as a holiday and conference centre attracts many people including groups of children and young people. The centre is a working convent where the sense of God's presence is almost tangible. Entering the chapel for instance, there is an overt spiritual atmosphere. Likewise the ability of the nuns to touch the human spirit through conversation, silence, prayer and worship, attracts spiritual responses. It is a place where something of the Christian ethos and spirituality can rub off on people, especially young people

While a convent has an obvious air of spirituality about it, all manner of environments can influence spiritual responses and therefore can also be said to influence spiritual value. Our relationship to the environment plays an important role in the process of our human and spiritual development. It is about 'feeling'. As we learn to reflect on the environments we are in or have been in, we can grow intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. That is perhaps why when we look back on a particular event in childhood, we view them differently than we did at the time. Indeed, even though going on the school trip to Malham was such a negative experience, Malham Cove and surrounding area remains for me a spiritually uplifting place. It is for me a place called 'home' where I 'feel' something for the place and know the majesty and awesomeness of God that all started on that weekend.

The value of residential work is therefore to be viewed much more widely than putting together a particularly well-crafted programme of activities. It is predominantly about deeper relationships with each other, with the environment and with Jesus and with God. Environments can influence many personal and spiritual developments.

For this reason, the 'vision' or 'purpose' of any residential work has a critical role to play in the construction of good quality activities. Environment does not just have a physical nature, be it a particular place or style such as camping, youth centre, conference centre or taking over a boarding school for a week. Environment is also about the spiritual nature and the influence of ethos or culture that can be created by those leading, as well as those present.

The Influence of Purpose - Vision and Values

A residential that is going to effectively nurture the physical, emotional and spiritual nature of young people is therefore going to be one that facilitates relationships in positive environments. It will help to develop their relationships and attitudes to themselves, to others, to their environments; at home, school, friends, church, their community and to Christ.

Clarity in the purpose will help to achieve this. Being focussed by that purpose will consequently influence all that is done; the activities, the worship and even the free time. This takes us beyond doing a residential merely because it happens to be a good idea at the time, into developing aims and objectives that consider not only what one would like to do but more essentially *why* you want to do them. It is strategic planning instead of letting things happen, or just putting together a programme for its own sake. It is about enabling a more holistic approach about everything that you might do on a residential.

Being focussed on purpose gives everyone a point of reference that serves as a constant and consistent reminder of what is being done and why. Harnessing that purpose generally enables everyone to work together in one direction. It gives everyone something to aim for and achieve. Some of the most disastrous residential work often happens when there is no corporate purpose or it has not been communicated effectively. Difficulties arise where volunteers work to quite different agendas or none, either because they do not know what it is or do not feel that they are part of it. As a result there may be missed opportunities in the development of young people. Even if the purpose is just to have a relaxed weekend, that purpose sets the agenda for all those taking part.

Jonathon Frank, one time Director of Ventures and Falcon Camps for the Church Pastoral Aid Society considers this area to be crucial in residential work. He frequently quotes Walter Wright in *Relational Leadership*: "*Vision is seeing the future so powerfully that it shapes today*" (p 66) This he further explained in an interview he gave to *Youth Work Magazine*:

"Vision properly discerned and communicated will unite volunteers and focus them to work together. And alongside vision must come values: 'the way we behave' which should be evident through everything. If you've got volunteers with a relationship with God, a shared vision and a commitment to a set of values, you've got a team who will be going in the same direction and who will work well together". (Youthwork April 2003 p17)

`Purpose', `Vision and Values' are thus vital in approaching the `what' `why' and `how' of a programme. It can create clear principles and motivations for the activities and a rationale to follow, especially for the leaders and volunteers. If this is also shared with the young people it not only enables them to know exactly what it is they are coming to, but why and even how things might be done. If young people are also involved in setting the purpose, there will be shared common goals.

For instance, a weekend camp may have the purpose of *"Bringing together several youth groups in order to: enable and encourage young people in their personal journey of faith"* The `what' is bringing the groups together, the `why' is to enable and encourage their journey in faith.

With this purpose in mind the `how' is in the delivery of the camp, so one has to ask what activities will help to achieve that purpose? In terms of `Values' one may need to ask: "how is faith going to be reflected in worship, how will it be reflected in the day to day running of the camp, in conversations, as well as through the activities, and how are leaders expected to conduct themselves and so on. What kind of environments will help create opportunities for the development of faith and spiritual growth? Having such a baseline should therefore help leaders and volunteers to create environments that consider and further develop the needs of young people in line with the overall purpose of the residential.

The Development of Young People through Residential Youth Work

With `relationship' and `environment' very much in mind then, what developments in young people might we expect?

The word "development" can be associated with words such as Growth, Progress, Advance, Increase, Maturity, Improvement. These words point towards what we might potentially expect to see happening (even if only slightly) in the build up to, during or after a residential. We might see growth or maturity in faith, or improved self-esteem, increase in self-confidence, and observe progress in all manner of relationships.

The potential goes far beyond what we might construe to create though. There may indeed be far reaching effects because of the importance placed on something that is said or done by an individual. Leaders may never know about or begin to understand what has gone on in a young person's mind though. I doubt that many of those Pathfinder leaders at Criccieth in the 1970's ever thought that I would go in to full time Christian ministry!

A young person bullied at school, with perhaps a low academic achievement, may find the belief or trust placed in them, or the friends they make, or personal triumphs or achievements during the course of the residential all contribute to a greater sense of self worth or sense of belonging and awareness of God. On the other hand a leader or another young person may contribute to a better understanding of anything from a sense of fairness to what it means to be a Christian. A campus chapel may create a sense of space or awe and wonder and ultimately a personal relationship with a loving God. Yet at the time such senses or feelings may be too difficult to articulate. Yet a level of development has taken place one that could be a defining moment in a young life, even in years to come!

This is the real value of doing youth work residential.

Conclusion

Young people learn and grow best by being involved, by experiencing and exploring. Reflecting on their experiences quickens the pace of learning. A residential needs to bear this in mind when considering not only a programme of events, but also the purpose, vision and values, central to which are the dynamics of the relationships that occur. If we are to help young people to develop personally as well as spiritually, they need the experiences of community and then the tools to reflect on their experiences. To begin to recognise spiritual thoughts and feelings that are entwined throughout our humanness.

A sense of achievement gained while rock climbing or abseiling or canoeing may also heighten a sense of the spiritual as they reflect on their feelings such as happiness or elation. A good, friendly, accepting environment that offers time to reflect and learn is probably going to nurture this far more than a frenzy of activity that only seeks to entertain, occupy or police young people into complicity with that of the leaders own plans.

Of course, one jacket does not fits all sizes and there is need for flexibility, understanding and patience. A young person may not follow Christ just because we do or because a friend does or because of a gospel talk. The likelihood of their wish to belong will come from their response to trying it out, taking small faith steps, building on relationships as well as observing the truth of faith demonstrated by leaders and perhaps just as important, young people of their own age. Faith development is a long-term strategy, not an instant scheme of accomplishment. It can be a life long journey of development; of change, of creativity, of human exploration and spiritual journeying. Residential work with young people is a huge asset to youth work that can be remembered and cherished or conversely hated for a lifetime. So we need to try to get it right. The value is not always appreciated at the time, as a woman called Sheila reflected writing to me about a choir trip:

"Thinking back over 30 years, I remember our own youth group being taken on two residential trips, one to Wales, and one to Filey with a German group who were doing an exchange visit. There was a tremendous sense of team spirit. It is largely because I remember the adults who gave up their time for me then - and I don't suppose I ever said more than a very token thank you - that I try to make my own small contribution now, in whatever way seems appropriate. I feel as if it's a bit like lighting a candle and then passing on that light to another, and as long as there's still some light, however feeble, there's hope for all of us!"

The value can never be underestimated. The developments can be significant.

Nigel Chapman
Original article 2003