

‘Being church’: The social and spiritual purposes and impacts of Christian detached youth work¹

Abstract

In this paper, we explore the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of Christian detached youth work in the UK through an exploration of relevant literature and through qualitative research with a small sample of youth workers. The article finds, both in the literature and the primary research, that the development of relationships between youth worker and young person is the most significant purpose and impact of Christian detached youth work. These relationships are used to facilitate impacts, both social and spiritual, in detached youth work, but are also seen as an important impact in themselves. The paper argues that social and spiritual purposes and impact are fluid and overlapping within Christian detached youth work, that institutional agendas are given low priority, and that youth workers aim to start their work from the young people’s own starting position rather than an imposed agenda. This equalising of power and negotiation of mutual relationships is largely considered, by both the literature explored and the youth workers in our primary research, to enhance the uniqueness and effectiveness of detached youth work in achieving its particular social and spiritual impacts.

Key words: detached youth work, street-based youth work, social impact, spiritual impact, relationships

This article explores the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of detached youth work conducted by Christians working or volunteering for Christian faith-based organisations in the UK. It begins by outlining the definitions and process of detached youth work, drawing on literature from secular and Christian perspectives. It then explores the key stages of Christian-motivated detached youth work, drawing on Richard Passmore and colleagues’ ‘Streetspace’ model.² The paper then explores the role of institutional agendas in detached youth work, both through the shift towards social control in secular detached youth work and the role of a church agenda in Christian youth work. The social and spiritual purposes and impacts of Christian detached youth work are then explored and analysed through primary research with Christian detached youth workers. Based on our research, we argue that Christian detached youth work has both social and spiritual impact but that these impacts are fluid and overlapping, led by the young people themselves and based on a process of developing relationships between youth worker and young person in which power is shared, equalised and even tipped in young people’s favour. The influence of external agendas, such as that of ‘filling the church’, are minimal for youth workers taking this approach and, in being so, these fluid social and spiritual impacts are maximised.

1. Statement of the problem

Discussions of detached youth work have largely been approached from either a theological or a social perspective – rarely both. In particular, secular practice has largely failed to recognise how its traditions are grounded in and informed by its Christian origins and Christian models of detached youth work largely fail to acknowledge their similarities with established secular theory. This has led to a rather one-

¹ Note on co-contributors: XXX approaches this paper from a sociological perspective and conducted the research with practitioners. XXX approaches this paper as a practical theologian and led on the exploration of the literature.

² Richard Passmore, Lorimer Passmore and James Ballantyne, *Here be Dragons: Youth work and mission off the map*, (Birmingham: Frontier Youth Trust, 2013)

dimensional approach to discussions of detached youth work that tend to focus either on social or spiritual impacts, and rarely both. In practice, secular workers may thus avoid connecting with young people's spiritual development and Christians have, at times, assumed the social agenda to be less primary than the spiritual or even a means to an end. How these purposes inter-play and rely on each other has yet to be explored in any depth. The model of Christian detached youth work developed by Richard Passmore and colleagues goes some way in recognising the importance of community engagement, social interaction and even social outcomes in effective detached youth work but with an ultimate focus on 'building church', albeit with a nuanced understanding of what church 'in community' might be and the diverse forms it might take.³

We build on this model to explore further how social and spiritual agendas work together in detached youth work, with arguably a reliance on each other for their effectiveness. The secular and Christian traditions and the models and theories that underpin them appear closely linked when explored alongside each other. Hence, this paper begins with an exploration of literature from theological and social perspectives. In particular, taking the model mentioned above as a starting point from a practical theology perspective, we explore how it links to literature from the secular-social perspective, notably Goetschius and Tash's long-established model of detached youth work.⁴ We also draw on relevant literature concerning youth ministry and youth work, as well as referring to some of the philosophical and educational theorists that underpin dominant models and theories of youth work. We explore the sometimes competing purposes and tensions within youth work and youth ministry. This is not presented as a full or systematic review of the literature, which there is not space for here, but an unpicking and comparing of dominant models and tensions from both Christian and secular perspectives.

We also seek to explore how Christian detached youth workers themselves define the spiritual and social aspects of their work. We do this through the following research question:

How do Christian detached youth workers articulate the social and spiritual purposes and impact of their work with young people in the communities they serve?

This is explored through narrative research interviews with youth workers which were conducted via email then subject to thematic analysis. A fuller outline of the primary research methodology is presented later in this paper before the discussion of the findings.

Defining what we mean by the social purposes and impacts of youth work presents little challenge. We can draw consensus that youth work with a social purpose seeks to impact on young people's wellbeing in relation to their social context. This impact might be on the individual and their understanding and expression of themselves in the social environments they inhabit such as through the forming and negotiating of relationships. More widely, youth work's social impact can be also understood as a significant change to a community or social context that young people inhabit through the young people's engagement with that youth work provision, such as lower levels of crime or higher levels of employment.

The spiritual purpose and impacts of youth work are more challenging to define because spirituality itself is a contested term. Maxine Green has explored definitions of spirituality both through a range of

³ Passmore, Passmore and Ballantyne, *Here Be Dragons*.

⁴ George Goetschius and Joan Tash, *Working with Unattached Youth* (London: Routledge, 1967).

literature and through research with young people.⁵ The common features of the various definitions appear to be that spirituality involves existential questions and beliefs that relate to our inner self and our self in relation to the world, universe, and other wider forces. These questions, beliefs and forces include, but not as an essential feature, the religious. The definitions also seem to suggest that spirituality relates to *that which makes us human*; that is, the feelings, values, beliefs and reflections that are unique to the human condition. The spiritual purpose and impacts of youth work can therefore be understood to be that youth work which intends or attains to enable young people to consider, understand and articulate these existential questions and reflections about themselves, their 'human-ness' or their place in relation to the world and beyond. Christian youth workers seeking to achieve this are likely to do so in relation to their own beliefs and values.

2. Detached youth work

Detached youth work has an established history and methodology as a process of informally educating young people, underpinned by voluntary relationships, often from a point of no engagement.⁶ Its origins lie in the outreach activities of faith-based organisations such as the YMCAs, as well as other philanthropic projects.⁷ Mark K. Smith outlines the distinctions made between different forms of street-based youth work:

- **Detached work:** 'working with people where they are at';
- **Outreach work:** 'concerned with bringing people into existing organizations and activities';
- **Project work:** 'work of a limited duration with a specific purpose or remit'.⁸

Smith emphasises that the terms can be problematic. Detached work rarely operates with no building base at all, even if it has no long-term centre. Even the term 'street-work' is problematic because detached work can move into and operate in other community settings away from the street. Not accounted for by Smith is the recent rise in mobile youth buses, often used by Christian projects as well as secular youth services. This article focuses on detached as opposed to other forms of street-based work with young people.

Detached youth work is a distinct form of work with young people which uses the principles and practice of informal education to engage young people in a constructive dialogue within a broad agenda of *personal* and *social* development.⁹ As a practice, detached youth work is often associated with engaging the 'hardest to reach'.¹⁰ As a consequence it is in danger of becoming a vehicle for social control and specific intervention agendas,¹¹ where other educational or therapeutic methods have failed. Sercombe argues that youth work itself is concerned with the 'formation of a professional

⁵ Maxine Green, *A Journey of Discovery: Spirituality and Spiritual Development in Youth Work* (Leicester: The National Youth Agency, 2006).

⁶ Tony Jeffs, 'Changing their ways: youth work and "underclass" theory' in MacDonald, R. (ed) *Youth, the 'underclass' and social exclusion* (London: Routledge, 1997)

⁷ Mark K. Smith, 'Detached, street-based and project work with young people', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*. (1996, 2005). Accessed September 2016. <http://infed.org/mobi/detached-street-based-and-project-work-with-young-people/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Federation of Detached Youth Work, *Reconnected detached youth work*, Leicester: NYA, 2008

¹⁰ Prince's Trust, *Thinking on your feet*, Glasgow; Prince's Trust, 2003

¹¹ Annette Coburn and David Wallace, *Youth work in communities and schools*, (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011); Federation of Detached Youth Work, *Reconnected detached youth work*

relationship with the young person as the primary agent, *in their social context*' (our italics).¹² Thus, detached youth work is a method of creating, forming and building voluntary relationships that is, when aligned with youth work values, concerned primarily with the young people themselves and not an external agenda. As it occurs in the space young people have chosen to inhabit, *in their social context*, we may say that it is based upon values which are embodied by contextual presence. The actions of being with, and amongst, community are to some extent the realisation of voluntary participation, devolution of power, and being equal – these being key principles of youth work. By its nature, detached youth work is a social activity; it is a method of encouraging young people to participate in conversations with supportive adults who seek to meet, engage and build relationships with young adults on their terms, in regard to beliefs, attitudes, values and lifestyles. It is in this 'meeting young people where they are at' geographically, that distinguishes detached youth work from other varieties of youth work practice where young people are expected to attend at a specific place and time. When practiced by Christians, detached youth work has social and spiritual impacts both upon the young people and also the delivery agents, youth workers, and the incumbent community of the practice.

3. Symbiotic detached youth work

In the Christian sector, Richard Passmore and colleagues have developed a nine stage model of practice, which they call 'symbiotic detached youth work', in which they draw on the values of youth work and the experiences of the 'Streetspace' network of practice. This model contains nine specific stages of practice; from 'observation of the area', to 'peer education/church on the edge' with seven stages in between.¹³ For the purposes of this article, we summarise these nine stages as the following three broader stages:

Passmore and Ballantyne/Streetspace Stages	Summarised definition
Observation (1)	Community research and observation
Cold contact (2&3), area group work (4), peer group work (5), basic small group work (6)	Creating relationship and establishing acceptance
Risky small group work (7), exploration of spirituality (8), peer education/church on the edge (9)	Developing the long-term relationship and impact

Table 1: Stages of detached youth work (based on Passmore, Passmore and Ballantyne, 2013)

Undoubtedly, there is scope to consider the social and spiritual impacts of detached work as the practice progresses through all nine of these stages, but for the purposes of this piece we have sought to summarise the process into three broader transitions: observation and research; creating relationship and establishing acceptance; and developing the relationship. These three stages fit closely with the theories and principles of detached youth work from the wider youth work sector as developed over time.¹⁴

3.1 Community Research and Observation

During the planning and preparation stages of detached youth work, which we refer to as 'observation and research', there is often a considerable upward learning curve for the worker, as they consider the aims and objectives of the practice, develop volunteers, teams and policies, and, even more

¹² Howard Sercombe, *Youth work ethics* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 28

¹³ Richard Passmore, *Meet them where they're at* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2003); Passmore, Passmore and Ballantyne, *Here Be Dragons*.

¹⁴ see, for example, George Goetschius and Joan Tash, *Working with Unattached Youth* (London: Routledge, 1967).

importantly, begin to acclimatise to the area of practice. This stage involves an indwelling of the worker within their community of practice, and therefore them beginning to understand the customs, cultures, values and attitudes of the community from a point of being *with* and *amongst* this culture, rather than an external resource *for* them. This early stage of detached work may have a more significant social impact upon the detached worker them-self, as they experience a new community, build networks and establish support, than on the young people with whom they seek to work. This impact occurs as the worker immerses themselves in the values and narratives of the organisation, the community and the young people - a phenomenon initially described by Goetschius and Tash.¹⁵ As Passmore states, this early and vital stage of observation is a two-way process, and so as the detached youth workers agree on their geographical patch, and begin their initial observational sessions so do the beginnings of mutual social and spiritual impact occur both from the perspective of the receiving community and young people as well as for the detached youth workers themselves. Whilst it may be easier to consider the methods of observation, gathering evidence, and acclimatising, there are social and spiritual impacts that occur even at this preliminary phase of the work. This is a listening and learning exercise for the detached youth worker as they begin to understand the social and spiritual nature of the local community. This stage links closely to the 'incarnational' approach that has been championed in Christian youth work and which has been defined and understood as being the 'word as flesh', among young people, and taking a relational approach.¹⁶

As the youth workers make contact with the other community partners, and physically walk around the area, they will have conversations that will not only assure the community of their presence but in those conversations begin, as Goetschius and Tash identify, to challenge the views and perceptions of other community agencies.¹⁷ This would be achieved through planned, formal meetings and also as the detached youth workers spend time in the physical community, develop a distinctive profile, take opportunities to share their intentions, and receive and respond to questions about the needs or prejudgements made of the young people. This is a social impact that should not be overlooked, as the social education of the community at large to be more understanding of young people will only benefit young people as they reside there.

Not only does this aspect of detached work have social impact, as the worker begins to understand the community, its agencies and young people; this pursuit is an emerging spiritual one. As Gadamer attests: 'Only the support of the familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world'.¹⁸ Or, alternatively, as Freire argues: 'Knowledge of the alienated culture leads to transforming action resulting in a culture which is being freed from alienation'¹⁹ – whereby the contradictions between the worldviews of, in our case, the young person, the wider community and the worker themselves, leads to enrichment for all. For the detached youth worker, their initial task is to become attuned to the community in order to become both accustomed to the familiar and to broaden experiences and horizons. This is no less a social exercise of common mutual understanding, than an emancipating spiritual experience.

Often young people are more at ease, in their own neighbourhood, near their own houses and with their own chosen friends, at a time and space of their choosing. It is not that they are necessarily

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.101-103

¹⁶ Steve Griffiths *Models for Youth Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2013), p.2

¹⁷ Ibid, p.102

¹⁸ Hans Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics (Trans.)*, (London: California Press, 1976), p.15

¹⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin, 1970, p.181

territorial about this space, but are comfortable in a space where the worker engages with them on their terms.²⁰ The impact thus that a detached youth worker can have in this moment is that they can interject into this space and time, and be given permission to ask questions, receive responses, begin conversation and then hear from the young person what they are willing to disclose. Detached youth work has become a place for hearing the raw and immediate ‘cry for help’ – especially from young people whose opportunities to do this are often prevented within didactic formal structures, where power is unequal, such as schools, churches or other state services.²¹ These initial moments of negotiated conversation often reveal something about the insecurities, attitudes and behaviours of young people and they set the tone for the nature of the proceeding relationship. Fostering such conversations is undoubtedly a challenging art for the detached youth worker - but one that has both immediate and long-term social and spiritual impact.

3.2 Establishing acceptance and developing long-term relationships

As Kerry Young argues, the role of the youth worker is to recognise, affirm and to encourage reflection on the young person’s experience.²² As Ricoeur confirms, the individual’s ‘narrative identity, constitutive of self consistency, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime’,²³ and so the detached youth worker, can interject and enable a new narrative reality of human potential and flourishing as a construct with the young person. This new narrative identity may become open to include a new reality construct of themselves which includes not only their reference to social structures such as school or family, but also reveals to the young person a dormant exploration of their spirituality. From a Christian perspective, this might mean a consideration of how they are a person in completeness, created by God, made in the image of God - and also possibly to understand God dwelling within humanity, as the image of God as ‘true man’.²⁴ With the pursuit of human improvement a key element of detached youth work,²⁵ a broad approach should account for the young person as having spiritual connections, through concepts of emotional and identity development, and how this may encompass a spiritual sense of being. Indeed, ‘spiritual development’ existed as a separate National Occupational Standard for youth work until very recently.²⁶

The detached youth worker puts themselves in the position to engage in banter, communicate informally with young people, in the process of building conversation in which they have the opportunity to reflect on new ideas and realities with young people. They often hear the angst of a young person and through these conversations, raise the possibility of them not only identifying coping strategies for that moment of angst, but of reflecting on their humanity, their frustrations and expectations, on the nature of feelings, identity, relationships and meaning. These become moments of sharing life experience and may naturally lead to spiritual questions. This is in accord with Dewey’s conception of experiential learning, often drawn on in youth work theory, who iterates that: ‘Many a

²⁰ Bernard Davies, ‘Youth Work: A Manifesto for our Times – Revisited’ in *Youth and Policy*, No. 114 (2015), pp.96-117.

²¹ Heather Smith, ‘Engaging in Conversation’ in Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. K. (eds) *Youth work practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), p. 37

²² Kerry Young, *The Art of Youth Work (2nd Edn)*, (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2006), pp. 87-88

²³ Ricoeur, 1988, cited by Dan R. Stiver, *Ricoeur and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 103

²⁴ Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p.198

²⁵ Richard Davies, ‘Places to go, things to see, space and activity in English youth work policy’ in Kraft, P., Horton, J. and Tucker, F. J. (eds) *Critical geographies of childhood and youth* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012), p.87

²⁶ Helen Bardy, Pauline Grace, Pete Harris, John Holmes and Mike Seal ‘Finding a middle way between faith-based and secular youth and community work courses’ in Smith, M.; Stanton, N. & Wylie, T. *Youth work and faith: debates, delights and dilemmas* (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2015), pp.99-114

person is unhappy, tortured within, because he has at command no art of expressive action'.²⁷ To be a detached youth worker is to embody that expressive action, in the art of conversation. Further moments of spiritual impact can occur as the detached youth worker becomes willing to receive and respond to questions of faith, or create situations of spiritual reflection through, for example, emerging discussions about bereavement. These moments occur because the detached youth worker puts themselves there, right into a contested space where the young person might be deliberating over purpose, sadness or the intricacies of that day's RE lesson. The detached worker can begin, in time, to recognise God at work already in the young person's life; as the group care for each other, for example, when one of them gets injured on a skateboard or if they have to settle disputes. These are moments to enhance the indwelling of Kingdom; an impact of being there is to recognise it in them, as the worker is in community with the group. They may take further risks to articulate these more deliberate notions of 'God here with' with the young people. In the initial moments of the social game played to established power and intentions, the 'why' questions are often articulated by the young people (e.g. 'why are you here?' or 'are you Christians?'). However, the appropriate time for a detached worker to be more intentional, to begin to take risks, is once there is a deeper relationship established between the young person and worker.

Therefore, not only do detached youth workers encourage conversations about the social or personal aspects of a young person's life, but they can develop conversations about themes that emerge from these conversations which may allow a young person to reflect upon personhood, identity and purpose, and explore themes such as art, music, prayer or belonging. Developing deliberately these kinds of themes may require an element of risk, with the relationship built up with the young person at stake. Given the ability of the detached youth worker to make discernments of the situation with a group in the development of the relationship and expectations thus far, they would be able to judge the appropriateness of developing further any spiritual or faith conversations. These conversations should become an accepted and mutually negotiated part of the dynamic of the conversation or encounter, in that they remain at the jurisdiction of the young person, who retains an element of decision-making. This open approach has led to a range of spiritual impacts within detached youth work such as facilitating a collective response to a community tragedy, celebration or festival – or simply creating space and capacity within a dominantly secular culture, for questions and stories about purpose, belonging or identity to be grappled with.

The narrative of the Bible is full of such fluid, seemingly unprepared encounters between people and Jesus, and of people with Jesus' disciples; where questions are raised and responded to, where knowledge is transferred, where stories are told, and on occasion, where true identities are hidden.²⁸ The conversation and liberation of the Ethiopian who is encountered by Philip in the desert in Acts 8 is one that detached youth workers can identify with. From a period of journeying and confusion, about his sexual identity and acceptance in the Jewish community, the Ethiopian makes his way back from the religious festival occurring in Jerusalem to South Sudan. En route, Philip catches him up (on foot) and asks him about what he is reading. The Ethiopian is reading from the Jewish text of Isaiah (and so he understands about belief and the law) and as he reads to Philip the passage that 'as they recognised him not',²⁹ Philip re-appropriates this not to the Ethiopians current experience – of rejection, misunderstanding and prejudice - but to the misunderstood life of Jesus, who was despised and rejected. Through the conversation, the Ethiopian reveals his own apprehensions, and mistrust, but when confronted by a new spiritual reality that could offer him acceptance, despite his sexual

²⁷ John Dewey, *The Art of Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1934), p.68

²⁸ Luke 24: 35-53

²⁹ Acts 8:26-40, The Holy Bible, New living Translation

ambiguity, he is able to engage in a ceremony of belonging, there and then, before he then continues his journey home. This story is referred to by Passmore and colleagues who use it to encourage the spiritual discipline of *drawing alongside*, of being with and being awakened to the possibilities of spiritual conversation and impact throughout the moments in time with young people, particularly through detached work.³⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer also argues that God interjects into our lives through dialogical conversation that maintains respect for the goodness of God, human freedom and the integrity of the relationship.³¹ Thus, the interjection by Philip in the biblical narrative, as well as the youth worker's interjections in conversation with young people, allow for the possibility of God to be at work, in that same goodness, maintaining human freedom (through the youth work principle of voluntary participation) and the authenticity of the relationship. These moments should spring from such unplanned cooperative imaginings, where the young person is open to being awakened to their own spirituality, rather than didactically from a point of judgement or assumption of deficit.

4. Detached youth work and social control

The real impact of detached youth work usually occurs over time and through long-term relationships, as described above. However, concrete outcomes such as the participation of a young person in an employment programme or dissociating themselves from an unhealthy lifestyle choice are, though often an unplanned consequence, one that is easier to measure than long-term changes in attitude. As such, a recent social shift in the secular detached youth work field is towards its use as an instrument for *social control* rather than social education. The essence of such practice is often aimed at removing, deterring or diverting young people away from one social space, and into another. This, Davies argues, is merely a matter of interpreting the narratives that predicate such spaces; for example, that it is problematic for groups of young people to inhabit a public space, a judgement not proffered to groups of 'tourists' or 'shoppers', that young people 'loiter' rather than 'talk to friends', and that they are deemed 'anti-social' when they are in fact being 'very social' with their peers.³² Thus, the discourse that shapes such practice deems young people's activity as problematic, and this a justifiable need for the employment of detached youth workers in these public spaces. Despite increasingly being agents employed under a social control agenda, many youth workers still act in this space in accordance with virtues and values of detached youth work. Even where it is used as a social control tool by a governmental agency (such as the police), detached youth work can still have some desired social outcomes – such as reduced crime, or 'anti-social' behaviour – which may occur because of a heightened presence in the locality, or that the detached youth workers distract the young people in conversations and arrange planned activities for and with them. However, the tension in this form of work occurs in the imbalance of power perceived by the young people through a conflict between 'them' (young people's perception of the authoritarian 'other') and 'us' (the young people themselves). As such, detached youth workers can find themselves walking an ontological tightrope between the young people on one side, and the expectations of their funding or managing organisation on the other. In reference to Foucault, Thiselton argues that 'power is everywhere... because it comes from everywhere. The social service professions, perhaps innocent at first, become power seeking and they exercise formative power'.³³ Coburn and Wallace suggest that this type of detached work becomes a functional activity, to encourage a change in behaviour (which is often more measurable), as opposed to the more critical, transformational practice of detached youth work which fosters participation,

³⁰ Passmore, Passmore and Ballantyne, *Here Be Dragons*, pp.167-168

³¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologising Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.316

³² Davies, 'Places to go'

³³ Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, p.194

conversation, human flourishing and dialogue.³⁴ Yet, hesitantly, it is not that some functional detached work does not have some social impact, it may be narrowly defined and short-term (such as for the duration of funding, or in a particular area perceived as a 'crime hotspot') but it sacrifices the essence of detached youth work in regard to its notions of the young person and the 'tipping the balance of power in their favour'.³⁵ It acts in this way, as Freire would argue, to 'invade' the community, rather than seek to liberate it through cooperation and acts of 'conscientization'.³⁶ Christian detached youth workers may find themselves less tied to agendas of social control imposed by local or national policy. This does not, however, mean necessarily that they are free from institutional agendas as churches and Christian organisations may have their own 'top down' agendas for their youth work.³⁷

5. Tensions between detached youth work and youth ministry

In recent years, community and street-based Christian youth work has been a growing phenomenon. The Message's Eden Project, formed in Manchester in the 1990s, now has projects across the country where Christians move into deprived areas to live and work with the people there, particularly young people.³⁸ Emerging more recently was Streetspace (a street-based youth work initiative run by Frontier Youth Trust) which has 52 UK projects. Streetspace describe their aim as 'to promote young people's personal, social and spiritual development in line with the core youth work principles of Empowerment, Education, Participation, and Equality of Opportunity'.³⁹ This clearly aligns them with the principles of informal education and the wider youth work sector as well as emphasising a primarily social starting point for engaging young people on their own terms. Another example of a recent street-based Christian initiative, though not restricted to engaging with young people, is Street Pastors. As well as these national examples there is also much locally organised detached youth work in the Christian sector not attached to these large organisations but run by local churches and projects.

Christian youth work, however, is contested terrain. There are expressions of it that are meeting a primarily social need and those that focus primarily on faith transmission. The debates on what it means to be 'incarnational' have shaped discussions about Christian youth work and ministry, as well as what makes youth work uniquely Christian. While the 'incarnational' approach has been prominent as a model of being the 'word as flesh' in Christian youth work, Griffiths has critiqued it for becoming a 'lazy' approach that focuses on the relational and fails to go beyond it to 'be proactive in speaking the gospel openly'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Richards has questioned what makes Christian youth work distinctly Christian if it lacks an explicit evangelical purpose.⁴¹ In recent years, there has been an increasing polarisation between those who argue strongly that Christian youth work must be more distinctly and primarily focused on faith transmission and/or conversion,⁴² and those that argue that Christian youth work can

³⁴ Coburn and Wallace, *Youth work in communities and schools*

³⁵ Davies, 'Youth Work: A Manifesto for our Times – Revisited'

³⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p.130

³⁷ Naomi Stanton 'Faith-based youth work – lessons from the Christian sector' in in Curran, S., Harrison, R. and Mackinnon, D. (eds) *Working with Young People* (2nd Edn) London: Sage, 2013. Please note Naomi Stanton is the previous name of Naomi Thompson, one of this article's authors.

³⁸ Matt Wilson, *Eden: Called to the Streets*, Eastbourne: Survivor, 2005

³⁹ Streetspace 'Welcome'. Accessed November 2013. www.streetspace.org.uk/Streetspace/Home.html

⁴⁰ Griffiths, *Models for Youth Ministry*, p.3

⁴¹ Sam Richards 'Christian Youth Work? Can youth work legitimately incorporate evangelism – or is evangelism necessarily indoctrination?' in *Perspectives* (1999), pp. 5-7

⁴² See, for example: Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, Sally Nash, and Christopher Cocksworth, *The Faith of Generation Y* (London: Church House Publishing, 2010); Griffiths, *Models for Youth Ministry*

be inherently social in purpose and that Christians should be leading the response to social issues.⁴³ The impact these debates have on practice play out in the tensions between whether Christian youth workers are employed to meet the community or church needs, and youth workers often find themselves balancing a number of agendas and purposes – social, spiritual and institutional.⁴⁴

The theory of informal education has underpinned youth work training and practice in the wider sector.⁴⁵ As such, it has also influenced youth work qualifying programmes specifically for Christian workers. However, there is debate as to whether informal education, as a process that is young-person-led and starts with their perceived needs,⁴⁶ fits with Christian youth work with some suggesting it does and others claiming there are tensions.

Danny Brierley firmly argues that informal education fits with the approach that Jesus took to engaging and teaching people:

Far from being a modern fad, informal education can be seen in the ministry of Christ. His use of conversation, story-telling, symbolic language, signs and wonders and personal example were all used to facilitate people's learning and response.⁴⁷

Sylvia Collins-Mayo and her colleagues, however, suggest that there is a direct clash of approaches between Christian ministry and informal education:

Informal education wants young people to have the right to make their own choices; the Church wants young people to choose what is 'right' and to respond to the historical truth revealed in Christ. These are two different epistemological realities placed alongside each other: the relativism of the former and the objectivism of the latter.⁴⁸

Collins-Mayo et al argue that informal education is philosophically opposed to Christian faith transmission. They criticise it for promoting 'choice over truth'.⁴⁹

Whilst Collins-Mayo and colleagues criticise the liberalism of youth work and informal education in Christian settings, claiming that this approach is ineffective as a means of faith transmission, Naomi Stanton's research found that the emphases on choice, dialogue, relationships and participation in Christian youth work settings were crucial to young people's engagement.⁵⁰ Her research also found that there were tensions in Christian youth work between meeting social, spiritual and institutional agendas and explored the ways in which youth workers manage these tensions. She found that youth workers manage the tensions between the different purposes of their work by separating their work into three main domains which address each agenda. The most typical model of church-based youth work involves open access groups which are primarily social, cell group style study groups which are primarily spiritual and, finally, support to attend Sunday services, in order to facilitate the young people's often complex relationship with and membership of the wider institution. It would be over-

⁴³ See, for example: Jon Jolly, 'Christian Youth Work: Motive and Method' in Smith, M.; Stanton, N. & Wylie, T. (eds) *Youth work and faith: debates, delights and dilemmas* (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2015)

⁴⁴ Stanton, *Faith-based youth work*

⁴⁵ As developed by: Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith, *Informal education – conversation, democracy and learning (revised edition)*, (Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 2005)

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An Introduction to Youth work and Ministry*, Cumbria: Spring Harvest Publishing/Authentic Lifestyle, 2003.

⁴⁸ Collins-Mayo et al, *The faith of generation Y*, p.97

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stanton, *Faith-based youth work*

simplistic to suggest that the social, spiritual and institutional agendas can be completely separated – there is clearly overlap – but each domain represents a primary agenda.

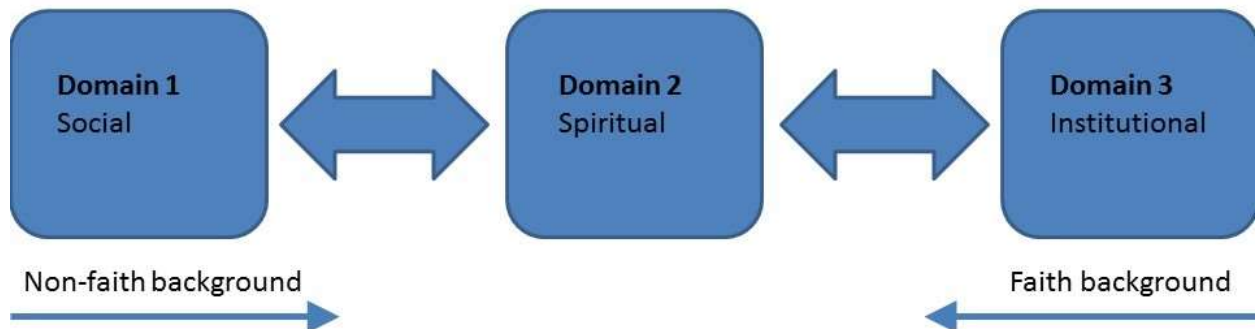


Figure 1: The three domain model of Christian youth work⁵¹

Stanton's model attempts to illustrate how youth workers address tensions in the purposes of Christian youth work by separating out the domains. However, the model has been criticised for not acknowledging that some expressions of Christian youth work are entirely social in purpose and not connected even very loosely with spiritual or institutional agendas.⁵² Thus, some forms of Christian youth work, particularly those which are community or street-based, may need consideration outside of the model presented above.

The key problem with the model is that it only accounts for church-based youth work and largely ignores the raft of Christian social provision that takes place in other community settings including the streets. For Christian detached youth workers working within the community, the tensions between the domains and purposes of Christian youth work may be less explicit than for those working within the church building. However, as theories and models of detached youth work draw on the principles of informal education which emphasise starting from the needs and concerns of young people themselves, it needs to be considered in light of this debate and the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of the work explored. It could be suggested that detached youth work, being one step removed from the church building and situated within the community itself, and with its clear theoretical grounding in informal education, allows for a more young-person-led practice.

6. Methods and sample

The analysis of detached youth work in the remainder of this paper is informed by a small study involving seven Christian detached youth workers. The study sought to illustrate how social and spiritual purposes and impact are articulated by the Christian detached youth workers involved. These were self-selecting participants who became involved in the research by responding to calls made via the social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. The participants were all working or volunteering as detached youth workers for churches or other Christian organisations. This began as an 'opportunity sample' in that the calls were made via the social media networks of one of the authors of this paper. It became a 'snowball sample' as these calls were shared through the networks of the contacts initially established. Six of the participants were male and one was female. Six of the participants were based in England and one was

⁵¹ Ibid., p.200

⁵² Jolly, *Christian Youth Work*

based in Scotland. The participants were interviewed via email. Whilst this is not a typical method for gathering qualitative data, it was a convenient and non-intrusive one. To avoid issues with writing fatigue, the number of open questions was kept to a minimum (focusing on asking them to articulate the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of their work) and the participants offered some detailed narratives via this medium.

Though the participants were not interviewed verbally, the interview approach largely followed the form of 'narrative inquiry' in which a small number of broad questions are asked, with any 'follow-up questions' defined by the participant's narrative (rather than the other way round) so as not to influence the unfolding narrative with specific, pre-set questions.⁵³ Sub-questions, where necessary, were asked through further emails to clarify points made in response to the broad questions. The responses were then subject to thematic analysis in which key themes were drawn from across the data.⁵⁴ The overall themes were: that the starting point for Christian detached work is primarily relational; that the social impact of youth work is valued by workers; that the social and spiritual purposes and impact of detached work are inseparable; and that 'religious' or 'institutional' agendas are held at a distance by the detached workers. The themes from this study are illustrative of how some workers articulate their practice and are offered to invite further discussion and reflection on the social and spiritual roles of detached youth work.

7. Research findings: social and spiritual purposes and impacts of detached youth work

The detached youth workers in the sample were keen to discuss the starting point of their work as relational and the developing of relationships as the primary approach to their work. One youth worker termed these as 'purposeful relationships', demonstrating the desire to use them as a vehicle for wider impact. All of the youth workers framed the success of their work around such relationships as illustrated by the following examples.

We seek to be a consistent and long term presence in our communities and developing strong relationships with young people who are often isolated or excluded. What comes out of these relationships is undoubtedly difficult to quantify. For some it may never go beyond simple conversations in the street, for others we have supported them for years, helping them with numerous challenges in their lives. If our work is seen in isolation our impact could be seen as relatively small, but we believe that we are doing something that is both meaningful and worthwhile. I see it as working as part of something bigger both spiritually and practically in terms of the other services and initiatives that are around. It is interesting to think how many lives have been affected over the 25 years of our existence.

We spend time getting to know the young people which makes them feel valued and worthwhile, I think they really appreciate people taking an interest in them. They often talk to us about their personal lives. We have the opportunity to speak into their lives when they open up to us with positive ideas and encouragement, which I think can have a significant impact in a teenager's life. We hope that our relationships with the young people make them feel valued and also give them positive role models which means they don't feel that their only option is

⁵³ Judith Bell, *Doing your Research Project* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005).

⁵⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, (2006), 77-101.

getting involved in drug dealing or crime or other destructive behaviours. We can point them in the direction of other agencies to do with drug rehabilitation or employment opportunities.

The youth workers interviewed outlined a clear social purpose to their work. This involved working to explicit social outcomes such as reducing crime and working with unemployed young people. The process of detached youth work was framed as inherently social through its key focus on building relationships. They were keen to outline the social impacts of their work. One youth worker explained:

This work has huge social impact. There is something hugely important about meeting young people on the streets and spending time with them on their territory... This takes a number of forms, from the young person who needs help and encouragement to apply for a job, to the young person who needs someone to support them in a court appearance. Street based work is much more than just being on the streets a few evenings a week. Simply by building relationships and being a visible presence we are impacting the lives of individuals and groups of young people.

However, they were also able to articulate their work as spiritual, though they emphasised that 'The social and spiritual are difficult to separate'. One youth worker explained the spiritual element to their practice as follows:

I have an understanding of Christian spirituality that emphasises the incarnation. God became man 'and moved into the neighbourhood' and I see youth work like this. It is about being a part of the community and this allows you, in fact almost forces you, to address the spiritual aspects of life. You earn the right to be heard. I also believe that as Christians we have hope, not just for the next life (though that is important) but also hope in this life. So much of what we do when we engage with young people is about sowing seeds of hope, seeds that we may not see grow into life, but seeds of hope are planted. Additionally, I believe that I learn much about spirituality and my own faith by positively engaging with young people. For me, street-based youth work is a highly spiritual activity.

The youth workers' expressions of their spiritual impacts with young people link back to the definitions of spirituality explored at the start of this paper. They tended to be those discussions and activities in their engagement with young people which go beyond addressing merely social and emotional needs to addressing their existential questions and concerns, creating spaces that enable young people to articulate what it means to be human and their understanding of themselves in relation to the world, universe and the supernatural. In the particular quotation above, this is expressed simply in young people having 'hope' – a deeply and uniquely human feeling.

The youth workers did explicitly claim to take an 'incarnational' approach, as illustrated above. As suggested earlier in this paper, this is a dominantly relational approach and the youth workers' understandings certainly reflect this. However, rather than it being a merely relational approach that responds simply to social and emotional needs, the youth workers framed this approach clearly in an overlap of the social and spiritual purposes of their work. Rather than this approach failing to move beyond the relational as some critics have suggested, the 'incarnational' approach involves a complex inter-weaving of the social and spiritual purposes of youth work. The youth workers were able to articulate how having developed a relational practice, they were able to use this to nurture spiritual impacts as in the example below.

We often offer to pray for the young people and their family. They are all aware that we are Christians and that is why we do the project. We talk freely about our beliefs and their impact on our personal lives when they ask. A lot of the young people pray themselves with us, and three have become Christians. I see this as a result of the fact that we have been intentionally bold and open with our faith - I know previous projects in the area have had great social impact but limited spiritual simply because they loved the young people without telling them why. We prioritise prayer before the project and have always been willing to take risks when we feel the Holy Spirit prompting us to, we want to follow his lead in everything. I believe that us being open to his direction and intentionally walking in step with what he is saying is the reason we are seeing fruit.

The feeling of social and spiritual as interlinked within the relational and 'incarnational approach' was unanimous among the youth workers and there was a sense that engaging in social action was people 'being church'. One described the connection between social and spiritual in their work in the following terms:

I am continually struck by Jesus' words in Matthew, where he says 'I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me...' This says to me that there is an explicitly divine connection between all of us. So I believe we have a spiritual impact in our actions and interactions caring for and supporting young people.

This overlap between social and spiritual was clearly articulated across the sample. In discussing the impacts of their work, these included both concrete social outcomes such as reduced crime and increased youth employment as well as subtler, 'softer' outcomes, both social and spiritual, such as relationships being developed and issues relating to identity and faith being explored. The spiritual impacts, in particular, tended to take this 'softer' form, as demonstrated by the quotations above, whereas social impacts were more easily articulated in concrete, measurable terms. This reflects the 'impact language' of secular youth work, with its current focus on targeting and the meeting of measurable outcomes, and links to the social control agenda discussed earlier. Recognising a spiritual dimension to detached youth work may, therefore, allow for the softer, more implicit outcomes to be valued.

7.1 Rejecting an institutional agenda?

Whilst the youth workers were not asked about the institutional agenda of their work, some did draw out the distinction between spiritual and institutional impact. One explained that: 'I have encouraged the volunteers to think spiritually about the work, and the notion of them being the church... and challenging a "come to us" mentality of "Sunday" church'. Another emphasised that 'In terms of a "religious impact", perhaps meaning "getting young people into church", our impact is almost non-existent'. This suggests that Christian detached workers are potentially more able to resist the imposition of institutional agendas on their work than church-based youth workers or their secular colleagues struggling with the tensions of working to agendas of filling churches or of social control.

Overall, it appeared that for the street-based youth workers, rather than their spiritual impact being closely tied to an institutional agenda, it was closely linked with the social agenda of their work. This was in contrast to the experiences of the church-based youth workers that informed Stanton's model, outlined earlier in this paper. The 'church on the streets' is more flexible and rather than a separating out of social and spiritual agendas, these are closely linked with the institutional agenda holding least weight and kept at a distance, as illustrated below.

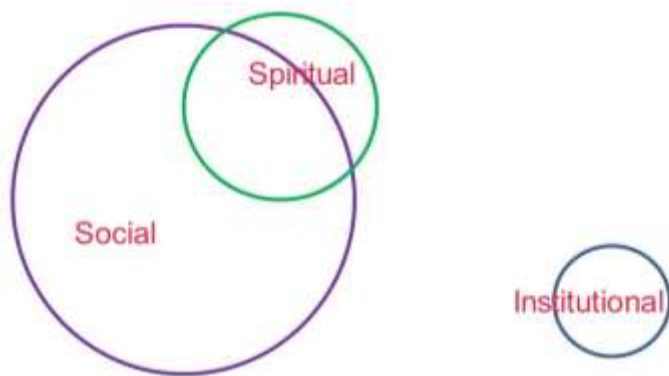


Figure 2: Stanton's three 'domains' in 'incarnational' Christian detached youth work

The circles in this diagram do not represent separate domains of practice, as in Stanton's model, simply because the detached youth workers' practice was not clearly distinguishable as these different domains. Instead, they represent the dominant articulation of where these agendas fit in their work. The social agenda being largest reflects this being the starting point for their engagement with young people and the most explicit purpose of their work. The spiritual agenda, though smaller in the illustration, was not necessarily less important to the practitioners, despite being less primary to their approach. This reflects the principle of detached youth work of 'starting where the young people are at' discussed earlier - and 'outreach work', by comparison, might well start with a more primary spiritual agenda. For the detached youth workers in this research, the spiritual was more implicit than the social (hence the smaller circle) but not separable from it (hence the overlap). As demonstrated by the quotation earlier, this relationship between the social and spiritual agendas is complex, because the youth workers frame the social aspect of their work in spiritual terms, as part of their spiritual purpose and practice. Therefore, the social aspect of their work is framed by and located in their own spiritual practices and motivations. Their social engagement is also clearly intertwined with their spiritual practice in the sense that, for example, conversations around identity overlap both the social and spiritual for Christian practitioners. The institutional agenda being least important and often consciously distanced by the youth workers, though recognised as an existing external tension in their narratives, is represented by the small and separated circle in the diagram.

8. Discussion of the findings

The research demonstrates that Christian detached youth workers can identify the social and spiritual purposes of their work and the impacts they make in young people's lives and communities. These purposes are fluid and overlapping and largely free of institutional agendas. The small qualitative sample cannot be generalised but perhaps reflects a 'best practice' model, as those who were willing to take part in the research were clearly confident about their work. The research participants' current experiences appear to reflect the latter two of the stages of detached youth work explored earlier in this paper, 'establishing acceptance' and 'developing long-term relationships', as their narratives demonstrate the formation of trusting relationships with young people, starting from their concerns and leading to young-person-led impacts, both social and spiritual. These broad stages appear, from the research, to be catalysts for the facilitation of social and spiritual impact through the process of 'incarnational' detached youth work.

The youth workers were keenly aware of the importance of the relationships established through their work. Detached youth work, occurring in the space that it does, gives young people the opportunity to

engage in mutual relationships of which they are to some extent in control.⁵⁵ As such, they may for the first time be able to make decisions using negotiation and compromise with adults, who as detached workers, understand the dynamics of power in such conversations and relationships. As Gadamer attests:

There would be no speaker and no art of speaking if understanding and consent were not in question; were not underlying elements; there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find together...to understand, we may say is itself a kind of happening.⁵⁶

Detached youth work opens up the possibility for new shared understandings of and for each person and a starting point for a new shared social reality and purpose. It is a starting point for collaborative change; of attitudes, values and behaviours, and collaborative community and social change. This is seen in the examples from the research findings where relationships lead to social and spiritual change. In allaying power by choosing to be with the young people in their context, detached youth workers disempower themselves in setting the boundaries and controls of a situation, and in doing so gain situational respect. This is not to say that problematic behaviour is ignored but that to challenge unacceptable behaviour is a negotiation itself. For example, the negotiation may be whether the worker leaves or stays (rather than them having the authority to bar the young person as in building-based youth work), not to gain control of a situation, but to be 'concerned with understanding and caring about how someone relates to another in the realms of the wider social context'.⁵⁷

These initial moments with young people occurring as they do in the open spaces of estates, streets and cities are also of more concrete social impact; young people themselves may articulate that detached workers can enable them to feel 'safe' (not that they might admit to being unsafe without them) or, as articulated in our research, move away from 'destructive behaviours' towards more positive outcomes. The effect of detached youth work that has an increased, regular presence in a particular geographical area will have a social effect of this space, with adult residents feeling safer, and possibly a reduction in crime committed or received by young people. Yet, as young people develop contact with the youth workers, and accept them in these public spaces, they build up for themselves a support structure, a person whom they can then relate to, who is often respected for *going to* them. Arguably, this increases the social capital of the young person.⁵⁸ Supportive relationships are deemed to be important in their own right for a variety of reasons.⁵⁹ Given that the relationships within detached work are negotiated by the young person, albeit intended by the worker, then this arguably enhances the personal, social and emotional impact of such relationships, for the young person, the worker and the community. The importance of these relationships, as an impact in themselves as well as a catalyst for the social and spiritual purposes of their work, was clearly emphasised in the narratives of the youth workers in our research.

It can be inferred that the principle nuance of detached youth work is that it enables support to *go to*, and be accepted more readily by young people, some of whom may not access these services offered from the 'top down'. This particular social purpose of detached youth work was first articulated by

⁵⁵ Davies, 'Places to go'

⁵⁶ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p.25,29

⁵⁷ Smith, 'Engaging in conversation', p.35

⁵⁸ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

⁵⁹ Huw Blacker 'Relationships, friendship and youth work' in Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. K. (eds) *Youth work practice*, (New York: Palgrave, 2010)

Goetschius and Tash when they described the situation of the 'them' and 'us' perceptions of authority figures and organisations by young people.⁶⁰ Although they identified the role of the detached worker as to 'be a bridge' between young people and designated services, they also realised that the impact of the worker in *coming to*, and not being associated with the 'them' of those authority relationships, was that it enabled young people to access appropriate information and/or guidance more readily.⁶¹ This is reflected in the narratives of our research in which the youth workers described a direct impact of their own work with the young people as well as the ability to signpost them to other services and agencies. The approach of the detached youth worker; to be an appropriate supportive adult, being in the community of the young person, is present in Paulo Freire's conception of the practice of community emancipation and liberation as being mutually cooperative.⁶² In the shared social reality, of the street or park, for example, actions can be devised and taken cooperatively.⁶³ This is reflected by the social circle being largest in our illustration of Christian detached youth work (see figure 2) and was clearly reflected in the youth workers' narratives of allowing their work to be led by the young people.

To say that detached youth work has a clear spiritual impact is to assume that spiritual impact can be simplistically defined and assessed, when it is in fact a fluid, complex and subjective phenomenon. Detached youth work offers a process of *being with and amongst* young people, in spaces where conversations can happen, and where God can inhabit these moments of communication within the bounds of cooperative respectful relationships. In enabling young people to be attuned to the possibility of spirituality, a new imagined reality is opened up to the young person, a new view of themselves, the world around them, God and each other, detached workers can and will, if attuned themselves to these possibilities, have a spiritual impact. The detached youth workers in our study were keenly aware of a spiritual dimension to their work, grounded in these mutual relationships and the conversations and opportunities they create. The youth worker who discussed praying with young people reflects this most explicitly.

9. Conclusion

This paper argues for the importance of recognising both the spiritual and social purposes and impacts of Christian detached youth work – as well as how these inter-link and overlap (something not allowed for by the consideration of these purposes and impacts separately). From an exploration of the key literature and from the narratives of workers themselves, it is clear that these impacts are achieved through conversations and relationships that build over time through an 'incarnational' approach. These social and spiritual impacts both have value and are arguably inter-dependent as conversations between youth worker and young person are not either social *or* spiritual but a complex process of identity sharing and forming that draws on the social and spiritual understandings and experiences of both parties. It is through these conversations that both spiritual issues may be explored and that social needs may be identified and acted upon in ways that have long-term impact for young people. As detached youth workers develop sustained, regular conversations and establish relationships with young people, the opportunity for so called 'risk' and challenge can occur. As trust increases, the workers are able to receive more information from the young people as well as being able to offer guidance, information or advice. The young people are more likely to participate in employment opportunities if offered, reduce unhealthy behaviours, seek professional or medical help or ask for support with other needs whether they be social, emotional or even 'spiritual'. The relationships formed

⁶⁰ Goetschius and Tash, *Working with unattached youth*, p.121

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123

⁶² Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p.148-164

⁶³ Davies, 'Places to go', p.81

have social credence themselves, often highly valued by the young person, and developed over a period of time. From a therapeutic perspective, Carl Rogers asserts that 'person-centred' and holistic 'whole-person' approaches, rather than narrow outcome-focused approaches, have a more long-term impact upon an individual and their sense of wellbeing.⁶⁴ Thus, in detached work, because its very essence is to be; to listen, understand, empathise and cooperate with young people in their context, regardless of its limited structure, it can and does have lasting resonance. For the youth workers in our research, the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of such relationships were overlapping and difficult to clearly separate. In answering our research question as to how they articulate the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of their work, we found that they framed these overlapping purposes and impacts as achieved through an 'incarnational' approach that goes beyond a secular relational model of youth work. Detached youth work, in its nature, opens opportunities for challenge, change and impact on the young people, the youth worker and the wider community, as values, attitudes, norms, structures and behaviours become available for shared reflection. For the Christian detached youth workers in this study, their work was concurrently social and spiritual, with these purposes, outcomes and the incarnational approach to their work emphasised, in the words of one of them, as simply 'being church'.

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⁶⁴ Carl Rogers, 'The characteristics of a helping relationship' in Kirschenbaum, H. and Henderson, V. L. (eds) *The Carl Rogers Reader*, London: Constable, 1989

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