

30 Years of Change – Turning a negative into a positive

Over the last 30 years, since I started working with children, the world has changed more than at any other time in modern history. In 1983 when I became a Boys' Brigade Officer, there was no Internet, no games consoles, no mobiles phones, Channel 4 had just become the fourth TV Channel (Sky TV was just a pipedream), the Premier League was a distant business opportunity and Boys' Brigade an integral part of youth life. In our Church both Boys' and Girls' Brigades were overflowing with young people and there were similar numbers in the multitude of other Companies in Churches across the Southport Battalion.

For the first 2 decades of my youth work, the vast majority of children who came through the doors into BB/GB/Youth Club etc had similar life stories and didn't appear to have needs that set them apart. The number of children with more complex backgrounds and needs didn't seem to enter our world, mainly, I feel, due to the lack of space available for them to truly express themselves and for the leaders to have the time to prioritise their requirements.

Recently, the world has changed out of all recognition and as more "inviting" opportunities have taken some of the "more able" children away from BB & GB etc, space has opened up to allow the children who were previously reluctant to attend to come to the fore and experience the opportunities provided by those types of organisations.

This change is particularly noticeable in our church where a large number of children have felt able to join us in recent years. Obviously this has led to a different approach being adopted by the officers and helpers who engage with these young people, and the workload has increased. But it has also, I feel, made the work more rewarding and fulfilling.

I know some people have struggled with the change, I've been wrestling with it for some time. Even after working with children for 25 years, I've had to change my approach to make sure the new batch of young people could be nurtured and brought closer to God. Changing after such a long time of working with children was a challenge, until one of the parents took time to explain the story of one of our young people. In an instant my priorities and perspective changed and I began to view the young people in a completely different light.

As well as opening my eyes to the hidden stories that we all carry, who'd have thought that I would have had a lifelong battle with a heart problem caused by Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, we need to learn as much as we can about everyone's stories so we can work more effectively with them and take into account their difficulties and challenges.

Since I've changed my approach, my time with the young people has become even more enjoyable and I feel truly honoured, privileged and blessed to be given the

opportunity to work with all the young people but especially in the current situation. Some people misinterpret the children's behaviour as being naughty and disrespectful but, to me, it is obvious from the way the children have grown and become a major part of our family that we should all feel blessed to be part of their story and help them to write new chapters as we nurture their growth.

In the past the rewards were gleaned from winning trophies, football matches, attending national events and seeing the young people progress, grow together and move towards a life with God. Now the rewards are seen in the children blossoming, learning to perform different activities for the first time, accepting the situation of others and feeling loved, welcomed, safe and cared for in an environment that brings them closer to others, society and ultimately closer to God.

This brings its own challenges especially to members of society who struggle with seeing children with a range of abilities in previously "stable" places. The natural reaction is to expect the current crop of children to behave in the same way as children did in the past but, for whatever reason, this is not always possible and greater understanding is required to allow the children to feel safe, loved and welcomed. We should all feel incredibly blessed to have so many children attending our church in such high numbers. The reaction we give, even in the smallest encounter with the children, will leave a lasting impression in their minds and increase their, and their parents, desire to worship with us on a Sunday.

The world has changed dramatically over the last 30 years, but three things remain constant. The world is still a very dangerous, scary, soulless place; God is still a loving, caring, amazing, powerful presence and all the Officers, leaders, helpers and Church members want the best for the young people who come into our care.

We can only work with the children when they are in our care, and in this ever changing world, if we don't work with the children, then who will?

What was looked upon as being a negative (when numbers in the Brigades decreased) is turning into something amazingly beautiful, positive and God given.

Mike Owen

Next Issue

The next edition of **The Link** is due to be published on the **Sunday the 7th of June 2015**. Therefore, items for inclusion in the next edition need to reach me by **Sunday the 31st of May**. Thanks, Mike (MikeOwen10@aol.com)