

# Sharing the Story With and Through Our Youth

Jacqui Foxall

After wrapping up Day 4 of our VBS program I had a visit with two of our teen helpers, who happened to be sisters. The theme of the day had been: “God loves us... no matter what”, and we had studied the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Our pastoral visit was focussed on their uncle’s ongoing battle with cancer and the toll it was taking on their family. The day’s events had provided

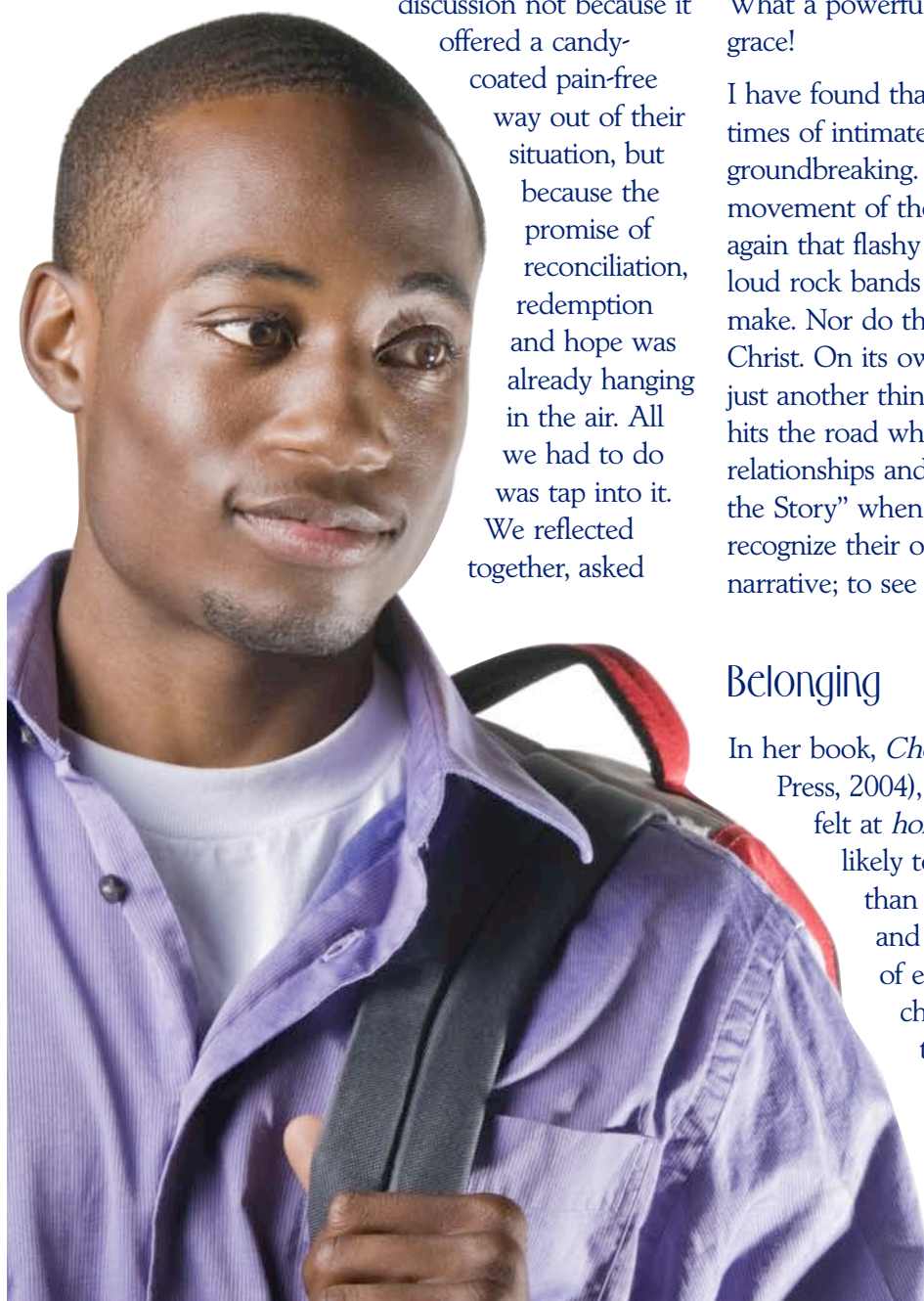
the perfect backdrop for our discussion not because it offered a candy-coated pain-free way out of their situation, but because the promise of reconciliation, redemption and hope was already hanging in the air. All we had to do was tap into it. We reflected together, asked

questions, laughed, cried and prayed. In the end, one of the sisters articulated how she felt sure that God would use these horrible circumstances in some way which would bring life and joy to others. She didn’t know how yet, but she was convinced. Their uncle has since passed away, and still both those young women hold firm to their belief that God’s plan prevails beyond cancer and death, and that *they* have a role to play in that story. What a powerful witness to God’s promise of life and grace!

I have found that the best “story sharing” comes in these times of intimate conversation. I know. This isn’t groundbreaking. However in light of the Youth Ministry movement of the last 30 years, it’s refreshing to hear it again that flashy programming, over the top events, and loud rock bands do not a successful Youth Ministry make. Nor do they tend to form faithful disciples of Christ. On its own, church “programming” can become just another thing to be “consumed”. The rubber really hits the road when we enter into meaningful relationships and attentive dialogue. Young people “tell the Story” when they feel empowered and equipped to recognize their own stories woven into a greater narrative; to see their stories as part of *God’s* Story.

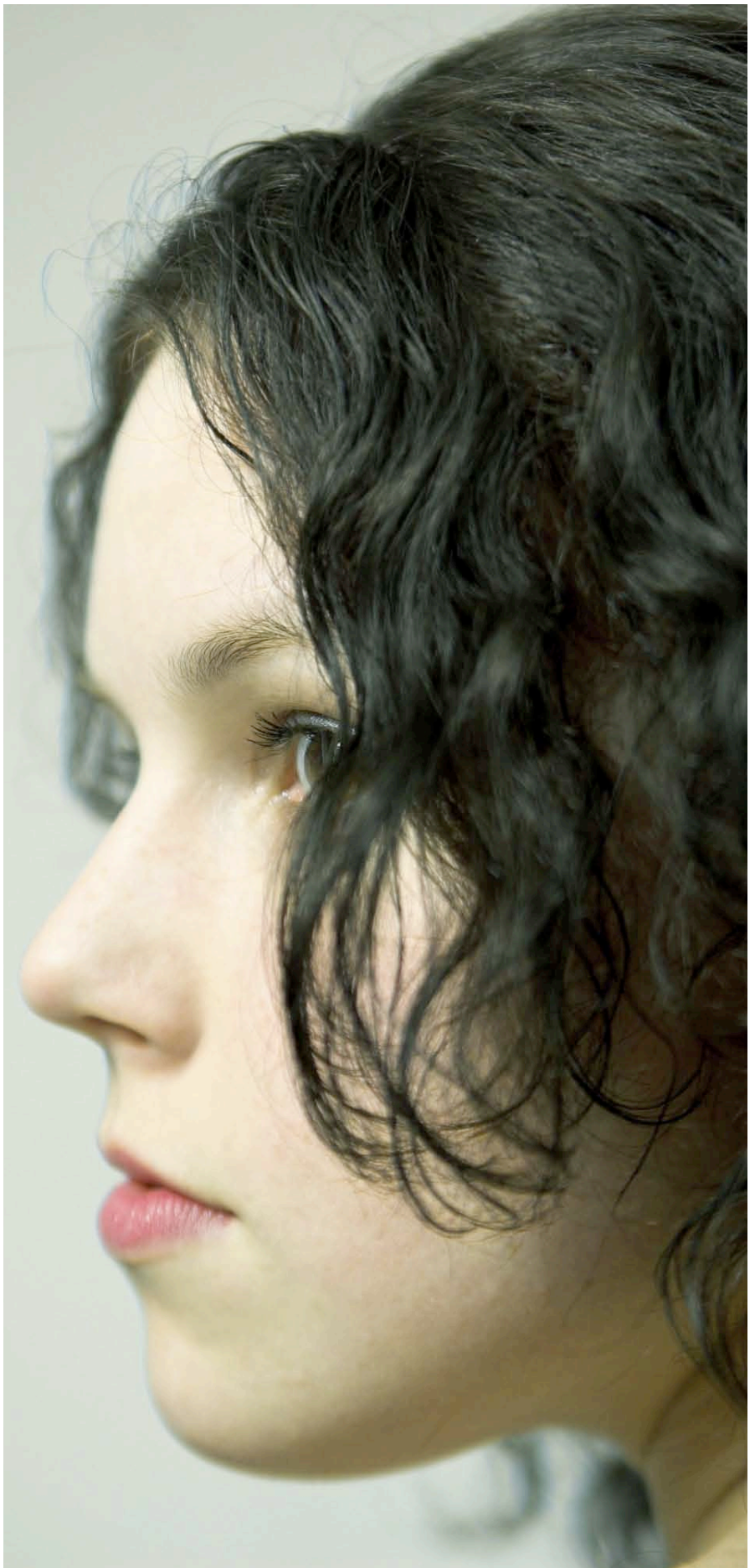
## Belonging

In her book, *Choosing Church* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), Carol Lytch concluded that Youth who felt at *home* and *safe* in their churches were most likely to stay actively involved. This is more than an act of hospitality, of welcoming youth and stuffing their pockets with our calendar of events. Let young people explore the chancel area of the sanctuary, invite them to participate in the maintenance of the grounds, let them have their overnight event in the parlour, and go on the trip up into the attic every fall and spring to close and open the vents! Help them to feel that this is *their* church, too.



But belonging doesn't end with the physical building, it continues into their sense of belonging as part of the body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul explains, in 1 Corinthians 12:27 *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it"*. Young people are not the *future* of our church - they are firmly rooted in its present. They are not like the hymn "In the bulb there is a flower", as if somehow people under the age of 30 are "unrevealed until their season". No, young people are gifted *now* to be fully active members of the body of Christ *today*. They have been given important roles to play within our communities of faith, offering their gifts *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12-13). Belonging means inviting youth to fully participate in, and have ownership of, the Church's ministries which are Christ's ministries to the world. Yes, this might mean things will be "different", but their gifts and talents and energy and enthusiasm are part of God's gift to the church *today*. Embrace it.

At St. Andrew's in Guelph, youth prepare and serve Communion on Easter Sunday. This is their gift to their worshipping community. Try as they might to appear stoic and pious (like every good Presbyterian), the energy in the worship space is electrified by their youthful presence. What a message to send on Easter Sunday as we celebrate life and energy and resurrection! At another Church, in Kitchener, I witnessed one teen in his year of preparation for Confirmation show up early many Sunday mornings in the winter to help the grounds keeper shovel sidewalks before the worshippers arrived. Last year, one of our youth at Knox Oakville discerned that she had spiritual gifts of teaching and leadership, and so she began attending our early service to help teach in Sunday school.





She always stayed for our second service in order to attend worship and her youth lessons. Young people belong in the church; in the physical building, and in the Body of Christ. When youth recognize their role in the Family of God, they feel more comfortable and empowered to tell The Story, and share their stories, too.

## Theological Reflection

Some youth love to talk. Some youth would rather not. Our role is to be active listeners - to both the chatter, and the silence - inviting youth to reflect on the deeper issues present in everyday life. Theological reflection requires focusing on the discussion rather than immediately arriving at answers; it means sometimes resting in the discomfort of the unknown and ultimately being sensitive to the movement of the Spirit. It means setting aside the flannel-graph and getting to the heart of the story, whether the topic is a story from the Bible, or an event from daily life. It's okay, in fact, it's preferable, to not have all the answers right away, or even at all. Doing so can help us develop a strong trust in God's promises of grace and justice, compassion and mercy - even in the midst of things we cannot understand. In today's postmodern, globalized, pluralistic world, equipping young people to do theological reflection is essential in spiritual growth and development, and enables them to more readily articulate their personal experience of Christ, and describe where they see the Spirit moving in the world.

As we were wrapping up a Luau Night at a youth ministry gathering recently, a young man in our youth group blurted out how sad he was about a young woman he knew by association who had taken her life the night before. When asked to say more, he explained that this young woman had discerned that she was gay, but being a Christian, she believed that the Church, nor God, would ever accept her or love her. The room was electrified. Every youth seemed to have an opinion, something to say, some experience to share. Jess, our Youth Leader at Knox, encouraged their conversation

and empowered each of them to share their thoughts and feelings. Very quickly anger at injustice rose to the surface, so did sadness at the senseless loss of a beautiful life. And then interestingly: remorse. After much passionate debate, one young woman thought out loud:

*"I wonder if I have ever done or said anything as a Christian that has ever made anyone feel unloved or hopeless. I hope I never act in a way that says to people that God cannot love them."* The Spirit moved, and the youth led one another in prayer for this young girl who had died by suicide, for her family, for her friends, and for the Church - that our witness would always be one of love, justice and compassion. Most certainly this night was a milestone in our Youth Ministry, but it had *nothing* to do with the fabulous Luau décor or the hula competition. It was a success because safe and inviting space was made for necessary theological reflection. The youth became incredibly sensitive to the moving of God's Spirit, and their discipleship

and witness glowed on them for weeks after that night. Being able to reflect theologically is a skill that will take them beyond youth group and well into their adult life.

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## Expectation

My colleague in ministry and I often discuss the level of commitment for Christ we see in people around us, in our community and in the world. In these conversations he often quotes a line he once heard from someone who confessed to wanting Christianity "in moderation". However, we always agree that when there is a sense of expectation and anticipation people rise to the occasion. I'm not talking about gold stars for attendance; I'm talking about encouraging one another in spiritual growth, in maturation of faith, of increasing our Christian discipleship. I mean journeying together as we rediscover each day what it means to confess, to be forgiven, to take up our cross, die to self and follow with singular focus, the One who marked the path for us. I mean learning to look at the world through the lens of God's mercy, justice and compassion, and responding as one called to



be an ambassador for God's Kingdom. I mean seeing ourselves, and one another, as part of a bigger plan, of God's plan of redemption for all of creation.

Expectation is what drove God's people across history: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11) - words God spoke through the prophet to the exiles living in Babylon. Helping young people to understand that God has a plan and purpose for their lives, and evoking in them a passion and anticipation for God's Kingdom is foundational to their growth in Christian discipleship. We must strive to discover together that we are sent into the world, as Christ was sent, to be instruments of God's love. The result is discovering that "our" stories are part of God's Story for all of creation.

### A final word...

In her most recent book, *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy-Dean points out four traits shared by devoted Christian teens, the first of which is having a personal and powerful God-story that they can articulate (pp. 70-78). A deeply-rooted sense of *belonging* in the household of God, regularly practicing the discipline of *theological reflection*, and grabbing on to already-but-not-yet *anticipation of God's Kingdom*, and our role within it, are foundational to "story sharing". Not sure where to start with your youth group? Take time over the year ahead to share your story with them, always pointing to its origin in God's story in Christ. As they listen to you articulate how the Spirit is moving in you and through you, and as they enter into meaningful dialogue about their lives and the world around them, encourage them as their witness for Christ grows.

*Jacqui Foxall is Associate Minister  
at Knox Oakville, Ontario.*