

PARTICIPATION –

***How do you
spell that?***

**INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING
WITHIN THE UNITARIAN MOVEMENT**

By Kevin Munday

THE 2001 ESSEX HALL LECTURE

Participation – How do you spell that?

Involving Young People in Decision-making within the Unitarian Movement

I am young in years and you are old; that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.' But it is the spirit in mortals, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding. It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right.

Job 32.6-9

1 Introduction

The late teens and early twenties are often a crucial time in the formation of a person's faith. Yet if you look around most church congregations the average age can appear high. Young people can be conspicuous by their absence and at least anecdotal evidence says that they are departing at an increasing rate.

George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has said that the Church is always 'one generation away from extinction'. For this reason it is important for the health of the Church to have strong work with and among young people. Yet young people are often marginalised and their contributions to worship, church life and policy-making are seen as peripheral.

This lecture aims to provide an accessible introduction to what is meant by youth participation and the issues involved in adopting a participative approach with young people. It will particularly address the involvement of young people in organisations' decision-making processes.

The lecture will give basic guidance on how to begin the process of working participatively and detail some of the benefits to be gained from adopting such an approach. It will also explain a number of models and methods of involving young people that may be adopted and give guidance on choosing the most appropriate. Finally it will provide ideas and advice on overcoming common barriers and problems.

This is the Essex Hall Lecture for the year 2001. It was delivered at University College, Chester on Friday 20 April, 2001. Essex Hall is the London Headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in an English-speaking country met over two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892 and many distinguished persons in various fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the General Assembly's Annual Meetings.

A complete list of previous lectures, many of which are still available for purchase, may be obtained by application to the Information Department of the General Assembly, at the address printed below.

Published by the Lindsey Press, an imprint of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

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ISBN 0 85319 065 8



www.unitarian.org.uk/docs

Relevant to all, whether a young person or adult, members of congregations and of the General Assembly alike, this lecture draws on research carried out by the British Youth Council and brings together ideas and experience from many different projects in the UK.

2 What is participation?

Many different definitions of the word participation have been used when discussing ways of involving young people. However, most of them contain three key elements:

- Young people expressing their views, having an effective voice, being heard;
- Young people changing, influencing, directing or controlling their own activities or services;
- Young people taking responsibility for the decisions they are involved in.

3 Models of participation

Similarly, a number of models have been developed to explain the different degrees or levels of participation that can be adopted. Perhaps the most straightforward is the one presented by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum in its publication 'Participation: Youth Work Curriculum Guidelines'. It identifies six levels or sections that are ranked according to the amount of power in the hands of the young people or adult facilitator.

A spectrum for participation					
			Power of the young people		
Led	Token-ism	Consul-tation	Repres-entation	Partici-pation	Self-managing
Power of the youth worker					

Led describes the approach where the adult facilitator has complete authority and the young people have no say in the decision-making process. All skills, knowledge and experience are seen as remaining with the facilitator who does all the planning, goal setting and organisation. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that young people are not capable of taking on responsibilities.

Tokenism is when adult facilitators still set the agenda and take the decisions but one or two young people may be consulted. However, their views may not necessarily be taken seriously. Again, young people are not seen as capable of taking responsibility but in need of the protection, supervision and instruction of workers. Interestingly, such an approach can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the young people losing self-esteem, lacking motivation and becoming dependent as a result of the lack of confidence the worker has in their abilities.

Consultation occurs when adult facilitators decide for themselves what they want to ask the young people about. Facilitators control how much information the young people receive and make the final decision on the issue. The young people themselves have no control over resources, or power to decide what to do. Adults are still seen as the leaders and young people as the consumers.

Representation involves a number of young people expressing the views of their peers in a meeting. However, this can be a very wide category, since the young people's status within the meeting can vary greatly from a single voice among many to having the power to veto any decision made. Similarly, the young people may be selected by adults or elected by their peers. It is also important to note what kind of decisions the meeting can make, or perhaps more crucially which ones are not on the meeting's agenda

Participation is defined as joint decision-making between the adults and young people so that both parties have some control over the final product and their views are given equal weight. All responsibility is shared, including finances and forward planning and the adult facilitator's role is to challenge, support, stimulate and facilitate.

Self-managing, the final level, is where young people have effective control over the project. They do not need to take adult guidance. They make the decisions and control the resources. This is power with responsibility, and the adult facilitator is very much in a supportive role. The facilitator is accountable in the first instance to the young people.

This model is clearly designed to give a sense of the balance of power between young people and adult facilitators that would occur as a result of the adoption of its different levels. However, it could be seen as suggesting an artificial divide between these two parties, as if they were naturally opposing groups. This is clearly not the case. Although they may have different viewpoints, skills and backgrounds, both groups are generally most concerned to do what is best for the young people and the project and want to work in partnership to achieve these aims.

Most of the models available seem to present a hierarchy of participative approaches, with the most participative at the top and those involving young people least at the bottom. However, while the lower levels of the model given are best avoided, the top three or four could all be recommended according to the circumstances of the project. Consequently, it is not advisable to think of one of these methods as inherently better than another but as different options for different circumstances.

To a large extent, the basic objectives of the organisation or project and what it is there to do will determine the extent to which it is possible to adopt a participative approach, and the particular approach that it is appropriate to use. This will also be affected by the potential of the people it is working with, the motives for adopting a participative approach and what difference it is hoped it will make to the outcomes achieved. For example, an outreach project may have difficulty getting its clients to attend committee meetings but could easily consult them informally and feed their views back.

Another difficulty with models is their tendency to describe participation in terms of structures, committees and meetings and the assumption that if there are young people on the management committee than the project is highly participative. The amount of influence a young person on a committee has is often limited due to the way they are treated by the other members or by the

issues it does and does not have the authority to discuss. Indeed in some circumstances a young person involved in a meaningful, well-organised consultation may have more influence than a young person on a committee.

The most important issue to be aware of when considering participation is not what method is adopted but that young people's views, however they are gathered, are listened to, taken seriously and acted upon as often as possible. Where they are not acted upon the reasons should be clearly communicated. Participation is less about structures and models and more about an attitude of mind, an approach to doing things that should permeate the whole organisation or project.

It may not always be possible or appropriate to the particular circumstances of a project to aim for the deepest degree of youth participation. Nevertheless, in time, as participants and workers gain skills and confidence in themselves and each other and the whole organisation becomes more aware of the benefits of participation, it should be possible to gradually increase the young people's level of involvement as part of the natural progression of the project.

4 Why involve young people?

The Church is not alone in addressing the subject of youth participation. There has been an unprecedented rise in interest in the involvement of young people in decision-making in recent years. A number of push and pull factors lie behind this rise. Although they are often inter-related, they can be expressed as three main groups:

Political factors: These include the importance placed by the current Government on making local government more democratic and responsive to local people as well as the need to implement Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This focuses on children's rights to express their opinions and have them taken into account in decisions that affect them.

Economic factors: These range from the tendency of trusts and other grant giving bodies to require likely recipients to be involved in the planning and development of projects, to the increasingly customer-focused approach to services adopted by local authorities and voluntary agencies.

Social factors: These include the increasing tendency for people to adopt a consumerist approach to services provided by various bodies. This is shown by a greater willingness by people to assert their rights, and rising expectations of involvement in decision making which affects them. In addition, the self-help approach to health and social problems has become more popular and awareness of the personal development possibilities of voluntary and community activities has increased.

To these can be added theological reasons why young people need to be truly a part of the Church. Saint Paul's picture of the people of the Church as a body (1 Corinthians 12.12-31) shows that each part is necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. His attention was not focused on the part of the body that is not being used and feels undervalued but on how the rest of the body is incapacitated without it. This offers a strong message if we are not fully using the gifts of young people in the Church.

5 The Benefits of Participation

The benefits of adopting a participative approach can be divided into two groups; those affecting the individuals involved and those affecting the organisation and society generally.

The Individuals

1 Young people gain transferable skills and abilities that will benefit them in their own lives.

Skills and abilities gained by young people when a participative approach is used that will help in their personal lives:

- greater self-confidence
- communication skills
- negotiating
- decision-making
- time management
- self-organisation
- higher self-esteem
- taking on responsibilities

2 Young people feel greater ownership of, and dedication to, the organisation or project so their continued participation is more likely in the face of peer pressure and competing demands on their time — such as exams and part-time jobs.

3 Adult facilitators have the satisfaction of knowing that they are also helping young people to develop skills and approaches that will benefit them greatly in their work and personal lives.

4 Policy makers are able to achieve more by spreading the load of responsibilities with the participating young people.

The organisation and society

1 The services or activities provided become more relevant and appropriate to the particular needs and interests of the young people involved rather than what adults *think* they want or require.

2 Young people feel a greater ownership of, and responsibility for, the service or project they are actively involved in. In this way, they are more likely to value and protect facilities they have helped plan and this may also encourage them to move into voluntary leadership roles in the organisation in the future.

3 People are more motivated to participate in different aspects of an organisation if they already experience a positive benefit from involvement in other areas of its work.

4 There is increasing support for participative approaches from central government and other major funding bodies. For example, organisations wishing to bid for government funding must often show they have consulted with the local community about their plans before their bid becomes operational. Charitable trusts often look more favourably on projects that involve representatives of the intended beneficiaries.

5 The message an organisation wants to get across has far greater impact if it is delivered (*and* developed) by young people themselves. It should be noted, however, that this observation does not hold if young people are merely used

as decoration to make a presentation, with minimal involvement in its preparation and planning.

6 Young people can often bring a fresh and innovative approach to the debate and are free to think the unthinkable and say the unsayable. This can ensure a more creative approach to problem solving, give organisations a new impetus and motivation, and awaken them to the possibilities which exist beyond more established ways of working.

6 Which method should be used?

There are a number of issues that should be borne in mind when deciding which method, or combination of methods, of involving young people in decision-making to adopt:

The basic aims and structure of the organisation: For example, a small organisation set up specifically to educate or prepare young people for adulthood may find it easier to justify spending significant time and money on involving young people in decision-making than a large organisation with a more general remit.

The current level of support for involving users: For example, a youth organisation may have a long-established view of young people as recipients of a service while a local authority may have already worked on involving other under-represented groups in decision-making. Extending this initiative to young people may be seen as a logical extension. The current level of support for involving users may also have an effect on the amount of resources made available to support the involvement of young people.

The amount of external pressure to involve young people: For example, local authorities are under increasing pressure from central government to be more responsive to all their users, while voluntary agencies may find that trusts funding youth projects are making the involvement young people in decision-making a requirement of the project.

What involving young people is trying to achieve: For example, a youth organisation may want to ensure its programmes reflect what young people

want, or to enable young users to gain management skills as part of their experience on the project. Alternatively, a local authority might wish to make sure they are providing a particular leisure facility that young people really want, or to ensure young people's needs are considered in every aspect of decision-making.

7 Methods of Involvement

A number of different methods of involving young people in decision-making have evolved over time. These vary from directly involving young people on committees or boards of management on a regular basis to organising a single consultative meeting. Six methods are examined below. However, the list is not exhaustive since it is impossible to categorise every different form of involvement. Similarly, some overlap between groups exists, and there may be variation within the different categories as well as between them.

1 Consultations

These usually take the form of one-off meetings, conferences or short-term projects where young people are asked what they think about a particular issue, proposal or project. Situations in which consultation could be used include when a local authority is planning more play facilities or a charitable trust is developing new funding criteria.

Consultations can have the advantage of being clearly focused and relatively simple and cheap to organise. They can also help gather new perspectives, and increase the sense of ownership of an idea or project within a community. However, as an exercise in genuine involvement they are rather superficial. They only take a snapshot view of a situation, failing to get a continuing sense of young people's views on the issue. They may not allow time for people's deeper views to emerge or their creativity to be awakened. Depending on the scope of the project, they can also be an unsatisfying experience because there may be limited feedback and no clear decision or outcome that the young people can see they have brought about.

2 Advisory Groups

This is where groups of young people (and perhaps others) advise another body on a project over a period of time. It usually involves attending a number of meetings during the development of a project or throughout its entire lifetime. Examples of their use include a research project on an issue affecting young people or the development of educational materials.

Advisory groups can enable young people to feed their particular ideas and viewpoint into projects affecting them in a cost-effective manner. They need not be too time-consuming and can provide a longer-term input than one-off events. Again, they can increase a sense of ownership and help break down barriers between different groups through their common involvement in the project.

However, the success of Advisory Groups in terms of real involvement of young people is very dependent on how they are organised by the project managers. Too often they can be used in a tokenistic way so that, rather than truly advising the project staff, they just rubber stamp decisions already taken. Meetings may be rather formal or intimidating and so infrequent as to prevent the build up of useful experience, confidence and contacts. In addition, the project may be drawn out over a number of years, preventing the young people who are often in a transitional stage of their lives attending more than once or twice.

3 Local Youth Councils/Forums

A local youth council is a forum that represents the views of young people at a local level. They can be organised at all levels, ranging from regional and countywide youth councils to school and estate-based youth councils. In some cases, they are initiated by a group of young people themselves; in others, the local authority sets them up. Increasingly, forums are also being initiated by specialised bodies such as health authorities or police forces, voluntary sector organisations and the churches. While some youth councils may have quite a formal structure, others keep their procedures and meetings more informal and relaxed.

Run by young people for young people, youth councils can represent their needs and interests, lobby for change and facilitate dialogue between young people and local decision-makers. They can provide young people with a space where they can voice their opinions, and gain skills and confidence.

However, local youth councils may find it hard to be truly representative of young people in the local area. Local youth councillors may also find their contributions ignored, leading to frustration and disenchantment. Whatever their origin, youth councils usually need some sort of formal support and dedicated resources from an authority or organisation to ensure their long-term existence.

4 Parallel structures

This is where a youth body is set up to run alongside established decision-making structures in order to provide advice or act as a sounding board for new ideas.

Such structures can be extremely beneficial for young people since they provide a space where they can learn and develop skills within a supportive peer environment; they have the opportunity to meet young people with similar interests and gain encouragement from their common attitudes and beliefs. Representatives elected from within this structure may also feel greater confidence and authority when expressing their views by receiving a mandate from the members of the youth body.

However, as an example of involvement, the key issue is the extent to which a parallel body can influence change in its parent organisation. Unless it has a clearly defined status, with a formally established role in the main body's decision making structure (such as reserved places on committees) and respect for its views from the main body's decision makers, young people's views can be regularly sidelined or ignored.

This can have a frustrating, demoralising effect on the young people participating in the parallel body, and may lead it to branch off into an effectively separate organisation, with its own projects that the young people can have some control over. In this way, the parallel body may end up with no

influence over the decision-making of the parent organisation and may also severely weaken its case for support and funding from it.

5 Committee Places

This is where young people are elected or selected to sit on committees. These committees may have places specifically reserved for young people and may range from small sub-committees to the Board of Management for the organisation. There is no legal problem with young people serving on committees generally; however, the trustees of registered charities cannot be aged under eighteen.

Clearly, having young people on committees and Boards of Management is the simplest, most direct way of having regular involvement of young people in the decision-making processes of voluntary bodies and large organisations. It provides an opportunity for young people to have a relatively long-term influence on the organisation, and to gain useful skills, confidence and experience. The organisation gains continuous input from young people's perspectives, and the experience of working together over a long period of time can enable stereotypes on both sides to be overcome.

However, many young people feel that they are not treated as equals on committees and that their involvement is a tokenistic gesture. They believe they are not listened to and that their views are only taken seriously when someone asks what young people think about an issue. They feel uncomfortable being asked to comment on this, since they do not feel qualified to represent the range of views that probably exist among young people on any issue. They want to be asked their views in their own right, but often this does not happen.

This approach also demands a great deal from the individual in terms of skills and commitment. The young people may feel a significant pressure to be seen to be successful, since their record of achievement may be used to decide on future involvement of young people. Moreover, if they are deemed successful, they are often asked to participate in other working groups and committees. In so doing, they run the risk of becoming institutionalised, losing touch with the perspective of their peers.

Having young people on committees requires a significant commitment from an organisation in terms of resources, staff support and training, both for the young people and the other committee members. Practical efforts also need to be made at the grass roots to secure a steady stream of young people who are willing and able to fill these positions. Involving young people in decision-making in this way may require a real change in attitudes, representing a significant cultural shift for the organisation.

6 Corporate Strategies

This occurs when an organisation decides to develop a new strategy to involve young people in some or all aspects of the services it delivers to them or the structures in which decisions affecting them are made. It is usually evolved slowly, carefully and methodically over a period of years using a combination of the methods already mentioned.

Clearly such an approach is usually extremely thorough and well thought out. It is focused and has a specific timescale. Young people have a clearly defined role and can see the intended result. They often have the opportunity to acquire new skills through training provided and participation in forums and events. They may also become more committed to, and knowledgeable about, the organisation as a whole. Adults have the time and opportunity to gain confidence in the young people's abilities and, by working together, stereotypes on both sides can be broken down.

Although attractive in its comprehensiveness, this is not an approach that should be undertaken lightly. It can be an extremely long, drawn-out affair, which may be very wearing for all those involved. Such an ambitious approach inevitably requires significant resources. The length of time taken to design and implement the plan may prevent young people involved at the beginning staying involved until the end. Extreme care has to be taken when changing well-established practices within large organisations. Some people may find it difficult to accept the need to change and this may lead to friction and ill feeling towards the young people.

8 Common concerns and how to overcome them

There are some common barriers that organisations often face when they begin to involve young people in decision-making. What follows are some suggestions outlining how organisations may overcome these difficulties or prevent them from arising.

Recruitment: There is no point just cajoling the nearest young person onto a committee or consultation group; this will not work. It is essential to recruit young people who have a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the issue or organisation concerned and have time to commit. Information about the opportunities to get involved should be circulated to every eligible young person. Word of mouth is likely to be the most important recruitment tool, but in order to maximise representativeness, a sustained outreach campaign is needed to publicise the initiative to young people from all parts of the community.

Retention: Retention difficulties are often caused by outside pressures, such as increasing schoolwork or lack of support from family and friends, as well as boredom or lack of scope for further development. Combat these by emphasising the transferable skills that young people are gaining and giving young people more responsibility. Make sure new challenges are available, but underpin these with appropriate training and support.

Recognition: It is important that the organisation recognises the contribution made by the young people and provides feedback wherever possible. For short-term events it may be enough to mention names in a report and ensure it is circulated to all those involved; for a local consultation, getting local media coverage may also be useful. For longer-term projects, care should be taken to build in opportunities to experience a sense of achievement and celebrate it. Some form of formal accreditation could also be considered.

Flexibility: Efforts should be made to accommodate young people's lifestyles, which can prohibit them from long-term time commitments or attending meetings at particular times. Financial arrangements may also need to be changed to ensure they can obtain expenses in advance and care taken to ensure their participation is not prevented by lack of access to safe transport.

Communications: Avoid using jargon and consider using alternatives to formal procedures. Ensure that the reasons behind decisions have been discussed clearly and openly and are understood by everyone. Opportunities for young people to express their views using different forms of communication may also be considered; however, it should be noted that young people are quite capable of expressing their views without the need for drama or music.

Training and Support: Training for young people should cover particular skills and knowledge that may be required for their new role as well as important contextual background. Information on the wider responsibilities of the organisation or project and the formal and informal decision-making process is particularly important. A dedicated staff member and peer training opportunities are extremely useful ways of providing professional guidance and personal support. Training on involving young people in decision-making should also be provided for staff and adult volunteers.

Attitudes: Attitudes may need to change throughout the organisation if young people are to be successfully involved in decision-making. Preconceived ideas about young people's capabilities may need to be reassessed, while young people's assumptions about committees' usefulness may prove inaccurate. All those involved will need to avoid the temptation to make generalisations about each other in favour of working together for the benefit of the organisation or project. Similarly, all those involved in decision-making must be prepared to take their responsibilities seriously, and appreciate the ramifications their decisions may have for the whole organisation, now and in the future.

Tokenism: To avoid tokenism, staff and adult volunteers need to treat young people as equals, listening to their contribution with respect and keeping them informed of developments. They should not be expected to represent the views of all young people in the organisation or area, nor only be expected to contribute on this basis. It may be helpful to have a number of young people involved over a period of time, so that the more experienced young people can provide support and advice for their new peers. Consideration should be given to allotting young people on committees a particular role or function, and clearly established lines of authority should be respected between parallel bodies and their parent organisations.

Resources: Involving young people in decision-making will have resource implications for any organisation. A significant commitment will be required from those in authority to ensure this is properly funded. If this is not forthcoming, adopt a gradual approach, organising some consultation events and arranging visits to other projects to build up evidence of what involving young people in decision-making can achieve.

Time: It takes time to design the right kind of involvement for any one organisation or project and, once in place, more time for such a process to get up and running. All those involved need to be aware of the importance of careful preparation and planning and ensure that impatience does not prevent this process of development.

8 Introducing a Participative Approach

A number of issues need to be considered when adopting a participative approach. These can be grouped into six categories.

Aims: The organisations and individuals involved need to be very clear about why they want to adopt this approach, what they want it to achieve, what difference they think it will make to their outcomes and what level of participation they think is appropriate. Ideally, these issues should be developed, written out explicitly and agreed at the beginning by all those involved in the project. This may take some time but it is important to iron out any major disagreements in this area before the real work begins. All those participating in the project should also be encouraged to revisit these aims on a regular basis to evaluate progress achieved, learn from experience and make alterations as necessary.

Timescale: Participation is not a quick fix for an ailing organisation or a demotivated group. It needs to be introduced slowly and carefully, following considerable preparation and planning which ideally involves young people from the earliest stage. A clear timescale for change should be developed and adhered to, and visible early signs of progress built into plans to provide encouragement and keep up the momentum.

Organisation and culture: The process of change can be difficult in any organisation, and introducing a participative approach can lead to some internal conflict. All those likely to be affected by the new approach to working should be consulted on the changes, and effort should be made to explain the reasoning behind it and the expected benefits it will bring. New structures and decision-making processes should be made clear to all those involved and efforts made to ensure information about the changes is distributed widely.

Once in place, a project run along participative lines may require more administrative work, make it harder to get a quick decision and be more difficult to evaluate than adult-run initiatives. Adult facilitators will have to adapt to having less direct control over the organisation and its work and learn to walk a fine line between advising and influencing the young people they are supporting.

In some cases, changes may need to be made to the organisation's constitution. However, this can be a long and complex process, so care should be taken not to get too preoccupied by this, thereby allowing the project to lose momentum.

Resources: Adequate resources are one of the crucial elements underpinning any successful participative project. Young people and adult facilitators alike may need a significant amount of support, training or skills development to enable them to fulfil their own roles, and gain awareness of the need to allow others the space to carry out their duties. While initial emphasis may be on providing training for the young people, care should also be taken to ensure resources are available for facilitators to develop the new skills they may need. It should also be ensured that they continue to have opportunities to attend conferences, events and activities in their own right.

Support: Commitment from the top is crucial to the successful adoption of a participative approach. Adult facilitators need to know that their efforts are really valued by those in positions of power and that the element of unpredictability or risk involved in using a relatively innovative approach is supported by those in authority. Support from the grassroots should also not be overlooked. A top-down approach may be successful in the short term but,

for the project to develop and thrive in the future, there must be enough people on the ground that are willing to dedicate time and effort to making it work.

Participants: Obviously a participative approach needs a good source of potential participants. If organisations are finding it difficult to recruit people, they should find out the reasons why young people are not willing or able to participate and try to address them. For example, if the young people say they do not have the skills or confidence, some introductory sessions could be organised which would explain exactly what would be involved and thus increase self-awareness of their actual or potential capabilities. If the young people lack the time, training in time or self-management could be offered together with information about the transferable skills they will develop.

While word of mouth is likely to be the most effective recruiting method in the long term, it is also important to identify specific sources from which to draw a steady stream of participants and some kind of strategy for drawing in and training up new people on a regular basis. This will ensure that the project has a sense of continuity and does not get too reliant on a few individuals, who may otherwise begin to identify more with the workers and staff than their peers they are supposed to be representing.

Attitudes: A number of attitudes appear to be crucial among all those involved in a participative project. Mutual respect, trust, patience, commitment, honesty and determination are among the most common attitudes considered necessary for success.

Of course, many of these attributes will need to be developed over time. There may well be some suspicion or cynicism on the part of workers and young people about the benefits of the participative approach in the early stages of the project. If this is the case, the reasons why this approach is being introduced and the actual way it will work in practice need to be made very clear. The level of commitment to the principle of participation expressed by other parts of the organisation also needs to be emphasised. Visits to other projects, and talks from their staff and young people, can be a good way of dealing with these concerns and gaining a better understanding of the benefits participation can bring all those involved.

Feelings of frustration or impatience with the slow process of change or decision-making should be countered by awareness of what has been achieved to date and a strong commitment to the agreed timetable of the project.

9 Examples from other churches

The issue of participation is on the agenda of many other denominations. Some have been taking seriously the involvement of young people in decision-making for a long time and have created ways for their voice to be more easily heard within church structures.

Below is an example from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, but others include the Church of England (Young Adult Network), the Methodist Church (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs – MAYC), and the United Reformed Church (Fellowship of United Reformed Youth – FURY).

Baptist Union of Great Britain – Alliance of Baptist Youth

During a youth conference in September 1988 the Baptist Union of Great Britain decided to establish a national youth structure for young Baptists to voice their opinions and to celebrate their faith together.

The key objectives were:

- To unite young Baptists together and widen their Christian vision of the impact they can have
- To challenge them with the call of Christ
- To give them a greater vision for God's Kingdom
- To give every young Baptist a voice
- To spiritually support young Baptists, and to encourage them to support each other
- To give them a broader vision of the Baptist movement and the church at large.

The Alliance of Baptist Youth (ABY) was formed to promote the voice of Baptist youth at all levels, regionally and nationally, so that they would become an active force in the church and community.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain at that time divided the country into twelve regions, each comprising of three to five Associations.

Each of these twelve regions formed a committee of young people, from those who attend the national assembly, who would then undertake the task organising their regional ABY. Initially, many of these regions had youth ministers who serviced these bodies. Through the years some of these posts have been removed, although many ABY committees have continued and flourished thanks to dedicated young people.

ABY developed resolutions on issues that concerned them. A key issue was that of Fair Trade and so they put forward a resolution which was then passed to the Baptist Union and adopted, and is now supported by almost all two thousand churches.

ABY MICHA 6:8 was a body that informed the members of ABY of human rights issues around the world and how they can act and pray to improve these situations.

28-19 Action teams: The Baptist Missionary Society enables young people to respond to the call to mission, offering opportunities around the world for young people to spend a year working in the missionary field.

Young Baptists, through these and other structures, were enabled to take on leadership responsibilities within their churches — either on the church Deaconates, running Sunday schools, Bible Studies, their own youth groups and leading worship or delivering sermons.

This empowerment of young people to express their beliefs and to be given the same rights as any believer following Christ, both enriched and strengthened the church that had introduced mechanisms to allow this.

10 Conclusions

Adopting a participative approach is not a decision to be taken lightly. It will have major repercussions on everyone involved in the project. It can be a slow, difficult process and at times seem to become all-consuming. However,

it can also be an extremely rewarding, liberating and life-changing experience for all those involved.

Perhaps the most important thing, however you decide to encourage participation in your situation, is that you start now. In this lecture I have tried to gather ways of thinking about participation, models of analysis that you can use, and examples that can inspire your work. My hope is that these ideas and thoughts will inspire more people, both young and older, to work, worship and develop together.

Resources

[A Guide to Setting up a Local Youth Council](#) Published in 1998 by the British Youth Council. A manual providing best practice ideas, information and case studies for organisations interested in setting up a local youth council.

[Empowering Children and Young People](#) by Phil Treseder. Published in 1997 by Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office (tel 0171 703 5400). A training manual that aims to help professionals make participation a reality for all children so that they can contribute to the decisions that affect them. It includes a discussion of the benefits of, and barriers to, empowerment as well as checklists, exercises and examples of good practice that can be used to train young people in decision-making.

[Participation: Youth Work Curriculum Guidelines](#) Published in 1993 by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (tel 01232 643882). A major resource document providing a detailed discussion of different types of participation, common barriers and necessary preconditions, as well as case studies and exercises.

[Taking A Part](#) by David and Maxine Green. Published in 2000 by the Board of Education of the Church of England. A study of young people's participation in the Church.



KEVIN MUNDAY

Kevin Munday has been a trustee of the British Youth Council since 1999 and the Vice Chair for the last six months. His particular responsibilities and interests have included finance and fundraising, support for local and schools youth councils and work around young people's health. He has represented BYC on the European Youth Forum and was a member of the Core

Group, responsible for planning young people's involvement in the development of the European Union White Paper on youth policy. Kevin has been on the Executive Board of the National Youth Agency since September 2000, where he particularly champions innovation in youth work.

Kevin currently works for Community Matters, the National Federation of Community Organisations, where he is the Millennium Volunteers Development Officer. His role is to set up projects around the country, providing a range of volunteering opportunities for 18-24 year olds. He also facilitates the Community Matters Young Active Members network, a young people-led group supporting and giving a voice to young members of community organisations.

Prior to his current post, Kevin was employed at the St. John Ambulance National Headquarters as a Youth Development Officer. He remains a lifelong St. John Ambulance volunteer and his roles have included running a youth group for 10-18 year olds, supporting a network of youth councils and delivering a drug prevention peer education programme.

BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL



The British Youth Council (BYC) is the representative body for young people in the UK. An independent charity, run for and by young people, it represents their views to decision-makers and promotes the increased participation of young people in society and public life.

BYC is an umbrella body representing, through its membership of youth organisations, over three million young people within the UK. Young people act as BYC's trustees — responsible for managing BYC, making financial and strategic decisions and implementing the work plan and policies passed at the AGM.

BYC campaigns on a wide range of youth issues, and responds to government policy as it affects young people. BYC organises a range of participative events and programmes bringing together young people and decision-makers, and providing young people with the skills to participate fully in the democratic process. BYC provides publications and training on a wide range of topics, pertinent to everyone involved in the youth sector.