religions

MDPI

Article

Roots, Threads, and Possibilities: How Learning from Some Origin Stories of Evangelical Youth Ministry Can Help Navigate a Challenging Future

Mark Scanlan [1,*], Gretchen Schoon-Tanis [2] and Ruth Lukabyo [3]

[1] St Mellitus College, London SW5 0LX, UK
[2] Independent Researcher, Hope Church, Holland, MI 49423, USA; schoontanis@gmail.com
[3] Australian College of Theology, Newtown, NSW 2042, Australia; ruth.lukabyo@youthworks.net
* Correspondence: mark.scanlan@stmellitus.ac.uk

Abstract: Working with young people is a key part of the story of British evangelicalism, both being formed by and forming evangelical Christian life. Exploring evangelical youth ministry through the lens of the origins of the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes (now Urban Saints) in the UK and demonstrating the shared threads and themes in regard to the Australian and US contexts, through studies of the InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF) and Young Life, respectively, key themes are revealed that embody an evangelical approach to working with young people. These themes, encapsulated within the overall practice of relationship building, focus on influential young people, charismatic lay leadership, and have an emphasis on fun. We further demonstrate the wider influence on evangelical church life encapsulated by this evangelical sensibility towards working with young people that endures, which is often unacknowledged. In addition, these themes suggest an operant theology that raises questions for the practice of evangelical youth ministry. The consideration of these themes can help us respond to some of the challenges faced by youth ministry in the UK and young people in contemporary culture. Moreover, the historical threads contain possibilities that might help evangelicals navigate a future in regard to working with young people.

Keywords: youth ministry; practical theology; evangelical; history; relationships; practice

Academic Editors: Andrew Rogers, Helen Collins and Israel Olofinjana

Received: 25 October 2024
Revised: 10 January 2025
Accepted: 13 January 2025
Published: 21 January 2025

Citation: Scanlan, Mark, Gretchen Schoon-Tanis, and Ruth Lukabyo. 2025. Roots, Threads, and Possibilities: How Learning from Some Origin Stories of Evangelical Youth Ministry Can Help Navigate a Challenging Future. *Religions* 16: 101. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020101

1. Introduction

The world has changed dramatically in recent years and continues to do so at an almost alarming rate. Whether it is the ongoing influence of the digital revolution and recent breakthroughs in AI technology, the interruptions and impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the global climate crisis, increasing military conflict, or the epidemic of poor mental health among younger people, this is a volatile and complex time to grow up in. As a distinct ministry of the church, youth ministry is still a relatively new phenomenon, with Nick Shepherd's claim from over a decade ago that "the task of understanding being a Christian Youth Worker has really only just begun" (Shepherd 2014, p. 10) still ringing true.

This article interrogates primary relational practices of evangelical youth ministry, through a reflection on aspects of its origin story, through the lens of three early youth ministry organisations in the UK, Australia, and the USA. In doing this, we will trace shared roots and threads that shaped the representative organisations and, through them, evangelical youth ministry practice more widely. Together these aspects give prominence to the central practice of relationship building, specifically through a focus on influential

young people, charismatic lay leadership, and an emphasis on fun. By offering reflections on these common roots and threads, this article acknowledges ways in which God was understood to be active in the practice of these early youth ministry organisations, highlighting how this understanding of God's action through relationships is still present in the evangelical practice of youth ministry. From these reflections, suggestions will be made that turn from the past, through the present, and toward the future; how might evangelical youth ministry develop from within its own history, without being bound by it? We will offer a hopeful way forward that critically engages with the past, acknowledging the giants on whose shoulders we stand,[1] whilst recognising the context in which we now "live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

2. Methodological Overview

This article is a work of practical theology, seeking to make a contribution based on the practices of Christians, desiring to faithfully follow God in the context they find themselves (Ward 2017, p. 55). The origins of the practices in question are historical, relating to the formational years of key early evangelical youth ministry movements, but the methods underpinning this article are a combination of research into organisational archival records and conducting group-based theological reflection. As such the methodology underpinning this article is akin to the notion of "writing the Body of Christ", a corporate act of "creating a narrative that tells the story of [the Church's] ongoing life" (Graham et al. 2019, chap. 4), although here it is employed in a parachurch rather than a congregational manner. In keeping with the acknowledged activism of evangelicalism (Bebbington 2003), the pioneers of youth ministry on whose work we draw did not take time to formulate complex ideas that underpinned their practice, rather their ideas and theology can be seen as embodied first in practice, then established as accepted practice by future generations. In this way, a study of historical practice can be understood as the study of the operant theological voice of these early and, therefore, formative, youth ministry organisations (Cameron et al. 2010, pp. 54–55).

In addition, this article is undergirded by aspects of auto/theobiography (Ward 2008, p. 4), with each of the three authors' interest in the topic emerging from their personal involvement in the practices of youth ministry, influenced to differing degrees by the work of the organisations that provide the threads of practice discussed in this article. Author one's focus on the history and influence of Crusaders/Urban Saints originated from a period of working for them in 1999–2002, as an Area Development Worker. This period, when author one was a member of staff, coincided with a turbulent period in the organisation's history, as a new CEO was brought in with a new vision and, ultimately, a new name for the organisation, which stirred strong feelings among those people that had been steeped in the work of the organisation for many years. Author two was a student leader of an InterVarsity Fellowship group in Australia and subsequently became a staff worker in 1992–1993. Her experience of a theologically rich, evangelical tradition strengthened her faith and her desire to be part of the global evangelical student movement. The third author's research interest in Young Life stems from her participation as a student (1990–1994), then as a volunteer leader, and finally as a student staff leader (1996–1999). She received her call to ministry on a Young Life camp, when her leader gave her the verses Matthew 28: 18–20 as they hiked in the mountains of Colorado.

Each author has continued to be actively involved in various forms of evangelical youth ministry practice, from leading local church-based groups in both an employed and volunteer capacity, through to teaching and training Christian youth workers in higher education, and regular involvement in key conferences and networks. It would not be

possible to dislocate ourselves as authors from our research, as we are formed by and involved in forming evangelical youth ministry practice.

The primary historical research underpinning this article was undertaken independently. Each author had conducted extensive archival research focused on a youth organisation for independent projects. On hearing and reading each other's findings, a sense of overlapping and shared themes developed. The authors then undertook a period of group-based theological reflection through conversation. This process involved each author detailing the story of their respective organisation and the themes that the story encapsulated, with the other authors reflecting on the themes that resonated with them. This process was repeated by each author for each organisation and, gradually, the themes that are detailed and discussed in this article developed, as did the analysis of contemporary youth ministry practice in light of the key historical threads.

3. Organisational Origins

This opening section outlines the origins of the three organisations from which we identify the roots and threads of youth ministry practice. We do not claim they cover every aspect and nuance of the origin stories for youth ministry or account for every aspect of contemporary practice, but we think that these organisations are particularly influential, highlighted by their transnational nature. Our contention is that these themes are archetypal of dynamics that continue to shape the practices of evangelical youth ministry and create a certain common sensibility as to how God is active in and through these practices.

3.1. Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, UK

In March 1900, Rev Albert Kestin, a Church Mission Society missionary, was in London on furlough and lodging in Crouch End with a wealthy couple, Mr and Mrs Saffrey. One day a conversation arose between Kestin and the Saffreys about some boys they observed in the park opposite the house on Sunday afternoons. Given Kestin's missionary experience and training, Mrs Saffrey suggested on one such Sunday that he might go into the park to meet and speak to these boys, inviting them back to the house for a Bible study. Kestin, perhaps with a sense of obligation, did just that:

> In her drawing room on Sunday afternoon, 1 April 1900, four boys met me in the first 'Crusaders' class. Next Sunday there were only two boys and for the first few weeks little progress was registered so that I began to ask myself if we really were working out any plan of God. (Kestin 1919)

From these inauspicious beginnings, however, the work grew and, by autumn 1901, the group numbered 60 boys. Based on the inspiration provided by this group and Herbert Bevington, another early leader, further classes began, and the formal Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes[2] came into being. Spreading slowly at first, twelve groups formalised the union in 1906. The spread then became quicker, such that by the start of the Second World War, there were 256 groups, with over 16,000 members (Crusaders 1956).

The influence of the Crusaders on Christian work with young people in the UK and beyond tends to be underplayed, often in favour of an emphasis on the much later influence of the Youth for Christ (YFC) movement. By the time of this transatlantic arrival, however, the impact of the Crusaders on shaping youth ministry practice and the wider evangelical church is hard to ignore.

3.2. InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF), Australia

The IVF in Australia was part of an international evangelical movement.[3] The background of this movement was the formation of breakaway Christian groups at Cambridge and London University. Some of the Christian students believed that the SCM (Student

Christian Movement) groups had become too liberal, especially in regard to their views on the atoning death of Christ and the authority of the Bible. In 1928, this break was formalised by a committee of students who called themselves the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF, later IVF). Together they vowed to establish a "truly Evangelical witness" throughout the world (Guinness 1978, p. 42) and vowed to plant IVCF evangelical unions both in Britain and other countries. The heart of these unions were small Bible study groups, similar to the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes in the UK.

The IVF in Australia was formed by the Vice-President of the IVF, Howard Guinness. He was given the role of missioner and, as part of his world tours, he visited Australian universities and schools in 1930 and 1934/35. Guinness began his Australian tour at Sydney University, where there was a small group of students that had broken away from the SCM in 1919 and now called themselves the Bible League (Prince 1987). Guinness encouraged the group to have a more visible presence in the university and, through public meetings and house parties (camps), to proclaim the message that Jesus Christ was the Saviour and the Lord. The group was named the Evangelical Union (EU) and was affiliated with the IVF. After establishing the EU, Guinness travelled to the other capital cities in the country and encouraged students to form EUs. These groups slowly grew in popularity. At Sydney University, the EU began with 20–30 men and women; by 1955, there were 450 members.

Through the influence of Guinness, the IVF in Australia was part of an international parachurch ministry for students. It understood its work, at least in part, as to win theological battles with student organisations that they considered to be theologically liberal. They did this through public meetings, but also through small group-based Bible studies run by students. In the 1930s, this model influenced youth ministry in Australia, as other organisations, such as the Australian Crusaders' Union, the ISCF (Inter Schools Christian Fellowship), and church fellowship groups in local churches, embraced it.

3.3. Young Life, USA

From Jim Rayburn III's account of the first days of Young Life,[4] the first meetings in the summer of 1940 were evangelistic crusades, complete with music and preaching. During that summer, Rayburn spoke to more than 13,000 people at his canvas church. He used a particular conversational style; he was a great joke teller, a master at getting people's attention, creatively adapting a Bible story to make it live. "Do you stop having fun when you start talking about Jesus? If you do, God help you", he would say. Along with his seminary friends, Addison Sewell and Walden Howard, he sought ways to build a bridge to teenagers in the area around Dallas. Across from the fair park, some businessmen helped put up a tent with a "God Bless America" banner. The Christian faith is what made America strong, they reasoned. From this summer experience and through his contact with fellow pastors at the seminary, Rayburn managed to recruit 65 volunteers to begin working with high school students as part of his Young Life campaign. That autumn, they began working in Dallas, Gainesville, and Houston, Texas, laying the foundations for Young Life. Relational, incarnational ministry became the pragmatic tool utilised by Young Life to present the gospel to young people in the United States. This style of ministry set the frame of reference for evangelical youth ministry globally.

4. Practices, Roots, and Threads

David Bailey details the way that relationships are considered the "key conduits of mediation and transmission within youth ministry" and contends that this idea has crossed "distances and continents [to] shape contemporary youth ministry" (Bailey 2019, p. 73). He goes on to describe such relationships as central "communicative acts" (p. 74) of evangelical work with young people. Such a focus on the practice of relationship building with young

people can be traced from the very earliest days of youth ministry (Ward 1996, pp. 37–39) to the present day, where it remains front and centre. This is evidenced by relationship building being named Young Life's second method, after prayer at a Young Life celebration event local to one of the authors, and the core theme within numerous contemporary youth ministry books (e.g., Ward 1998; Root 2007). Consequently, in this context, a historical focus is particularly illuminative in regard to understanding the dynamics of contemporary youth ministry practice.

The practice of building relationships takes a particular form when viewed through the lens of the roots and threads of youth ministry history. It can be seen, for example, in each of the following three threads: (1) a focus on influential young people, (2) charismatic lay leadership, and (3) fun. These threads carry expressions of the relational practice of evangelical youth ministry, demonstrable in the origin stories shared and, also, full of potential in regard to holding God's action in and for the lives of young people into the future. It is, therefore, to these threads that we turn.

4.1. Thread One: A Focus on Influential Young People

The first thread drawn from youth ministry's story out of which relational practice develops is a focus on certain influential young people, colloquially termed "key kids" by Rayburn. Each organisation, in its own way, is focused on the potential of young people themselves to influence, reach others, and grow the ministry. The form of this focus shaped each organisation in a particular way, but with a common underpinning practice of targeted relationship building as the means by which God was understood to be at work.

From its earliest days, the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes had a focus that might seem strange to contemporary ears. During the formation of the Union in 1906, it was stated "as a guiding principle that the Crusaders' classes were aimed at the upper middle-class boys attending public and private schools".[5] There were two reasons for this clause:

> Sunday Schools [attracted] children of the working classes by offering an education that, due to work commitments, they would otherwise have been unable to have. . . [They] tended to meet on both a Sunday morning and afternoon. It follows then. . . those from the middle and upper classes who, significantly, would have been attending public or private school during the week were less likely to be attached to a Sunday school. . . It was precisely one of these unattached groups of boys with free time on a Sunday afternoon that came to the attention of Albert Kestin. (Scanlan 2017, p. 33)

The more strategic rationale for this focus relates to influential young people in a specific way. This is an example of what has been coined the "grand strategy" of UK evangelicals, which relates to approaching influential young people at the right time to reach the next generation and, thereby, gain "control of the future" (Ward 1996, pp. 45–62). This meant they sought to reach boys who, as adults, could be influential in society, perhaps through politics, business, and church leadership, and to do so as committed evangelical Christians. Given the way in which, especially in the early twentieth century, such influential positions in society were dominated by men from the upper and upper-middle classes, it was to such boys that the focus turned. Furthermore, the grand strategy suggests a second-stage desire to not only see young people become followers of Jesus, but that an evangelical flavour to Christianity might be perpetuated and, resultantly, wider culture shaped. It is unclear from the historical records available whether such a second-stage aim was made explicit to the boys joining early Crusaders' classes. It is of interest to note that such second-stage intentions have often, explicitly or implicitly, formed part of the narrative of Christian work with young people, whether that be to preserve the church, change society, or influence their peers, flowing from a relational basis.[6]

The Australian context was directly influenced by this approach in the UK. Howard Guinness, when he arrived in Australia, was committed to the same grand strategy, focusing on connecting relationally with influential young people from key schools. Guinness had encountered this strategy in England through his experiences with Crusaders and, again, this grand strategy presumed that elite school and university students would become the movers and shakers, the leaders of the church, state, and business (Lukabyo 2020, p. 79). Guinness saw himself as beginning a movement and, using relationships, deliberately mentored gifted young men to follow his example of living a life of service. In his second tour of 1933/1934, he invited three students to accompany him as missioners. He trained them and many others and said that he was "handing on the torch" (Guinness 1978, p. 67). Guinness came to Australia with a vision for university ministry, but he soon realised that he needed to reach students from elite independent schools. As early as 1930, he decided the first target would be schools (ibid). These school students would become his "key boys". His plan was that young people would be converted at school and then trained and mentored at university. They would then graduate to become evangelical leaders. Therefore, along with the university ministry, he began to speak at independent schools and urged school students to start Crusader groups and evangelise their friends.

Subsequent leaders of the IVF continued to employ this strategy and train key boys. Paul White became the IVF General Secretary in 1943 and was involved with the Crusaders' Union. He coined the term "Blokes Worth Watching", or BWW for short. A BWW was a younger man, who had potential as a minister or missionary. White would write the names of BWW in his prayer diary and would spend time investing in them as leaders (White 1986). The relational strategy used by Guinness was effective in training a small group of leaders. However, this also meant that there were naturally those, often students from state-run schools, who felt excluded. There was an "in group" and these students were not in it.[7] There was, therefore, as with the Crusaders' Union, a focus on the relationships built.

Although not directly linked to the origins of the Crusaders' Union as an IVF, a similar relational strategy, albeit with a particular US flavour, is evident in the origins of Young Life. This highlights the shared instincts in regard to evangelical youth ministry practice across transnational boundaries. Young Life's philosophy of "winning the right to be heard" meant leaders gained the respect of students before expecting them to listen to the claims of Christ. From the beginning, Young Life believed this had to be done on the young person's turf, at football games and practice, high schoolers' hangouts, such as soda fountains, school events and, when permitted by the school authorities, the high school cafeteria. This whole process, which came to be understood as "incarnational", led up to a point at which the Christian gospel was presented. As the ministry of Young Life emerged and evolved, this method of proclaiming the gospel to young people framed their style of evangelism. It was also discovered that kids would go where their friends were, so to reach them, school leaders were the initial target. Relational, incarnational ministry became the pragmatic tool utilised by Young Life to present the gospel to young people in the United States.

Young Life's relational approach, the focus on winning the right to be heard while meeting young people on their turf, are maintained as central practices and tenets of Young Life's local work to this day. This was witnessed by one of the authors, when attending a tenth anniversary thanksgiving event for a local Young Life centre. Building relationships with young people was described as the most important practice, reinforced by the use of 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (NIV).

A relational focus on young people, with a view to influencing them, and for them to become influential, has maintained its primary status among youth ministry practice and a central way in which God is understood to work through youth ministers in the

lives of young people. This has been demonstrated in recent research among Christian youth workers in the UK, who said that their expression "through relationships" was connected to "being like Jesus" in terms of their theology of practice (Bailey 2019). Similarly, Root articulates the relationship of a leader with a young person as being the concrete location of God's action in youth ministry (Root 2007, p. 15). In youth ministry, the terminology of "incarnational" is commonplace, being used to describe the significance of relationship building with young people. Another common expression is to "enter their world". Pete Ward exemplifies this by conflating the terms in a chapter entitled "The Incarnational Approach", describing how "relationships are the fuel on which youthwork travels" (Ward 1998, p. 43). The wide use of these terms has been criticised for being theologically shallow (Griffiths 2013; Gough 2019). Despite this, these terms still influence writers and youth ministry practice today and have their roots in the very origins of evangelical youth ministry practice.

4.2. Thread Two: Charismatic Lay Leadership

The second thread that is common across our contexts and the formation of relational practice is charismatic lay leadership.[8] As with each thread, however, the way it plays out is distinct, recognising cultural and contextual differences. The significance of this, as a theme within evangelical youth ministry, is seen in the way that such foundational leadership being lay, rather than ordained, along with the classic activism of evangelical Christianity (Bebbington 2003), created flexibility and ambiguity regarding the place of the church within the work. Consequently, the place where relationships might be formed between leaders and young people, be it at Bible studies in houses, camps, sports grounds, or any other viable location, becomes the locus of God's action. The structures of formal church are secondary at best. As will be detailed later, this created an approach to evangelical youth ministry practice in which it is understood that God is active outside, and perhaps despite, institutional forms of church life. Suffice to say, for now, that relationships in youth ministry take the place of ecclesial identity in many ways.

While Albert Kestin was the founder of the Crusaders' Union, Herbert Bevington carried more influence establishing more Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, beyond the ones Kestin launched. Bevington was recruited as a co-leader as the first classes grew in size, being described by Kestin as his "old boy", having been discipled through his involvement in a previous group by Kestin himself. In 1904, when Bevington's business took him from London to Brighton, he launched a class there. By 1906, when twelve classes were formalised as Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, Bevington had already personally launched three classes and more had been launched by boys involved in the original class he had co-led with Kestin (Scanlan 2017, p. 30). None of these classes sat within the boundaries of a local congregation or under the auspices of denominational church.

The leadership of these early classes created a multiplying effect. New classes were led by those who had grown up within the Crusaders' Union, resulting in the existence of over 250 classes within thirty years. The leadership culture led to new leaders developing and launching new classes. Within this culture, the identity of the Crusaders' Union became something of an unacknowledged faith tradition, akin to a local church and denominational affiliation, and was surprisingly strong (ibid, p. 38). Replacing a denominational affiliation was a relational connection, through leaders of a local group or class, to the organisation. The strength of this extra-ecclesial faith tradition forged among members and leaders within the Crusaders' Union is evidenced by the near identical phrases used over eighty years. On becoming the first paid General Secretary, A. J. Vereker was described as a "Crusader to his fingertips"; eighty-two years later in 2002, when re-naming of the organisation was first mooted, the then-Chair of the Crusaders' Council pushed back stating that he "feel[s]

'Crusaders' down through [his] roots" (ibid, p. 39). Few would name Kestin or Bevington as influential youth ministry pioneers, yet their fingerprints are all over the shape and approach of much evangelical youth work in the UK, with the crucial emphasis on relational connections through Bible study groups and activities, rather than ecclesial affiliation.

As highlighted above, the approach of IVF in Australia was directly influenced by the Crusaders' Union in the UK and, similarly, was reliant on lay leadership, this time by Howard Guinness. Guinness was converted and nurtured within English parachurch organisations, rather than his local church. At the age of fourteen, he became a Christian, following a conversation with the leader of the local Crusaders' Union Bible class (Guinness 1975, p. 21) after a cricket game. Following his conversion, Guinness and his brother established a class at their school. In the holidays, they attended Christian camps, called Varsity and Public Schools Camps (VPSCs), run by the Children's Special Service Mission (CSSM). All of these early experiences in parachurch youth ministries would shape him, and his focus on relationships and gatherings outside of the institutional church followed suit.

On arrival in Sydney, Guinness was quickly accepted and admired by the children of key evangelical families. He was 26 years old, young, energetic, tall, and an extrovert. He took an interest in the students and what they cared about (White 1986). He loved sports and reflected a kind of "muscular Christianity" that was evident in English public schools in the early 20th century (Weir et al. 2005, p. 2; Bezzant 2021, pp. 1–16). In his dress, he was debonair in an upper-class way that Australian students respected, no doubt this was due to their colonial cringe and high regard for all things British. The students looked up to him, while the men even imitated the way he dressed, by wearing conservative grey slacks and Harris Tweed sports coats![9] The form of Christianity to which Guinness inspired students was in a context where many churchgoers were nominal, thus the extra-ecclesial nature of the relationships and fellowship formed was deemed essential to the work. This is reinforced by claims that "habitual churchgoers resented the religious enthusiasm which carried Sunday observance into weekday living" (Prince and Prince 1979, p. 103).

Although not directly traced back to the Crusaders' Union in the UK in the manner of IVFs, it is fascinating to highlight a similar thread in terms of lay leadership, operating and seeking the work of God, outside the normal structures of church life, within the origins of Young Life. Andrew Root states that as the parachurch movement expanded within the United States from 1940 to 1960, the model of relational youth ministry was unleashed. Root argues that Rayburn and the Young Life organisation invented this form of youth ministry (Root 2007, p. 53).

Young Life was so popular in many towns that the only space large enough to hold events was the local mortuary. More than three hundred young people would gather to listen to Rayburn speak to them about Jesus Christ. There are many photographs documenting gatherings of this kind. Wally Howard summed up Rayburn's style by stating, "His faith had a daredevil quality about it. There were times when I could not decide if he was a man of God or just presumptuous, whether he was driven by ambition to serve Christ or to build his own empire" (Schoon Tanis 2016). As more and more stories were discovered about the early years of Young Life, the same theme resonated: Rayburn was such a dynamic speaker that he often packed-out rooms with young people, who clamoured to hear him tell stories about this person, Jesus Christ. Whether it was in mortuaries, hotel ballrooms, or living rooms in large houses, Rayburn had a way of attracting teenagers to hear the good news of the gospel, albeit deliberately outside of the usual structures of church life.

Embedded, then, in the origin stories of evangelical youth ministry is the influential role of lay leadership, whose lay identity and active desire to reach young people with the gospel led them outside the boundaries of institutional church life, believing that God

was as much, if not more, suited to being at work among young people in those spaces. This extra-ecclesial practice is still seen as both an opportunity and a form of tension within evangelical youth ministry. Schoon Tanis highlights this ongoing tension in her contemporary exploration of Young Life's uneasy relationship with the life of the church and, in particular, the deliberate decision to avoid the questions of the sacraments (Schoon Tanis 2016). The action of God being located in relational connections suggests an implicit sacramentality in regard to these relationships, thus replacing the more formal ecclesial sacraments (ibid).

4.3. Thread Three: Fun

As a contemporary Urban Saints' leader said when interviewed, "if you're not thinking fun, then you're not going to have any youth work!" (Scanlan 2021, p. 152). Evangelical youth ministry developing, as it did, alongside the social changes in the twentieth century, found itself competing for the time and attention of young people with other activities and possibilities. Consequently, the thread of fun, of making youth ministry enjoyable, runs through our origin stories, becoming a core practice within evangelical youth ministry. Creating fun is not periphery to the work, but is seen as a way that God can shape the lives of young people, seen especially through the idea that the Christian life is the best life that a young person can lead. Or in the words of John 10:10, Jesus offers life in all its fullness. It can be argued that fun fuelled the relational heart of youth ministry practice at its origin and still does today.

The idea of fun activities for teenagers emerges almost immediately in the story of the Crusaders' Union, beginning with a proposal in 1907 to run a summer camp to bring together boys from across different classes that were already part of the Union. One of the benefits of being part of a larger movement was the ability to gather for activities and events on a scale that a local church could not manage (Watford 1995, p. 25). The development of fun activities by the Crusaders' Union was justified in the early days as needing to cater for the body, mind, and spirit.

This early move into organising camping activities developed into a programme of camps across multiple locations and weeks of the summer. Alongside this, regular sports competitions, annual trips, and events were developed to bring young people together from different regions of the UK, as well as nationally. These events were high profile enough that in 1993, Ian Botham, perhaps England's most well-known cricketer, presented a Crusader, Tim Pamphlett, with prizes at the Oval cricket ground in London for beating the Crusaders' Union cricket ball-throwing record, beating the record set by Botham himself, in 1969 (ibid, pp. 75–76). These events were clearly well-loved by the young people involved, with some games invented specifically within the Crusaders' Union and for Crusaders.

The significance of fun was not simply for young people to enjoy themselves, but also to reinforce the relational connection to the Crusaders' Union, so that the Crusaders' Union was not simply something you went to, but became something you were. It is of course not surprising that the leaders wanted to make being a Crusader fun and attractive, and whilst they never went as far as Jim Rayburn and Young Life, avoiding boredom was crucial. The evidence of an early Crusaders' Union camp song displays an aspect of this: "Come to Cru Camp, Come to Cru Camp, that is the best place to be" (ibid, p. 34).

This focus on fun and enjoyable activities, making the Crusaders' Union the "best place to be", betrays a tension in these origin stories that is perhaps still felt in attempts to develop faithful youth ministry in the ever-shifting cultural dynamics of the 21st century, the question of cultural relevance and Christian distinctiveness. The desire of these early Christian youth leaders to create fun places that might be seen as the "best" place for young people laid the foundation for much of the youth ministry work that seeks to

provide activities that young people might enjoy, to create a space to build rapport and relationships, with the hope that gospel sharing becomes easier as a result. This relational strategy is exemplified in more recent literature, such as that of Doug Fields, describing how to move young people from the "crowd" to the "core" (Fields 1998, p. 211) or Ward's vision for "incarnational" outreach that begins with "contact", followed by "extended contact" to building relationships, before moving to talk about the gospel (Ward 1998, pp. 52–79). This demonstrates how the practice inherent to these early organisations has become embedded within youth ministry theory, thus shaping contemporary practice to this day.

The IVF had a similar approach to fun as the Crusaders' Union. The Bible and evangelism were the priority, but fun was essential to facilitating these through building relationships. With a similar approach to the Crusaders' Union, it was assumed that fun would attract non-believers to come to the camps, join Christian groups, and be converted. The goal was to show young people that the Christian life was joyful and relational. Guinness embraced this approach, especially in organising camps and house parties. The house parties (holidays at a house) were a lot of fun for university students. They included a programme of Christian talks, but also games, sport, swimming, and other fun activities. Christians would invite their non-Christian friends, who might be attracted to the faith by the fun they experienced. Guinness believed that a scenario involving fun and community was the best context for deep personal conversations about faith. He recounted a conversation at a house party near the sea in Tasmania: "I can still see a striking girl in scarlet shorts who told us all that she had come down to have a good time. To her astonishment, she discovered that to be a Christian was the very essence of having a good time" (Guinness 1978, p. 87). The Crusaders' Union groups also organised house parties and they were often led by university students who had attended their schools. During the Great Depression, when there was not a lot of money for holidays and other fun activities, Crusaders' Union camps advertised themselves as a "real holiday" and used fellowship and fun to "explode the idea that Christianity is something to be avoided" (Crusaders' Union Camp Brochure 1979).

There is a never-ending list of the ways Young Life emphasises fun in their ministry. Early stories tell of Jim Rayburn taking Young Life kids on hikes to mountain tops, so that they could slide back down on snow patches that remained on the side of the mountain. With both camping and club ministry evolving simultaneously for Young Life, camping ministry allowed Young Life to develop a praxis of ministry that would influence their club work. This parallel evolution led Rayburn and Young Life to share their ministry around weekly clubs and summer camps, full of rides, adventures, entertainment, and the gospel. In 2007, Young Life touted this idea of fun as a brand strength, with the concept of "making Christianity attractive" a central tenet from the early days, with the role of volunteer lay leaders as crucial to this concept's success (Schoon Tanis 2016, chap. 4).

The practice of creating fun and youth ministry go together, hand in glove. In youth ministry, this connection is not frivolous, but is essential to the kind of life that the leaders believe young people can have if they respond to the gospel for themselves. The fun and activities are both meant to attract and keep young people involved and to build relationships. Both aspects present to young people a vision of God's work in their lives, that a life lived for and with Jesus Christ will be the most fulfilling life possible.

5. Further Reflections on Relational Practice and the Action of God

Whilst much of this article has been focused on historical reflection, such enquiry can bring light to the shape of contemporary practice and help to equip future-focused thinking. It is clear from the historical analysis that implicitly, and to some extent explicitly, God is seen to be at work in evangelical youth ministry through the primary means of

relationships, expressed specifically in the themes of influential young people, charismatic lay leadership, and fun. Whilst this is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of such practice, this final section offers some further reflections on the wider impact of these practices on youth ministry.

While the reflections threaded through the sections above highlight how historic practices of youth ministry have shaped and continue to shape contemporary youth ministry practice, there is a sense in which these practices have also shaped the wider life of the church, despite the extra-ecclesial, lay-led nature of youth ministry detailed above. It is clear that the practices of these parachurch youth organisations have shaped church-based work with young people throughout the twentieth century to the present day. Indeed, it could be argued that church-based youth ministry took on a parachurch ethos (Scanlan 2017, pp. 62–63).

In the British context in particular, the methods of the Crusaders' Union had a direct influence on church-based youth ministry. Essentially, the Crusaders' Union model of relationally gathering young people for Bible-based activities and fun, away from the usual streams of congregational life, proved so successful that the model was taken up within both the established Church of England and Free Churches through two distinct organisations: Covenanters across free churches and Pathfinders within the C of E. These movements within denominational and congregational networks were launched in the era between the world wars. Businessman John Laing, who was a local Crusaders' Union leader and part of the Crusaders' Council, piloted a class based on the Crusaders' Union model in his local church. This proved so successful in engaging young people that he left his Crusaders' Union roles to multiply this work, eventually launching Covenanters in order to hold groups together.[10] While there was not the same personal relationship with the launch of Pathfinders, there was a similar influence through the mirroring of the style, as well as a recorded visit from the first secretary of Pathfinders to the Crusaders' Union Head Office in order to learn how the work was run (Scanlan 2017, p. 48). These moves are examples of the phenomenon identified by Mark Senter in which imitators follow an innovative youth ministry leader and replicate the form of successful innovative work (Senter 1992, pp. 68–69). In the UK, the Bible class model of Christian ministry moved into local churches and set the course for the "fellowship" model of youth ministry to become the mainstay of evangelical youth ministry practice (Ward 1996, p. 24).

It is interesting to note that the increase in thinking and action towards new forms of church, exemplified by the Fresh Expressions movement in the Church of England in the early years of the twenty-first century, can be seen to occupy the same dialogical space and emerge from the same heritage practice (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, p. 100). A key characteristic of this work is what has elsewhere been argued to be a previously "unprecedented move" of creating parachurch youth ministry organisations that carried within them the hallmarks of an evangelical ecclesial imagination (Scanlan 2017, pp. 35–37). Such an imagination sees personal piety, building on what Bebbington described as "conversionism" (Bebbington 2003, chap. 1), and small groups within an "interconfessional fellowship", as being more significant than a traditional local, parish, or denominational church affiliation (Scanlan 2017, p. 37). The expectation in this regard is that God is active outside the usual boundaries of the church and, perhaps further, that reaching young people with the gospel requires movement outside the church, almost suggesting that in regard to these threads of early youth ministry, God was able to be more active in young people's lives in those extra-ecclesial spaces that were not identifiable as church. Moreover, it has been argued that the moves to work with young people outside the boundaries of church life, exemplified by the charismatic lay leadership of Bevington, Guinness, and Rayburn, serve to provide a context through which the church itself might be transformed. This transformation is

happening as the church is stretched by the Holy Spirit into new spaces that are being opened up by relationship-focused work with young people. As a result, the activity of God through relational spaces created outside, or in parallel to the church, is understood to be transformative of the church, enabling the church to learn further how to be the church (Scanlan 2021, p. 246).

A second further reflection builds on the theme of creating fun within youth ministry. The emphasis on creating an atmosphere of enjoyment, adventure, and entertainment has played a central role in youth ministry practice from the early days. Looking at this through the lens of contemporary life for young people, there is great potential for God's action to be evident afresh through this practice. As we have reflected, we believe fun remains an essential part of ministry to and with young people, not so much in regard to the emphasis on excitement, but because it might undergird God's command to remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Providing and creating spaces for fun allows young people a sabbath space of rest that might alleviate the strains of growing up in a time when the number of young people suffering from anxiety has risen dramatically (Haidt 2024). In this context, relational practice is vital as leaders and young people enjoy activities involving play with one another, aware that this might in itself create a fresh space for God's work in young's people lives to be evident. Building on the historical thread of fun, therefore, might create a sabbath space of fun within youth ministry in the 21st century, establishing restive and restorative spaces for young people to live in the coming years.

These further reflections on practice have addressed the ongoing impact of lay leadership and creating fun within the relational practice of evangelical youth ministry. Alongside these, it is of interest to note that there seems to be no contemporary equivalent within the literature or practice of the 'grand strategy' of early evangelical youth work. Despite this, questions remain in regard to the connection to contemporary expressions of relational influence within evangelical youth ministry. UK-based research, for example, has found that over 75% of young people from churched backgrounds, and 85% of Christian young people from non-churched families, cite the influence of their peers as having a positive impact on their faith (Youthscape Centre for Research 2022). Such research findings should encourage those working within a classic 'nucleus' model of Christian youth groups (Ward 1998, pp. 8–9), still much favoured within evangelical church life, that young people themselves can be effective in relationally influencing their friends positively towards the Chrisitan faith.

6. Conclusions

This article has explored a historical perspective to illuminate contemporary practice within evangelical youth ministry, through a transnational lens. A tradition of evangelical youth ministry practices that centres on God's action through relationships can be traced from the earliest days of key lay leaders, with a focus on young people stepping outside of the usual boundaries of church life to meet young people, provide places to meet, and share the gospel with them. This is clear in the UK context, through the work and influence of the Crusaders' Union/Urban Saints, with transnational dynamics reinforcing this central practice, seen in the work of exemplars, namely the IVF in Australia and Young Life in the USA. Through a historical focus, this article has highlighted how relational practice has remained central to evangelical work with young people and has the potential to continue to shape the church in new ways and support young people through the challenges of growing up, albeit in an ever-changing context, as the world of young people continues to change and develop.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.S., G.S.-T. and R.L.; methodology, M.S., G.S.-T. and R.L.; validation, M.S., G.S.-T. and R.L.; formal analysis, M.S., G.S.-T. and R.L.; investigation, M.S., G.S.-T.

and R.L.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S.; writing—review and editing, M.S., G.S.-T. and R.L.; project administration, M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This project received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest other than personal affiliation to the organizations discussed in the article and as detailed in the article itself.

Notes

1 As per the phrase attributed to Sir Issac Newton and inscribed on the UK £2 coin.

2 Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes is the full original name for the organisation that more commonly became known simply as 'Crusaders'. In 2006, as part of the Crusaders' centenary, the name was changed to 'Urban Saints'.

3 Sometimes named the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF).

4 This section draws on chapter 1 of Gretchen Schoon Tanis' previously published work (Schoon Tanis 2016).

5 Quoted from handwritten minutes in the 1906 Crusaders' Union minute book. Note that in the UK, somewhat confusingly, public and private schools are both fee paying, rather than freely available statutory schooling, which is known as a state school education.

6 See for example the current strategy of the CofE to grow younger, in large part to ensure the survival of the denomination.

7 For example, Jean Porter interviewed by Richard Ford on 23 June 2000. Held in their personal collection.

8 We acknowledge as we write this section the very real abuses of power and position that have come to light within evangelical youth ministry. The documented abuses perpetuated by, for example, both John Smyth and Mike Pilavachi within the Church of England, are horrendous and evidence of the potential for the theology and practice we are detailing here to turn toxic, being used for sinful and evil purpose by leaders who should have young people's wellbeing at the very centre of their practice. An analysis and discussion of these abuses is beyond the scope of this article, but we signpost readers to the detailed reports that have been published in relation to John Smyth (https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf (accessed 13 December 2024) and Mike Pilavachi/Soul Survivor (https://static1.squarespace.com/static/547c7dfde4b028a1612a4736/t/66f5374e329e35524f9c0f7c/1727346512153/Soul+Survivor+Review+-+Final+Report+260924.pdf, accessed 13 December 2024), as well as to the reporting process within the CofE (https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/reporting-abuse, accessed 13 December 2024) and an independent safeguarding body, ThirtyOneEight (https://thirtyoneeight.org/help-and-resources/safeguarding-helpline/, accessed 13 December 2024), should any support be required. We are also fully supportive of research recently launched by Prof. Mike Higton and others at Durham University to centre the voices of victims, specifically in relation to the abuse by Mike Pilavachi at Soul Survivor Church in the UK.

9 Allan Bryson interviewed by Richard Ford on 28 June 2000, held in Ruth Lukabyo's personal collection.

10 Covenanters ran until 2000, when it merged with YFC in the UK.

References

Bailey, David. 2019. *Youth Ministry and Theological Shorthand: Living Amongst the Fragments of a Coherent Theology*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.

Bebbington, David. 2003. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Routledge.

Bezzant, Rhys S. 2021. Muscular Christianity: Celebrating and Constructing Manhood at the End of the Nineteenth Century. *Fides et Historia* 53: 1–16.

Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny, and Clare Watkins. 2010. *Talking About God in Practice*. London: SCM Press.

Collins-Mayo, Sylvia, Bob Mayo, and Sally Nash. 2010. *The Faith of Generation Y*. London: Church House Publishing.

Crusaders. 1956. *The Story of the Crusaders' Union: These Fifty Years, 1906–1956*. Guildford and London: Printed by Billing and Sons Ltd.

Crusaders' Union Camp Brochure. 1979. *Crusader Union Boys Division Camp Brochure 1937*. Donald Robinson Archives. Newtown: Donald Robinson Library.

Fields, Doug. 1998. *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Gough, Tim. 2019. Has the 'incarnational model' been a Theologically Helpful Influence on Modern Youth Ministry? *Journal of Youth and Theology* 18: 135–63. [CrossRef]

Graham, Elaine, Frances Ward, and Heather Walton. 2019. *Theological Reflection: Methods*. London: SCM Press.

Griffiths, Steve. 2013. *Models for Youth Ministry*. London: SPCK.
Guinness, Howard. 1975. *Sacrifice*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
Guinness, Howard. 1978. *Journey Among Students*. Sydney: Anglican Information Office.
Haidt, Jonathan. 2024. *The Anxious Generation*. London: Penguin Random House.
Kestin, Albert. 1919. Looking Back. *The Crusader*.
Lukabyo, Ruth. 2020. *From a Ministry for Youth to a Ministry of Youth: Aspects of Protestant Youth Ministry in Sydney 1930–1959*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
Prince, John. 1987. *Out of the Tower*. Sydney: Anzea.
Prince, John, and Moya Prince. 1979. *Tuned in to Change*. Sydney: Scripture Union.
Root, Andrew. 2007. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*. Downers Grove: IVP.
Scanlan, Mark. 2017. Urban Saints: An Interweaving Ecclesiology as a Contribution to the Fresh Expressions Debate. Ph.D. thesis, Durham University, Durham, UK.
Scanlan, Mark. 2021. *An Interweaving Ecclesiology: The Church, Mission and Young People*. London: SCM Press.
Schoon Tanis, Gretchen. 2016. *Making Jesus Attractive: The Ministry and Message of Young Life*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
Senter, Mark. 1992. *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry*. Wheaton: SP Publications.
Shepherd, Nick. 2014. Being a Christian Youth Worker: Finding Ourselves by Losing Ourselves. In *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice*. Edited by Sally Nash and Jo Whitehead. London: SCM Press.
Ward, Pete. 1996. *Growing Up Evangelical: Youthwork and the Making of a Subculture*. London: SPCK.
Ward, Pete. 1998. *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Ward, Pete. 2008. *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*. London: SCM Press.
Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Watford, Jack. 1995. *Yesterday and Today: A History of Crusaders*. St. Albans: Crusaders.
Weir, Stuart, Nick Watson, and Stephen Friend. 2005. The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond. *Journal of Religion and Society* 7: 1–18.
White, Paul. 1986. *Interview by Margaret Lamb, 3 April 1986*. Oral History Collection. Newtown: Donald Robinson Library.
Youthscape Centre for Research. 2022. Influencers: Peer Evangelism Amongst Young People in the UK. Available online: https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/published-research/influencers (accessed on 10 January 2025).