

CRITICAL TIME TO REACH YOUTH



It's happening again - youth crimes are dominating the national headlines. Reports of ram-raids, theft, stabbings and vandalism by adolescents have shocked the country. Young people between the ages of 7-12 have been implicated and police along with retailers, teachers and social workers are frustrated that young offenders continue to be involved in criminal activities.

People watching these developments ask, 'What is wrong with our society? Why are these children behaving so badly?' and 'Where are the parents?' The headlines and questions that surround this issue are not new. In 2010 it was reported that violent youth crimes had escalated throughout New Zealand. At that time, like now, many **people are shaking their heads and looking for answers.**ⁱ

It's not just youth ram-raids that are of concern. Truancy has been a growing dilemma for years, compounded further by Covid. Unlicensed teens are joyriding in stolen cars and speeding off from police pursuits, often ending with a crash and death. Drug addiction, substance supplements, alcohol abuse and mental health troubles land hundreds of teenagers in emergency departments every year.ⁱⁱ

Each year as more and more kids get involved in the underbelly of criminal and antisocial behaviours, predictably media reports it, politicians suggest a quick-fix, and the police, truancy services and social agencies step up to try and solve the problems. It seems to me that despite copious funding being thrown at this social predicament, there is an ongoing problematic cycle of youth dysfunctions, crime spikes, police intervention, policy changes and then a cry for help, yet nothing changes.

For example, in 2010 a Hamilton senior sergeant urged parents to take more responsibility for children's whereabouts. He said, 'Between 23 and 28 per cent of burglaries between 9am and 5pm are carried out by offenders of school age. In the case of the seven boys linked to the 26 burglaries, each child was absent from school at the time of the offending.' He continued, 'Police would meet with schools, parents and social service agencies this week to deal with the youths.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Twelve years later...last month, teens ram-raided their way into an Auckland shopping centre, driving through the mall and smashing into Postie Plus and Noel Leeming. Ben Hannifin, director of Youth Justice System Development at Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children) said, 'A plan would be formed to present to a Youth Court judge, and any further investigations that may be needed surrounding concerns like mental health or function could be commissioned.' 'Ultimately,' Hannifin said, 'a decision was made in court on how best to manage the young person.'^{iv}

Our government reports about 80% of the young offenders that Oranga Tamariki work with are victims of family violence. They are 10 times more likely to have a psychiatric disorder, over 90% of them have a learning disability and most have experienced at least two traumatic life events.^v It's a sad state of affairs that the children of this country seem hopelessly lost and out of control.

It appears that amid a global pandemic, New Zealand is also experiencing an adolescent educational, moral and behavioural pandemic.

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Year after year, society wrestles with the issue of youth offending, yet year after year our youth plummet to greater depths of dreadful behaviour. Politicians, social workers, police, counsellors and others hold more hui to discuss these issues in the hope of determining the cause of these actions and expect to find better outcomes for the contemptible offenders. They talk about punishment or prevention resulting in another inadequate cycle at the bottom of the cliff.

As this juvenile crisis races towards another tipping point, I suggest we can do one of two things;

Watch the government develop more programmes to address the heart of the matter,
or, Watch the church develop more programmes to address the matter of the heart.

New Zealand was in a similar position in 1944. Post war, many fatherless young people were facing a hopeless future. Despair of the unknown was a prevailing mood. On a warm summer's evening, January 17, 1944, two Christian men met in a church with 30 others. 'After opening in prayer their discussions centred on how they could effectively conduct a well-balanced programme of spiritual, mental and physical activities for boys. As the meeting progressed it became obvious there was a definite need for a work of this kind. They formed a Christian youth movement to be known as Every Boy's Rally (EBR).^{vi}

I retell this historic event because there wasn't a politician, policeman or counsellor present at that initial meeting. The Christian men who met that evening had deep concerns for the young people they knew. The heart of the matter was the country was recovering from a World War, trying to cater for despondent widows and rebuilding the economy. Yet, these men were on their knees seeking the Lord's guidance on how to address the matter of the heart. In other words, without any political agenda, these humble but insightful men were asking heaven how they could bring hope to the affected youth in New Zealand. The Lord answered their prayers and expanded their dreams. Just six years later, the EBR and EGR were conducting programmes from Northland to Invercargill teaching truth and inspiring thousands of boys and girls to live a life pleasing to God. Initiatives like the Every Boy's and the Every Girl's Rally movements commenced because men and women saw a great need among the nation's youth and in obedience and faith acted. In doing so, the Lord honoured their endeavours and changed the hearts of thousands of children. **It is my hope and prayer that soon another revival of youth work begins in this country.**

There are a number of reasons the EBR and EGR succeeded beyond expectations:

- The early leaders did this for God and not personal recognition.
- They were sincerely committed to walk by faith and to speak to the heart of the nation's youth.
- They learnt from their mistakes, were practical and intent on delivering the Gospel.
- They were backed by hundreds of likeminded Christian volunteers.

- The churches known as Open Brethren (now CCCNZ – Christian Community Churches of New Zealand) supported the initiative with generous financial support and sustained prayer.
- The Lord kept the Rally movement from destructive scandals.

THE QUESTION IS – WILL WE, OR WON'T WE?

Like the pioneering Rally leaders, the church knows that the great problem of humanity is the heart. *'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?'* (Jere. 17:9). Politicians and police are not in a position to change hearts. **Changing hearts is what God does best.** Only God can give a human the miracle of a new heart, a new hope and a new life.

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The advantage the church has over secular society is that each true Christian has experienced the revolution of a new heart. We know what Christ did for us and in us when he transformed us into His family. We get it – God can make a bitter life better, and we want others to connect with this joy.

The resource the church has over government agencies is, it does not need permission to act socially. The Christian community does not jump to the political drum beat of social issues. We are free to conduct youth activities in any city, town or neighbourhood where our trustworthy people are respected. The church doesn't have to go through bureaucratic hoops to conduct programmes, nor do we have to apply for funding to get underway. We can do it today. All it takes is a grass area, a ball, some biscuits and water. That's how simple it is to attract children. The key strategy is to keep them coming because they know they are in a safe, fun, caring and inspiring place.

In 2022, the need for youth focused enterprises is needed more than ever to help an entire country equip our socially inept and vulnerable young people. It seems bizarre that we have children on our streets who can hot-wire a car, but they can't catch a ball. They are prepared to smash, grab and damage all for the sake of cigarettes, clothes and confectionary. That's not acceptable, but it appears they do not know the difference between right and wrong. Their recidivist behaviour is atrocious because their conscience is corrupted. These young people don't need more rules, they need to discover what love, respect and kindness is. The heart of the problem is, for many of these young offenders, their home, culture and society have either failed them or neglected them.

What happens if we do not address this tsunami of bad behaviour? What will the outcomes be if we lock these children in cells and isolate them from the one community that can help them the most? If we don't take this opportunity to work with them now, they will emerge from prison as inadequate and dysfunctional adults that will most likely default back to the only behaviour they know.

It's remarkable that the recent crime wave was to secure Play stations, sneakers and sweets. Children think these things are priorities. With repetitive rejection they crave acceptance even if it is with perverse peers. What they need is to be with a group of people who relationally invest time into to these young

people. Time to engage their natural curiosity with learning, creativity and laughing, not with a screen but with a real human. **Safe relationships, positive communication and truth are what our young people need to help them navigate life.**

They need their village to be alert to the dangers that will destroy them. Without a parental role-model they need authentic people to teach them the difference between right and wrong. Our children need men and women who epitomize positivity; adults who young people look up to and who won't give conflicting and confusing messages. If we don't provide this environment gangs will. Our tamariki need stability and consistency from people they can trust. **Above all, the children from this country, and every country, need to know Jesus Christ. Discovering His love, His joy, His salvation and His way, will be the one thing that can make them a better person.**

Today I stand on the mountain of God's Word and blow the shofar to sound the battle cry to our churches. I do so because this is a critical point of time to reach the youth of this nation. There is a real urgency for the Christian church to lead the charge on bringing hope and help to our distressed communities. If we do not reap our children, we will weep for our children. We must engage and move forward into the thick of the battle for the hearts of our children because we've been part of the solution before. Jesus said, 'Let the children come (Matthew 19:24). Will you respond?

Steps to engagement:

- It's time to call the church to national prayer regarding these matters.
- All Christians should recognise all children are at risk socially, morally and spiritually.
- We need to collaborate with existing youth ministries like Rally, Word of Life, Scripture Union New Zealand and others who are trustworthy.
- We need to financially invest in ways to engage the youth of New Zealand with truth, now.
- Every Christian needs to consider how they can help this strategic thrust.
- Talking to other churches in your community will strengthen interdenominational unity.

We cannot always build the future for our youth,
but we can build our youth for the future.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Questions to work with:

- What can your church do to help young people be transformed by Jesus?
- Who can we identify as people who could enthusiastically lead such a work?
- How many of our children could bring their friends to an activity?
- Can we afford to *not* invest in the children of our community?
- What needs to change in our church, so youth feel welcome and loved among us?
- Why did Jesus give us the command, 'Let the children come to me?'

As our history shows, all it takes to save this nation's children from ultimate destruction, is the belief that **God will do a great work in the hearts of our young people if we are available** to show, live and speak the truth into them. Will you?

Graham Ashby – Mar 2022

ⁱ [Backlash as youth crime escalates | Stuff.co.nz](#)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/76035795/thousands-of-children-treated-for-drug-and-alcohol-abuse>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/4079156/Police-bust-youth-crime-ring?cid=app-android>

^{iv} [Is youth crime really a growing problem and what can be done about it? | Stuff.co.nz](#)

^v [Is youth crime really a growing problem and what can be done about it? | Stuff.co.nz](#)

^{vi} *Rally, Past, Present & Future* by Graham Ashby p.19