

SOUSTER YOUTH ISSUE #7

ARTICLES, NEWS & INSPIRATION

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meaningless?

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CHRIST
IS RISEN

APRIL 2024

 Souster
Youth

Director's Letter

A new chapter.

I begin this editorial with some personal news. After eight years as Director, I'll be leaving Souster Youth at the end of the summer. In September, I'll begin training for ministry within the Church of England.

Youth ministry is in my blood, so it will be a wrench to leave the people and work I love so much here at Souster Youth. At the same time, in recent years, I've had a growing sense of a calling to serve within the church as a minister. This is the right time to pursue that calling further.

Since I shared the news with our board and team, we've been making plans to find our next Director - watch this space for news on that in the coming days. We would be grateful for your help in getting the word out about that vacancy when it arrives.

Now, to this latest issue of our newsletter, packed with all the usual stuff you've come to expect - inspiring stories, thought-provoking articles and news about the difference our work is making to local young people.

On pages 4-5, Tim shares about his innovative work in schools talking about refugees. Through an interactive team game, students have been experiencing some of the difficult decisions that refugees (including their age) have to make.

On pages 6-7, Bex shares an update on our building. It's exciting to see Drop-in beginning to become a home for young people in Thrapston and the surrounding area.

On pages 8-9, I've written an article about how we've been exploring the science vs. faith debate with our discipleship group, 'The Way.'



On pages 10-11, Anna shares another significant story of a young person's wellbeing changed through the Grow intervention.

You can meet one of our volunteers on the page opposite. We have the best volunteers a charity could wish for! Find out how you could join our team.

I and the whole Souster Youth team remain fired by our mission and will be giving our absolute best for young people over these next five months. If you pray, please keep us in mind as it is also an unsettling time of transition.

See you soon,

Jason

Jason Royce leads the work of Souster Youth.

Volunteer spotlight



SY: Tell us about yourself.

My name is Dick Casey. I am married to June and we have four grown up daughters and seven grandchildren ranging from 7 to 24 years old. I am part of Nene Valley Vineyard Church which meets at Manor School in Raunds.

SY: What do you enjoy about volunteering?

The best part of volunteering is interacting with students in the classroom, especially when they ask deep questions and are genuinely searching for answers. There is great joy in presenting the Christian message to students, in some cases for the first time they've heard it.

SY: Why do you like supporting young people?

When I see the challenges that young people are facing today, I find that bringing hope and a future to them and letting them know that they are valuable is important.

SY: On a day off we'd most likely find you...

Travelling around in our touring caravan or undertaking DIY tasks!

SY: Three things you couldn't live without:

My family, my church and my DIY tools.

SY: Two things you wouldn't miss:

Broccoli, and queuing!

So we're not likely to find Dick queuing up for broccoli then! We'll be back with another volunteer spotlight in the next issue. Visit our website for information on volunteering with us.

“There is great joy in presenting the Christian message to students, in some cases for the first time they've heard it.”

Refugee Stories



110 million. It's an unimaginably large number.

That's how many people in the world have been forcibly displaced from their home because of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and natural disasters (UNHCR figures, Mid-Year Trends 2023).

110 million. It's hard to picture so many people. It amounts to about 1 in 73 people worldwide and the total is growing year on year.

In recent years there have been a number of world shaping events that have contributed to this situation: Israel and Palestine, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the drought in Somalia, human rights abuses in Afghanistan, and many more.

We were invited into three local secondary schools to present some thoughts on the topic of the refugee crisis. This forms part of the students' wider education for growing up in an increasingly multicultural society and touches upon aspects of both the PSHE and RE curricula. Barely a month goes by these days without another tragic headline of a small boat that has sunk and people lost at sea. How can we prepare the leaders of tomorrow to respond with compassion to what is undeniably a complex issue with no quick and easy solutions?

We began by understanding some of the key terminology. What is displacement? What is the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker? What is an economic migrant? What is migration and immigration? Who are the UNHCR? What is human trafficking? What is xenophobia?

We then watched a video of a young refugee's story. He spoke of his school being bombed and his friend dying before his eyes. That was the catalyst for him, his younger brother and his mother leaving their home in Syria. They now resided in a refugee camp in Jordan.

We gave the students a task to do whilst they watched the video. We asked them to write down three similarities and three differences between this young refugee and them; his life and their life.

The differences were stark and shocking. Thankfully none of us had ever experienced living through such traumatic events. But there were also similarities. The students noted some similar interests; creative writing, engineering. They remarked that the young refugee spoke fluent English, which he had learnt predominantly from YouTube (which was another point of similarity!). He dressed like them, jeans and a hoodie. He had hopes and dreams for his future.

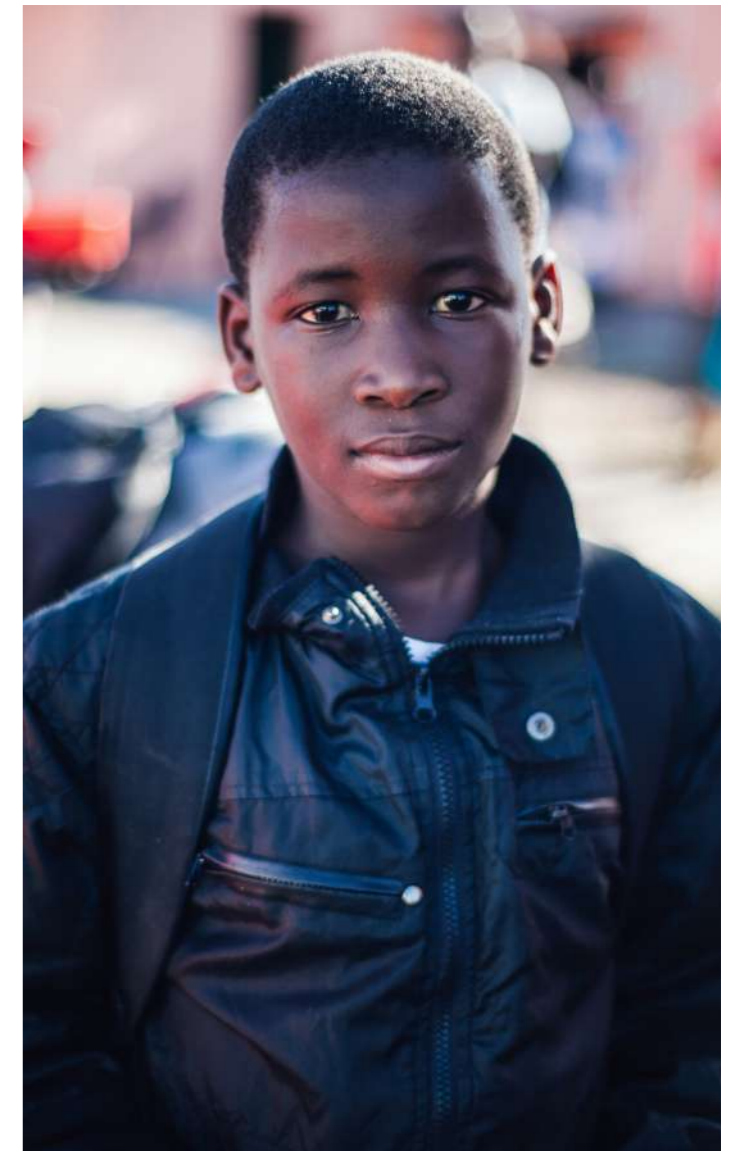
After the video the lesson took a sharp turn. We launched the students into a fictitious refugee scenario of their own... but with a twist! To bring things closer to home we imagined a scenario where the UK had suddenly plunged into a dangerous civil war. The government had been overthrown. The economy had collapsed. Chaos was everywhere!

Competing in teams, they needed to make decisions about whether to leave, which route to take, what to pack and where they should go after they left the country. Teams gained or lost happiness points based upon their decision, but also upon the luck of the dice. The students really enjoyed this experience, which we tried to keep light-hearted and fun despite its serious underlying subject. One student wrote on their feedback form, **"I particularly liked the game as it was interactive and fun, as well as showing how stressful it can be as a refugee and how hard some decisions are."**

After the game we looked at the statistics about how many refugees reside in different countries. The UK has about 360,000 refugees and people in refugee-like situations, which ranks 20th in the world. We concluded the lesson with a reading from the Bible where God's people are encouraged to treat foreigners residing among them as native-born, remembering their own history.

As I reflect back upon the lessons, there was one comment that really stuck with me. During the activity where the students wrote down similarities between themselves and the young refugee, one student answered **"our humanity; we're both human."** If I'm honest, at first I thought it was a cheeky answer! I thought that the student had reached for any surface-level similarity without really engaging with the task. I was profoundly wrong. This 13 year old boy was naming his shared humanity with the young man from Syria. He felt a sense of deep connection simply as another human being on this planet earth.

The refugee crisis is a complex problem. **That's a great place to start.**



Tim Sandford is the Schoolswork Lead for Souster Youth.

Building update

We have some super exciting news!

Our drop-in space has been having some transformation work done, and it is really starting to take shape! We have now had the downstairs space painted, in keeping with the Souster colours, and also using ideas from some of the young people who attend our groups which gives it more of a youth vibe. Take a look at our before and after photos on the right hand side of the page.

We've chosen some flooring and are hoping to have it laid very soon. This is going to completely change the feel of the space and will allow us to start buying new furniture and setting out the room in a way that is really engaging and homely for young people as we seek to create a space that is a "home away from home" for them.

Upstairs, since the pews were removed, we have now reduced the stage area and removed all of the carpets from the main area. A stud wall is now in place separating our



Before: The empty hall



Choosing colours: The wooden wall



In progress: Wooden wall and lower half of walls done



Choosing colours: Lower half of walls



In progress: Far walls done



In progress: Wide angle view



After: Bright new colours and window edging

storage area from the main room, and now it is time for the decorating to take place! Watch this space for more photos as this work develops. Once the paintwork is completed we will be moving onto flooring, and then we are really excited to be able to start using both floors for the drop-in and also to be able to make use of it for other events as well.

This project has been on our hearts and minds for a long time and it is incredible to see it come to fruition. Watching the building transform from an old Methodist Church hall, rich in heritage but lacking in comfort, into a space where young people feel comfortable and at home is such a blessing to be a part of.

We have been so encouraged with the funding and donations that have been generously given to get us this far, so thank you to everyone who has been involved, however big or small. It is making a huge difference to the lives of so many young people in Thrapston.



After: It matches our beanbags too!



Bex Hunter is our Drop-in Lead.

Is life meaningless?

We are just atoms zooming around, life is meaningless.

That's the proposition that 16 young people debated at 'The Way' last week.

The debate teams, composed regardless of personal beliefs, had to make the strongest case they could for their side.

At the end of the debate, I was asked to choose a winner but I didn't, in recognition of the fact that neither side has been able to completely and finally eradicate the arguments of the other side. The debate continues to rage in our culture and each one must make their choice.

When we speak to young people in schools, we often find that they have been taught that it's a choice between science and faith. But this simply isn't true: many Christians are working within the scientific field, so science and Christianity are not opposites. Also, the distinction (science vs. faith) does not acknowledge the fact that a belief in science also requires a step of faith.

When we look at our planet, and when we explore the amazing universe in which we find ourselves, we're all faced with the same evidence. Of course, we don't all interpret that evidence in the same way.

These debates have significance outside of the classroom. There's a big difference between how you live if you think life is meaningless and we're here by accident, and how you live if you believe there's a creator and a purpose for your life.

“ Humans have always wondered about the meaning of life... life has no higher purpose than to perpetuate the survival of DNA... life has no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.

— Prof. Richard Dawkins

I can't help but wonder whether the meaninglessness that is presented by some worldviews is a significant factor in the unprecedented decreases in life satisfaction and positive feelings about the future that we are seeing among young people. **Where is the hope?!**

Our purpose last week was to try to show that the Christian faith is, at the very least, plausible, and that being a Christian does not require us to ignore the evidence. We can engage with science and be people of faith.

We are meaning-making creatures. We ache to have meaning in our lives. This would certainly help to explain the persistence of religious faith throughout societies across the globe.

I recently watched a debate between Richard Dawkins and Professor John Lennox. It's from a few years ago in Oxford but the debate goes over many of the same topics that their debates typically cover. In one exchange, Richard Dawkins offered the reflection that if he were to ever believe in God, it certainly wouldn't be the Christian God. The reason he offered for this was his incredulity that the kind of God that the Bible describes, one who made the entire universe, should be at all interested in the minutiae of an individual life.

At this point in the debate, I'm sure I caught the flash of a smile across Prof. Lennox's face. He would smile because he knows that, like Dawkins, the Bible writers were astonished by this idea too, though of course from a different viewpoint.

In the Bible, Psalm 8:3-4 expresses exactly this kind of astonishment.

“

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

— Psalm 8:3-4 (NIV)

To give our group a flavour of this astonishment, we showed them a video exploring the largest stars in the known universe. The group were then invited to consider the possibility that, not only is there a creator, but that this creator is interested in their lives and does care about them.

Our group is a mix of those who don't yet have faith and those who do, but they're always willing to explore. Our team is convinced by the evidence for God, but we always make space for young people to choose for themselves. They're on a journey and our role is to walk alongside them as they consider both the proposition offered by the humanistic scientists and also the claim of the Christian faith. Both can't be right.

One view offers us relentless competition for DNA-based dominance and the perpetuation of our species. The other invites us to lay aside competition at the expense of others, and instead to live a life of service to God and others. They couldn't be more different.

Over the coming weeks, our group will be thinking about how life would look if there is a purpose to it. What if they placed the service of others at the centre of their lives? We will also be giving away baked goods in exchange for donations to a charitable cause as a way of practising the kind of life that is lived for others.



Jason Royce leads the work of Souster Youth.

“IT FOLLOWS ME AROUND IN MY HEAD, I’VE THOUGHT ABOUT ENDING IT.”

Each term we support the social and emotional wellbeing of young people in schools. The Grow Intervention helps young people to open up and find coping strategies for the challenges that they face in life. **Anna Freij** shares about the impact upon one young person this term. >>

>> Sadly, but unsurprisingly, students with special educational needs and disabilities are overrepresented in the referrals we receive from schools. Like many students with autism and/or ADHD, Luke struggles with sensory overload and finds it hard to focus in a busy classroom environment.

When I first met him in January, he told me that he had been sexually abused by a student in the year above when he was in year 7. He said, **"It follows me around in my head, I've thought about ending it."** A video had been circulated by the perpetrator. Although it had subsequently been taken down, people continued to ask Luke about it.

His baseline assessment indicated probable clinical depression. He was having frequent panic attacks and confided, **"Sometimes I fake illness, because it's scary having to face it again."**

We asked Luke what his hopes were for his time with us. He longed to be heard and understood and to have, what he termed, "a successful life." Although he said that he hated talking about feelings, he managed to express himself, especially on paper; both writing and drawing.

We gave him opportunities to mourn, and we mourned with him as he grieved feeling ashamed and embarrassed, alone and left out. We also gave him strategies for dealing with intrusive thoughts.

Luke found that being part of a group and knowing others were struggling as well, helped him to feel like he wasn't alone. **"There are people who relate to me,"** he reflected about his experiences.

At the end of our time with Luke we asked him how he had found it. **"I shared really difficult stuff and I've discovered more about myself,"** he said. **"I was anxious at first; it's hard talking about how I feel, but it helps. It feels better having got some stuff off my chest. It helped my headspace. It has boosted me up, calmed me down and helped me to think."**

Luke's wellbeing score increased by over 25% (11 points) during his time taking part in the Grow intervention. This is a very significant increase, suggesting a transformation in wellbeing. (Depending upon the initial scores, an improvement of just 3 points can be considered meaningful.)



Anna Freij is our Psychological Health Lead.

QUOTES FROM THIS TERM

"I've started to talk a lot more with my family and I've got closer to them. If I fall out with someone or get into an argument, I've learnt to walk away and come back to resolve it."

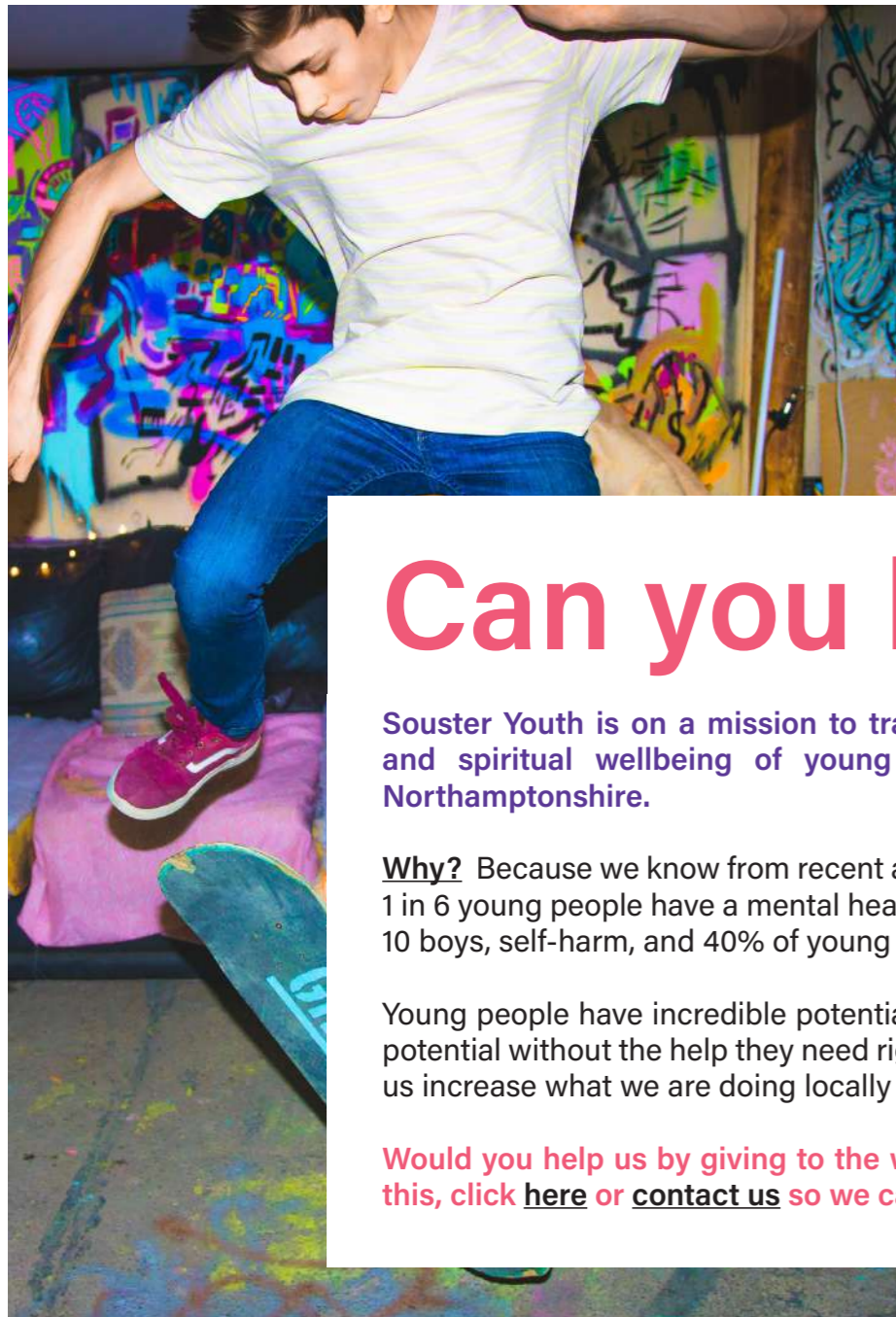
"My sleep pattern has improved. I don't sleep when I get home from school now. When I go to bed, sometimes still late, I sleep right through. I turn off my screen and listen to music instead."

"I'm more able to concentrate in class because I'm thinking less about [the things that were bothering me]."

"I've got a better relationship with boys; they don't need to be boyfriends."

"I feel better coming here because people like me for myself, rather than judging me. We get to all help each other. Souster has really helped me — it's got me more friends and stronger relationships with existing friends."

*Name changed to protect anonymity.



Can you help us?

Souster Youth is on a mission to transform the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of young people aged 11-19 in east Northamptonshire.

Why? Because we know from recent academic studies that in the UK 1 in 6 young people have a mental health disorder; 1 in 5 girls, and 1 in 10 boys, self-harm, and 40% of young people often feel lonely.

Young people have incredible potential, but many won't achieve that potential without the help they need right now. Your support can help us increase what we are doing locally for young people.

Would you help us by giving to the work of Souster Youth? To do this, click [here](#) or [contact us](#) so we can send you a giving form.

Support us as you shop!

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