Review of Practitioner Focussed Books


Like the Gospel of Mark which is at the core of this seekers course, Christianity Explored: Youth Edition has a certain urgency about it: “So we must share the gospel with young people before it is too late” (Leader’s Guide p. 70). This is an ideal course if your church or school with a core of committed young Christians and a team of adults committed to them which is looking to engage with a group of unchurched young people. It sets out a seven week course including a weekend. The model is one of a large group eating together, listening to some teaching and then breaking into smaller groups each led by two people. There is also an excellent website which can help you explore the course before you buy into it at www.christianityexplored.com. The site gives you a little flexibility in the course which offers the possibility of either using some DVD film clips as the main teaching or having one person leading the core teaching at each of the sessions. There is also a very smart looking set of PowerPoint slides to give the evenings a professional look which succeed in looking modern without trying to be too clever.

Much like Youth Alpha and Youth Emmaus, the course covers the basics of who Jesus is what he teaches and what it means to follow Him. I was very impressed with an early assertion in the book that the course has consciously learnt lessons from existing youth evangelism: “In some youth evangelism there has been too much emphasis on ‘getting people to pray the prayer’, with little opportunity for serious consideration of what is involved in following Jesus. As Christians our aim should be to work for “fruit that will last” (John 15:16), not a superficial religious experience that is quickly forgotten which it gets tough.” (Leader’s Guide, p. 12). The course focuses solely on the Gospel of Mark which is in some ways a good choice as it keeps the message clearer and simpler – Mark’s Gospel being the most pacey and shortest – but in other ways I think focussing on only one of the Gospels with no reference to other books in the Bible misses out on much of the rich variety of the Christian story. That said I accept that for those who have no experience or limited experience of Christianity this may well be a much easier way to begin to get an idea about what it means to follow Christ.

The course comes with a Leader’s Guide and a User’s Guide intended for each of the young people taking part. The User’s Guide is nicely laid out with cartoon
illustrations that young people will either think are alright, cheesy or cool depending on their age and inclination but I think all will accept that someone has at least made an effort to aim the book at teenagers. I think there is a slight overemphasis on comprehension questions within the User's Guide and little space for questions at a deeper level or personal reflection outside the box. As the guideline given is that these books should be collected in at the end of the session by the group leader and not taken home (Leader's Guide, p.16) I think the emphasis of the book is more on teaching than personal reflection on the course. I think overall the User's Guide treads carefully that precarious tightrope stretched between relevance and trying too hard to be trendy and comes across alright in the end.

The Leader's Guide, somewhat confusingly I think, is designed in the first section for the core leader who will be leading the main teaching as well as for the individual group leaders who will be responsible for the smaller groups. I think perhaps these might have been better as two separate volumes as, for the small group leaders, there are sixty-five pages at the start of the book which are not really relevant. Out of a book of 152 pages this is quite a significant section to ignore. The book is extremely precise about how the course should be run. The guidance for the teacher and the small group leaders is very clear and there is a particularly good set of guidelines on how to work with the small group when there are problems of the group or members of the group not engaging (Leader's Guide, pp. 83-86). This is a good course for anyone who has never run a course of this kind as there is nothing you need to work out for yourselves. The book tells you absolutely everything you need to do. I’d like to say that this is excellent but I must admit that this course has me struggling with various reservations about it.

My reservations may stem from the assumption that all Christians leading the course will have come to the faith as adults rather than brought up as Christians, as I myself was:

“Share your own experience of how you viewed Christianity before you became a Christian.” (Leader's Guide p.18) However I think it is also the highly prescriptive nature of the book which makes it a resource I am personally less likely to use. Someone said it would be a good book for someone who did not have the time to think about how to run the course but my reflection on that would be that anyone running a course like this needs time to think about how they run it and also needs to be flexible. It seems flexibility is something which Christianity Explored: Youth Edition rejects in favour of prescription. I think it may reflect my more liberal outlook both on life and faith that