



HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO PRAY

- advice to parents of secondary school pupils -

Introduction

As young people enter the secondary phase of education, they continue their physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Emotionally, they are no longer children but not yet adults either so their moods swing from one extreme to another. Peer pressure becomes very important as the young people compare themselves with persons of their own gender in terms of abilities, appearances, popularity, and so on. They are also beginning to be attracted to others, and are learning to deal with a range of views of various aspects of life. They have many questions – about the state of the world, their faith, their family and themselves.

They may question their faith and may argue about attending church services because they are 'boring'. Some may even abandon their belief because of negative life experiences such as being called names for believing, not being sure what life is about, the illness or death of a loved one, or feeling that believing is not 'cool'. They may also stop believing because of media hype, or following what a celebrity has said. They may also stop believing as they question what they see and read about which makes them question their faith. For example, 'If there is a God, why is this world in such a mess with war, starvation and poverty? 'Why is there so much evil instead of good?' 'Why doesn't God intervene?'

Parents need to be aware of what is happening to their children at this time. They should provide opportunities for them to talk about their fears, hopes and aspirations and be sensitive to their questions and fears. Parents who have prayed with their children throughout their lives can help by using prayer times to help their children express their fears to God. They can remind them that prayer bring us closer to God and being closer helps people better understand the purpose of life. Parents can remind their children that getting closer to God takes time, as it does in human relationships. Drawing closer to a person demands listening as well as talking. Relationships do not work where only one person does the talking. Some teenagers do not like saying prayers out loud so we need to allow them to be silent.

It is important that parents are honest about prayer, about the difficulties they face in being faithful to prayer, about their experience of prayer. As young people become teenagers and mature they will, with encouragement, develop their own prayer life. Therefore, the role of parents is no longer to be the 'expert', teaching the child how to pray, but to be a person who accompanies the young person to understand their experience of prayer and the person who gently and consistently encourages the young person to pray. Young people are looking for parents to stimulate discussion and an exchange of views; rarely do they welcome being 'preached at'.