

Training young people (Discussion paper)

The CC Education Committee was given two main actions by the trends working group report, each coupled with actions for other committees:

- To consider 'fast track' training courses for young people
- To seek ways of providing support to university ringing societies

This paper describes ideas produced so far. It raises some questions and suggests some possible directions. This paper was first produced some time ago and this slightly amended version is now being circulated more widely for comment and discussion.

1 University societies

The committee had already identified the opportunity to work with university societies as part of its stewardship initiative (the way we try to develop long term contacts with people involved with training in member societies). This had previously been directed solely at the territorials, and extending it to universities is complicated by the rapid turnover of officers. Work is in hand to identify how best to remain in touch with university societies on a regular basis - Mike Winterbourne (Education Committee) and Sarah Andrews (PRAG).

The committee's main aim is to identify what sort of training related support university societies would find useful. We are discussing the possibility of running an MTM course. This might need adapting to the needs of people teaching and coaching ringers in a university setting, rather than a local tower. Depending on the interest and numbers, courses could be rung for individual universities or for groups of several universities in a region.

2 Training young people

Training and developing any ringer is an extended process, and concentrating on one small part of it is likely to miss the bigger picture. We therefore broadened our remit on this action and looked at three complementary issues:

- Making ringing attractive to young people
- Training courses directed at young people
- Providing continuing support to young people after their initial training

The sections below describe our thoughts in each area. A final section discusses the impact of child protection, a topic that recurs continually in almost every aspect of training young people.

2.1 Make ringing attractive to youngsters

Young people will only take up, and persist with, ringing if it is attractive to them. The idea of becoming a ringer must be attractive beforehand, and the experience of learning to ring and developing within the ringing community must remain attractive afterwards. The creation of this attractive image and experience spans the realms of public relations,

training and routine management of ringing. The PR committee has a parallel remit in this area, so their conclusions will need merging with the ideas here.

Negative factors that young people might associate with ringing include:

- Image - Ringing isn't 'cool' for youngsters, and has a nerdy image in society at large.
- Association with the church - In a secular society this can be negative.
- Slow progress - Ringing is slower to learn than many things youngsters do.
- Lack of peers - Youngsters like doing things with others of their own age.

To these must be added the indirect effects caused by child protection measures.

Image

Why is ringing not 'cool'? It could be that it needs serious commitment and sustained effort, but so does playing a musical instrument, and that is probably more widespread now than it was a generation ago. More likely, it is the cranky image of ringers held by many people that percolates through to the young. Adults might appreciate the tradition of ringing, and therefore accept ringers as a necessary, albeit unusual minority, but their offspring would not wish to join that quirky minority, especially if, as popularly portrayed, they are mostly old.

To the uninitiated, ringing probably seems pointless as a hobby - after all, where is the skill or fun in pulling on a rope?

Correcting the distorted image of ringers is clearly needed, with much more exposure of ringers and ringing to the public, through as many channels as possible. If society at large, and young people in particular, perceive ringing as a significant skill, with challenges and excitement, then they are more likely to countenance taking part.

The church

The relationship between the Church and the community is changing. Most of the population has largely abandoned church-going as a duty and sees the traditional church as somewhat distant. Some churches are responding by reaching out to the community, with youth drop-ins and other forms of ministry.

These all provide different points of contact between the church and the community. The agenda of these 'non-church' activities is necessarily set mainly on the community's terms, but they nevertheless offer a potential opportunity for ringers to meet people in the community, especially the young, and to dispel some of the ignorance about ringing. A single contact is unlikely to cause an instant transformation, but over a period, the climate could be changed.

Slow progress

'You've never had it so good' said MacMillan, and this still rings true in our society of excessive

consumerism. If you want something, get it. If it breaks, throw it away. If you have to wait, try something else. The working party report described a culture of 'instant gratification' among the young. Certainly many of the things youngsters do conform to that view, but many other things don't. Playing a musical instrument was mentioned above, and competitive sports is another example. Not all youngsters do these things, but if as many people learnt to ring as got into a school team or played music, then the declining trend of young ringers would be dramatically reversed.

There will always be many things in a youngster's life that offer instant gratification, and it is neither sensible nor possible for ringing to compete on those terms. Rather, the aim should be to make ringing seem worthwhile to the outsider, and then to train and develop youngsters in a way that enables them to reach the point where ringing itself provides enough satisfaction for them to want to continue.

Competition

It is commonly said that youngsters do not take up ringing because there are so many other things to do these days. The assumption seems to be that decades ago, there was nothing else for the lads of the village to do, so they took up ringing to avoid boredom.

Both assumptions seem highly questionable. Even in the 'golden age' when many of our senior ringers were in their youth, the majority of people did not learn to ring, but presumably they managed to fill their time. Youngsters probably do more things now, certainly middle class youngsters do, but that need not be to the detriment of ringing. Ringing after all is another 'thing that can be done' so in a climate when parents encourage their children to take up gainful activities, ringing could get its share of that increase, along with violin playing or sports, if it were perceived as worthwhile.

The assumption that youngsters only learn to ring if there is nothing better to do is a sad indictment of how we ourselves view ringing. Do we ring because we can't do anything else, or because we find it rewarding? Ringing can be as stimulating and challenging as many other activities. If youngsters and their parents do not see it as such, we have a communication failure to rectify. We should compete alongside other activities, not wring hands that there is any competition.

Peers

The simultaneous increase in older ringers and the reduction in young ringers has made it much less likely that young ringers will have ringing peers. In many towers this has probably contributed to a vicious spiral, making it less likely that more youngsters will take up ringing. It is not surprising that bands take the easy way out by just training the (mostly older) people who come along, rather than seeking to attract youngsters, especially in the current climate of child protection restrictions.

A few decades ago many bands were continually training half a dozen youngsters at once, most of

whom were lost a few months after learning to handle a bell. Many tower captains have realised that the chance of success is greater with only one or two learning at once, because they can devote far more attention and rope time to each of them, but this approach inevitably reduces the number of young people in the tower.

Child protection

Superficially, this is of no concern to the young, only to their trainers and tower captains. In practice though, the measures taken to conform to child protection policies can aggravate each of the factors above. If a parent routinely sits in at teaching sessions to provide the second adult, then the youngster is still under parental surveillance and direction - not very 'cool', and hardly doing your own thing'.

Potential solutions

There seem to be several broad ways to make ringing more attractive to youngsters:

- Get more information about ringing into the community, sowing seeds of interest whenever and wherever possible.
- Adapt the way we do things to take account of young people.
- Ensure that youngsters get high quality training and support.
- Get youngsters involved actively rather than passively in ringing.

These approaches overlap. So far we have identified several useful things that can be done:

- Develop different contacts with the community.
- Work through the church community ministry if there is one.
- Work with schools if possible.
- Offer to talk about bells and ringing to infant and junior schools.
- Offer ringing as a component of activity weeks for secondary schools.
- Organise some events specifically for youngsters - both ringers with some experience and non ringers interested to see what it is about.
- Help young people to organise some things for themselves.
- Encourage young people to take responsibilities in their towers and branches.
- Create role models for young people.
- Use young people as helpers, mentors and instructors as soon as they are able to do so.
- Try to attract youngsters early, before negative peer pressures of the later teens set in.

2.2 Training courses directed at young people

By definition, training courses are additional to what goes on week by week in towers. Societies have run several different types of course aimed at young people:

- An introductory course - aimed at both non ringers who would like to try ringing and at recent recruits. Held over several days during school holidays, this combines both ringing tuition and ringing related general interest activities.
- A course for established young ringers - either a weekend or a day
- 'Other' courses - various activities organised by the youngsters themselves

Courses have also been on different scales:

- Saturday courses, timed to be at a non critical part of the school year
- Weekend courses, at a non critical part of the school year
- Long holiday courses - several days or a week during school summer holidays
- Short holiday courses - a day during Christmas, Easter or summer holidays

Age range

Some courses have been aimed at a limited range, rather than attempting to cover the full spectrum of say 9 - 18. Is this a practical constraint, or does it mean that different age bands represent different sub cultures to be approached differently?

Segregation?

Our brief seems to presume that young people are only suited to training courses attended solely by young people. Many things constrain the ability to deliver such courses, and even if more people run them, they are likely to remain in a minority. Is the presumption true? The alternative to youth only courses would be to seek to make non age specific courses more youth friendly. There are several ways to do this:

- Young people could be used as helpers.
- Groups on larger courses could be manipulated to cluster young students and helpers in the same groups.
- Evening options and non ringing activities could be designed to appeal to young people.
- Young people could organise some of the activities.

The idea of clustering youngsters in the same group might seem unduly difficult since they are likely to want to ring different methods, which goes counter to the way courses have traditionally been organised. It is worth noting that a number of courses have successfully run mixed method groups.

The child protection implications of courses entirely for youngsters are quite high, especially if they are

not held at a single location and therefore entail transporting children around. The increasing availability of effective sound control (whether physical or electronic) should make single location courses increasingly practical.

Fast track courses

We consider that best practice for teaching anyone to handle a bell is to hold sessions as often as possible. The practicality of achieving this is a matter of finding common slots in the student and tutor's diaries. It is not clear that this is any easier or harder for youngsters than adults in general. We assume though that this was not the meaning of 'fast track'.

We assume that 'fast track training for youngsters' means teaching a group intensively over a short period out of their own towers. In that sense, most courses are 'fast track', but courses have not traditionally been used for ab initio training. Some ringing centres have successfully done this though.

If recruitment is undertaken through towers, the practical issue is how to synchronise it to fit in with a centralised course. If recruiting is done centrally, then there is an issue about moving the new ringers into towers. We need more input on these aspects.

Numbers

It is important to distinguish between actions that are worth doing because they improve the way young people are trained and developed, thereby making it easier to recruit and retain more young people, and actions that of themselves will 'solve the shortfall in young ringers'.

What sorts of training could have a significant impact on overall numbers, given the likely practicalities, frequency and number of locations at which they could be run?

Ringling Centre courses

If intensive courses are to be run outwith the local tower on a regular basis, then ringing centres are possibly in the best position to provide them. Some (eg Gwennap) already do this, but find it a strain on resources. What is needed to spread this practice more widely, and to ensure that the necessary trainer resources can be made available?

There could be merit in working with one or two ringing centres to develop a course aimed at young people that would be suitable for more widespread adoption.

If this were given high profile publicity, not only would it help create interest within the Exercise to encourage others to copy it, but it would also be a major PR opportunity for ringing, with follow ups about the progress of the youngsters in the RW, and possibly local and national media.

2.3 Continuing support to young people

Even in the supposed golden age of youth recruitment, the vast majority of recruits were lost. It has often been said that we wouldn't have a recruitment problem if we could solve the retention problem.

Having acquired a young recruit by whatever means, how do we ensure that the early experience of ringing is attractive, rewarding and stimulating?

Even for a fast learner, becoming a fully fledged ringer is a prolonged process, much longer than any fast track course, so there is a need for continued support for youngsters in their local towers.

This might take several forms:

- Help tower captains to provide more stimulating, youth-friendly practices.
- Help local societies to become more youth-friendly
- Find ways to support young ringers directly

Support through tower captains

The NRT conference identified the need for some sort of tower resource, containing ideas and suggestions for enriching practices, overcoming problems, and so on. That has a role to play. Better practices should be more satisfying for young and old ringers alike, and because the resource has not yet been produced, we have an opportunity to ensure that it includes youth friendly ideas.

MTM courses provide another channel for introducing ideas about how to ensure that practices are satisfying for ringers of all ages.

The apocryphal 'Old Fred' (who would never go on a course) is always quoted as proof that it is impossible to achieve improvement through reliance on tower captains. In fact, perhaps 'Old Fred' is dying out (or is he being replaced by Young Fred or Freda?)

Other support in the tower

In a healthy tower, much teaching & encouragement is done by people other than the tower captain, who take learners under their wing or provide background support and advice as needed. Not all able ringers do this though, so there is scope for encouraging a more collective approach to developing new ringers (of any age) on the back of which it might be possible to include youth specific ideas. This might be a constructive way to circumvent 'Old Fred'.

Paradoxically, the influx of middle aged people into ringing might help here. They are mature enough to question the way things are done, yet still open to learn. Many bring with them organising and training skills, and expectations from outside ringing. They could be strong allies for the 'Younger members gently fighting the old regime'. Perhaps there is a need for a campaign to encourage 'Old Fred' to be made 'tower captain emeritus' (as happened in at least one band) and hand over the running of things to someone more able to do it.

Support through local societies

The raison d'etre of local societies is to provide support and services beyond what can be achieved by towers in isolation. It should therefore be axiomatic that they would provide a second tier of support to young people.

It might be helpful to identify three levels of support, the bottom level of which is the weekly coaching that a ringer receives in the home tower, with the top one

being the 'special' services provided by the local society, like training courses. What is in the middle layer, and can it bridge the significant gap between the other two for the average youngster?

There is a major threshold to be crossed by any new ringer, and especially a youngster, in order to become engaged in ringing activities outside the home tower. Societies currently survive because enough people manage to cross this threshold to keep them active, but many ringers gain no personal benefit from local societies, whether nominal members or not. This is a major challenge. Societies can probably ignore it and still stay alive, but they cannot avoid it if they wish to play a major role in encouraging the majority of young ringers.

Direct support to youngsters

A generation ago, this would have been impossible. With the Internet, most young people can have direct access to all manner of resources, if they know where to look.

The proposed learners' help line would be directly accessible by any ringer, young or old, providing the contact details are widely enough promulgated.

Beyond the help line, there could be potential for building more web based resources directed at young people. It might even be possible to host some sort of young ringers' forum on line. There will doubtless be worries about the evils of 'chat rooms' but an e-mail list provided for (and run by?) young ringers ought to be pretty safe. [Such a list was set up by the CC PR committee after this paper was written].

Assuming that the young ringers' site is part of the CC site, then once youngsters develop the habit of going to it, they will have easy access to other useful parts of the site, providing we can make them youth friendly too!

Involvement

Much talk is about doing things **for** youngsters, but most of the young people we are concerned about are not 'children' with passive needs, they are teenagers with huge energy and enthusiasm that we could tap. Most of us find much more satisfaction and commitment in 'doing' things rather than having things done for us. So will many young ringers, certainly the future movers and shakers of the Exercise, about whom there is so much concern.

Youngsters can and do take responsible roles if given the chance - there have been teenage tower captains and ringing masters. Perhaps we need a culture change so that older people stand back more, and help younger people to try out their ideas, rather than doing everything themselves (and complaining that they are too busy).

Young officers would not only be more motivated themselves, they would be more likely to introduce youth-friendly ideas, and they would provide role models to encourage other youngsters.

As a further provocative thought - at an event run by young people, with only young people attending there are no adults present, so presumably no risk of abuse, and therefore no need for chaperones to prevent it.

Lack of experience is an obvious inhibitor of young people playing a more active role in leading and training ringers. We could run MTM (Management, Teaching and Maintenance) courses focused on young people. The most likely way to gain critical mass for such courses would be through university societies (see above). Local societies should perhaps be encouraged to nominate young people to attend the MTMs that they sponsor as well.

Critical mass

Any youth event, or youth biased event, needs a minimum number of young ringers together in the same place. If youngsters are thin on the ground, as they currently are in many areas, that raises the question of transport.

It is easy to argue that transport constraints make organising events impossible - it is too far to walk, there are too few people to meet child protection rules in cars, it is not safe for youngsters to cycle, there are no buses, and so on. The fact remains that young people do manage to congregate for all the other activities that are claimed to compete with ringing.

There are no general solutions, but transport problems can be solved if there is a will to solve them, especially if we treat young people as they would like to be treated - as human beings.

Ideas

Various ideas have been discussed to provide direct or indirect support to developing young ringers, including:

- Youth practices
- Social (or semi social) events
- Youth striking competitions
- Young people as organisers
- Young people as officers
- MTMs for university societies

2.4 Child Protection

The factor that keeps recurring in all discussions about training youngsters, and which works counter to most other attempts at improvement, is 'child protection' - or rather the Church's and the Exercise's reaction to it.

The draconian measures being introduced as 'child protection policies', if and when they are applied, act at least as partial deterrents to almost every aspect of training.

- Anyone who does not go through a clearance process is deemed unsuitable to teach young people, and by implication could be considered morally suspect. This is a strong incentive not to teach or become involved with young people.
- The dual adult chaperoning rules make it hard to schedule individual training sessions, thus dragging out the initial training period - hardly fast track.
- Using a parent as the chaperone is a deterrent to any normal teenager who

wants to get away from his or her parents, so ringing becomes less of 'my activity'.

- The chaperoning constraints for transport are an irritant on large scale activities like outings, but they effectively ban anyone taking one or two youngsters under their wing and giving them lifts to other practices.

The child protection legislation is a reality that the exercise must come to terms with, but the initial responses to it appear to have taken the easy option of focusing on restrictions, rather than the more difficult need to minimise the harm that could be done to ringing. We seem to have focused on making sure that the wrong thing cannot happen, and have forgotten that our primary role should be to try to make the right thing happen.

Conclusion - If Council and the Exercise are serious about wanting to attract young people into ringing, there is an urgent need:

- To find legitimate ways to avoid excessive Child Protection constraints
- To help all ringers to deal with Child Protection and related issues
- To ensure that diocese and parishes do not set up inappropriate guidelines

The risk of abuse in ringing is tiny, but if it leads to youngsters being driven away and deprived of the many benefits that ringing can offer them, we could be doing the next generation a disservice.

A provocative example

Child protection guidelines say that a ringer should not transport young people in his or her car with no other adult present.

The problem could be avoided if their own parents transported the young people, but that would waste parental time, be environmentally harmful, and perhaps not even feasible.

Presumably there would be no objection if the parents set up a rota, and each in turn transported a car full of young people to ringing events.

To the bobby on the corner as the car drives past, this is indistinguishable from the initial situation where an adult ringer drives the four young people to the event.

Since this practice is already widespread for other events, school runs, etc, it presumably does not violate child protection legislation.

Therefore the presence of the driver's child must be an adequate substitute (within the meaning of the act) for a second adult of the appropriate sex.

In that case, the ringer could have transported the four youngsters in the first place, providing one of them was his son or daughter.

Why has no one pointed this out?

3 Preliminary conclusions

- The training of young ringers is a rather diffuse problem to come to grips with. It has many threads, some related specifically to young people and others merely more acute expressions of general problems in the Exercise.
- Broadening the problem into three areas, rather than simply focusing on youth training courses, has been helpful. The threads are by no means separate, but thinking about all three gives a much more comprehensive picture.
- The discussion so far has identified several new ideas with potential for development
- Correcting the distorted image of ringers is an important precursor to recruiting and training more young ringers.
- There are already examples of good practice that could be developed and copied more widely.
- Ongoing support to young ringers is potentially as important as good initial training.
- The child protection bogey needs laying somehow.

4 Way ahead

This paper sets the scene for further discussion and investigation prior to reaching conclusions. Ultimate actions could include:

- Gather any reaction to the ideas already expounded in this paper
- Explore each aspect to determine how best to exploit it
- Consider how best the various activities could be transferred into widespread practice
- Prepare action plans to feed into future work of appropriate CC committees.
- Prepare recommendations and guidance for action by member societies and their own education committees or training officers.
- Prepare a short, focused summary report of the findings, for dissemination.