

Training young people (Conclusions)

Introduction

The CC Education Committee was given two main actions in the report of the Trends Working Group, 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

The second action was already in hand, as the committee had begun developing relationships with university societies as an extension of its stewardship activity (periodic contact with people involved with training in member societies). This has developed on two fronts.

Some societies are interested in courses on teaching ringers. Some societies are concerned that many ringers give up when they move to university. The committee is exploring ways to work with them on this problem.

This report relates mainly to the first action – to consider developing some sort of special training aimed at youngsters, though we broadened it into three complementary aspects:

- Making ringing attractive to youngsters
- Training courses directed at young people
- Providing continuing support to young people as they develop

A discussion paper was published (RW 2004 p73-75, also available at

<http://www.cccbr.org.uk/edc/edcreports.php>. It generated a few comments, and examples of practical things that various people had done, including a proposal to set up a ringing centre within a school.

The paper did not envisage major central action as a solution, but assumed that the committee would play some sort of facilitating role, by collating and making available information that would be helpful in support of local action of various kinds. Thus the provisional actions envisaged in the paper were to develop some generic actions plans, with recommendations and guidelines, to feed to other CC committees and member societies.

After further reflection and discussion, the committee concluded that such an approach would still be too centralised, and that it would be difficult to produce common material that would be genuinely useful to people in many different situations. In essence, we decided that:

- There are many useful things that can be done, and quite a lot already have been.
- What it is sensible to try depends very much on the local context.
- Making anything happen requires someone capable of driving it through.
- Such people probably don't need to be fed complex guidance.

This report therefore sets out the committee's conclusions and recommendations in more general terms.

Conclusions

Training young ringers is not a simple, watertight topic that can be considered in isolation. Many of the factors that make for good or bad practice when training young people, apply equally to training ringers of any age (though some issues might be more acutely manifested). Likewise, the effectiveness with which young people are trained is closely bound up with what attracts them to ringing, and how effectively they are supported outside their formal training.

Broadening the problem into three areas (see above) gives a more comprehensive picture than simply focusing on youth training courses.

Make ringing attractive to youngsters

Youngsters must be motivated to want to progress. If they are, then they probably will, given a half decent chance. They are less likely to be motivated by things like duty to the church, so the motivation must relate to the ringing activity itself, and what the youngsters get out of it. Some (especially those with ringing parents) will initially be subject to considerable implicit pressure, but unless there is a genuine motivation underneath, they will not persist when they gain freedom from parental influence, and when other activities compete.

If ringing is more widely understood and respected within society, then some of this will

rub off onto youngsters – ringing will be a ‘normal’ activity rather than an ‘unusual’ one. We can therefore expect the benefits of good general PR to feed through into youth recruitment. The ‘cool’ factor will probably remain unpredictable, and incomprehensible to the rest of us. We can’t control it, but if ringing starts as ‘normal’ then it is no more likely to become ‘uncool’ than any other activity, and just as likely to become ‘cool’.

The relationship between ringing and the church ought to be amenable to an ‘each-way bet’ in terms of its effect on youngsters. Ringing itself is a secular activity (like singing or flower arranging) though most regular ringing serves a Christian purpose. Not all ringers go to church, though some are pillars of the congregation. If the background public perception of ringing can be shifted to that of a worthy, skill-rich pastime, then it should greatly help youngsters without religious links to gloss over the fact that they use the church’s bells. Likewise, as more churches develop their community ministry, and are perceived more for what they do in the community, rather than as something remote and mystic, this too should help.

One thing we cannot expect young people to tolerate, once they become free of parental pressures, is lack of opportunity or poor progress. There is much talk of a so called ‘instant gratification culture’ but we cannot blame that for things like poor teaching and inadequate support. Teaching that leaves them with poor handling will never let them feel truly in control of the bell. Inadequate bell control will make learning later things that should be quite simple, extremely protracted. And inadequate rope time per week will compound the whole process. Many youngsters do survive this, as do many adults, but we shouldn’t be surprised that many don’t.

One of the biggest rewards that a ringer (or anyone doing any skilled activity) gets, is the buzz of doing it well. We must aim to give that experience to our youngsters. If we don’t, then we will continue to lose many whom we train.

In short, if we believe in ringing as a worthwhile activity, if we can effectively communicate this to the public, and if we help trainees to have rewarding experiences, then ringing should be able to compete on even terms with other non-ringing youth activities.

Potential solutions

- Sow seeds of interest – get information about ringing into the community.
- Adapt the way we do things to take account of young people.
- Ensure that youngsters get high quality training and support.
- Involve youngsters actively rather than passively in ringing.

Ways to do this include:

- Develop different community contacts
- Work through the church community ministry if there is one
- Work with schools where possible
- Talks about bells in primary schools
- Ringing projects in secondary schools
- Courses or ringing centres linked to schools
- Events for youngsters - ringers and/or non ringers interested to find out
- Youngsters organising things themselves
- Youngsters having responsibilities in their towers and branches
- Role models for young people
- Young helpers, mentors and instructors
- Attracting youngsters early, before negative peer pressures in late teens

Training courses for the young

By definition, training courses are additional to what goes on week by week in towers. Making courses ‘youth friendly’ will obviously benefit youngsters, but the case for ‘youth only’ courses is less clear. Also, what is meant by ‘youth’? The world is not split into two separate homogeneous groups, whether the line is drawn at 18, 21 or anywhere else. For example, why should an 18 year old feel more comfortable being trained alongside 12 year olds than alongside 40 year olds? Do young people like being categorised as such, or do they just want to be treated as people in their own right?

The case for special courses therefore rests on the presumption that without them youngsters would not be able to obtain the same quality or

quantity of training – in other words on the presumption that even good all-age courses will not adequately serve young people. This case seems to be strongest for (young) children, rather than for teenagers or young adults. Where courses are run for young children, the complications of child protection can be considerably reduced by using single centres, instead of the traditional tour around multiple towers. This is now quite practical with effective sound control (whether physical or electronic).

For the peripheral social interaction that often accompanies a course, there is probably more natural age stratification than in the course itself, so on large courses, if it is practical, grouping teenagers together might be helpful. All age courses can also be made more youth friendly, and help to provide role models for youngsters, if they use more young people as helpers, assistant tutors, or as organisers of some activities.

The original action was to consider ‘fast track training for youngsters’, which we interpreted to mean teaching a group intensively over a short period, out of their own towers. That applies to most courses, but we assumed it to include ab-initio training. This requires close co-ordination with the towers to which the new ringers will move, and by which they have possibly been recruited. Training new ringers away from the home tower might meet cultural resistance as significant as the logistic and organisational practicalities.

If regular intensive courses for youngsters are to be run outwith the local tower on a regular basis, then ringing centres are the obvious places to provide them. Some (eg Gwennap) already do run such courses (not specifically for youngsters) but find it a strain on resources. That could prove a barrier to more widespread adoption, quite apart from whether it could make a significant contribution to teaching youngsters specifically. There might be scope for working with one or two ringing centres, and the Ringing Centres Committee) to explore the idea, and see whether it could be used more widely.

Some things that have been done

- An introductory course for children (non ringers who would like to try, and recent recruits) with ringing tuition and related general interest activities
- A course for established young ringers

- Courses during weekdays in school holidays
- Activities organised by youngsters themselves

Supporting young people

Even in the supposed golden age of youth recruitment, the vast majority of recruits were lost, and it has often been said that we wouldn't have a recruitment problem if we could solve the retention problem. Much of the loss comes after the initial period of intensive tuition, so failures at this stage are likely to relate to (in)adequacy of the follow up support. Making good the deficiency might or might not involve youth specific aspects.

Even for a fast learner, becoming a fully fledged ringer is a prolonged process, so whether or not ab-initio training is taken out of the home tower into ‘fast track courses’, this extended period of support will still need to be integrated with ringing and life in the home tower. Some towers already provide good support, but there is almost certainly scope for improvement in many. It could potentially be delivered through tower captains, through local ringing societies, or direct to young ringers in some way.

Support delivered through tower captains would most usefully take the form of enabling them to enrich their practices, overcome problems and so on. The committee has already identified the need for some sort of ‘tower captain' s resource’ to help do this, though its development is still at an embryonic stage. It might be possible to include specific ideas where youngsters’ support needs are likely to be different from those of older ringers. MTM (Management, Teaching & Maintenance) courses provide another channel for introducing ideas about how to ensure that practices are satisfying for ringers of all ages.

In a healthy tower, much teaching and encouragement is done by people other than the tower captain, with other ringers taking learners ‘under their wing’. This more collective approach might help provide more effective support to youngsters, so it could be encouraged. Paradoxically, the influx of middle aged people as trainees could help, because they have more recently shared the learning process. Many have skills from outside ringing, and are mature enough to question how things are done.

Local ringing societies exist to support their members, and to do things that individual towers cannot do in isolation. In practice, there is often a significant threshold to cross for a ringer to become engaged in activities outside the home tower. As a result, many ringers, including nominal members, gain no personal benefit from their local society. This is not a youth specific problem, but with youngsters in a minority in many towers, the opportunity for them to benefit from any collective support from outside could be greater than for older members.

University societies are those most involved with the needs of youth, and they vary enormously in strength. At one end of the scale, the elite societies are bursting with high achievers, and are largely self-perpetuating. At the other end some of them struggle to remain in existence, and rely on local support to be able to ring at all. There ought to be ways for the rest of the Exercise to support them more effectively.

A generation ago, direct support to individual ringers, bypassing towers and associations, would have been impossible (apart from *Ringing World* readers) but with the Internet, most young people can gain direct access to all manner of resources, if they know where to look. The committee is already considering a 'learner's help line', directly accessible by any ringer, young or old, but advertising its presence would of course have to be done through traditional channels. Providing such a service, which would entail some sort of one to one communication, to young people would of course have to clear the barriers erected by child protection. The PR Committee has already set up the MiniRingerz list for discussion between young people.

Any youth specific information can potentially be made available via the web. The Ringing Centres Committee Learn2Ring initiative could develop in this direction.

Closely linked to the support is the question of involvement. All the talk of protection and doing things **for** youngsters can obscure their need to become involved and feel useful. Most of the young people we are concerned about are not 'children' with passive needs, they are teenagers with huge energy and enthusiasm that could be tapped into. They can and do take responsible roles if given the chance. Perhaps we need a culture change where the older people are prepared to stand back and help younger

people try out their ideas, rather than doing everything – and then complaining of being too busy.

Young officers in towers and ringing societies can be highly motivated and might introduce youth-friendly ideas, they could also provide role models for other youngsters.

Child protection

This topic keeps recurring in discussions about training youngsters, normally as a constraint on doing something beneficial. Training young ringers is not harmful, indeed in most ways it is the opposite. Protecting children from harm is a worthy aim, but the institutional response to it seems to err on the side of 'prevent first and ask questions later'. Had the policy been called 'child welfare' rather than 'child protection', then perhaps there would have been more focus on how to benefit young people, which would undoubtedly have been favourable to ringing.

The Exercise seems to have accepted the need to live with the problem, though official policies and lack of protest do not mean uniform grass roots acceptance. Even if bands with under 18s go through the process, there is now a much bigger barrier to the re-introduction of young people into an all adult band.

The legislation and regulations are now here. We must live with them and seek to minimise the harm done to young ringers, by finding ways to comply with the spirit of child protection, while still allowing the benefits of training and other ringing activities to be fully experienced by them. In short, we should try to make the right thing happen, and not be satisfied with making sure only that the wrong thing doesn't happen.

Making things happen

As with any study, identifying the problems and what could be done about them is a lot easier than making something happen to bring about change. The original action placed on the Committee no doubt assumed that we would make something happen. If the solution were amenable to central action, that would be easier. If a book needs writing, a new course developing or a conference organising, it can usually be made to happen. But when the solutions are diverse and need local application, it gets harder, especially in areas where local culture and 'ownership' come into play.

Last year's discussion paper said the committee would 'consider how best the various activities could be transferred into widespread practice'. There is no single answer to that question. Many of the ideas presented are based on things that have already happened. They did so because the people on the spot realised they were worth doing, and made them happen. We hope that both our earlier paper and this report will encourage more people to think about the needs, motivation, training and support of young people, and where possible to do things to make improvements, but there is no single prescription for what they should do or how they should do it.

We commend local use of these questions.

In a tower:

- Is the training, motivation and support of all our ringers as good as it should be? If not, then any improvements we make are likely to benefit the youngsters as well.
- Do we have any young ringers? If not, do we understand why? And what if anything could we do about it?
- Is the training, motivation and support we give our young ringers less effective than that for our older ringers? If so, let's try to understand why, and let's try to remove some of the barriers.
- Do we understand our youngsters' real needs, and the support that they would like? (Would they agree with us?)
- Do we implement the child protection rules in a way that prevents our young ringers from receiving benefits that they might otherwise? If so, could we find alternative ways of complying with the aims of child protection, which harm our young ringers' development less?

In an association:

- Are the activities we run, and the services we provide for our members, as good as they should be? If not, then any improvements we make are likely to benefit our young members as well.
- Do the youngsters in our towers join the society? Do we see our young members? If not, do we understand why not? And what if anything could we do about it?

- Do our young members gain less benefit from their membership than our older members? If so, let's try to understand why, and find ways to deliver more benefit to them.
- Does our implementation of the child protection rules prevent us delivering benefits to our young members that we might otherwise deliver? If so, then could we find alternative ways of complying with the aims of child protection, which are less restrictive of the benefits we can deliver.

In a ringing centre:

- Similar questions to those above, plus:
- Are there any things we could do to help the youngsters in our area that individual towers and the local society could not do (or could not do without using the ringing centre)? If so, then let's offer them, and encourage all those concerned to make use of our facilities.

In any of the above:

- Is there anything worth doing to help our young ringers, that we can't do locally, but that the CC could do for us? If so, what is it? If not, then it's up to us.

*John Harrison
CC Education Committee
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