

Young Christians in Latin America

The experiences of young Christians who participate in faith-based international volunteering projects in Latin America

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Section 1: Summary of key points

Locating Latin Link

- A growing emphasis on development, citizenship and professional development highlight the different ways in which the role and activities of Latin Link fit into the wider sector and how its activities can be read.

Citizenship, social justice and development: young people's perspectives

- Faith narratives provide constructive contexts in which teams work together with each other, as well as shaping how young people make sense of the settings they find themselves in.
- There is a limited engagement with ideas of social justice as young people seek to make sense of the places in which they volunteer, their roles in those settings and the significance of popular rhetoric around development and the global South in helping to do this.

Growing in faith: religious enhancement and personal development

- The majority of the research participants experienced spiritual growth and renewed spiritual meaning through their volunteering experiences in Latin America although this was often subtle in nature.
- A key challenge for many participants was retaining closeness with God upon returning home.

Growing up and experiencing adulthood: age, faith and the life-course

- Research participants felt it was time to volunteer now due to them having fewer responsibilities and commitments than they would have later in life. Their volunteering experiences often helped clarify their decisions about their careers and personal development.
- Volunteering with Latin Link enabled young people to explore different forms of adulthood and in particular, helped them to grow in maturity with regards to their personal faith.

Section 2 Introduction: Young Christians in Latin America

Latin America has regularly been a popular site for a range of organisations working with young people. It witnessed some of the first international Christian volunteering schemes with Peru in particular becoming an important site for Christian volunteer activities in recent years. Two missionary societies that were pioneering in this respect in the 1980s in Latin America merged in 1991 to form Latin Link. As an international Christian organization with a focus upon Latin America, Latin Link works with churches across the denominations and offers a variety of volunteering experiences and missions for people of all ages. The vision and mission of Latin Link are outlined on their website (www.latinlink.org):

The **vision** of Latin Link is one of partnership and linking, of fellowship and friendship, of listening and encouragement, availability and flexibility; of accountability, sensitivity, sacrifice and humility, of seeking after godliness and openness to the leading of the Spirit of God.

Our **mission** springs from a desire to be involved with God in his work, and to bring honour to him. We believe that allowing people to follow their heart to fulfil a calling is how God uses Latin Link to achieve his purposes.

One of the many ways that Latin Link seeks to advance its vision and mission are through individual and team placements in different contexts in Latin America. Step Teams provide a 'practical, short introduction to mission in another culture, working as part of a team alongside a local church community' (www.latinlink.org). Every year, Latin Link sends Step Teams to work with church communities in Latin America. These teams visit for anything between 3-4 weeks to a few months and are often involved in working with children, communities and on building projects.

As the number of young people participating in such programmes continues to increase, their experiences of international faith-based volunteering projects remains under-explored in social research. We therefore collaborated with Latin Link and secured funding from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme for a research project on this topic. In particular, we are interested in what happens to the religious identities and spiritual understandings of young evangelical Christians through their participation in faith-based international volunteering projects in Latin America.

Our specific objectives are:

1) To detail what happens to religious identities and meanings in the lives of young people before, during and after their participation in faith-based volunteering projects in Latin America.

2) To explore the ways in which young people's experiences of faith-based volunteering relate to their experiences of being a young person, their transitions to adulthood and what it means to be a religious adult.

3) To understand the role of faith-based volunteering in young people's formulations of citizenship and social justice.

Alongside these specific objectives, we also had four interrelated questions that we planned to explore in this research:

1) How do faith-based organisations perceive the role of volunteering in processes of youth transitions?

2) What role does spirituality and/or religiosity play in emerging adulthood among faith-based international volunteering youth?

3) How does faith-based international volunteering influence the faith and identities of participating youth and their notions of religious community?

4) How do the experiences of evangelical faith-based international volunteers intersect with understandings of global citizenship and conceptions of social justice?

In this report, we present what we have found from our engagement with young people's experiences of volunteering as part of a Latin Link Step Team. We initially outline our methodological approach before going on to explore the findings of this research. We start by exploring Latin Link's location in the volunteering sector, comparing it with other organisations in terms of its approach to development and how much volunteers pay to participate. Following this, we focus specifically upon the perspectives of the young people involved in the research. Here we look at their perceptions of citizenship, social justice and development, their personal accounts of religious and spiritual enhancement and the ways in which their volunteering experiences have contributed to their experiences of growing up.

Section 3 Methodology: how we did the research

This project sought to explore issues relating to the religious beliefs, meanings and experiences of young people's engagements with faith-based volunteering and so warranted an approach to research that gave us access to the social worlds of the young people who participated. We were also eager to access young people's lived experiences before, during and after their participation and so we designed the methodology to reflect this. All of those who have participated in the research did so on the grounds that what they said would be confidential and so where we use quotes from young people in this report, their names and other information that might identify them has been anonymised.

Before leaving for Latin America, twenty-two young people participated in individual interviews with one member of the research team. These discussions focused on the expectations, motivations and hopes of young Christian volunteers with time being available for the participants to raise other concerns and issues. Some young people were interviewed in person at a Latin Link orientation event, others in a convenient location of their choice and others over the phone. These interviews were conducted between May and July 2009. The sample of young people who volunteered to participate in the research included:

- 14 young women and 8 young men drawn from six different Step Teams scheduled to volunteer in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador.
- Four interviews with team leaders.
- The youngest research participant was seventeen and the oldest thirty-five, although the majority of the participants were in their late teens or early twenties.
- Nine of the young people who took part in the research belonged to 'ready-made' teams that were established by local church groups in the UK with the remaining thirteen young people being organized into teams by Latin Link.
- Seventeen of the young people were studying at university, four were in full-time employment and one was in part-time employment.
- Half of the participants had previously engaged in international volunteering and for three of the young people, this was one of their first experiences of international travel without their parents or other family members.

As well as finding out about the pre-departure expectations of the young Christian volunteers, we were also eager to explore their experiences whilst in Latin America. Insufficient funds prevented the research team from visiting the young volunteers whilst they were in Latin America and so we asked all of those who participated in individual interviews if they could fill out a diary whilst volunteering. All young people were provided with a diary that included three headings for each day: interactions, observations, and moments and meditations. The intention here was for young volunteers to record their experiences and focus in particular upon their interactions with others, their observations of the host community and key moments and meditations in their daily experiences. We contacted all of the volunteers when they returned to the UK and fourteen diaries were returned to us.

After all of the volunteers had returned to the UK, we contacted them in order to conduct a follow-up individual interview. All twenty-two young people who participated in an initial interview agreed to take part in a follow-up interview and these discussions focused on young people's experiences whilst in Latin America as well as their accounts of coming home. These interviews were conducted between August 2009 and February 2010. We also asked all of the research participants if they would be willing to share any photographs with us that they had taken whilst in Latin America. Some of these photographs appear in this report with the permission of those they belong to. The individual accounts of the young volunteers' experiences were also supplemented by four focus group discussions focusing specifically upon issues of spiritual development and personal change. These took place at the Latin Link de-briefing event in Kidderminster in November 2009 and at two additional group meetings.

As well as accessing the lived experiences of the young Christian volunteers, the research team was interested in consulting key stakeholders who work in the faith-based volunteering sector. We therefore individually interviewed ten stakeholders who work with Latin Link and other such organizations within this sector. Following the data collection, all interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed allowing the research team to meet and develop a framework for synthesizing and analyzing the data. This report presents the main findings emerging from our analysis and further outputs from the research will be added to the project website – www.ycla.org – as they become available.

Section 4: Locating Latin Link

Whilst Latin Link self-identifies as a mission organisation, its promotion of international volunteering opportunities in Latin America also provides connections – if more subtle ones - to the international development and international volunteering sectors. Understanding how Latin Link fits into the broader marketplace helps us understand Step participants choice of Latin Link, their experiences and the impacts these can have.

The costs of volunteering

In the table to the right we have collated the costs for different short term placements in the leading organisations working in Latin America.

Latin Link has a well established infrastructure (including in relation to codes of conduct and health and safety) which provides opportunities for engagement with diverse Latin American contexts, and what this table reveals is that, since Latin Link includes transport costs, its placements are considerably cheaper than their competitors, including those which are Christian organisations. Whilst this is clearly a positive in marketing terms, it also raises questions about how Latin Link and their ‘customers’ evaluate the cost of a Step programme, how they benchmark this within the wider sector, how Latin Link’s added value is determined and whether there is scope to attract additional income from Step, perhaps for its strategic development. These all point to the importance of considering how the value of what Latin Link offers is communicated within and beyond the organisation, and suggests it is important to assess the pros and cons of being seen as ‘cheaper’ than other opportunities.

Changing ideas of international volunteering

At one level, Latin Link is distinct from changes in the wider international volunteering sector. Its historical focus on mission contrasts with the more recent focus on international volunteering as a way of building global citizenship or enhancing professional development (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2009). It also sits outside the growth in state sponsored international volunteering programmes and the promoting of international volunteering by corporate actors as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2009). But whilst Latin Link does not promote itself and its activities in terms of global citizenship, development, justice or professional development, it is located in a marketplace where these are increasingly becoming norms. This means that Latin Link can be interpreted by others in relation to these ideas, with the emphasis on Christian mission also providing connections to them, as we outline below.

Table 1 Price of short term international volunteer placements

Organisation	4 months	12 weeks	10 weeks	7 weeks	4 weeks	3 weeks	Countries/ region	Christian
Latin Link* (includes flights where no other organisation does)	£2,950			£2,150	£1,850		Latin America	Y
Toy Box and Latin Link Step OMF						£1,850	Guatemala	Y
					£1,250-£1,600 (4-6 wks)		Africa, Asia and Latin America	Y
Cross Cultural Solutions		£3,718		£2,673	£2,046	£1,837	Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe	N
GVI					£1,160-£1,320	£970-£1,105	Latin America	N
GVI		£1,435-£1,850		£1,145-£1,195	£925-£995	£850-£915	Latin America	N
Frontier		£2,755		£1,780	£1,195		Peru abd Bolivia	N
Raleigh International			£2,995	£2,250		£1,500 (3.5 wks)	Borneo, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, India	N
The Leap			£2,468-£2,679				Ecuador, Costa Rica, Venezuela	N
Travellers Worldwide		£1,595			£995		Guatemala	N
Lattitude	£1,800						South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, India, South East Asia, Africa, South and North America	N
Projects Abroad	£2,340 - £2,390	£1,845-£1,895			£1,295 - £1,345		Bolivia and Peru	N
Worldwide Experience		£3,099			£1,649	£1,399	South Africa	N
Real Gap		£1,499-£1,979			£699 - £1,099	£599-£749	Guatemala, Bolivia,Peru, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Brazil	N
Tear Fund Transform			2 months £1,370 (Peru), £1,650 (Rwanda)		£1,200, £1,300		Peru, India, Thailand, Uganda, South Africa, Rwanda	Y

Global Christian mission connects with international development in a number of ways, and can be mapped onto the changing relationship between international volunteering and development. The approaches and goals of both have sometimes mirrored each other and have at other times diverged. The table below highlights some key characteristics of both, all of which are evident in global Christian mission to differing degrees depending on the organisations involved and their particular histories and mission focus. The synergies between Christian mission and ‘secular’ development goals helps to explain the mainstreaming of faith based development over the past 15 years (Rakodi 2007). However, while the activities of Latin Link and especially the Step program clearly reflect some of the development and volunteering goals and approaches outlined below, given the over arching emphasis on Christian evangelism and discipleship in Latin Link’s mission, we would not categorise it currently as a faith based development organisation but rather reserve this descriptor for more overtly development focused organisations such as Tearfund, CAFOD, Christian Aid and Islamic Relief.

Genealogies of international volunteering and development

Development approaches	Volunteering goal
Modernisation	Benevolence and service
Basic needs	Technical assistance/knowledge transfer
Participation	Mutual learning
Governance/Civil society	Citizenship and empowerment
NGOisation/Professionalisation	Professional development
Rights based development	Global citizenship, social justice,
Niche’ paradigms (e.g. fair trade ethnodevelopment, faith based development)	personal development and community building/strengthening

(Baillie Smith and Laurie 2009)

What this table highlights are the different ways Latin Link may be ‘read’ by external individuals and organisations through the wider shifts and changes taking place in the sector. So even where it may not be intended, people’s choice of Latin Link and their expectations may be shaped by these wider issues and debates. A good example of this can be found in the idea of Latin Link as a ‘charity’, which we discuss below, and which resonates with dominant ideas of how development is done, how people in the North can engage with it, issues which we can then also see in participants’ responses.

Choosing Latin Link: A Cool Charity?

On its web page Latin Link describes itself as “an international charity with a focus on Latin America. We aim to be a channel whereby people can develop their God-given potential in the service of others”. This representation as a charity is certainly picked up in the interviews, with Kirsten, a student in her earlier twenties, coining the phrase ‘cool charity’ to refer to the sort of work Latin Link does.

Kirsten: Like 6 or 7 of my friends have gone with Latin Link. So that’s how I really found out about them and have had such great times and they are close friends of mine so I just thought well it’s a cool charity and... It’s a cool charity did you say? It’s doing good stuff. Well we are doing a building project and I think that is practically useful, also staying in the same place for 7 weeks 6 weeks, I think that could be positive. I mean 6 weeks isn’t that long a time but it’s longer than, I don’t know, a few days in a place then moving on.

One of the things that seemed to be important to many participants was that going with Latin Link distinguished them from being on a gap year. As illustrated above, they had the opportunity to stay in one place, stay for longer and do ‘good things’. This was frequently contrasted with an idea of the gap year experience being about continual travel with few opportunities to meet local people. Beyond this, however, there was very little evidence that many of the Steppers knew very much about Latin Link. Indeed it almost seemed to be happenstance that they selected that particular organisation. The choice was largely informed by friendship networks or family connections and in some cases the express desire to go with a Christian Organisation rather than any wider understanding of Latin Link’s history, its profile in the volunteering/Christian sector or its wider activities beyond Step. Several male interviewees suggested they had only chosen Latin Link because the deadline was later than other organisations, the application form was easier and/or their sister/friends had downloaded it from the web and given it to them. No one overtly mentioned that Latin Link was chosen because it was cheaper than any others. In some cases people had gone with other organisations before and wanted to try a different one or go to a new country where the previous organisation they had gone with did not work.

In summary there seems to be no clear understanding of a Latin Link ‘brand’ at the pre-departure stage that attracts people to volunteer with the organisation. While this was generally less the case with ‘church based teams’ visiting a particular missionary it was still the case with a

student based church team which has for many years supported a Latin Link UK based member of staff.

Key point

- A growing emphasis on development, citizenship and professional development highlight the different ways in which the role and activities of Latin Link fit into the wider sector and how its activities can be read.



Section 5 Citizenship, social justice and development: young people's perspectives

Some of the different readings and contradictions around ideas of international volunteering, citizenship, justice and development are reflected in the ways Step participants seek to make sense of the places they visit and their roles within those settings and on return. At one level, the data reveal an awareness of the need to recognise difference and to challenge more imperial ways of thinking about Latin America as highlighted here by Karen, a student in her early twenties:

Karen: ... between Christians it will be quite nice because it means you have something in common and you can be friends but I think it will be nice to share the western Christianity with them without trying to overrule their ways

At the same time, a language of 'over there' dominated young people's speech as two of our youngest participants note here:

Michael... I think over there, there could be a risk that the message has been distorted because the people themselves don't know it fully

Lucy: I was aware of poverty before I went and I am still aware of it. I saw a bit more when I was out there, but I am not going to claim to understand why it's there and all about it, cause I don't. And it's not like I helped change it all when I was out there, because that wasn't part of the trip the ... of the trip was to witness my faith and help guide the church out there and yeah. I learned some stuff about myself at the same time but, that wasn't the be all and end all.

In line with more commercialised 'gap year' and voluntourism initiatives, the notion of a volunteer placement was sometimes reduced to being a 'trip' as illustrated above.

In some respects, and hardly surprisingly, to make sense of their experiences, young people draw on widely held and popular understandings of development, shaped particularly by the 'public faces of development' (Smith 2004) in which the global South is largely defined in terms of acts of charity and by what it lacks. Classifications of the global South as 'poor but happy', or disorganised, alongside an emphasis on the need to produce something visible and material as a way of achieving development, have a long history, continue to be reinvented in contemporary popular representations, and can be found in some Steppers' perceptions. Consider the quotes here from two of our oldest participants, both of whom are in full-time employment:

Bob: It's hard to be specific because they tend to be disorganised about what they want doing but I hope we will be doing some kind of construction project and provide some sort of building that may be useful to them and help improve their lives and to show them some love and show we care about them our brothers and sisters in Christ...

Cara: They won't have the same materialistic things as we would do here in England, like they would be, they will be in mud houses built with bricks kind of thing ... The streets will be very dusty and hardly any greenery, it is a poor area, so if there is any greenery it will be kind of dry kind of thing ...

The importance of popular imaginations of the global South, poverty and development are well illustrated in the following comment:

Rachel: And yeah I don't feel that I like I loved the time out there but I don't feel that South America is somewhere I feel particularly called to go back to. I feel like I more want to be in India or in Africa or somewhere like that somewhere with a bit more extreme poverty if I'm going to like do that sort of thing again I think...

Our data highlight that, in interviews, participants portrayed quite certain understandings, in line with popular understandings, and with an emphasis on charity and care, as opposed to identification with Christian supported actions and events that are constructed more in terms of social justice (e.g. Make Poverty History, Jubilee 2000). However, this certainty is not conveyed as clearly in the diary extracts, which give us an insight into how they deal with the social justice issue in a way that the interviews don't. These are more reflective spaces and written over time and highlight people's thought (and thoughtful prayer) processes. Consider the comments here from Martin, a student in his early twenties, and Lynn, who has recently started studying at university and is one of our youngest participants:

Martin: This morning was a pretty surreal and emotional experience. Surreal in the sense that although I was telling myself that those people actually lived under a bridge and out on the streets – it felt that when I would go home so would they – it was hard and is hard to imagine that as I sit in a house, warm and comforted, those guys are outside with nothing. It's easy to imagine how they get involved in activities such as stealing. You sort of get the sense they have nothing to lose. – mainly I suppose because they don't. We could see them sniffing glue and a couple completely drunk – it was only midday. It's so sad that that is

what they do to I suppose numb themselves to their situation.

Lynn: I feel challenged in my faith. I think in western society it is easier to soften the edges of Christianity to fit in with how we want to live, to justify our own wrongdoings and bad attitudes because 1 Christians are a minority therefore are full integrated into every aspect of society and 2 we have little culture! – very few long standing traditions (apart from drinking). In Ecuador much of the bible is taken very literally, I believe rightly so, for generations and generations Christians here have not gone to discos etc – spouse our equivalent of going clubbing. They are much stricter with gambling and alcohol and dance ... Although some may find their strictness stupid or unnecessary I think it's both bold and pro-active. God does not want us getting drunk so they don't drink – at all...

These diary entries would suggest that rather than being totally absent in young people's accounts, social justice issues can become manifest in understandings of poverty and community which are interpreted through the lens of the different cultural mores such as those around drink. The basic premise for the young woman in the second quote is that drink is bad 'God does not want us getting drunk'. In the first quote drink is seen as a refuge from poverty and this becomes a challenge to this young person. In the second quote this challenge is turned back on western society as a long hard stare turned on the values exhibited here. Is it possible to interpret such reflections as part of a continuum of prayerful thought, one step away from the next revelation from one diary which implies a two-way reflection on development processes and ideas of fairness? Consider this comment from one of our older participants:

Allan: Found out we were using too much water. Argentine's have small community reservoirs which are replenished in the wet season. We've been told the reservoirs running low. It's amazing how adaptable we are though no real complaints we just used less water. Corruption is a way of life for Argentineans it seems. If you have money you can get what you want. But is that so different in the west?

Our research highlights young people's struggles to make sense of their own roles and the settings in which they find themselves. An emphasis on 'being' and 'sharing', rooted in faith, provides one way of coping, but this can also run alongside a sidestepping or marginalising of the stark inequalities they encounter, and a retreat into popular stereotypes about development. As young people's faith provides their language and lens on development, in contrast to some competitors in the sector who emphasise ideas of citizenship, career enhancement or the 'technospeak' of develop-

ment, this also means that personal social issues such as drink, rather than broader issues of justice, provide a key way in which young people narrate and think through issues of difference and development.

Key points

- Faith narratives provide constructive contexts in which teams work together with each other, as well as shaping how young people make sense of the settings they find themselves in.
- There is a limited engagement with ideas of social justice as young people seek to make sense of the places in which they volunteer, their roles in those settings and the significance of popular rhetoric around development and the global South in helping to do this.



Section 6 Growing in faith: religious enhancement and personal development

The young people interviewed for this study stressed the importance of spiritual growth in their decisions to go on a Latin Link programme. Of our participants, all were professed Christians who were very confident in their faith, though interested in growing in their faith and, on occasion, finding their own relationship with God outside of the family unit. The importance of being able to volunteer with other Christians, and to participate in a structure which encouraged the active living of faith, was emphasised as an important reason for choosing Latin Link over other projects. Indeed, anticipated outcomes actively incorporated hopes for spiritual growth as evidenced here by Allan, one of our older participants, and Rosy, a student in her early twenties:

Allan: A deeper understanding of God. New friends. And a better world view, basically a better understanding of how this world works...[to] ultimately drive me closer to God I hope.

Rosy: ... I am expecting for myself and the team spiritual growth, as we learn from them, as we grow in fellowship, as we read the Bible together, as we understand more on what he tells us to do through the Bible and through his word. I will completely leave room for the Lord to work in any way but I am not expecting... I am expecting the Lord to work in the way he works.

Upon returning, most young people commented on the importance of silent, reflective times; of fellowship and daily bible study; evening hours of praying for each other individually, and group devotions. Some frustration was experienced when devotions were missed or planned community events cancelled due to unanticipated changes in worshiping schedules.

Visions of service

Service was often envisioned as an important way for young people to live their Christian ideals. Here, Rachel, a student in her early twenties, and Barbara and Cara, both of whom are in their twenties and in full-time employment:

Rachel: Yes I want to deepen my relationship with God and show God's love to people who ... I guess living in an area of poverty you think people in the rich world don't care, I don't obviously think of myself as a rich person but compared to some people in Ecuador they will think of me as incredibly rich so it's just a way of saying actually we do care and God cares about you just as much as he does about me.

Barbara: There is life beyond what you've experienced, and there is a bigger God that understands and knows more than you could ever imagine. And that is what I have now, and that is what I want to help the children realise,

so you know, yes you might be going through some hard times now, but you know, just imagine what God has in store for you 20 years down the line. And what you know the things he might bless you with or give you and transform you, if you only allow him to do that

Cara: ... God has put this desire and burden in my heart to serve to work with children, I don't think anybody really encouraged me into that – it was a time when God was really started calling me to. In fact the call I got this call to do this work when I was in Ecuador when I was in Quito. And saw through my eyes the need the desperate need that South American countries have.

The prospect of being in a new, unknown context, where most of the participants could not speak the language and where the standard comforts of 'home' would be missing, was daunting for some young people. Yet for most of the Latin Link participants, this distance and first-hand experience of suffering was viewed as an opportunity to put greater faith in God. Consider the views of three of our youngest participants, all of whom are studying at university:

Alex: I think also it's time away from where I am with other Christians and make myself vulnerable in situations to see if I can strengthen my faith, and I have heard about so many great experiences that other people have had... There are loads of [people] in the Bible who go through hard times, whether God comforted them through hard times or whether God used those hard times to strengthen them.

Rachel: I am hoping it will make my faith in God stronger and I will learn to rely on him more and back at home we talk about relying on God but here it's harder to do because we have so much and we don't need to rely on God for our next meal because when I arrive home I know mum will have the meal ready for me so I guess it's not so easy to rely on God because God is giving you everything but when you have to rely on God because you don't know the people, you don't know the culture, you don't know how it works, you don't know the language so he needs to show me what to do and where to go.

Michael: ...I guess it's a step of faith going out because it might be dangerous and we could get ill or whatever and being in those situations will make us put our trust in God and hopefully we will see him working through us and it will give us confidence in our faith and make us love God more and make us realise how amazing he is, so I think I will grow in faith and it will be really challenging at points.

For all of the young people who participated in the research, their time in Latin America did facilitate some kind of spiritual growth or renewed spiritual meaning, but the majority of these changes were subtle transformations rather than dramatic conversions. It is likely that this reflects the sample of participants which consisted of largely dedicated Christians who had already accepted Jesus as their Saviour rather than those who might have been doubting, or were uncommitted Christians. Having already been touched by Jesus, the trip was often used as a reference point for ensuring that worship would remain a central priority once back at home, as highlighted by these comments from Alex and Helen, both of whom are students:..

Alex: When [Argentinians] come to pray they are always thanking God, it is like their priority, they just know how dependent they are whereas in our country we say please and thank you for everything, like even small things, but we use it so much it almost doesn't mean anything anymore. Like if you are in a church service and someone prays you know often the first thing we say is thanks, but not always and it can be sometimes quite a small part of our prayers [...] I realised the importance of being thankful. Like the body of Christ and stuff like that... when I was tired and worn out I was reminded that in reading my Bible, like, I need to totally rely on God for everything and not just when I reach the end of my [life] it's like all the love I show needs to be God's love...

Helen: ... for me it's opened my understanding of loving God and worshipping God rather than just having it my way of thinking, it's broadened my knowledge of it which has challenged the way I want to worship God and give my life to Jesus so it has strengthened it and broadened it as well.

Coming home and moving on

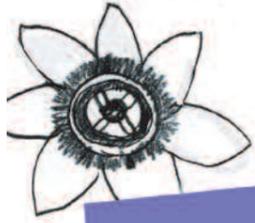
One of the issues raised by the interviews is the challenge of retaining the closeness with God after returning home. Materialism, lack of time, the pressures of negotiating secular society and the absence of the kinds of prayerful spaces generated on the trips lead some young people to struggle to keep their faithful practices central to their lives. Still, many of the young people – such as Tony, a 21 year old student - felt that they were able to retain at least some of the centrality of faith and witness that they experienced during their time in Latin America:

Tony: In terms of spiritually I would say I have become a bit more serious and I think throughout the first two years of University I managed to sidetrack my faith quite a lot but this summer it really hit home and it was the most important thing.

One very important element in ensuring continued centrality of faith and worship was the integration of the young people into a church community upon return. For those young people who were then starting their first year at University, or for those who had been at University but not been seriously embedded in a faith community prior to the trip, building new relationships in a Christian Union or a local church was essential. For one young participant, the experience encouraged her to return to her church at University with a new vision of dedicating her life to mission work.

Summary

- The majority of the research participants experienced spiritual growth and renewed spiritual meaning through their volunteering experiences in Latin America although this was often subtle in nature.
- A key challenge for many participants was retaining closeness with God upon returning home.



Lynn: it was challenging...and it was a very liberating experience

humbling

happy and amazed



very moving

Satisfaction

phenomenal

Refreshing

Fantastic

wonder

Emotions that describe the experience for you

AMAZING

Joy

overwhelming



Awesome

ABSOLUTELY

AMAZING

Derek: a sense of joy, all these different things you experience and so many amazing people we got to meet, it was fantastic it really was.



Helen: I think it's exciting because it's challenging exciting but also it's fun and enjoyable and there is times when it's scary but that's exciting as well.

Section 7 Growing up and experiencing adulthood: age, faith and the lifecourse

The young people who participated in this research emphasised that their age – and the levels of responsibility and independence they had – were key factors in motivating them to apply to be a part of a Latin Link Step Team. The key point made by the participants was that this was the right time to volunteer as it was a period in their lives when they had neither work nor family commitments (such as a long term partner and children) preventing them from spending time volunteering in Latin America. 23 year old student, Rosy stated 'I am young and I have time' and Tony felt that 'It's a time when I have nothing to hold me back'. All of these young students in their late teens supported this:

Alex: I think it's important that I do this before I go to University and maybe again while I am at University because once I leave I hope I will have a job and then it makes it more tricky to travel and I might have a family in the next ten years or so and that makes it tricky as well you can't just go away for seven weeks and leave a family.

James: I have the opportunity now and also the time as a student

Rita: ...at the moment I know and I am not restricted I have the time to go and do what God has asked me to do because I am free and don't have many barriers to get past.

What was clear from the perspectives of these young people is that there was a strong sense that if they did not volunteer now, they may not have future opportunities to do so. Furthermore, motivations to volunteer were generally driven by two main forces: parents or family members and/or peer group affiliations. A number of the young people – including James and Lucy – talked about their mothers suggesting that they should consider volunteering with Latin Link. Cara, one of our older participants clarifies:

Cara: at the same time there has been a huge influence from my parents and that is my main motivation for going away to see the changes in people in South America.

Faith-based volunteering: one of many transitions

As well as discussing their motivations to volunteer at this point in their lives, young people also highlighted that their participation in faith-based volunteering was one part of many transitions they were currently experiencing whilst growing up. Some of the young people were already very independent in terms of living in their own house, having a full-time job and being self-reliant. For these young people, participating in faith-based volunteering with Latin Link was often something they had always wanted to do, or it was about taking on new leadership responsibilities and advancing their personal

faith. However, the majority of the young people were semi-independent and were studying at university or college and so still relied on family networks for financial and emotional support. These participants hoped that their volunteering experiences would contribute towards other aspects of their lives, such as helping them with their personal and spiritual development. Some of the youngest participants in the research explained that their volunteering experiences sat alongside other important stages they were currently negotiating, such as the transition to university or the transition to independent living:

Michael: moving towards adulthood will be more when I live in a student house next year when we have to cook and wash for ourselves and sort out bills and a more day to day adult life because in halls I am catered and I take my clothes home for washing so I don't have to do that so I think practical things next year will be where I learn but this I guess is another step to becoming more independent and it will be the longest time I have been away from my parents and my family as I have never been away from them before for longer than a couple of weeks so that could be tough but I think it is an important step to take and it prepares me for next year anyway.

Alex: when I get back I am home for two weeks then I am off to University so that in itself is another big step I think I will always be the same person but with God's help I am going to be the person he wants me to be as much as the person I want to be.

Career decisions and personal commitments

A number of the participants made it clear that their volunteering experiences were very influential in shaping their decisions about college or university studies and the career paths they wanted to pursue. Before visiting Latin America, Rachel and Kirsten, both of whom are students in their early twenties, commented:

Rachel: I am hoping I will get more of a sense of what I am to do with my life and what God wants me to do and who I will be serving.

Kirsten: I am just trying to test things out and see kind of what I want to do with my life...

Then, when we spoke to Rachel and Kirsten when they returned, they said:

Rachel: I think I prefer the public sector work or work for an NGO or something, yeah

Kirsten: It did make me think things over about what I want to do and where I want to be next year and I suppose that had an effect on what I am applying to do this year.

Some participants talked about working with children, studying social work, training to be a teacher or applying for work in international development or in their local church. For others it cemented the decisions they had already made or helped them to realise that it was time for them to change their role at work or to expand the work they did with their local church or community.

Experiencing religious adulthood

What was particularly striking about the perspectives of the young people was how their experiences of volunteering allowed them to engage with different forms of adulthood. All of the participants felt that their experiences had contributed to their personal and spiritual growth with many commenting on how their role in their team and their leadership skills had been enhanced as a result of their participation with Latin Link. Two students in their early twenties confirm this:

Rosy: ... responsibility of growing as a Christian now as a team leader

Tony: I definitely feel grown up and my leadership skills have been put to the test

Related to this, participants often talked to us about the skills they had acquired in both organising their volunteering experiences and in fulfilling the demands of the role they had in their team. Some young people raised funds through their local church which often involved making presentations to their congregation or community and discussed the challenges of planning and organising such work. Many reflected on what they had learnt and gained from the role they had in their team, how this had boosted their confidence and how this had shaped their experiences upon return. Two of our youngest participants note:

Lynn: I really budgeted all my money to make sure I had the right amount and I was disciplined and I don't like getting up and speaking to people but I was able to get up in front of my church and speak and explain it all which is stuff I never do and fundraise and be really focused I have never had anything before where I have really had to focus and have wanted to focus so it was really good now to know that I can put my mind to something and that I can do it and can survive.

Rachel: I definitely feel like I've grown in confidence in my leadership skills and stuff and so well there is a whole range of different things just kind of

the planning and organisation beforehand and, and suppose I have just got used to having a bit more responsibility

The young people's experiences of team leadership or their role in their team coupled with their work with local communities in Latin America all contributed to them feeling an increasing sense of personal independence and autonomy. Also, their interactions with individuals and communities in Latin America provided them with access to, and experience of, other forms of adulthood – such as the adults in the communities they worked with in Latin America - that could potentially inform their own. In addition to this, many of the interview discussions, diary extracts and personal photographs of the young people included reference to, or images of, Latin American children and childhood. Some young people clarified that their work with children helped them to realise that they wanted to follow a career path that involved working with children. It was clear from others however, that their work with children in Latin America contributed towards their experiences of adulthood as they took on new responsibilities and engaged as adult volunteers with the children in the local communities in which they worked.

Experiencing religious adulthood was a factor that most of the research participants discussed in their accounts. Many felt a strengthened sense of faith as a result of volunteering. Upon returning home, and just before starting university, Alex said that he '*had learned about a lot about myself and my faith*' and claimed to have '*confidence in God's provision*'. Also, Kelly and Michael noted:

Kelly: I think I am more mature in my faith

Michael: my faith has been made stronger

When looking at the pre-departure and return interviews, it was particularly striking how so many of the participants felt stronger in terms of their personal faith and their abilities to communicate this. Before leaving, many discussed feeling uncertain about how and when to talk about their religious beliefs and practice with others, feeling self-conscious or nervous about discussing issues of faith in public or in Church. As two of our youngest participants, Kay and Barbara noted:

Kay: I'm not massively talented about talking about the gospels and things to people and I would love this experience to be also somewhere where I can learn how to, how to bring Jesus into more conversations, so that he becomes more relevant in conversations I have

Barbara: is a bit of a faith check to see how much you really know, what

you actually believe and why you believe, and what happens if somebody opposes your view.

Despite these uncertainties, all participants returned to the UK with a renewed confidence about their faith. Post-it notes filled out during a group discussion with one team highlighted the significance of this (see Table 2). For many, this confidence came from the daily devotionals that they participated in with their team and which often involved them in speaking publicly about their faith and practice. For others, there were critical moments during their experiences where they were asked to speak at the local church or lead an event in the local community. For example, 20 year old student, James, talked in depth about his experience of speaking to the local church community where he was volunteering:



James... well I was told that I was speaking at one of the churches and that was something I hadn't done before and that was pretty cool because every speaker I have ever see is a very well regarded person in the church and come across as very wise so been given the opportunity to do that and seeing how people responded so it was quite good, I don't know what kind of transition that would be, it was a transition to preacher I tell you that...

Table 2 Post-it notes from group discussion at Latin Link debriefing

Come back feeling a lot older that when I went out!! More mature in faith, responsibility and self-identity

I feel more independent in my faith, more reliant upon myself to spend time with God and therefore more likely to - motivation to pray through wanting to spend time with God.

I now feel more responsible for my own faith!

It's up to me, my own discipline, my own motivations, decisions, choices.

My faith has matured ...

Feel more independent, that I can rely on God's provision. I don't have to worry about the future.

Learning to be a Christian adult in the secular world, I need to look to the future and how do I need to grow for when I'm a husband, co-worker, father etc...

Key points

- Research participants felt it was time to volunteer now due to them having fewer responsibilities and commitments than they would have later in life. Their volunteering experiences often helped clarify their decisions about their careers and personal development
- Volunteering with Latin Link enabled young people to explore different forms of adulthood in different places and in particular, helped them to grow in maturity with regards to their personal faith.

Section 8: Conclusion

As the analysis of the data for this project continues, we will add academic papers and further outputs to our website. This project is a part of a very large programme of research about Religion and Society, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK. Both research councils contributed to the £12 million fund for research of the highest quality that explores the relationships between and within religion and society. Here we provide links to the websites of the Religion and Society programme, our own project and a further three projects that may be of interest:

Religion and Society programme - www.religionandsociety.org.uk/

Youth transitions, international volunteering and religious transformation: the experiences of young evangelical Christians in Latin America – www.ycla.org.uk/

Marginalised spiritualities: faith and religion among young people in socially deprived Britain - <http://www.youthandreligion.org.uk/>

Christianity and the University experience in contemporary England - www.cueproject.org.uk

ESRC Seminar Series: 'Activism, Volunteering and Citizenship' - <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sass/about/socscience/socscieventspage/esrcsemseries>

Summary of Key Points

Locating Latin Link

- A growing emphasis on development, citizenship and professional development highlight the different ways in which the role and activities of Latin Link fit into the wider sector and how its activities can be read.

Citizenship, social justice and development: young people's perspectives

- Faith narratives provide constructive contexts in which teams work together with each other, as well as shaping how young people make sense of the settings they find themselves in.

- There is a limited engagement with ideas of social justice as young people seek to make sense of the places in which they volunteer, their roles in those settings and the significance of popular rhetoric around development and the global South in helping to do this.

Growing in faith: religious enhancement and personal development

- The majority of the research participants experienced spiritual growth and renewed spiritual meaning through their volunteering experiences in Latin America although this was often subtle in nature.

- A key challenge for many participants was retaining closeness with God upon returning home.

Growing up and experiencing adulthood: age, faith and the life-course

- Research participants felt it was time to volunteer now due to them having less responsibilities and commitments than they would have later in life. Their volunteering experiences often helped clarify their decisions about their careers and personal development.

- Volunteering with Latin Link enabled young people to explore different forms of adulthood and in particular, helped them to grow in maturity with regards to their personal faith.



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