

Youth Event Has Helped Spark Praise ‘Revolution’ in Northern Ireland

Musician Johnny Parks has seen youth from both sides of ‘The Troubles’ unite in worship at Mannafest concerts

A new revolution is taking place among hundreds of young people in Northern Ireland. At the height of “The Troubles,” some of them were lining up to support the “armed struggle”—now many are lining up to praise God.

More than 1,000 youth raise the roof on Belfast’s Ulster Hall every month at Mannafest, an event run by Youth for Christ. The initiative has also spread to Enniskillen—a town that was torn apart by an IRA bomb in 1987.

Each location has its own flavor but shares the same aim—to provide a place where young people can meet and discover more of God. “It got to the stage recently where we couldn’t let people in because it was beyond capacity,” said Mannafest team member Johnny Parks.

“So we’ve opened up the stall seats behind the stage now, which means you can get another 300 or 400 people in. We’re filling that as well.” The 30-something musician said Mannafest has been “hugely significant” in people’s lives.

“It’s had its highs and lows,” Parks admitted. “We feel like it’s going through a real harvest at the moment. A lot of that is because there’s a good team on board who don’t do anything too radical, and make it accessible to people.”

It's caused such a stir that a "live" recording was released on a label called Emerge, which offers listeners a sample of new and up-and-coming worship leaders from across the United Kingdom. The CD Close to You displays Parks' brand of gritty guitar-driven praise.

Leaders say these clear, spiritual songs help the young people open up to God. "It's simple things that I'd probably notice," Parks said, "just seeing a lot of young people who at the end of the night are being prayed with and are in tears. God's moving and speaking to them."

Parks experienced a breakthrough himself after leading worship at MannaFest for about a year. Then during 2000 he returned home from a U.S. visit—with a broken leg. "One night I thought, 'Stuff it, I'm going to take my guitar off and dance my heart out here.'"

Parks used to be embarrassed about such behavior. But now he isn't afraid of what others might think. He started dancing, and the idea caught on. "People came out of their seats into the aisles, up the front and started dancing. It was fantastic. ... Now every night you play, they expect you to dance."

However, MannaFest is not only about one night. "We try to provide facilities and support for people outside the Saturday night," Parks said. "We would run Bible notes for them, access to the Web site, training events in drama, worship and teaching."

Parks' full-time job is directing a secular organization

called the Northern Ireland Youth Forum that represents young people's views to policy makers.

That means he works among a broad spectrum of youth—from both republican and loyalist areas (the two sides of the Northern Ireland conflict). “I love that richness,” said Parks, who has family roots on both sides of the border. “It keeps me on my toes.”

Though he said most Mannaifest participants are Protestant, he dares to believe that the sound of praise could help bring Catholic and Protestant together. “I feel the next challenge for Mannaifest is to engage in that issue,” he said. “An outsider would probably think it's quite straightforward—but it's ... very complex. I still think we have a responsibility to think about it and to seek God.”

Parks and his band plan to be involved with Mannaifest for another year. They want to make way for younger leaders and musicians, and to honor increasing commitments in the United States and Canada, where Parks is involved in Worship Together conferences.

He finds that American Christians have a particularly keen interest in Northern Ireland. Whenever he leads worship in the States, he said another line appears—this time of people wanting to know more about his homeland.

Clive Price