

YOUNG PEOPLE AND EVANGELISM— HAVE WE GONE TOO FAR?

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Over the last five years there has been considerable discussion concerning the area of youth work. Many people have asked the question 'Where have we gone wrong?', 'Why are 300 young people leaving the Church weekly?'¹ As a result activity has flourished; youth work projects, plans, programmes, action have all been generated, all seeking to address the sad statistic that the Church will eventually be decimated and young people will no longer be part of the life blood of the Church if present trends continue.

I believe the next ten years will be crucial in the development not only of youth work generally but also in the Church which in many ways is at a cross roads in this nation as well as globally.

This article seeks to pose and answer some of the most pressing problems regarding youth and their response to Jesus. Have we gone too far down the road of failure in the area of youth evangelism—that process of bringing young people to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Young People—Where have we come from?

Our discussion is probably best begun by undertaking a retrospective glance. Consider these two quotes:

- a. 'When I look at the younger generation I despair for the future of civilization'
- b. 'Youth has no regard for old age and the wisdom of the centuries is looked down upon both as stupid and foolishness. The young men are indolent, the young women are indecent and indecorous in their speech, behaviour and dress.'

This could easily have been written in one of the today's national papers as an editorial feature on young people today. However the first quote is from Aristotle in the fourth century BC and the second quote is from Peter the Hermit in 1114. It seems that our views of young people may not have changed a great deal since then! In fact we can see that young people have always been perceived as a problem by society; it is not a new phenomenon. In fact, if you

consider yourself when you were in the 13–17 year-old bracket you may recall some of the things with which you had to come to terms. One of the exercises I give to my students is to say: 'What were your thoughts and feelings towards friends, family, leisure, work, church, romance, school etc. when you were in those teen years 13–17?' This is usually quite a salutary exercise and a useful reminder to us of how we coped during those years.

It is clear, however, that the teen phenomenon has grown up during the last hundred years. In the Western world we now have a situation where a special time is allowed between a child and being an adult. It is a time for development and adjustment, a time to decide what it means to be an adult.

Mark Ashton in his book 'Christian Youth Work' rightly states that as a society we have provided no clear guidelines on the matter of adulthood. 'A young person's status is often ambiguous. He or she may be old enough to get married, but not old enough to watch certain films. But the most significant sign of entering the adult world is seen by adolescents themselves as obtaining employment.'² Yet living in a society where unemployment amongst young people is increasingly high from where do they they find their sense of maturing into adulthood?

However, it is clear that about a hundred years ago 85% of all people who gave their lives to Jesus did so before the age of 21 and writers such as George Barner in his book 'User Friendly Churches', continue to stress the fact that work with people under 21 is essential if we want to make any difference to the society we live in for the gospel's sake.

Young People—Where are we now?

The Western world in the 90s, the post modernist age as writers call it, is full of the icons of the present era. Against this backdrop young people are developing as they always have done. They cope with the changes which one would expect to occur in normal maturation, while trying out and experimenting with things which were unthought of when they were

children. They may enter into individual conflict but they also discover opportunities to be creative, to challenge life, pursue a career and look beyond the immediacy of their situation. It is the time when young people are most likely to look into the spiritual side of their lives and ask themselves questions about God and death and life and what's right and fair. In doing this they seek out clear boundaries within which to work these issues through.

So what are the differences between being a teenager today and one, say, twenty years ago? A cursory glance at statistics clearly highlights the major changes in our society over twenty years. Our post modernist age now has 'gods' of music, movie, muscle and money—not that those things weren't 'gods' in the 60s/70s but that these 'gods' seem to have come of age. We also see that suicide is the third most common cause of death in the UK; 52% of 16–19 year olds have had sexual intercourse, and one in eight has used illegal substances while under the age of 16. It is estimated that by the year 2000 only half of all young people will be brought up by their original parents. Young people's crime still accounts for 20% of all total crime. 30% of young people in 1991 are on the margins of poverty in the UK while their idols, Michael Jackson and Madonna, earn \$15,000,000 each and the total teen population in the United States in 1992 spent 57 billion dollars. What does this say about our society? It clearly says that we have come to a place where we are now sowing what we have reaped. This is demonstrated by a look at the music industry and one of the latest pop videos young people are watching. In the United States of America in particular, teenagers watch a minimum of two hours of music television, MTV daily. When questioned on its success an MTV Director replied, 'We don't influence young people, we own them.' In the UK 55% of teens own their own TV while MTV is quickly becoming the music channel of the world.

Not surprisingly the Youth Worker Update journal said, 'TV's first generation of global villagers has sprung up amongst this generation of teenagers.' TV is now shaping the attitude not only of teenagers in the UK and the US but across the whole of the world. A new international database surveying teenagers revealed that young people of similar socio economic background throughout the world are more alike than different. In fact the attitudes of the world's teenagers are remarkably uniform; a quarter of these young people said that they were frequently sad and lonely and felt empty emotionally as well as being overwhelmed by life's problems. The report continues, 'In any case we may be witnessing the global cohort of teenagers influenced by information and images that have a common origin—the television'.³ Closely allied to the music industry is the movie industry where again values are shaped which speak increasingly of intimacy and violence; but the intimacy is faked.

We have come to a place where we recognize that young people are merely the fruit of a popular culture which has no longer a respect for God and in his place has put music, movie and money. If popular culture is aware of this it certainly doesn't seem to take any notice of the fact that TV, the movie, music and money now shape values and attitudes. Kit

Woods on interviewing young people about their attitude towards the media says that 'There is virtually no indication of boy and girls attributing learning growth of understanding, interest, concern or satisfaction to its influence (the media)'.⁴ The situation is rather similar with pop music. Thus both television and pop music seem to form part of the background noise against which more dramatic episodes are enacted. Consequently, as Ashton has said, it may be that the media is all the more influential on young people because they do not perceive its influence and therefore do not evaluate it.⁵

Challenge to the Church—Young People in the 90s

How can the Church compete against the popular culture? How can the Church form and shape young people's values against the background of the media and popular society, turning young people's heads away from God and towards other 'gods'? Tony Campolo⁶ argues that the best answer that we can find is heroism. He cites Bernice Becker who says, 'Heroes are humans who do things that would be a credit to God. The glory of heroes is that even though they are limited by a corruptible humanity that would tend to make them failures heroes attempt feats worthy of angels. Hence in heroism young people see both sides of their personhood affirmed—youth was made for heroism and not for pleasure.' Campolo continues, 'I believe that teenagers are thrilled when the evangelist at a young convention shouts "If those of us here totally give ourselves to Jesus we can change the world"—teenagers hear in such challenges a call to Holy crusades in which they can unite. They hear in the word of the evangelist a call to undertake what they are led to believe is the greatest cause in human history. They can't help but love the almost fanatical call to take over the world for Jesus.'

This may be fine on a Sunday night but what happens on a Monday morning and how do these young people relate to the call of Jesus to follow him on a day to day basis? This is the greatest challenge to the contemporary Church and one that it needs to respond to; otherwise the future for young people in the 90s will be as dim as a light which isn't put on the hill but in the valley. The only answer to a society which is more knowledgeable but less wise is for Christians and particular youth workers within the church to pass on their heritage to young people and disciple them in a way that is culturally relevant. In other words young people need to be able to tell the gospel stories in their own words and using their own images and parables. Many subgroups within mainstream young people in the UK are now so removed from the gospel that they have almost become unreached people groups in missionary terms; witness the scenes at a rave party or look at riots or a new age traveller or even some computer wizards.

One answer to this challenge is for youth workers and the Church to set up 'mission stations' aimed at discipling young people once they have made a commitment to Christ. As Winkney Pratney states, 'We must study the youth culture as deeply and

as seriously as any missionary preparation to an unreached nation—most mission fields remained unchanged for centuries but this one changes daily. The price we pay for failing is a lost church.⁷ Missiology then is a key. Yet Jesus clearly encouraged the disciples to great acts of heroism. He showed them the way to the Father but the way was not an easy one, it was a way of overcoming trial and temptation, of weakness and failure, but Jesus also called most of his disciples with a simple 'follow me' and spent three years after that training young people, those young men who were the disciples. Thus there must be an emphasis on discipleship; discipleship which is biblical, practical and personal. We must become Jesus to these young people and allow them to see into our lives. The mystery of the incarnation is at the heart of effective youth work and what have we at stake? What if we do not achieve it? Campolo states, 'The future of civilisation then may well be determined to the extent to which the Christian Church makes youth ministry its missionary programme—to discover the excitement and opportunity waiting us on the mission fields of the urban and the two third nations.'⁸ The people there may be in fact the only ones left receptive to the transforming message of Jesus. If we ignore them others are waiting to reap their allegiance.

From closer to home Michael Eastman says, 'At present over 90% of the resources and people engaged in Christian youth work are devoted to 15% of the nation's youth.'⁹ It is obvious that we must be methodical and clear in the way that we evangelize those young people who have never heard the gospel. It is not enough to stay with our own young people's groups if we have one and work with them. We must be spreading the resources to the other 85% of the nation's youth. Andy Hickford from Stopsley Baptist Church says, 'Unless youth leaders can become modern day Nehemiahs and Daniels com-

manding respect, shaping policy and so turning the dinosaur of the church around, there is no future for Christian youth work.'¹⁰

We see then from our society that it has become more complex and stressful and more existential. At almost every turn we become more knowledgeable but less wise. So it is up to us to be Jesus in those situations which involve us with young people. It is up to us to pass on our heritage to young people, who are left only with an image that has no content but violence and faked intimacy. We need to be Jesus to those young people both within and outside the Church so that we can lovingly yet firmly help bring the Church and nation round to a biblical agenda and assist in the process of bringing God's kingdom in to save a generation of young people who know nothing about the freedom and life that commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ brings.

Footnotes

1. *Christian England*, MARC Europe.
2. Mark Ashton: *Christian Youth Work*, Kingsway, 1986.
3. *Psychology Today*, September 1988.
4. Kit Woods: 'Disclosure to a Stranger', in Ashton, *op. cit.*
5. *Op. cit.*
6. Tony Campolo: *Growing up in America*, Zondervan, 1989.
7. Winkney Pratney: *Youth Aflame*, Bethany House, 1983.
8. *op. cit.*
9. Future Shock Article, *Youth Work Magazine*, April/May 1993, Elm House.
10. In Aston, *op. cit.*

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GETTING TO KNOW YOUNG PEOPLE

From: *Youth Culture & The Gospel*, Pete Ward. London. Marshall Pickering, 1992

It's one thing 'knowing about' young people, it's another thing actually to know them. 'Knowing about' young people is relatively easy; reading books is a good way (including this one, of course), but if we really want to know a group of young people then it means we've got to start to get involved. There's no way around it, one way or another we've got to make a move. Personal contact is the only way to form a genuine friendship. But this is very hard and there

are lots of things that make us adults very cautious about meeting young people. This chapter is a basic introduction to meeting young people for the first time, and in it I will try to give some practical advice to help soothe away some of the fears that we have when we think of meeting young people. This chapter will also give some ideas as to how and where to meet young people.