

Changing Youth Ministry without Changing the Church

Implications of Both Options

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Introduction

In considering this question of changing youth ministry without changing the church, I am primarily focussing on the cultural issues and challenges of mission to youth.

Change in churches can be in one of three areas of significance: theology, philosophy and culture (values, behaviour). Structure is important but is, in my view, subservient to the other areas; ultimately being a secondary expression of them. Theological changes usually move from one end of continuum to another, for example: liberal to fundamental; Pentecostal to conservative; orthodox to protestant; etc. Philosophical changes deal with the process and approach to ministry and how the practice of ministry is carried out and evaluated: such as mechanic or organic; programs or relationships; cell groups/congregational; addition/ multiplication; passive or aggressive evangelism; leadership structures and management. etc. Cultural changes refer to the different ways of expressing faith and ministry. It deals with style, expression, the way things are done. Two churches may share the same doctrinal statement, the same denominational badge, even the same leadership structure and philosophy of ministry yet be culturally very different. This could be true from one country to another (Russian Baptist and Australian Baptist) or within the same country and suburb (two Baptist churches a block from each other, one casual, 'authentic', spontaneous and contemporary and the other formal, structured, predictable' and traditional).

A change in culture itself is the most obvious change in the life of a church from the perspective of the attenders. They may or may not notice a change in the doctrinal or philosophical position of the church, but they will immediately notice a change from traditional to contemporary, modern to post-modern, organ/choir to band and techno music style. Such changes will not escape notice.

Think about it: why do people come and why do people stay involved in churches? If not out of loyalty or lack of choice of alternative churches, it will be because they enjoy it and they sense their needs are being met. It *feels good*. People respond to the climate of the church, the 'feel' when people come together in large or small group settings. An atmosphere of love, a sense of significance, relevance and vision, a positive group image, warmth and involvement. These are all aspects of the culture of the church. People stay involved where they sense a match with their own culture and preferred values.

I have chosen not to consider the need for changes in theology and philosophy areas as this would be too huge a scope for an article. I am assuming that youth ministry is to be built on the relational model of Jesus as outlined by the life of Christ. This article focuses on what we who are committed to developing youth ministry along the model of Jesus must consider in terms of churches and change. What are the implications of developing a healthy youth ministry in churches that need to change to become relevant to and integrate the young adults emerging from a great

commission/great commandment youth ministry?

Biblical considerations

* Matt 9:16, 17. New wine old skins; new cloth, old garment; Jesus saying: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners..."

* Jerusalem council and the response to the new believers among the Gentiles;

* Paul's culturally responsive approach to mission 1 Cor 9:22. "...become all things to all men *in order that* I may win some..."

The great commission gives the mandate to reach the unreached including every generation of young people in every 'people group'. We are required to be reaching and discipling *each generation*.

The gospel needs to be contextualised to each culture and people grouping. *This paper will argue that in some cases generational differences are significant enough to amount to different cultures and different 'people groups'.*

The Great Commission and Culture

Structures and 'forms' of expression of the Christian experience are by their very nature culture bound being the expression/application of a particular group of peoples' faith and understanding of biblical mandates at a particular point in time. Christianity is cross-cultural in its truth and principles, in its world view. Yet while Christianity is cross-cultural in essence, it can only ever be cultural in its expression given that it must be lived out in the context of individual believers living in the midst of their own culture and community. Therefore the mandate of the great commission and even the great commandment (particularly regarding fellow man) must be expressed culturally. Both the communication of the gospel, and the "teaching them to obey" of following Jesus, must and can only ever be, 'culture-specific' because it is to specific people.

This principle is demonstrated in the words of the Apostle Paul when he says ..."I have become all things to all men so that by all means I might save some." (1 Cor. 9:22) That is, so far as the non-negotiables of the gospel and holiness allow, he seeks to submit to the culture and style of those he is seeking to reach that he would be understood more clearly and that they would know what it means to be a Christ follower in their world. The preferred culture of the messenger and the forms of communication of the message are to be second to the culture and meaningful forms of the target people (receivers). Paul describes it thus: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."

Clearly, effectiveness in communication of the true Biblical meanings of the faith (values, truths, precepts, principles etc...) is the controlling factor (master) over the personal cultural preferences of the messengers. In short, for the sake of effectiveness in the great commission of making disciples, leaders in mission must seek to be receiver oriented, intentionally contextualizing the truths and values of the faith into cultural forms of expression that carry the same meanings from within the context of the target people's culture.

Scripture deals with cultural differences between races (Jews/Gentiles, Greek/Roman) and between people groups within a race (Pharisees/tax-collectors and sinners, Galileans/Judeans). It does not

specifically address generational differences in culture although it does deal with generational changes in faith, as in Judges 2, for example where it refers to "another generation, who knew neither the Lord nor the things He had done for Israel..." That is, in the space of one generation, the knowledge and first hand experience of God was lost. It became nothing more than head knowledge and history. Each generation is responsible to pass on their faith to the next. In the words of the Psalmist, "Since *my* youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when *I am old* and grey, do not forsake me, O God, *till I declare your power to the next generation*, your might to all who are to come." (Ps 71:17,18)

In our time, the rate of change in society (in the west at least) is accelerating. Each new generation is significantly different in culture from its parents. The generation gap from one culture to the next seems to grow larger. Such differences are more than cosmetic or superficial changes in 'forms' of expression and behaviour (e.g. clothing and music styles, mannerisms). Increasingly we see changes emerging at the level of 'meanings' and worldview.

For example, Generation-X, as the latest exponents of the post modernist worldview don't just dress different and act different to their parents, they actually think about and view the world differently. These differences are as significant as those from one culture to another even though the basic language may be the same. If Vietnamese and Japanese spoke the same language, would they still constitute a different people group and different culture? Of course they would. Culture is not simply a matter of language but of worldview. They are different in the basic way they view, interpret and respond to the world around them. In the same way, though more subtle, the differences between one generation and the next in societies that are showing the accelerating influence of 'westernisation/globalisation', we are seeing the emergence of what I refer to as "generational people groups".

As the influence of the western post modern world view and consumerism spreads through the global media and markets, the contrast between each generation will grow to point where they become different *generational people groups*. This puts pressure on the existing and traditional churches in any culture to adapt and flex with the emerging new culture to remain relevant or risk increasing marginalisation of the emerging *generational people group*. The first generation that is marginalized will likely be the last generation to be identified with that expression of faith. The next generation will most likely either reject it altogether or drift off to alternative expressions closer to their own cultural style. Of course, *future generational people groups* may well rediscover that style as so 'alternative' to their previous generations 'establishment' that they embrace it with their own adaptations. But this is no reason for intentional irrelevance in the vain hope that one day "...they'll discover we were right all along..."

The rate of change brought about by spreading global 'western' culture with all its post modernist characteristics, renders traditional 'forms' of religious expression unhelpful in conveying their original 'meanings'. Simply put, the same forms no longer communicate the same meaning, and it's meaning that matters. The biblical mandate of the contextualization of the gospel requires that no unnecessary stumbling block be put in the way of people embracing Christianity. No people group should be required to first adopt another culture as a prerequisite to being welcomed and integrated into the worshipping community of faith.

In westernised countries, the traditional church is facing a crisis of change. Declining attendance to the point of closure and financial non-viability force the issue: Change or die. Yet in spite of spectacular net losses in traditional denominations, contemporary churches whose culture is personal, spontaneous, involving, and relational rather than programmatic, are showing growth. Across the board Christianity is growing faster than ever before and most of that growth is in charismatic and Pentecostal style churches. Though some would argue this fact is due to issues of theology, I argue that it is more to do with issues of culture and style, with the experience of 'church' and the presented relevance to the immediate values of the prevailing culture. For an excellent detailed exploration of this issue I recommend the Leonard Sweet's book, Soul Tsunami, Chap 6, Get EPIC.

The message hasn't changed, but the form and culture of manifesting the message must. It seems plain to the observer that churches that do not embrace change and more contemporary forms of expressing and practising the faith are on the decline and have no future beyond providing a setting for traditional wedding photos and a refuge for the shrinking few who cling to traditional form. Certainly, there is little long-term future for youth ministry in such places beyond outreach and service centres operating much like a local church based para-church organisation.

Effectiveness

What is the basis of evaluating the effectiveness and validity of Youth ministry over the long term? If the measure is how many young people 'reached' or touched by the program of the church, then such a ministry can possibly grow and exist in an unchanging church. It will be like a community arm of the church. However, if the measure of effectiveness is not just how many young people are reached, but are retained in active involvement in the community and mission of the church, then the whole church may be required to change. Effectiveness is measured by the long-term personal involvement of believers in great commission and great commandment lifestyle as an active member of the Body of Christ, the local community of faith. Failure to respond to the emerging generation's needs, expectations of ministry and culture will alienate, marginalise and exclude them resulting in youth leaving once they pass youth group age.

Target Youth: the Emerging Culture

The fact is that the culture of the youth of any nation is the *emerging* culture of the great unreached masses which every church is called to reach. In one sense, without compromising the non-negotiables of scripture, the changes required of a church to accommodate, integrate and communicate to their youth, effectively amounts to adjusting their sites to be on target to reach their mission field of unchurched neighbours. As a rule, the unchurched adults in a community are more familiar with the forms and styles of their youth than they are with those of the traditional church. So changing to become more relevant to youth actually makes the church more relevant to the unchurched generally. I'm not talking about superficialities of adopting any fringe fashion but of moving to keep pace with changing cultural trends of the broad population of the under 30 year olds. Youth ministry itself must be more contemporary than that keeping pace with the culture of its immediate target group (say 13-19 year olds) but the church in general ought to be no more than one generation behind.

In Australia, extensive research in churches (ref. National Church Life Survey, Peter Kaldor) demonstrates that regardless of denomination and theological difference, the growing churches are

those that target a 'younger' style. Anglican (ie. Episcopal), Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian alike all have examples of growing churches and those congregations have the youngest age profile of attenders. The most likely age group of first time attenders is from 15-25 and the most likely age group of 'returnees' is in the mid 30's, the age that corresponds to parents of young children who are looking to return to their spiritual roots. The difference is that they are not loyal to any denomination, rather they are looking for a church that they *and their children* can relate to and share in a sense of community, to belong. Given that the only way churches can grow is by attracting 'first-timers' and 'returnees' then youth ministry and a church's attractiveness to young people are of central importance. Churches who do not change to accommodate this need will simply decline and die within a generation.

In most countries, especially the major cities of the world, the influence of contemporary western culture is growing. In the broadest sense there is a global youth culture emerging. This trend will likely accelerate unless resisted intentionally by some nationalistic drive from within a culture. (eg. Islamic extremism and nationalism in certain countries). It would seem fair to say that any church or mission group that targets the emerging generation of its people will position itself well to be on target to reach the people of today and tomorrow, where as to target the older generation is to position oneself for defeat, tomorrow if not today. The emerging generation is the marker of the culture shift across the board to follow.

What if a church refuses to change...

If a church refuses to change to accommodate a growing youth ministry:

1. The young people will 'graduate' with healthy, biblical and reasonable expectations the church simply cannot meet.
2. The young people will leave because they fail to see attractive adult role models of practising Christians that they can relate to therefore viewing their Christian experience as a stage of their life - kids stuff - rather than a lifelong Journey.
3. They will split off becoming a separate congregation with in the same building or perhaps break away all together to become a separate congregation with a history, a history of splitting and defining itself in reaction to or distinction from the 'parent' church. .
4. As the young people become young adults they will produce a disgruntled power block within the congregation who bring pressure for change which, if resisted, will result in destabilisation and eventual fragmentation. In congregationally governed churches a leadership crisis will result as the forces for change are marshalled against incumbent leadership. In particular, emerging leaders will become a pressure to change. If they sense there is little or no hope of them giving expression to their leadership or shaping the direction of the church then they will leave, possibly disillusioned.
5. Young adults will leave the zeal of their teen years behind as 'kids stuff' as they are socialised into the adult values and culture of the church. Often this will mean adopting a passive Christianity where peer to peer ministry is unknown.

It seems that the options of a growing youth ministry in an unchanging church are less than positive with the odds against survival of the new young believers and in time the ministry itself. If the group becomes a separate congregation then the painful 'childhood' and 'adolescence' it experienced on the way to independence threatens to load it up with unwanted mitigating baggage. The situation would have been a lot simpler had the new congregation started out separate and autonomous able to be a contemporary and contextual expression of the Christian faith for those involved with positive spiritual leadership building great commission and great commandment values.

The Challenges to Change

1. Local churches need to be able to provide opportunity for the contemporary expression of each generation's faith experience. They must be able to continually accommodate the style and expression of their young people as part of the main stream of the congregation not just the 'youth group'. Emerging generations must be able to freely and keenly identify with the values and lifestyle of the church community or they will not embrace them as their own and not integrate well. If they do integrate to a church community that is irrelevant to their contemporary culture then they will struggle integrating their faith to their daily lives in the 'real world' in which they live and are called to minister.
2. Traditional forms of church are least likely to be effective in reaching, establishing and integrating young people. Congregations who define their identity in terms of traditional expressions of their faith with traditional structures and forms will be viewed as increasingly irrelevant in the face of the accelerating changes from one generation to the next. Granted, the emphasis on the mystical and transcendent aspects of 'high church' culture and practice may appeal to a generation in search of spirituality, but the failure to express the immanence of God, the personal and practical reality in daily living, will present an impotent gospel (1 Cor 4:20) and make true discipling unlikely.
3. Church planting through youth ministry is a radical but real option for mission. In certain countries where there is a dominant traditional state Christian denomination the challenge to change to reach an unreached generation may require radical options. If the dominant church is either unregenerate or inflexible to the point of being unresponsive to the needs of the target generational people group, then the only options available are to plant a new congregation with new leadership as part of the denomination (unlikely in a traditional hierarchy structure) or to plant a new church of another denomination or independently. This is a radical option and should only be adopted when other options have been eliminated as it will surely bring the greatest opposition, even persecution. To plant a new church from which to reach and disciple young people will require adult leaders and at least a core of role models of mature Christians so that new believers can observe and be 'parented' by those older in the faith, as is true Christian community. This may be developed in time if not at first. Multi generational community is the ideal.

In certain cultures church planting through youth ministry would benefit from involvement of elderly, mature believers from the beginning as kind of transplanted instant eldership and mentors. This is the case in cultures where the population reveres age (eg. China) and those where the adult populations have been decimated by disease or war (eg. Aids in Africa). In a real sense, this presents a major mission opportunity for the retired and the adventurous elderly looking to make a significant

contribution for the Kingdom in the sunset years. Certainly they would require cultural flexibility and a servant heart. But beyond that they would need only to be mature in faith and grey of head. Age would be a necessary and desirable prerequisite for 'instant' elders, adoptive spiritual grandparents.

Church planting partnerships could be formed between denominations existing in the country or with mission agencies operating there. Such partnerships would enable youth ministry to be developed reaching the emerging and unreached generation under the umbrella of a church plant with pastoral leadership provided. Linking with a denominational or mission agency structure provides the accountability, resourcing and training backup necessary to survive long term.

In certain countries, any churches outside of the traditional state recognised church is branded cultic and subject to real persecution. Therefore, this option, though necessary in some cases, should not be considered until all others have been explored. However, the persecuted church has tended to thrive throughout history from the first century to now. The controlling factor must be whatever is necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the great commission among each generation.

4. Given that young people need the local expression of the Body of Christ for their survival in the Christian life and growth, and that the primary place they should get that is through a local church, workers must connect them into healthy local churches committed to nurture and discipleship. If such churches are not available then the workers either should seek a partnership with a denominational structure to plant a church, or the workers should plant and develop a church in the community from the youth ministry itself. Responsibility demands that the worker not leave the youth alone to drown in traditional religion or personal and cultural neglect.

5. The structures of church life and organisation are the most culture bound and unresponsive to the changing needs of people. Therefore programmatic churches are most at risk as is programmatic youth ministry. Ministry that is people primary, relational in nature rather than program and structures, will be most adaptable and responsive to changes. This is a challenge that is as applicable to youth ministry as it is to church. As a rule in a changing culture, the structures that help us today will hinder us tomorrow; today's helpful programmes will become tomorrow's unhelpful problems. The shoes that fit today will hurt and restrict growth tomorrow, if your feet are growing. Wineskins that are new today will be old before long and new wine demands new skins that can expand to accommodate it.

We must be constantly evaluating the needs of the generation we seek to minister to and the capacity and effectiveness of our programmes to deliver with precision and no extra baggage. In this regard, the cell structure is simplest, most people primary, least programmatic and by nature responsive to the changing needs of people. The cell approach to ministry enables new wineskins to be created as the new wine is produced. Cell based ministry also places the emphasis in the cell in the community rather than in the structured 'formal' congregational setting, which is by nature more bound by tradition. In many contexts - especially in situations where there is little hope for change in traditional structures - cell based ministry is a practical solution for church planting in the long run and nurture and outreach from the beginning.

Youth Ministry as a Catalyst

Of course in many cases churches are open to change and have a desire to be honest in evaluation and sharpened in their effectiveness to reach each generation. Often they lack the leadership, skills, contacts in the unchurched community, and connections. They may have been locked in a programme cycle or traditional structure for so long that they just cannot see any other way. They may well have an increasing sense of their own slow death but be clueless as to how or unwilling to risk change from the known to the unknown.

The three most consistent nonnegotiables of change in any church are:

1. Leadership with vision of a preferred future and a new paradigm of operation. Not only a visionary idea, but some demonstration of the reality of the proposed change through modelling of leadership;
2. A group of people within the congregation (5%) who are typically called 'early adopters', wanting change and willing to jump on board to support it and swing the momentum of the 'middle adopters' (30+%). The 'middle adopters' are more inclined to the status quo than to change but are willing to follow the lead of a credible and trusted group of 'leaders' and people that seem to know what they are about.
3. Increasing pain in remaining the same. That is people are not open to change until the pain of remaining with the status quo is greater than the pain of change.

For all three of these elements, long term youth ministry can provide a source. Healthy youth ministry will produce young adult leadership with a great commission vision and the experience to deliver in terms of a proven track record of personal ministry. It will also produce a growing pool of young adults with ministry values and expectations. These will both advocate for change and lead others in adopting it. If the leadership structure of the church allows for new leadership to enter the 'power base' then the stand out spiritual leaders will increasingly be the product of the youth ministry. In time, they can become deacons, elders or board members. In a cell based church of course they will already be in positions of leadership because leadership is based on fruitfulness in multiplication rather than management (ie. maintenance) positions in committees and boards.

A healthy youth ministry will provide a growing group of members who are looking for change and will act as early adopters to follow leadership vision of change toward great commission priorities and values.

A healthy youth ministry will increase internal pressure to change on more reluctant leadership and members increasing a healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo. Those who get disenchanted and leave will increase the pain/cost of the status quo. Parents and sincere adults with a mission heart will want to 'keep the young people' and increasingly be prepared to pay the price of change to do so. Of course those who are opposed to change because of entrenched traditionalism or their own eroding power and control will increase their opposition and usually do so by spiritualising the issues as a smokescreen to their own insecurity and personal agendas.

Certainly the most common cry of unhealthy churches is "we need leaders and workers". A healthy youth ministry is the easiest way of producing both. Like a free flowing stream, it can be channelled into the stagnant pond to flood it and as some of the 'new water breaks the banks it can flush the pond much like the Jordan River with the Sea of Galilee.

In Australia, a Billabong is the name for an ox-bow lake. It is the pool of water (water hole) left by a change of course in the river. It is still, quiet, stable and increasingly stagnating. It typically becomes viewed as the personal territory of the largest inhabitants (fish, frogs, or in the tropical north, crocodiles). At times of flood, the river may break its banks changing course again to flow into the billabong, flood it, and break through the other end to reclaim it as part of the river path. This changes everything about the billabong, rejuvenates it, and introduces new inhabitants, healthier conditions for regeneration. But the 'big frogs' or 'big crocs' lose their influence and power of control. If they are frogs, that's not a problem to the new corners. But it's a different matter if they are crocs. They can become a threat, even killers and may need to be controlled if not removed entirely. The same is true in changing the billabongs of church. As healthy as the change may be in the long term, some people will be losers, those with the vested interest in the status quo. There is need to identify them and monitor them, even remove them for the protection of the rest of the inhabitants, especially the new corners.

The Focus For Change

Build the new before dismantling the old. Make the new wine skin before cutting up the old. Focus on the incoming new growth, new members, youth ministry fruit, conversion growth as the vehicle to usher in the new structures, and culture. By developing an intentional flow chart of growth in structures that serve that end of moving people through to maturity and ministry in Christ the new expression of 'church' can be created in the midst of the old. The headwaters of the youth ministry can be used to flush out and carve new channels through the old ponds of church life. Dig channels for the water coming down stream (emerging young people and new contacts/converts), the fresh, the new. Too often leaders focus on the existing church, the 'water' that past down stream long ago and now lies still, motionless in the pond. This is a sure recipe for frustration and pain. Leaders need to focus on shaping and crafting the future through focussing on the new growth of the present. Youth ministry typically is and generally can be the primary source of new growth.

Application Questions:

1. What is the mandate of the great commission as it relates to local churches? Is it incumbent on disciple makers to work under the authority of existing local churches even if those churches are in decline, refusing to change growing increasingly irrelevant to the culture they are trying to reach? (new wine old skins) Or does the mandate to reach each generation sometimes require that existing local churches are bypassed in order to ensure effectiveness of the mission to make disciples?
2. Youth ministry seeks to serve the church, serve Christ, and serve the needs of young people. But what happens when these things are in conflict and what are the priorities? What about when the church(es) is not evangelical and Bible believing?
3. What is the place of church planting? Is the prevailing theology of 'commitment to the local

church" limiting youth ministry to existing local churches or can youth ministry actually become a primary tool for planting new churches for a new generation? (eg. World Wide Mission Tribe in Manchester, UK; Hillside Youth Programs, Australia, which became Hillside New Community Church; Youth Ministry International, Ian Green, in Eastern Europe; Don Roscoe's Grace Community Church, Nashville, Michigan, USA; Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, USA)

4. What of the responsibility of young people to their parents (in the case of minors) and how does this impact on the issue when the parents are the ones resisting change to traditional approaches to church? What does this mean in Islamic and other cultures where parents may forbid their children's participation in Christian activities?

5. What are the cross generational needs of healthy faith communities and what does this mean for youth ministry church-plants either within existing churches or as separate autonomous congregations? (Eg. older women teaching the younger, grandparents in the faith, elders etc.). What creative strategies can be developed to involve mature elderly believers in missionary placements as church elders in church plants especially in cultures and societies that revere age?

6. Are we prepared to pay the price of opposition to change and church planting and what forms may it take in different countries?

7. Given people's sinful tendency to operate counter to the love, unity (John 17) and submission, when do we decide to operate outside the established church and who makes those decisions so that it is not the result of frustration but a sense of the leading of God?

8. Specifically, what are the options in countries where the dominant state church in the culture is a non-evangelical and at times unregenerate traditional religious expression of Christian faith? What is the mandate of the youth ministry missionary as far as working outside, even in defiance of, the dominant church denominational system?

9. How did the early church respond to the issue of synagogue culture and dominant Hebrew culture in the early church when there was a steady influx of gentiles to the faith family? Is it irresponsible to seek to integrate the new believers into the prevailing religious system when that system is not great commission oriented or even acknowledges basics of biblical Christianity? Is it acting responsibly to enfold healthy new believers into unhealthy stagnant churches?

10. What are the keys to avoiding the Saul/David, or synagogue/cell syndrome where the 'emerging new' threatens the 'established old' as we look at the issues of youth ministry leading the change and increased fruitfulness and effectiveness in the church? What are the non-negotiables that need to be in place in leadership?

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