

Reflections of a Youth Pastor from Singapore
Extracts from a book entitled "Serious Fun"
By Norman Wong

Encourage Questions and Debate

I have had the privilege of working among young people for over 20 years. One thing I have learned is that if they keep quiet and don't say anything for a long time, something is wrong. Their silence is a sign to me that I am not really connecting with them.

Mark Yaconelli tells an unusual story of a pastor who took the radical step of not preaching a sermon during the Sunday worship service – for several weeks.ⁱ Instead he just encouraged the whole congregation to ask questions. If they had no questions they would sit together in silence thinking about what questions they would like to ask God!

The youth in his congregation responded. After the service in their youth group, the young people started asking many questions. Their searching discussions deepened the whole life of the church.

Young people learn best when they get personally involved in the process of learning – when they question you, argue with you, disagree with you, and thus discover truth for themselves.

Stories, Stories, Stories

I always make it a point to look into the eyes of the young people I speak to. I have also been trying to follow Christ's example of preaching:

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable.
(Matthew 13:34)

I haven't always succeeded. I still feel compelled to try and teach abstract concepts and principles. And whenever I do so, I almost always see a few eyes glaze over. Some stare out of the window blankly. Others stretch and yawn openly, giving me a clear signal of what they think of my teaching. But whenever I begin to tell a story, I see their eyes return to meet mine and for a few precious moments, I have them in my spell!

One Quiz Question

What short phrase of advice did Jesus repeat most often to His disciples?
(The answer is on the next page BUT do NOT turn to it until you have thought it through and can suggest at least 3 of Jesus' sayings. Discuss this with your group.)

Answer: He who has ears, let him hear!

Apart from the seven times this phrase occurs in the Gospels, it also occurs eight times in the Book of Revelation where the risen Christ repeatedly instructs the churches to listen to the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ Imagine that! Christ repeats this same instruction 15 times! It is very important to ensure that we are able to discern accurately what God is saying. The Scriptures clearly teach us to expect to hear directly from God. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to My voice.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Something’s happening.

And if you haven’t seen it for yourself, please check it out. For the last three years it has been my responsibility to travel round and visit children and youth ministries that have been growing rapidly. And it’s happening everywhere – not just in my own country of Singapore – but in the region around us as well – in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. I have had the privilege of interacting with Haggai Institute participants from the four corners of the earth; they report a similar development: Children (yes – children as young as six years old) and youth are learning to listen to the voice of God. Many have a vibrant faith and deep love for the Lord.

How can we be sure they have heard the voice of God? Could they have been deceived and are hearing the voice of the evil one instead? Or is what they imagine to be the voice of God is merely a reflection of their own thoughts and desires?

These questions highlight the need to be on our guard against deception. This is a powerful reason for involving mature adults, with a good knowledge of the Scriptures, in children and youth and children ministries. A consistent study of the Scriptures will help safeguard against deception.

No one should ever be so arrogant as to think that he or she is the only source of true revelation from God. Therefore, we should always ask others to check what we think God is saying.

This is the attitude in which I’m presenting this book. The following pages are a summary of what I think the Spirit of God is saying to His church. The Spirit of God is stirring among our children and youth. Are there dangers? Have mistakes been made? Yes. But through it all God is doing something – and it is good! I have submitted these thoughts to many church leaders from different parts of the world and they have affirmed them. I now submit these thoughts to you. As you read, I am praying that you will hear what the Lord wants to say to you directly and personally.

Something’s happening: the Lord is raising up a generation of children and youth who are learning to recognize the voice of God.

Jesus – the Rock of our Faith

I am aware that some people find all this talk about hearing directly from God a little upsetting. So I am going to start slowly.

Let me tell you a story about a famine in China.

Deep in the interior of China, far from the booming prosperity of the eastern coastal mega cities, a farming community repeatedly suffers from drought and

famine. This causes widespread disease, suffering and death. Many miles away in the comfort of his home, a businessman from Singapore receives a letter from a distant relative living in that famine area, asking for help.

How should he respond?

- The very least he could do is to reply and encourage his relative to ‘endure the suffering’. But you can’t eat a letter when you are hungry!
- He could buy cartons of dried foodstuff and send them to his relative – that would be much better! That would be a much higher expression of love and concern. One can’t really expect him to do much more. But what happens after the food runs out?
- This is what he did. He took leave from his job and personally organized an expedition which included engineers, medical personnel and aid workers. Together they left the comfort and security of Singapore and went right into the stricken area, bringing not only food and medical supplies but also the engineering skills and equipment to construct irrigation channels and reservoirs to provide a long term solution to the repeated cycles of drought. What an incredible expression of the sacrificial love.

That story helps me understand what God has done for us in the miracle of the incarnation. Almighty God left the glory, beauty, security and comfort of Heaven to enter our war-torn, diseased, wicked world – to be born a human being just like us – yet without sin. He became like us – so that we might become like Him. All my thoughts and ideas about youth ministry unfold from this central truth.

*For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form.
(Colossians 2:9)*

I know that the whole of Scripture is inspired by God and anyone who studies any part of it with an open heart will be greatly blessed. But the four Gospels in particular – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – stand out as extra special, simply because they describe our Lord Jesus.

If we compare truth to a light source, then every page of the Bible is glowing with light – yet the brightest light radiates from the four Gospels. I am fully aware that we need the Old Testament background to help us interpret the four Gospels accurately. But equally, if not more so, we cannot fully appreciate the Old Testament without understanding the life of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. Do you remember that incredible Old Testament discussion that Jesus had with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus?

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. (Luke 24:27)

The life of Christ helps us to understand the Old Testament better! Christ is the centre – the highest and brightest revelation of God. The clearest description of His life and teachings is found in the Gospels. Because of this, some churches today, following a very ancient tradition, read a portion of the Old Testament, a portion of the Gospels and a portion from the epistles – but when the Gospels are read, the whole congregation stands up to listen.

All preaching and teaching must be tested against this question: “Is your teaching consistent with the life and teaching of Christ?” We must repeatedly focus the attention of our youth on His life and teaching. This is why I am not afraid of teaching our youth and children to learn to obey Christ’s most repeated instruction: “If you have ears – listen!”

We teach them to check whatever they think the Lord has said to them inwardly and personally by the objective teaching and example of Christ Himself.

Let me share with you a few observations before delivering my punch line. As I have gone round various youth ministries, I notice two things.

- There is often a shortage of adults who are prepared to get involved in youth ministry. One of the main reasons cited is that they think they have an inadequate grasp of the Scriptures.
- On the other extreme, some of the adults who are committed to youth ministry see it as their mission to teach the whole Bible in depth to all their students. This has resulted in the much repeated response when youth give honest feedback about the youth meetings or Sunday school classes – ‘boring!’

One more thing I have noticed, particularly in Protestant circles, having been a student of theology for the past thirty years – the epistles of Paul seem to be the main influence on church doctrine and practice.

I am all for a thorough study of Paul’s letters.^{iv} But I think this has been overemphasized to the detriment of our understanding of the Gospels. Now here’s what I think the Spirit is saying: *it is sufficient to base the principles and practice of youth ministry on a thorough study of the four Gospels.*

I will say more about this later. For now it will be enough to note that:

- If adults were told that their main task was to explain the Gospels to youth, many more will be prepared to come forward because the task would be less daunting. You do not have to know the whole Bible before you can mentor a young person for Christ.
- If adult leaders of youth ministries were convinced that it is not necessary to teach youth the whole Bible, that would make it a lot easier to tailor a youth programme that meets the needs of the young people.

The rest of this book is an attempt to apply the principles gleaned from the life and teaching of Christ to the practice of youth ministry today.

The Parable of the Sower

Short activity: Ask someone in the team to repeat the story of the parable of the sower – just the parable; *not* the explanation of it. If you are on your own – do it yourself.^v

The parable of the sower is the chief of all the parables that Jesus told and deserves special consideration. Referring to the parable of the sower, Jesus said:

Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? (Mark 4:13)

Note the sequence of events described in Mark 4.

- Jesus tells the parable to the crowd – *but does not explain the meaning.*
- His disciples, “when He was alone”, ask Him to explain.
- He replies: “The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those outside everything is said in parables.” Then he goes on to explain the parable.
- Mark 4:33, 34 – “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. *He did not say anything to them without using a parable.* But when He was alone with His disciples, He explained everything.”

It is extremely important that we are convinced about the answer to two questions:

- What is the ‘secret’ of the kingdom of God revealed in the parable of the sower?
- Why did Jesus teach in parables?

Before reading my answer to these two questions, take a few moments to try and answer them yourself. (If you are reading this with your team allow everyone a chance to respond.)

The first thing to note is that when Jesus used the word ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ it did not mean anything ‘secretive’ that should not ever be revealed. It is more like the answer to a riddle. Every riddle has a ‘secret’. Why did the rooster dash on to the football pitch? Think for a moment before reading the answer in the endnote.^{vi}

A riddle is meant to both conceal and reveal something. When someone presents you with a riddle that you have not heard – it makes you think. Sometimes you solve the riddle yourself; at other times, you have to ask for the answer.

Whichever way, once you know the answer to the riddle, it is no longer a mystery to you. Next time someone asks you the same riddle, you know the answer.

The parable of the sower reveals a secret about the Kingdom of God. Once you know the secret, it is no longer a secret. Before Jesus explained this parable, everyone thought that when the Messiah came, He would come with great power and authority, destroy all evil and establish God’s Kingdom on earth.

The secret is this: the Messiah has come! And yet the power of evil is still thriving. In fact Satan is able to snatch God’s life-giving Word from the hearts of men! The cares of the world can choke the Word of God and prevent it from transforming your life. Put simply, the secret is this: you can reject God’s powerful Word!

His life-giving Word is given to you – but because you harden your heart – it has no effect – it does not bear fruit. God is like the perfect gentleman, He will not force His Kingdom on your life. He allows you to ignore His invitation to embrace His Kingdom. God is speaking to everyone through the voice of conscience. But you can choose not to listen. But beware – for if you continue to reject His Word, your heart will harden to the point where you are unable to

hear the Word of God even if it were shouted in your ear! Even if Almighty God Himself were to stand right before your very eyes, you would not be able to see Him! You may even look Him in the eye and call Him the devil! This actually happened.^{vii} There were those who thought that Jesus, the purest revelation of God, was using the power of the devil. How blind can you get?

The Word of God is like a bright Light. It can blind you or it can show you the way in the dark. Many people have literally gone blind attempting to stare into the sun. This is the reason Jesus always spoke to the crowd in parables: He was revealing truth (the Word of God) little by little. He didn't want to blind the crowds by revealing too much too soon. So He told them a parable – He gave them a little light. If they responded and wanted to know more – He gave them more!

This is such an important principle which many well-meaning Christians have failed to grasp. In a desperate bid to secure the salvation of their loved ones, they have “shoved the Gospel down their throats” often causing a further hardening and resistance to the Gospel. Jesus longs that everyone should repent. But His approach was to preach in parables without explaining them! He just gave them a little taste and left it! If they walked away without enquiring further, he let them go! Only if they responded did He give them a little more.

The Main Point

Now I come to the main point of this chapter. It is also the main point of the whole book. Because of the great changes in these four areas that youth are going through – they are very impressionable and vulnerable. This sounds like a contradiction. How can they be rebellious and impressionable at the same time? The fact of the matter is that they are! This is the irony of the adolescent period. They actually need guidance but they do not want to be guided!

Charismatic world leaders hungry for power have exploited this fact for their own ends. Who can forget the powerful images of a million young Chinese flooding Tiananmen Square and screaming hysterically as Chairman Mao Tse-tung made a brief appearance?

He mobilized a whole generation of youth who faithfully recited his thoughts from his little “Red Book” dreaming of a better tomorrow. He used them to enforce his iron rule with great cruelty. Many have since followed in his steps.

In 1988 I spoke to Bernard Lee, a full time evangelist with the Navigators in Singapore whom I considered one of the most effective in winning and discipling youth for Christ. I asked him what he thought the Lord was saying to His church about youth ministry. Without missing a beat he said, “It needs to be adult led.” I disagreed with him initially. I argued that it was important to allow the young people themselves to organize and lead their own activities. Let them make their own mistakes. That's the best way for them to learn.

He fully agreed with me, but maintained that it was still vital that adults were sufficiently involved to provide direction, personal mentoring and money for the long term effectiveness of the ministry.

I went round all the major youth agencies in Singapore that were making an impact for the Lord among young people – Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ,

Scripture Union, The Boys' Brigade and The Girls' Brigade and they were all doing the same thing. They were training youth to take leadership but the adults were there to provide support and direction.

If you do not know of YWAM – or Youth With A Mission - you may think that they are a group of youth serving the Lord. YWAM is one of the largest and most effective missionary organizations of our generation and they too are led by adults. Their goal is to raise a generation of young people who can reach their own peers for Christ.

Can you recall the last verse of the Old Testament mentioned earlier?

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. (Malachi 4:6)

I believe the Holy Spirit is clearly speaking to the senior leadership of churches all around the world to be personally involved in youth evangelism and discipleship. I hope you are listening. We cannot afford to leave this matter just to the parachurch youth organizations.

If you will not seize this opportune moment to make a great impact on the lives of your youth – someone else will!

These next few lines are some of the most important in this whole book. If you take away only one thing from the great effort you have put in to read this far, I hope you take away this:

- You are the model.
- Your youth need to see you in action.
- They need to see an example of how to share Christ with their friends.
- We cannot just tell our youth to reach out to their friends – we must show them!
- So sit together with your youth and plan a weekly evangelistic activity. It could be anything from your weekly Sunday school hour to a game of football. (Note: if you make your weekly Sunday school hour evangelistic in nature – and I think you should - that means you need another time in the week to ‘build your believers’ and ‘train your workers.’)
- Then choose one or at most two youth who show some interest in spiritual matters and challenge them to reach out to others.
- If they agree, ask them to meet you 10 minutes before the event.
- Brief them as follows: “For the next two hours, the three of us will stick together like glue. We will move as one unit, silently praying that the Lord will lead us to someone to talk to. Any one of us can take the lead to strike up a conversation. The other two will support and pray silently for the person or join in the conversation as appropriate. We may or may not have the opportunity to talk about Christ but at the very least we will reaching out and making people feel welcome. If possible we can exchange contact details. After the event we will meet for 10 minutes for a short debrief.”
- After the event, ask them to reflect on the conversations and remind them to follow through with a phone call or email with any who responded during the conversations.
- Having two younger persons watching me try and strike up conversations with non-Christians stretched me beyond what I would normally do.

Personally, this was the most difficult part for me to put into practice. I mentioned earlier that I had the privilege of pastoring a church with 1600 adults gathering for worship every Sunday. Even if I had the physical strength to work 24 hours every day, I would not be able to meet all their needs. All my time was spent with Christians and I had no time for meeting non-Christians and evangelism apart from preaching from the pulpit. I realized that I had to change. So I asked my staff to hold me accountable. At our weekly meetings, I report to them what efforts in evangelism I made during the previous week and my plans for evangelism in the week ahead.

We have no option in this matter. Whatever it takes, we must change our pattern of living. If we want our youth to reach their peers for Christ – we must show them how! We must put evangelism into our weekly schedules.

Serious Fun

Something has happened in all the 18 churches in the Conference I have worked in over the past 20 years. There was no organized consultation or direction given from the headquarters. It just evolved. I think it happened in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In each church, we used to have a Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) which was led by the youths themselves and a Sunday School which was led by the adults. MYF activities led by the youth were always a lot of fun – but often lacked purpose. Sunday School led by the adults was very strong on teaching from the Bible, but many youth found this boring and just stopped attending. What has happened is that both these organizations (MYF and Sunday School) have combined into one youth ministry. This combination has its own set of problems, but I believe this is the right way to go. Remember the prophet Malachi is encouraging us to bridge the generation gap. We need both adults and youth sitting down together and creating a programme that is both fun and meaningful for our youth.

ⁱ Yaconelli, Mark, “A Life Creates a Bridge” in *The Princeton Lectures on Youth Culture 2003* Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological College pages 68-71.

ⁱⁱ Matt 11:15; 13:9,43; Mark 4:9,23; Lk 8:8; 14:35; Rev 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22; 13:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 10:27; also John 10:4.

^{iv} In fact my first Masters degree was a research paper on Pauline theology supervised by Dr John Drane at the University of Stirling.

^v If you are not sure which parable I am referring to, please read Mark 4:1-9.

^{vi} Answer: Because the referee blew the whistle for foul (fowl) play!

^{vii} Mark 3:22.