

Global Youth Culture and Faith Development



By: Sean Marston
Website: www.youthmesh.org
Email: sean@youthmesh.org

YOUTH Mesh.

Index

- Pg 3: Global Youth Culture—The Numbers
- Pg 4: How Global Youth Culture is Developing
- Pg 5: Youth Culture—An Unreached People Group
- Pg 6: Understanding Youth Culture Identity
- Pg 7: Global Youth Culture—A Separate Culture
- Pg 8: How to Understand Global Youth Culture
- Pg 9: Youth Culture—What Youth are Really Like
- Pg 10: Norms of the Emerging Generation
- Pg 11: The Complicated World of Youth Culture
- Pg 12: Global Youth Culture—A World of Too Many Choices
- Pg 13: Youth Culture—Creating a Christian Identity
- Pg 14: Connecting Young People Into Church
- Pg 15: Youth Culture and Justice
- Pg 16: Global Youth Culture and Emotions
- Pg 17: Youth Culture—Reasons for Faith
- Pg 18: From Individual to Shared Faith
- Pg 19: Global Youth Culture—Losing Their Religion
- Pg 20: Youth Culture—View of Sin
- Pg 21: Youth Culture—Looking for Community
- Pg 22: Developing Leadership with Global Youth Culture
- Pg 23: Making Space for Youth Culture in Church
- Pg 24: Ideas to Engage Young People
- Pg 25: Mess and Disorder is the Norm
- Pg 26: Break Out Opportunities
- Pg 27: Transitioning Youth to Young Adults
- Pg 28: Sex and Sexuality
- Pg 29: Relational Based Youth Ministry
- Pg 30: Ideas for Putting Together an Effective Youth Ministry
- Pg 31: Looking for Honesty
- Pg 32: Narrative and Story Telling



Global Youth Culture—The Numbers

Numbers can be useful or frustrating in mission work. Numbers can be overwhelming or they can be inspiring. For instance—What do you do with the reality that around 60% of all people in many of the countries of the world are under the age of 25?

Do these figures cause you to look at what is occurring in the country you are working in and evaluate what might need to change? The reason I say 'change' is because this percentage tells a story of need and of where the opportunity is for ministry. People under 25 are the most open to the gospel and it is a time in their lives when they are setting their world view. Numbers also talk about an opportunity, an opportunity to connect the emerging generations with the gospel. Are you prepared and ready to take up the challenge? Are you prepared to look at how your field of ministry can connect with this younger generation?

The percentage of people under the age of 25 of various countries around the world

China — 25%	India — 50%
Bangladesh — 57%	Philippines — 55%
Nepal — 59%	Mongolia — 51%
Ethiopia — 64%	Nigeria—62%
South Africa—52%	Sudan—63%
Kenya—65%	Ghana—60%
Cote d'Ivoire—62%	Angola—63%
Niger—66%	Burkina Faso—67%
Zimbabwe—64%	Malawi—68%
Zambia—69%	Senegal—62%
Guinea—64%	Benin—65%
Togo—64%	Liberia—64%
Namibia—61%	Botswana—64%
Ecuador—52.7%	Peru—49.6%
Bolivia—56.4%	Chile—41.7%
Paraguay—56.3%	Uruguay—38%

It is just about impossible to comprehend these figures because they represent so many people—a billion or two. They also represent an age group that can be challenging and confusing to work with. The reality that to work with emerging generations around the world can be like choosing to work with people of another culture. But the figures are there and they require a response.



How Global Youth Culture is Developing

One of the most challenging and motivating books I have read recently is 'The World is Flat' by Thomas L Friedman. It is a real eye opener about how inter-connected we all are now in the world. This is a book about economics, media, the internet and other ways we are connected. It excited me because it is also about the world that emerging generations are growing up in. Because of the internet, media and travel young people from all parts of the world are developing similar ways of thinking, acting and viewing the world.

What a 'Flat' world looks like for young people...

- Young people across Africa are developing their own form of rap music. It has its origins from rap music from the USA and the UK but their songs are not such much about sex and violence but about social issues and their stories of strife and struggle but also hope.
- As economic prosperity grows in Asia then young people are wanting to not just have more material goods but they are wanting to use this financial prosperity to make a difference in areas of social justice and the environment
- Asia is one of the most internet connected parts of the world. Young people live through their cell phone and the internet.
- In most parts of the world to understand youth culture in each country you need to spend time looking through internet sites and chat rooms about the country.
- I read a comment that in India, the place of woman and girls, is a true mirror of the social and cultural changes that are happening. In urban India young women are finding their own freedom and choice. They are now pursuing their own careers, going shopping, having cell phones, partying and having boyfriends..
- In Africa young people spend hours at the local video store watching movies and sports videos from all over the world. This is opening up their understanding of the wider world but also their expectations for themselves and what their lives could be like.
- In South America young people are finding freedom from their parents watching eye and this is resulting in them experimenting of things in the world
- In China, break dancing is on the brink of going mainstream. Young people are using this form of dancing and the culture that comes with it as a way to express themselves—love, anger, confusion, disillusionment and hope. There are no rules to break dancing and so everyone is free to express how they feel in a way they like.

Questions to think about...

- What happens when young people learn through education and modern communication (cell phones, internet, chat rooms, blogs) to have their own voice and to question things?
- What happens when the new ways young people express themselves clash with the traditional views of the church?
- How do young people have a voice about what church looks like and how it functions in society?



Youth Culture—An Unreached People Group

To reach youth culture around the world we have to start seeing global youth culture as a 'separate culture' in themselves and that they are an 'unreached people group'. Most thinking about unreached groups are based on cultural, regional and language aspects and global youth culture incorporates these three aspects.

Why Global Youth Culture is a separate culture?

- A general rejection of organised religion (across all religions)
- A questioning of structure and style of organisations (including religious organisations)
- Across most of the majority world around 60% of the population is under 25 years old
- Global media (English, Japanese, Korean, Latino) is creating a common culture
- Shared information and ideas that are accessible to youth all around the world
- Common world views (truth, relationships, hopes, expressions, doubts, life challenges)

Treating Global Youth Culture as a separate culture

- Youth culture would be recognised as being different to the predominant culture
- More time would be taken to understand the youth culture world (language, world view, beliefs, actions) to gain a better understanding of why they think and act as they do
- People would not be so quick to judge the values, attitudes and actions of young people as they would recognise that their starting point is different from the majority culture
- People would recognise that global youth culture has things to offer the predominant church culture (which is predominantly that of adults)
- Differences of youth culture would be acknowledged and celebrated (so therefore helping to make people more understanding and embracing of that culture)

Treating Global Youth Culture as an unreached People Group

- The starting point for understanding youth culture in any country would be from the youth culture world view rather than the dominant one
- People would take time to understand the youth culture understanding of spiritual issues and how they express that because this understanding would be crucial in reaching this culture
- Young people would be given more of a say and control of how they express their faith (because people would see the importance and relevance of having their own expression)
- People would understand that youth culture is different to the predominant culture of the church (adults) and therefore this requires relevant ways to reach into their world
- The gospel would be presented in forms and styles that are relevant to a youth culture
- Much more people and financial resources would be put into reaching youth culture because there would be an understanding of the specific needs involved
- The ways to reach young people would adapt as youth culture evolves and changes
- Churches around the world would be challenged to seriously review how they view, interact with and disciple young people



Understanding Youth Culture Identity

If you want to understand and youth culture you have to take the time to understand the values and world views that are an integral part of young people's thinking and actions. Here are some:

- **I am what I consume** : What young people read, see and experience has increasingly more influence on them than their social and religious background
- **I am significant** : Because of the number of people young people have as contacts on their mobile and social network site and because they communicate with them everyday
- **I am defined by my group** : Increasingly young people are defined and get their self worth from the group or groups that they belong to
- **I feel Loved** : Because people choose to enter their world. They know people truly care because of their actions more than their words or promises
- **I Know God is Real** : When young people see Christians live out the Christian faith before them through action and commitment then they know God is there and real
- **I am defined by my commitments** : Where once people got their sense of identity by the organisations they were part of now young people get their identity by the commitments and causes they choose to follow
- **I am defined by my friends** : Family is still important but friends (their views and beliefs) have a lot more influence on how I see myself and what I believe
- **I see the world through Multi-Coloured Lenses** : Young people are growing up in a more multi-cultural and multi-religious world and this means they are able to see, understand and absorb ideas from outside their culture, country and religious boundaries.
- **I am special**: Ultimately it is the relationships that young people have that makes them feel special more than their standing in society or because of the job or career
- **What I do is more important than what I say** : The words that are spoken by young people are not as important as what they actually do with their life. Their lifestyle is a true description of who they are and their beliefs.
- **Small is important and not big** : Large visions and plans by organisations are not that meaningful to young people but instead they want to know what it actually looks like on the ground.
- **Stories Give Understanding** : Tell young people a story and they learn more easily from it and take it on board their lives than just doing straight teaching
- **In Christianity the community is most important**: Being in community and Christian family is more important than buildings, the right worship, and the best sermon
- **Life is walking up a mountain and not a set of stairs** : Often the Christian life is talked about like a set of stairs you climb but for young people it should be talked about like climbing a mountain where sometimes you are going up, and sometimes you are heading down and then sometimes going back on yourself—but you are still on the path
- **Experience equals Real** : Young people often want to feel and experience something before they buy into it—as they experience God working through them and in their world then He becomes real
- **Uncertainty is the Rule** : Young people are more comfortable with uncertainty and vagueness. They have learned to operate in this system as they have grown up in an uncertain world

Global Youth Culture—A Separate Culture

I believe we need to see the emerging generations as a separate culture in itself and as we do this we will then change the way we approach connecting with them. Here is one of the best ways of describing why global youth culture is a separate culture and what this means about the way we seek to engage them.

“Jesus commands his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Fulfilling the Great Commission in a rapidly changing, post-Christian world requires the church to think seriously about responding to the unique “nation” and culture of young people living in our midst. We need also to develop effective paradigms for understanding and reaching cultures of future emerging generations. In fact, the label “Emerging generations” is no longer limited to just teenagers. In addition, “adolescence” is no longer limited to those whose chronological age places them in their middle and high school years. Our growing understanding of early, middle, and extended adolescence has expanded the boundaries on both ends, resulting in a world where youth culture is shaping individuals in the emerging generations from birth through young adulthood”

If we start to recognise emerging generations around the world as a different and unique culture then it forces us to ask different questions than we have and to look at connecting into their world in new ways: So some ideas of questions:

- What is the language, attitudes and values that this generation uses?
- What is the basis of their faith decision making process?
- What does commitment look like for this age group?
- What are their forms of community and how do you enter into them?
- What are the questions that they are looking to have answered?
- What is their view of the future in Christ look like?
- In what ways do they want to see their faith worked out?
- What aspects of the Christian faith and beliefs do they see as important?
- How do they interpret the Bible and how it is involved in their lives?

If we can start seeing young people as a separate culture then we will better understand their world and be more willing to see their way of life as relevant. We will also see that their culture has something to offer to the church of today rather than trying to change them to fit into our view of church and the Christian faith.



How to Understand Global Youth Culture

I have spent over twenty four years watching and listening to young people around the world. I like to just go up and chat with young people and to ask them questions that will help me understand their world. It has been this watching, asking questions and listening that has helped shape my understanding of young people and how to connect into their world whether they are in New Zealand, Zambia, the Philippines or wherever.

You can read lots of books and articles about young people and youth culture and this is a beginning point but it will be when you just sit and watch and listen and interact with young people that you get a much clearer picture. As you do this more often then you will be surprised at what you start to understand about the young people around you. Here are some ideas of questions to help you do this.

- What are the three biggest influences in young people's lives?
- What type of music do young people listen to?
- How do they talk about their parents, church and their lives?
- How do young people spend their free time?
- What types of media do young people spend their time connected to? (ie: internet, music, movies, mobile phone, online games, social network sites)
- What are the major issues that young people are facing?
- How much influence does religion or religious leaders have on young people?
- Who do young people talk to about their issues and struggles?
- How do young people act at church or youth group?
- How do young people spend their money?
- Where do young people hang out?
- What questions are young people asking?
- Who are the heroes or people of influence that young people look up to?
- What gets young people angry and frustrated?
- What do they understand about the life of Jesus, the church, and the Gospel?

I want to encourage you to start asking young people around you questions. Most often young people are keen to share their thoughts and ideas. As you spend time watching and asking questions then you will start to understand the world into which you need to bring Jesus Christ and clues on how to do this.

Some ideas about youth culture to get you started...

Young people distrust organisations and too much structure, they are more communal and relational, they see life as more inclusive than exclusive, they are holistic in their approach to life, they see life as a process and journey, friends are more important than family, media is a major influence in their lives, education and work dominates their thinking, they need ongoing support and affirmation, they are into being followers of Jesus Christ and they want to see God at work transforming this world.

Youth Culture—What Youth are Really Like

Much of our expectations and beliefs dictate what we expect from young people. The 'stories' that we have been told have created a way in which we view young people and how we expect them to behave and act. If we expect young people to act and think in certain ways then they will. They will live up to the expectations and views we have because we have put out there (in direct and not so direct ways) to them expectations about what it means to be a young person.

Then we get upset when young people live out their lives in ways that we say we are not happy with but all along we have allowed them to be this way by the way we have related to them and the myths we have put across to them. But it doesn't have to be this way. Young people all around have and want different stories to live by. Here are a few of the stories they want:

- Young people want to be in 'relationship' with significant adults
- Young people are desperate to be known, understood and find a place of belonging
- Young people are able to express their feelings and emotions in clear ways
- Young people don't want to be disconnected from their families
- Young people are amazing people with dreams and visions
- Young people are passionate about the Christian faith and they want to express that

The stories and myths we live by have created a separate and disconnected youth culture and we have allowed these views to permeate church life and our faith journeys. But we have a chance to challenge these myths if we create and act on new stories that we determine are the right ones. But we have to start thinking, relating and acting in ways to help young people live out these new stories. This means:

- Creating regular opportunities for young people to talk with us about the issues they are facing and the things they are thinking about
- Allow young people the chance to explore ideas and views about life, relationships and faith issues (without getting freaked out by the ideas and thoughts they have on the way)
- Create opportunities for young people to interact, discuss and journey with adults in the church and faith communities you are part of (remember it is caught before taught)
- Not getting freaked out by what young people say and do (it is part of their life and faith journey process). If you over react and clamp down then young people will get stuck
- Be willing to challenge and confront young people about their thinking and actions (not in the 'don't do that and don't think that attitude' but the 'why do you think that or why did you do that attitude'). It is about getting them to think about and engage with their actions rather than just letting them get away with things because it is 'too hard'
- Help young people to express their feelings and emotions because often destructive actions come out of the inability of young people to understand and express the emotions they have
- Spend more time listening to young people than talking at them
- Just learn to 'hang out' with young people with no agenda's



Norms of the Emerging Generation

There are many articles, blogs and books about what is happening with the emerging youth cultures around the world. These can be found in areas such as economics, sociology, management, education, and statistics. Different areas of life and research often give lots of insight about what is happening to young people and their world.

This has been the case of the work of Don Tapscott. In his book 'Grown Up Digital' there is a list called "The Eight Net Generation Norms". These norms are not just established from a Western perspective as the research for these norms also included youth from Mexico, Brazil, China and India. These norms are:

Eight Norms of the Net Generation

They want freedom in everything they do, from freedom of choice to freedom of expression: Choice is like oxygen to young people. It is the world they have grown up in and so the freedom to change jobs, freedom to take their own path and to express themselves is the norm

They love to customise and personalise: Today's youth change the media world around them—desktop, Web site, ring tone, screen saver, news sources and entertainment. This need to customise is now extending beyond the digital world to just about everything they touch including the organisations they choose to be part of (including mission agencies and churches)

They are the new scrutinisers: Businesses and organisations targeting or working with the Net Generation should expect and welcome intense scrutiny of their products, promotional efforts and corporate practices

They look for corporate integrity and openness when deciding what to buy and where to work (or where to serve or go to church): The Internet and other information technologies strip away barriers between organisations and the people they are targeting. Young people work hard at making sure an organisations values align with their own

The Net Generation wants entertainment and play in their work, education and social life: This generation is changing the meaning and purpose regarding work. Work and service is about finding meaning and enjoyment in the process

They are the collaboration and relationship generation: The actions and decisions that young people make are heavily influenced by their friends. Word of mouth has more impact than advertising with this generation. Ministry and service needs to be done around relationships

The Net Generation has a need for speed: The flow of information among vast networks of people, communication with friends, colleagues and superiors takes place faster than ever. Rapid communication is the new norm for the Net Generation and this age group expect the same quick communication from the organisations they are involved with

They are the innovators: The Net Generation seek innovative organisations to belong to and they are constantly looking for innovative ways to collaborate, entertain themselves, learn, and work

The Complicated World of Youth Culture

Young people around the world are juggling many more changes and issues in their lives than previous generations. They are trying to understand themselves and their world and how the Christian faith fits into this world and because of this young people can seem so complicated. They are also trying to deal with so many more choices, options and opportunities in life.

I think that many church leaders and adults find young people hard to understand because young people seem so all over the place and they don't seem to have the same secure anchors of their Christian faith as their parents and leaders do. But being complicated is part of being young today and part of finding one's faith and identity.

Why Young People are so Complicated? (And Why That is a Good Thing)

- Young people wear their heart on their sleeve—this means that they often express the reality of what they are going through (and in fact they are often more real than the adults around them who have learnt to hide what they are going through)
- As young people are trying to work out their world and who they are they often end up expressing the way God created us—spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual
- Many aspects of the Christian faith have been wrapped up in cotton wool where there is lots of pretence that 'everything is good and we are all happy' but young people push against this accepted practice of 'normality'
- Young people are seeking to understand how the Christian faith fits into real life and this includes the joy, frustrations, hopes, pain and questions that occur in life. The Christian life and the Bible become real when dealing with real situations
- Part of being young is the need to question the world they are part of and this includes aspects of the Christian faith. To be young is to push against the boundaries and against norms and this unsettles people and makes things complicated because most adults have stopped questioning and pushing the boundaries
- Part of the growing up process is learning to deal with and handle emotions—for young people many of the decision making processes and actions are dictated by emotions but as a person grows older they learn to make decisions based on fact, truth and experience. This process does not happen quickly but it is part of helping to make the Christian faith solid and strong in a person's life
- The aim in the Christian journey is to become mature but often what is lost in that journey is the wonder and steps of being a Christian and that is why young people can continue to encourage and remind all of us about the need for questioning and growing in our faith journey
- Adults in church need young people to energise them and get them moving in their own Christian faith. It is so easy as a Christian to settle down and to stop asking and seeking after God but that is what young people do
- Many of the people that Jesus interacted with in the Gospels were complicated—they weren't simple and didn't fit into nice boxes. This complicated world is the one that Jesus came into and it is the world that young people are involved in (and therefore, like Jesus, we must be willing to enter it as well)

Global Youth Culture—A World of Too Many Choices

One of the interesting things about global youth culture is that young people are struggling in the skills and knowledge about 'how to make choices'. Young people are growing up in a world where there are so many more choices than their parents ever had. This world that they live in is creating a web of uncertainty as young people do not have the skills or support to help them make choices. So what does this world of too many choices look like and how can we help...

The type of choices young people struggle with

- How to live out their Christian life—the struggle to make choices about their actions and beliefs when the issue is vague and challenging. There is a difference between knowing truth and applying it to individual situations because this involves the ability to make choices based on the knowledge you have and the examples you have seen lived out around you
- Education— a large percentage of young people are either studying something at university that they really don't want to or they don't have the opportunity to study
- Career and employment opportunities—Young people are scared of being in a career that is "not really them" and is boring. Young people tell me they are scared of having lives like their parents where they worked hard but weren't often happy in their jobs
- Relationships—how to choose good friends and to develop friendships
- Romantic relationships—how to make a good choice about a marriage partner (also out of fear of the bad marriages some have seen in church and in society)
- Media—how to choose what to watch and listen to in a world where media is everywhere in public and private situations
- Life choices - how to make choices so they don't mess up their life (these are choices about how they interact with other people, the community and the world)

Some ideas to help young people to make choices

- Encourage and develop environments that create a sense of connection and direction (family, community, rituals, mentoring etc) for young people. These will help give young people not just information but more importantly examples to follow and live by
- Don't just provide answers for young people but give them the chance to express their thoughts and ideas they have in different areas. Half of the answer is getting young people to express out loud what they already think and know. This process is so important in helping them develop skills in being able to make choices
- Be open to talk about all issues in life (relationships, faith, sexuality, fear, drugs, doubt) because the young people around you are already thinking about, talking about and involved in these issues.
- This generation is all about 'living the reality' and not just talking about it so give them practical exercises where they have to put into practice what they are learning
- Create 'relational learning' moments where young people learn from you about how and why you make choices in life (ie: parenting, marriage, finances, conflict and relationships)



Youth Culture —Creating a Christian Identity

In a world where there has been a resurgence in people of different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds seeking to know about and promote their identity, it seems strange that the Christian faith is seeing to be going in the different direction. There seems to be less hooks or flags by which people can identify themselves as Christian. Youth ministry must be about developing identity in young people so that when describing themselves they will firstly say 'Christian' before they say anything else. Some ideas of what these hooks are:

Knowing our history

There is a large move in the last few decades towards more of an experiential Christian faith but what is being left behind is what I call a thinking and identity faith. Many cultures are putting time and effort to teaching their young people their history, language, stories and culture so that their youth can know their sense of identity. It gives them a framework for who they are. We need to find ways to teach our young people the Christian stories, which is their history. I am not just talking about Biblical literacy but actually telling the stories of how the Christian church came into being. This should include the stories and celebrations from the Old and New Testament (because it is all part of our story) and church history

Creating a New Story

Young people all around the world are being bombarded with ideas, values and life experiences which are teaching them a story about 'what life is about'. There are stories about the importance of self, about anything goes, and that truth is relative. There are also stories about self worth, about beauty and being popular, about success and life goals. Many of these stories are undermining young people's sense of worth and identity. We need to find relevant, interesting and challenging ways to tell young people a different story from the one they are hearing

Defining our identity

When you meet a Christian young person often they define themselves by what they do, what they have or what they are wanting to do in life, and then at the end you might find out that they are a Christian. I think one of the reasons for this is because we have created a Christianity that is not "life changing step out of the boat into the waves stuff". Young Christians want to know that Christ is engaging and entering their world, that the God of the Gospels is the God of today and that church is not just about getting together on a Sunday morning.

Engaging theologically with Youth

Much of the theology and truth we teach young people is more like fairy tales. They cover the nice truths we want to teach them while negotiating away from hard realities and struggles of the Christian faith and the Bible. Young people in recent years have been taught to engage with the material they are learning at school and university and yet at church we treat them like children in Sunday school in the way we teach them. Unless we allow young people to tackle the tough theological issues of the faith then we are not preparing them for the real world and we are not allowing them the chance to have 'ownership' of their faith. Instead we are just teaching them to repeat the right answers without having understanding and experience

Connecting Young People into the Church

It is really interesting to do research about the trends and changes happening in youth culture around the world and how this is impacting how we reach this age group for Christ and connect them into church. However, like many things, the hard part of this process is how do you actually bring this emerging generation into the local church when often where the local church is at and where youth culture is at is so far apart. What happens when the local church in a mission context runs head on into a local youth culture that is just finding it's voice and it's identity?

Here are some ideas of ways forward to start thinking about how we connect these emerging youth cultures into the local church. I am not saying that you can create a profile of young people that fits everyone around the world but I do think there are some key similarities. This information can be a resource to help people understand how to connect with young people in any part of the world.

- Values and ethos are a stronger glue or binding force for younger people than authority. In many countries, authority and compliance to that authority has been the dominant value and it is what has created a sense of structure and control in those cultures. This is not how things work for a younger generation
- The need to create a sense of ownership of church for young people. In older generations ownership was based on tradition or culture but ownership for younger generations comes through young people playing a part in church
- The need to make church a decentralised structure. Previous generations grew up with centralised structures (religious, political and cultural) but younger generations are growing up with decentralised structures and so for them to relate and connect into church they need a church structure that is more open and decentralised
- The style and structure of leadership in churches will need to change. (In many of my conversations with young people they struggle with both the way the church is led and the character and style of their leaders). With younger generations respect for leaders is now earned not bestowed but this is quite different from previous generations
- The need to teach the story and the narrative of the Gospels and the Bible rather than the text and the rules. Young people are captured by the story and the vision. For too long the belief has been that young people's lives will be transformed by good Biblical teaching where they were taught what was right and wrong. However, if you only teach young people the rules then they can easily walk away from rules and from God because they have only learnt the right and wrong and not the heart, vision and bigger picture of God's story for them as individuals and the world as a whole
- Young people need opportunities where they can express their faith in ways that are suitable to them. This gives young people the chance to start exercising their gifts, use their ideas and step out (This helps create ownership because then church becomes 'ours' and not just 'theirs')
- Use things that young people are into to connect with them. By using sports, media, relationships, and music in youth ministry then young people feel that church (and God) are relevant to their world and their lives



Youth Culture and Justice

There is a growing number of young people around the world (including the majority world) who are concerned about issues of justice. For many years 'issues of justice' were considered to be a 'developed world' issue but increasingly young people from all areas of the world are starting to find out information and make a difference. Whether it is young people rapping in Kenya about issues of injustice and corruption or young people in China seeking to make changes to the care of the environment, young people are finding their voice.

This concern represents the increased levels of information and communication that young people have but it also reflects what is important to them and also their view of the world they are part of. Christian young people are interpreting the Bible as a call to bring change in people's lives both spiritually and physically

There are some great verses in the Old Testament about justice (Deuteronomy 10:18-19 , Isaiah 1:17 , Psalm 82: 3-4 , Proverbs 31: 8-9, Jeremiah 21:12) and the justice theme is strong in the New Testament. One of the key underlying themes in the Gospels is about justice. Jesus was always dealing with people on the outside of society. These people were the down and outs and the ones that didn't fit in. There were the lepers and sick, non-Jews, possessed, Romans, sinners, women, and children. In each of these interactions he treated these people with kindness and respect and he often sought to meet their practical need (food, healing, deliverance) before he spoke about spiritual issues.

Young people I talk to say that the church tends to have more of a focus on religious issues rather than on social and justice issues. They are frustrated that there is talk about 'getting involved' but little action. When I was a youth pastor young people in my group were interested in housing for the poor, refugees, medical care and the environment but often these concerns were considered outside the ministry of the church and so young people weren't encouraged to get involved in these issues as a Christian.

But these issues should be the very thing that we encourage young people to learn about and get involved with. Often it is in these environments that young people will have a chance to interact and share with non-Christians. Young people tell me they want to be where people are hurting and struggling and they want their faith to rub up against the real world and not just being out-worked in a church based programme.

Issues such as child labour, slavery, fair trade and the environment are big issues right now but what about issues such as housing in your local community, sanitation, poor education, bullying in schools, drugs in your community, the impact of negative television on young people. These are valid justice issues that affecting communities all around the world.

You see young people aren't dumb—they know the Christian faith is supposed to be 'out there' and they don't see it. They know that Jesus got involved with the world and pushed against the justice issues of the world and they just want the chance to do the same.



Global Youth Culture and Emotions

Young people are at a life stage where they experience intense, changing and confusing emotions. While Christian youth work is centrally about the spiritual needs of youth, the reality is that you can't separate out others aspects of a young person's life—such as the physical, intellectual, relational and emotional. Here are some ideas about the importance of helping youth own and express their emotions and how we can do this.

Why helping youth understand their emotions is important

- If we do not help young people become comfortable with their emotions then they can often spin away from their faith because they feel overwhelmed with what they are going through and they then feel like failures in their faith and personally
- If people grow up not having learnt to deal with the emotions in their lives then they can often struggle to maintain normal relationships, work situations and their faith journey
- There are too many Christian adults in this world who still act like a teenager (in the way they deal with emotions, conflict and relationships) because they were not taught when they were younger the skills of how to own, deal with and express their emotions
- We need to teach young people that emotions are not a bad thing and that they are a God given blessing. It seems that too often in faith we have taken emotion and the expression of emotion out of our faith experience
- For all of us life is about dealing with emotional situations everyday and by not acknowledging this we are denying the human part of each of us
- Youth need to be able to see how mature Christians deal with emotions such as doubt, anger, fear, and sadness otherwise they will learn bad examples of dealing with emotions from friends, the world around them and media

Ideas to help youth understand and express their emotions

- Avoid over reacting to expressions of emotion. Remember that adolescents are still learning how to express emotions in an appropriate way
- Try to respond in a way that acknowledges their emotions while offering a degree of stability and perspective (so that they can also sense a wider perspective for themselves)
- Remember that what young people express is not often what they actually feel or think
- Help them understand their emotions. Often the adolescent is as much puzzled by their emotional reaction as we are! We can help them by giving the opportunity to verbalise their feelings and to analyse reasons for them. Often by allowing young people to express their emotions then we are giving them the chance to own their emotions
- Normalising emotions means that they don't become feelings and actions that are going to overwhelm young people as the sting of it has been taken out of the emotions
- Run sessions at youth group where you talk about emotions. This can be done by telling stories, talking about events, getting people to express what they felt and why
- Be willing to share your own stories about disappointment, failure, feeling down, being scared, doubting etc. Young people thrive on hearing stories of people just a bit older than them

Youth Culture—Reasons for Faith

One of the main theological differences between older and younger generations is the **'hope and reward that young people see in following Jesus and therefore their motivation in being a Christian'**. For many older Christians the hope for their faith is the 'glory that is on the reward (heaven) that God has prepared for them. Younger generations hope to bring the kingdom of God on earth now, as well as in heaven. For young people the test of the reality of the Christian faith is how the kingdom of God impacts the world now with heaven being a secondary purpose for what they seek to do as a Christian. Here is a list of some of the reasons why younger generations think like this and why we all need to understand these views...

- They tend to be more holistic in the view of the Christian faith—this means that they recognise that God desires to impact all areas of a persons life and their communities
- A gospel that focuses just on a person's spiritual life while ignoring other areas of their lives is seen as being hypocritical by young people
- For the Gospel, the Bible and church to be real for young people means that it has to actually make an impact and transform individuals and communities now
- Younger generations view and interpret the Bible differently to older generations. Young people focus more on the teachings of Jesus and how he transformed people and communities. In the process they interpret scripture in the wider truths and ideals it is trying to teach us about living as Christians rather than using individual verses and passages to do this
- A focus on 'the glory that is to come' can lead people to not actually do anything with their Christian faith because the focus is on 'getting oneself saved and safe' and this causes people to look inwards rather than outwards
- There is a part of older generations who hold the view that if we protect ourselves and our families from all the bad stuff out there then we will be safe and protect our faith and get to heaven. A younger generations view is that you protect your faith not by hiding from it but by actually engaging with the world—that is when your faith becomes real and when prayer and the Bible becomes more real.
- The church has been losing ground in the Western world for many decades because the feeling is that the focus has been on making people good Christians (moral focus) rather than promoting how God can change and impact people and communities alongside issues of morality
- Young people (because of media and the internet) have a better understanding of what is happening around the world and the issues involved
- Younger generations tend to have more of a communal idea of their Christian faith rather than an individualistic focus and this means that they evaluate how the Christian message is impacting communities, cultures and environments and not just individuals
- Younger generations tend to have more of an inclusive faith rather than an exclusive faith—that is they more easily recognise that Jesus spent his life interacting and bringing God to those on the outside of society—but often church seems like it is trying to do the opposite—to exclude those on the outside of society



From Individual to Shared Faith

Youth culture has for many years been influenced in its understanding and expression of faith in the Western individual stance but this is changing rapidly as youth become a lot more relational and they are starting to acknowledge the struggle of the 'individual faith' that they have been brought up on. Youth today (whether in the Western or majority world) are heading very quickly (in understanding and expression) towards a more shared or communal expression of their faith.

What Shared Faith Looks like in a Youth Culture

- **They learn way better in groups than they do individually**—young people are more and more growing up in education styles that are based around group learning and interaction rather than rote learning. For many young people it is hearing others ideas and thoughts that helps them develop their own understanding and insight
- **They learn how to express their faith in groups**—youth struggle to learn how to pray, read the Bible, and practice Christian disciplines by themselves. They learn how to develop Christian practices of prayer, reading and ministry by learning these things in a group setting. As they gain understanding and confidence in a group setting then they are more likely to practice these things in an individual setting
- **There is more accountability**—learning and sharing together means that people are led to be more accountable in their faith journey. Too often for young people (and probably for all of us) it is too easy to let things slide in our faith journey because we don't have people around us to be accountable to. Expressions of shared faith mean that there are other people around who young people have to talk about their faith with
- **I am committed to Christ because I am committed to you**—Now I know this point may seem strange but relationships is central to young people. They have a committed to God and desire to become more Christ like but because there are many distractions and struggles in life often it is being in relationship with others that help young people stay committed in their faith and relationship with God. Young people's commitment to relationships in a faith community helps them in their commitment to God
- **It provides a sense of identity**—my experience is that Christian young people all around the world struggle to find a sense of identity as a Christian. Too often it is expressed as a religious belief or something that you do on a Sunday but it doesn't provide a wider sense of identity or meaning. Expressions of communal faith provide young people with a sense of belonging and an identity with a group of people on the same journey as them. Talking with young people I get the feeling that they do not get this sense of belonging or identity from being part of a church where to them it feels like a whole lot of individual people meeting together on a Sunday morning.
- **The faith journey is just as important as the destination**— for youth culture the journey and process of the Christian faith is really important. While there is an awareness of the reward of being in Heaven with God, there is just as much as a desire to live out their faith as real as they can as they grow in their faith. For many young people this journey only makes sense if it is done in close relationship with others. They understand theologically that we were created to not just be in relationship with God but also with other people.
- **It expresses the theological truth—we are all learners and we are all teachers**—Youth recognise that Jesus emphasised the fact that we can all learn from each other no matter what our age, experience or standing in society. Shared faith experiences allow this cross-pollination of experience and ideas to occur. It emphasises an important youth culture value—that we are all seen as equal in God's eyes and we need to reflect this. Some of young people's struggles with church is that often relationships and teaching are based on hierarchy, training and supposedly faith experience.

Global Youth Culture—Losing Their Religion

Young people all around the world (whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim) are losing their affiliation and connection to a religious belief. I know that there are pockets of committed (and sometimes radical) young people in all religions in the world but as a whole young people are struggling with the religious practices and attitudes of their parents beliefs and they are opting out. What does this look like regarding Christian young people and their faith.

Why Young People are Losing their Christian Faith?

- They cant see the truths and stories from the Bible being worked out in church
- Church members seem judgemental and hypocritical
- They can relate to youth or young adults ministry but not 'adult church'
- They disagree with the church's view on political or social issues
- Church is not about relationships and community but instead it is about a structure, programmes and 'getting it right'
- There is little room for failure, doubt, fear and vulnerability
- Church doesn't tackle real issues (pain, suffering, breakdowns of marriage, failure, anger, jealousy, unemployment, justice, poverty, loneliness etc)
- Church is too often about a building and not enough about the people
- Scripture is evaluated from personal interpretation and not community interpretation
- Too focused on issues of morality and not how we live out our lives as Christians
- Leaders and parents do not admit to being wrong or struggling
- There is no place for discussion or evaluation of what is being taught
- Positions of power in church are used for financial or personal gain
- Church is about developing members and not disciples
- Church is not designed for young people and children — it is all designed for adults
- Young people do not have a voice in church and are not involved in giving direction

What are some ideas to help young people gain their Christian Faith?

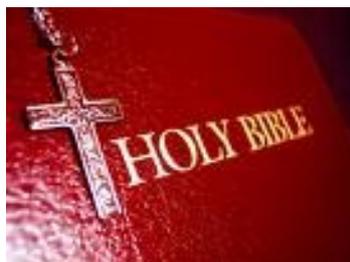
- Recognise that young people are firstly moved and challenged by relationships
- Allow young people the chance to explore ideas, run events, take risks and fail
- Have a wider understanding of the concept of 'the community of believers'
- Young people learn from different models and styles of teaching and experiences
- Ownership of the 'Christian faith' does not come through telling young people truths but through interaction and living out Christian truths
- Have variety in the way youth ministry and church is run—surprise young people
- Recognise, as young people do, that church is the people in it and not the building and programmes—this will change what church looks like and how it functions
- Weakness and being real will draw young people to the Christian faith
- Move away from this 'perfection' and 'getting it right' mentality in church. It is in the struggles and the mess that often we learn the most about God, the Bible and ourselves.
- Young people are looking for acceptance, to be known, community and a family

Youth Culture—View of Sin

Younger generations have a different view of sin and what makes them feel guilt or shame as a Christian. For many years in youth ministry, sin was seen as actions that you did that you weren't supposed to. They generally were physical actions—lust, swearing, drinking, lying, anger, masturbating, cheating. It was a case of learning to control your actions and your sinful nature. The focus was on actions of the individual rather than action (or non-action) of the church as a whole.

When I talk to young people now I see a different view of what 'sin' is and what it means to 'sin or not to sin'. It is not now just about action but just as much about non-action and what is in your heart and attitude. Here are some ideas of what 'sin' or "being separated from God" looks like for young people

- Sin is about 'lack of action' as well as 'actions you have done that are wrong'
- Sin is less about a 'line in the sand' and more about a 'circle around what I believe is important values and attitudes to have as a follower of Jesus'
- Sin is failing to live in a Christ like manner with others—if I am hurting, neglecting, overpowering over, causing others to go without then I am sinning
- Sin is often more about the inward attitude rather than the outward action
- Sin is now more seen as external action or inaction —such as failing to provide for those with less, not taking care of those in pain and suffering, not being real, not speaking up for a cause, not being there for a friend in need
- Sin is falling out of relationship with those Christians close to me or who I am in community with—breaking the connection and commitment between us
- In much of the teachings of Jesus he slammed many of the religious people (whose focus was on keeping the rules and looking right) because they had no focus on how they treated others and how they pointed others to God
- The church sees sin (the list of things you shouldn't do) as the thing that separates us from the love of God while younger generations see the choice not to seek to be like Jesus and to be light and salt in society as separating us from the love of God (because we are therefore choosing not to live as Jesus called us to do)
- Sin becomes more real to young people as they build their relationship with God and as they experience His love and grace they are moved to change their behaviour and to act more Christ like. The motivation is because of their experience of God rather than because there is a list of things you should not do as a Christian
- Younger generations are more likely to seek to not sin because they are part of a community where they desire to live like others and to live out the 'unspoken ways' of that community. BUT—if young people do not feel that church is their community then they are more inclined to struggle and sin
- For previous generations a sign of showing your commitment to God was to follow a list of actions that you shouldn't do. There was a sense of guilt for 'sinning' and this became a prompt to not sin again. Younger generations more feel a sense of shame for not being the type of Christian they should be rather than doing things that are seen as 'sinful'



Youth Culture—Looking For Community

Youth have a different view of what will keep them connected into the church. For many young people the glue they are looking for is 'community'. It is a priority and value that is at the top of the list when young people are searching for somewhere to put down roots and commit their time and energy to a faith community.

What does Community look like for a younger generation?

- It means that what ever material things I have I am willing to share with you because in community you freely share your possessions in the same way you share your time.
- They live in each others space a lot more and relate to each other like family and so they are always in touch and in each others spaces. The idea of having your own private space is less normal—my space is your space and visa versa because that is what family is like
- Has a strong focus on being part of a team or a group rather than being an individual
- The Christian faith often only makes sense with friends and in a community
- Commitment is to people and relationships and not so much to structures and organisations and so if you take away the relationships then the commitment to a group or cause can often finish
- They are open about all aspects of life—many older people are surprised at what young people share in social network sites but it is really just a reflection of what people allow other people to know. If we are community then we are a lot more open about life—relationships, Christian faith, the church, family, struggles and failures, hopes and dreams
- It is the relationships people build together that give young people meaning and a sense of purpose for doing a project or being involved in a group or a ministry

What does this mean for youth ministry?

- The key word for youth ministry is 'relationships, relationships, relationships'
- The purpose of programmes and structures is to provide a place to build relationships
- The key role for youth leaders is to develop strong relationships with groups of young people so you can enter their world and earn the right to speak into their lives
- Provide structures for young people to build community—small groups, discipleship groups, fun activities, ministry opportunities, places to hang out
- Youth learn and grow in their Christian faith when it is done in groups and communities
- Youth ministry must be more than what happens at the youth programmes or services—it must be like a spiders web where young people are all interconnected with each other and with the leaders.
- Community means providing chances for young people to relate across the different ages and cultures because this reflects actual communities outside church. Young people learn from people of all ages and backgrounds and it gives them a sense of place and identity
- Allow times and places where young people can be honest and real about their lives and their faith (often it seems that churches are scared of honesty because then everyone will know what people, the Christian faith and church is really like—but it is this honesty that will keep young people connected while not being real will drive them away)

Developing Leadership with Global Youth Culture

Developing young people into areas of leadership and responsibility is key to this age group owning their faith and being committed to church. Some of the key ideas to help develop young people into areas of leadership and responsibility are...

Ownership—young people are firstly committed to causes and needs and they look for the organisation that can help them be part of helping in these causes. The reason they commit to an organisation and stay with it is because they feel a sense of ownership in that organisation. This has more to do with their role in that organisation and relationships within it than it does with the goals and philosophy of the organisation

Proactive Leadership—why can't we look at developing leadership structures that work at bridging the gaps that arise. Can we be proactive where we recognise at an early stage the possibilities in people out there and go and tap them on the shoulder and tell them that we need them? We then give them responsibility, trust, opportunities, encouragement, and let them know that we are inputting into them for future leadership roles.

Desire to be needed—young people need to know that they are needed. This is not an emotional selfish need but the desire to make sure that where they are at and what they are doing is actually worth while. Churches need to make it plainly obvious to people that we need them and how we see them being used. It is an intentional view of developing leadership where we put people in training programmes, walk alongside them in the process, give them opportunities, and help them see how they can make a difference.

Continual Evaluation—young people have been brought up in a world and education system that has taught them to question and evaluate and so this is normal for them. They are also more aware of the world and the way things really are at. They are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of church and Christian organisations. As a result younger generations are more open to tackle problems and issues when things aren't working and things aren't going well.

The People Factor—You know they say that the three rules of buying good real estate is 'location, location, location'. Well when it comes to keeping young people connected to an organisation through leadership then the three key rules are 'relationships, relationships, relationships'. In a church environment youth want to be in relationship with other church members and with the local community. Young generations want to work in teams and struggle when they are out there by themselves because they interpret many aspects of their lives through their relationships with others.

Hands On Approach—There is a Chinese proverb that says "*Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand*". This value applies to developing leadership with young people. Telling this age group a lot of facts and figures, rules and regulations and structures will not cut it. If leadership training does not come with real life situations and real people then these important organisational details will be lost because theory is okay but working models beats everything.



Making Space for Youth Culture in Church

For young people to feel at home and accepted at church requires that we must create space for them. We need to be able to provide an environment where young people feel accepted but just as important is that we need to be church in ways that young people feel they have some ownership and are comfortable. Here are some ideas to get you thinking about what 'creating space' may look like for young people in our churches...

Creating informal settings—younger generations function way better in informal settings than formal ones. For young people everything is about 'relationships' and this doesn't occur too easily in formal settings. Young people are energised and engaged when the setting is informal

Creating conversation and not just sermons—Sermons generally provide little chance to engage with it personally or as a community of faith. For youth we need to develop conversations. Conversations are ongoing, involve many people, allow for multiple ideas and thoughts and people learn from each others contributions. Sermons are for teaching while conversations help shape and develop people's learning. There is a difference and young people know it

Young people's thoughts and ideas are just as valid as anyone else's—if young people feel that what they think and believe is not given a chance to be expressed and if what they share is not seen as valid as what an adult shares then they will feel that this 'church thing' is not for them. Creating space is not just a physical action—it is about creating space for the voice and feelings of all members of the church, including young people

Creating a diverse worship experience—Creating space for young people is not just about youth orientated worship and music but it is about creating worship experiences that involve other forms that create opportunity to engage other senses, for interaction and for different forms of expression of love to God

Young people leading in services—By allowing young people to take the lead is about creating space for them. When young people see and hear other young people being involved then they will feel that there is space for them and their age group.

Creating multi-age services—there needs to be more multi-age services where there are ingredients from across the age spectrum so that everyone learns to learn from others and appreciates other ways of being and doing church

Allow space to hear each others stories—there is supposed to be a wall between young people and older people where they can't really relate to each others worlds. I don't think this is true. If you allow the chance for each age group to hear about their joys, sorrows, dreams and experiences you will find that deep down people are the same no matter what their age. As people hear each others stories then they will want to support each other in their journeys and the differences we talk about will not seem as big



Ideas to Engage Young People

Some people say that this present youth generation are the least committed generation and that they are selfish and lazy. Others say that this present generation are the most aware of the needs around their community and their world and that if you can engage them then they will want to do amazing things with their faith and skills and passions.

This emerging generation are more aware of what their families, communities and the wider world is really like. AND they also have the education, skills, passions and opportunities to engage the world with their faith like never before. But I also know that young people are still young people. They can be lazy and self centred (just like all teenage generations before them). So how do you help young people engage with the issues and needs around them?

- **Find out what pushes their buttons**—most young people I know have something that pushes their buttons (are passionate, interested in, moved by) and often the starting point is finding out what these buttons are and why. You have more chance of engaging young people if the starting point relates to something they are already moved by
- **Must be interactive**—the old way of engaging people was promoting a need or an issue and inviting people to get involved (broadcast model) but now to engage young people you have to make it interactive. Young people can now be a publisher (blog), a filmmaker (Youtube), write an encyclopaedia (Wikipedia) and be involved in creating new ideas and products. To engage youth requires that they themselves must be part of the process of identifying the need, promoting it, developing ways to get involved.
- **Youth engaging youth**—the greatest way to engage youth is through a youth peer to peer model where youth are engaging other youth. This generation are the most influenced by their friends and peers so you need to find young people who will highlight, push, and demonstrate the need or issue that you are trying to encourage youth to engage in. Young people will choose to support or engage in a need just to be with their friends
- **Be honest, up-front and transparent**—Gone are the days of presenting a need and people jumping on board without question. Today's youth want to scrutinise, evaluate and pull apart the issue or need being put before them and the process of promoting this issue
- **Look at the structures and values**—Often the ethos, structures and procedures reflect the worldview of the generations that formed them. This doesn't make them right or even necessarily Christian and so you need to be willing to see the validity of the ethos and structures that younger generations would choose in order to see a need accomplished
- **It must be meaningful and useful**—Young people want their lives, careers, fun time and relationships to be meaningful and to make a difference. They are looking for ways for personal and spiritual growth. This means they need to feel that what they are doing has a purpose and is not just going through the motions for the sake of it.
- **Not 'Big Picture' but 'Grass-Roots'**- Young people are not inspired by large ambitious programmes or needs (they have heard it all before) but what they are looking for is low-key, sustainable, grass-roots involvement. They want to know what it looks like on the ground and how they can make a difference in their small corner of the world
- **Understanding Commitment**— Recognise that young people are just as committed to a cause or need than previous generations but their commitment looks differently. It is to a cause and not an organisation or a structure and they seek to live one day at a time for God using their skills and passions that they have. This partly reflects the temporariness of life and situations for this younger generation
- **People—Projects—Organisation**— This is the new order of commitment. It is firstly to the people presenting the need or organisation (relationships), then the projects or process and lastly to the organisation. In previous generations it was the other way around

Mess and disorder is the norm

Life for emerging generations is becoming more complicated. For previous generations around the world there was generally a few paths or choices that they had to take (this is particularly true for people from the majority world). Aspects about life from career choices, education opportunities, relationships, where you lived, where you went to church, ability to travel were generally limited. There were social and religious rules and expectations and people knew what these were. But now life (personal, social, faith) is becoming messy and complicated. This mess and disorder that youth live in however makes previous generations feel uncomfortable.

What mess and disorder looks like

- **Change is a constant**—For youth change is the norm and is something that they anticipate. They have learnt to operate in a world where things do not stay the same for long (study, employment, relationships, interests, truth, experiences)
- **Evaluation is constantly happening**—A world of choice causes people to continually evaluate things in their life. This is because there is always another option or choice that could be had. This evaluation extends to all aspects of a young person's life
- **Truth changes**—For previous generations truth came from places of respected authority (church, school, state government, newspapers). For youth today truth comes from many different and challenging places and it can change and evolve
- **Innovation**—This means anything from new technology changing every month to youth wanting to challenge and change the way that business is done, to new styles of leadership, what the workplace looks like, or how people express themselves
- **Everything happens on the 'fast' setting**—Youth expect everything in life to happen in an instant and they are used to getting things when they need it including answers to questions about life and faith
- **Youth are more comfortable in the real world**—in the real world things like finances, relationships, employment and faith are complicated. Youth are comfortable navigating through and engaging with this real world rather than hiding from it

What this means for connecting to youth

- **They need the big picture**—young people need to know where they fit and what their story is. The constant for them is a sense of where they belong. Teach them about the narratives and the stories and themes of the Bible rather than just individual sections.
- **Deciphering the messages**—youth need help understanding and evaluating the multitude of messages and ideas that they are constantly being fed. Help them think about and engage with these messages rather than just a 'don't touch' attitude
- **They need patience from leaders**—what a young person thinks and expresses today may not actually be what they think or believe. They are trying to sort through the overload of information, ideas and views that they get everyday. Don't point out where you think they are wrong but learn to guide them through the world of mess and choice
- **Help them build a core**—Youth live in a world where anything goes and so they need help to develop a core of beliefs that become central to their faith and identity. BUT then we must be willing to allow them to explore their beliefs that are on the fringe of that core.
- **Recognise that the Christian faith is a process and journey**—we must be willing to help youth see the Christian life as a journey (like that of walking up a mountain where sometimes you go up, sometimes around and sometimes down)
- **Deal with real life and real world issues**— Youth want to know, how as a Christian they can engage in this world. If you hide the real world from youth then they just get frustrated and feel that the Christian faith is irrelevant

Break Out Opportunities: Taking Youth Outside Their Normal Lives

There are many benefits of camps, retreats or events that take youth outside of their normal lives. I call these type of events 'Break-Out Opportunities' because they allow young people to be in situations where they break-out of their normal lives, worlds and influences. Taking young people to a place, event or activity that is not normal to them can help create a platform for relationships and dialogue. Youth are more open to talk, interact and build relationships when they are away from the things that occupy their world and thinking.

Ideas to engage youth outside their normal lives...

- Don't fill it up with speakers. I have heard of too many camps and retreats in the majority world that have people listening to speakers the whole time. Young people don't learn much from a talking head. The talks should just give them a framework or background to the issues and ideas. It is in the interaction about the topics where young people get to express what they think that is important. As they talk and share then what they think becomes part of them and they get to own their own views
- So allow plenty of time for interaction and reflection about what is being taught and about the young people's own lives. This is best done in small groups or one to one
- Don't allow speakers to speak longer than twenty minutes at a time. Young people will turn off so fast if they get bored. Keep talks short and relaxed using stories etc.
- Don't be afraid to tackle hard, sensitive issues that can create strong emotional responses. Allowing young people to express emotions is part of growth, healing and change
- Don't be scared to allow times for reflection, stillness, quiet. In the busy and frantic lives of youth they don't have space to sense God, feel their lives, dream and be themselves
- Ask young people questions. You will be amazed what you will learn. Too often young people are being talked at or told what to do. Youth hardly get the chance to share their thoughts and ideas and so if you give them the chance they suddenly have lots to say. This information is a springboard for you to use to connect into their lives and to understand how you can bring spiritual thoughts and truths into their world
- Have enough social and fun times. Being away is often a time when young people are suddenly with lots of other young people and they need chances to mix and have fun
- Create events that are hard and challenging. Youth discover more about themselves and what they are capable of when they are put into demanding situations
- Give time for the leaders / older youth to share their stories and journeys. Too often youth think those older than them have it all together and know what they are doing. By telling stories allows youth to see that leaders are not much different than themselves
- Use short snappy videos to challenge or highlight an issue. Youth are so used to watching DVD's and movies that they learn a lot from good ones (especially ones that tell a story to highlight a point). It also breaks up the sessions and keeps things moving and changing
- Events are not just about 'getting people saved' and doing lots of heavy 'get right with God' times. It must also tackle things that young people are struggling with such as education, relationships, drugs and alcohol, lack of identity, doubt, fitting in, anger, broken families
- Give young people the chance to express themselves through doing some art, writing a song or poem, performing a rap or a play. There needs to be time where young people are involved and using their skills. Not just being receivers of information but giving of their own ideas and skills
- Events provide an opportunity when people have their guards down, are more relaxed, are outside their home situation but at the end of the event the young people have to go back into these situations. Making connections between leaders and young people are important for youth because it creates the chance for leaders to have ongoing relationships with young people and to be involved in their real worlds

Transitioning Youth to Young Adults

Increasing numbers of young people are 'getting lost' when they transition from their teenage years to their young adult years. More and more young people are struggling to retain their Christian beliefs and commitments as they enter the adult world. They are becoming unstuck in their Christian and personal lives because they are not equipped to handle the world and environment they encounter. This situation requires us to not just look at the programmes we provide for young people in transition but also to look at what we believe about the way we develop young people in their Christian faith.

Ideas to help young people transition...

Tackling the 'Grey Areas'

When you are young there is lots of structure and simplicity to your life and so it is easy to evaluate everything as either black and white. As you get older you start to realise that there is lots of grey in the world and in the Christian life. Young people start to see all these 'grey areas' but are not always given the chance to tackle them in a Christian environment

Demolishing the Christian Fairytales

The church has created a number of Christian fairytales that cause young people to struggle in their faith. They are stories based on the desire to make the Christian faith seem like it has all the answers and solves all your problems. Young people don't want fairytales to hide them from the truth but they want to know how the Christian faith can engage in these situations

Taking Young People out of the Christian Bubble

Protecting young people from issues of sex, alcohol, drugs, abuse, pain, anger and fear doesn't actually prepare them to deal with these things when they enter this world. What it does do is teach them about what is right and wrong but it doesn't provide them with a framework to be able to deal with these issues from a Christian point of view.

Doubt and Questioning is Normal

There is a fear that if you start to question and challenge the Christian faith then it is all going to fall apart. From my experience with young people the exact opposite happens. It is when you don't allow questioning that the Christian faith starts to unravel. People are not just robots who take in truth and information because someone tells them. Human nature needs to evaluate and test to discover the truth as real for oneself.

Changing the Way we Teach Biblical Truth

Young people are thinking about and interacting with truth differently than previous generations and this includes the Bible. Young people learn more through interacting with and discussing the Bible with others than by themselves. They also have a focus on the larger themes of the Bible (big picture). They are more interested in the life and teachings of Jesus and the Kingdom of God (to them this is about how we live out the Christian life here and now)

Creating Ownership

In previous generations people were committed to church because 'commitment' was a strong aspect of those generations. Now younger generations are committed to church because they have a sense of ownership of church. This ownership occurs if they see church as part of their world and feel like it is their community where they can be real and be known for who they are

Making Church Ministry Relevant for Young People

Young people are interested in issues outside the walls of the church such as justice, poverty, abused women, the environment and housing. If we want young people to engage in ministry then we need to widen our understanding of what is seen as ministry in a church situation. When the church can start engaging in the issues that push young people's buttons then there is much more chance of retaining them in the church

Sex and Sexuality

Sex and sexuality is such a major issue because so many young people are drifting away from church due to their struggles in this area while the churches attitude towards sex and sexuality is setting young people up for a fall. For too many years it was felt that the less you talk about sex with young people then the less chance they will want to engage in it. The opposite is true —the less you engage youth in this area the more chance they will struggle.

Why we need to engage youth about sex?

- Young people know more about sex than you can ever imagine—they know stories, have seen images and videos, have engaged in sexual activity
- Therefore youth have so many questions and ideas about sex (because it is dominating the world around them) and expressing your sexuality is becoming the 'norm' in their world
- Just saying "No" is totally irrelevant today because youth today need to understand the "Why" and also because the reality is that all of us are created sexual beings but too often youth are made to feel shameful or sinful for having feelings of sexuality
- One of the reasons youth look to society and friends for answers about sex is because they have learnt that sex is not allowed to be talked about in religious settings and feel embarrassed for even pondering such thoughts and questions
- We must get past this idea that "You shouldn't feel sexual until you are married". It is not a switch that suddenly gets turned on at your wedding day, so how do we deal with sexuality when you are single
- From the statistics I read large numbers of adults in church have issues with their own sexuality (pornography, lust, extra-marital affairs) but never tell anyone because issues of sexuality are one of the BIG sins. And yet young people are given such a hard time when they question and struggle with their own sexuality issues. I think this is because generally Biblical teaching about sexuality is coloured by culture and our own struggles rather than a true Biblical and theological understanding
- Sex is not just about the physical reality of the act but so much of what happens around sexual activity and sexuality has to do with people's sense of worth and how they see themselves before God

How we can help youth in the area of sex and sexuality?

- We need to be willing to have conversations (not lectures) with young people about sex and sexuality and be willing to be upfront about our own journey in this area. This may range from talking about the realities of sexual relationships to discussing the ideas and images that the world is promoting as 'normal'
- We must move our conversations and teaching about sexuality and sex from being about 'shame and repressiveness' to pictures of our humanity as God made us and ideas of grace and forgiveness. (Christian young people still see 'sexual sin' as the sin that means that they are no longer Christian—we must change this)
- We must teach youth that "Your sexuality can never make you worthless. It is your responsibility to respect and love that part of yourself that creates pleasure and life"
- Help youth understand that they are not alone in this journey and that their questions and feelings are 'normal'
- Help normalise sex and sexuality from a Christian perspective
- Listen, listen and listen—often youth feel pressurised into being sexually active and may even be boastful about it but often there is a small voice inside that person screaming to be heard among the sea of other voices and messages being pressed upon them
- Help youth think about where their personal affirmation comes from. If youth can't find value and worth from within themselves—the person made and loved by God, it's going to be even harder to find it placed in the hands of someone else

Relational Based Youth Ministry

Youth leaders and pastors always want to know how to retain the young people in their youth groups and how to be relevant to young people. I am often asked for ideas on how to make youth ministry work and ideas for programmes. I understand the need for these practical things to help in engaging young people and making youth ministry more relevant. I try to help groups as I can but I also tell youth leaders that while these practical things will help, the truth is that 'relational based youth ministry' is far more effective at reaching youth and influencing their lives than 'programme based youth ministry'. Here are some ideas about why relational based youth ministry is so central to any youth ministry and some ideas to taking onboard this approach

Why 'Relational Based Youth Ministry'

- At the core of all young people is the desire to be loved and to be known for who they are. They want to know whether you care about them outside of the programme and church
- People are easily more influenced and changed through the relationships they have than through the things they have in their lives and the information they hear
- I estimate that 80% of what youth learn is through 'caught' rather than 'taught' but we still tend to put all our time and focus into teaching and programmes to make this happen
- No matter what you teach young people it is what you do and how you behave that has so much more influence on what young people believe and live out (which is one reason why the church around the world is struggling—because often what we say and teach is different from what we do and young people will follow what we do)
- Truth is becoming more experiential for young people and so they need to not just be taught truth but they need to see that truth in action—that is how it is lived out in the real world of relationships, money, employment, failure, marriage, families etc
- Being part of the connected world means youth have many more questions about faith and life. They need people to help them evaluate these questions and to navigate through life
- Respect is now earned and not bestowed with this present generation and this means that youth leaders must earn the right to be a listening ear to youth and to speak into their lives
- In the same way that youth in traditional communities learnt what it mean to be part of a community through watching those around them who were further along the journey—so it is with young people in church today. They are looking for others to learn from and be like

Relational Based Youth Ministry—Ideas

- Choose youth leaders based on their passion and care for young people rather than on fulfilling programme or administrative roles
- Make one of the key roles of leaders to build relationships with 4 to 6 young people of the same sex as the leader and get them to learn just to 'hang-out' with these young people without any agenda or reason but just learning to be part of their world
- As the pastor or youth leader, mentor youth leaders and walk alongside them to help teach them and give them understanding of what it means to be impacted by relational based ministry. Youth leaders need to experience it before they can do the same for young people
- Involve your life in the lives of young people—go to their sports games, have a soft drink together, watch movies together, if you are going to do the food shopping take them with you, if you are fixing the fence at home get them to help you.
- The more you hang out with young people the more you will become involved in their personal and faith lives and the more you can speak into their lives and be there when there are hard times and good times
- It is more about mentoring and walking alongside rather than a prescribed programme of topics and issues that you need to work through with young people
- It will cost your leaders more personally—time, energy, finances, emotions, personal space but it is this commitment that will change lives (just look at Jesus and his disciples)

Ideas for Putting Together an Effective Youth Ministry

Here are some ideas to help people think about, evaluate and put together an effective youth ministry. These ideas aren't the only answers to doing youth ministry but they are helpful tools to help you think about what you are doing and why

Basic Questions of Young People

My beliefs - What do I believe - about God, life, and spirituality?

My worth - Do people like me? Do I like myself? Does God really love me?

My significance - What am I good at? What do I want to do with my life?

My values - What morals, standards and values do I want to adopt for myself?

My commitments - What is important to me? What do I want to invest my time in?

My appearance - Is my physical development normal? Do I have the "right look"?

My feelings - How should I best express and control my feelings?

My relationships - How do I relate to my parents? How do I relate to my friends?

Steps to Building a Youth Ministry

Identify Needs (see 'Questions to ask young people' below)

The first step in building a youth programme that is "needs related" is to identify the needs through surveys/questionnaires, personal interviews, casual conversations and forums

Assess Needs

The next step for the leader is to collate the needs and assess them in the light of their experience, training, personal observation and conviction. The questions to ask at this point are:

- * What common trends are emerging?
- * What needs can be grouped together?
- * Based on these needs, what do I want to see happen in our group over the next week/month term/year?
- * What is the priority of each of these needs?

Meet needs

This is the implementation stage where programmes are put into place to meet specific needs. Questions to ask are:

- * How do I meet the needs of young people and their families without compromising my own convictions and beliefs?
- * What resources, ideas and learning experiences can I use to address these needs?
- * How will I know if I am being effective in meeting needs?

7 Laws of Programming

The law of planning - Effective planning involves a number of tasks including decision making, problem solving, delegation and publicity

The law of engagement - When young people turn up to a programme they need to know that they are noticed, welcomed and appreciated

The law of research - We can also do some research into what young people need, by reading books, talking with other youth leaders, and keeping a file full of ideas

The law of faith - despite all the principles and ideas that we learn, everything ultimately depends on God

The law of ownership - means that young people must have a stake in what goes on in the youth programme. They are to be participants, not consumers

The law of review - After an event, leaders can then assess the effectiveness of the programmes against their objectives, and learn lessons for future implementation.

The law of motivation - Before a leader can hope to motivate anyone about a programme, they must themselves be enthusiastic

Looking for Honesty

One of the issues we can all struggle with, is that much of our life can be hidden from those around us. Young people on the other hand, are at a stage in life where things are what they are. They can be very open to talk about anything and everything and to be honest and upfront about life (with those people they trust). This is because they are desperately trying to figure out life and where they fit and to know what is normal in life. Young people are crying out for honesty from leaders and adults. Here are some thoughts on why we need more honesty in youth work and what difference it would mean if this started to happen.

Why youth need HONESTY from leaders and adults?

- Young people need to grow up with realistic expectations. In this connected world young people often think they can do and be anything. This is why everyone who goes on American Idol (and similar shows) truly believe they can be a pop superstar even though many of them are terrible. They have been brought up in a world where people do not fail or struggle and people are supposed to get what they want. This creates unrealistic expectations about life
- Young people often grow up with this fairytale view that because you are a Christian then life just works out but when they hit the real world (where there is struggle, failure and doubt) this myth is blown apart and they struggle to fit their expectations in with reality. The fact is that young people don't want the fairytale (because it sets them up to fail) but they want realistic expectations about how people's spiritual and personal lives can be
- Hearing honesty from adults helps youth learn about life and relationships, finance, employment, bringing up children, failure, doubt, depression, anger etc. It gives youth a framework so when they are confronted with these things they have tools to help them know how to respond
- Helping youth must be more than "just pray about it or leave it in God's hands'. It must be about including God in life but also about how youth can practically (emotionally, physically, intellectually) deal with the various aspects of life they come across.
- Makes the faith journey more of a reality for youth rather than giving them a sense of failure because they will believe that what is spoken about or portrayed is how life and faith is really lived out (but they don't get to see the behind the scenes realities of these things)
- They get to see life in action rather than just information and life lessons that they get taught from the pulpit. This helps them develop a better framework for how to live life
- The reality is that 95% of people will have a normal life (job, relationships, family, mortgage, responsibilities, challenges, commitments, health issues, singleness etc) and so young people need to know how to understand and live out their faith in this normal life
- By hearing stories and honestly from adults, gives young people a sense of normality. I know young people who go through sexual struggles, depression, failure, unemployment, anger, doubt etc, and then think they are strange because they look at the adults in church around them and they never seem to express or have to deal with these things.
- Hearing honesty from adults gives young people the permission and opportunity to ask questions they have about these issues. When youth do not feel open to ask questions about things they are thinking or struggling with, then they will bury those feelings and thoughts and end up frustrated or getting that information from other sources
- Openness by adults builds trust by the young people and creates more opportunities for youth to ask questions of adults and to be open with them (trust me—youth are watching what adults talk or don't talk about, how they relate, how they treat others, how they act)
- Being open is good for adults. I think as we get older we learn to hide out thoughts and feelings



Narrative and Story Telling

I have been thinking for a long time about the importance of 'narrative or story' in the lives of young people. Wikipedia tells me that "narrative helps in the process of self-identity, memory and meaning-making". The more young people know the narrative of the Christian faith (the Old Testament as well) and the stories of the Christians around them, then it is more likely they will have a stronger Christian faith.

Why the 'narrative' is so important to young people?

- Youth are more influenced and changed through the relationships they have than through the things they have in their lives and the information they hear from programmes
- By telling stories that convey a message on values, successes, managing adversity, people absorb the lesson better than being told the message directly. Jesus was great at using this technique
- Narrative is found all around us—speech, writing, songs, film, photography, theatre, television and visual arts. It is such a natural part of life but we don't often recognise it
- It helps young people to develop a strong 'intergenerational self.' This means that they know they belong to something bigger than themselves.
- Young people develop empathy for older Christians whose Christian and personal attitudes, values and behaviours might seem old fashioned before become more understandable in the context of their personal and spiritual history.
- It helps young people to hear and understand the person behind the person they see on the other side of the church and don't ever really relate to
- Young people who live in a society that venerates youth, begin to understand the potential path for their own lives both from a person and spiritual perspective. This is especially needed in a world of too many choices and challenges.
- Young people are using social network sites as a way of creating their own personal narratives. There is something in them (and all of us) about telling our story about who we are and being able to keep a record of it
- When adults (and in fact anyone) tells their story then it makes those people feel like their own journeys count and that their lives connect with others

Some ideas on telling the narrative

- It is not about stories that tell young people what to do but stories that give examples and help provide youth with understanding about life
- It's often during relaxed times that are the most conducive to sharing narratives so make sure there are casual opportunities (cafe's, driving, walking, camps) for sharing narratives
- The most helpful narrative is called the 'oscillating narrative'. This is when young people get to hear stories when faith has been strong and when it has struggled and when there has been joy and sadness. When young people hear these stories then we can situate ourselves in that reality. If you think this type of narrative sounds familiar then just read the Bible a bit..
- Oscillating narratives and stories teach young people about overcoming hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence and who are constantly bombarded with the message about 'giving up' if the going gets to tough
- Create opportunities for young people and older Christians to tell their stories and hear each others heart and personality. (camps, cafes, church service, shared meals)
- Develop mentoring relationships between adults and young people
- It is not just about getting young people to listen and hear but it is also about getting older people to learn to be open about their lives
- Use multi media, songs, photos, videos, art to help enhance the narrative