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## YOUTH MINISTRY PRACTICE AND CULTURE

The practices we adopt in youth ministry must be influenced by culture. We do not do effective youth ministry in a cultural vacuum. Instead we approach culture with a mindset that asks:

**“What practices will make youth ministry most effective within the culture in which we undertake mission to young people?”**

Therefore we commence our study of youth ministry practice by endeavouring to become familiar with the cultural trends and characteristics that are apparent within the communities in which we live in the early 21st century.

Such a task is fraught with challenges. The diversity of youth culture and the debates about it that rage make it difficult to say anything that is truly definitive. The best that can be achieved here is to paint some broad cultural brush strokes that point to macro-characteristics and then to provide insights into reading and responding to sub-cultural specifics which we observe in the young people we minister to.

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A proper biblical approach [to culture] will include a *missiological* element as well. This requires evangelicals to relate to popular culture in such a way as to carry out the evangelical mission of proclaiming and embodying the kingdom of God. Here the objective is to take popular culture captive, so to speak, in ways that will allow evangelicals to enjoy and use it in service to the kingdom purposes of Jesus Christ. A biblical approach to popular culture is part of both the Great Commission and the cultural mandate, twin aspects of the Christian's calling to make disciples in every nation.

- T. M. Moore<sup>1</sup>

## The Dimensions of Culture

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### 1. Defining Culture

In order to understand the culture of the young people we work with, we need a grid or template through which to define or explain their culture. Authors have variously defined culture as:

“The patterned way of doing things within a particular society which binds people together and gives them a sense of identity and continuity.”

- Lloyd Kwast

*Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Institute of International Studies, 1981

“The more or less integrated system of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do.”

- Paul Hiebert

*Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1985

“A society's complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behavior, plus their underlying perspectives (worldview) and resulting artefacts (material culture).”

- Charles Kraft

*Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis. 1996

“Folkways, models, and mores, language, human productions, and social structures of any given people.”

- David Hesselgrave,

*Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978

Taken together we can define culture as symbols, behaviours, values, beliefs and worldview.\*

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Think about your hair cut and why you have it the way you do. Ask yourself why you bought the clothes that you are wearing right now. Think about the music that you listen to or the food that you had for your last meal. Think about where you want to go on holiday next year or even whether you like tattoos or not. Think about these issues and you immediately start thinking about culture. Culture is experienced more readily than it can be described. It is the air we breathe. It is the water we swim in. It is everything about our background and environment which shapes the people we are. So, for example, you are not the first person to have your hair that way or to dress as you are today. In making those choices you were first influenced by the styles and fashions around you. You may not view yourself as a fashion victim, but the truth is that you only had a number of options to choose from and those options were shaped by the culture of which you are a part.

- Andy Hickford<sup>2</sup>

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\* For a more detailed description see *Youth Culture*, YouthTRAIN 2000 (as used in Carey Baptist College's MM670: Mission Within Youth Culture – Workbook 1).

## 2. Levels of Culture

In understanding the culture of the young people we work with we need to be aware that culture exists at a number of levels:

### a. Universal Culture

Universal culture consists of those norms that are shared by all of humanity collectively, no matter where they live in the world. For example:

- Language: Communicating with a verbal language consisting of a limited set of sounds and grammatical rules for constructing sentences
- Leadership: Hierarchical structures for decision making and governance
- Leisure: Playing games, appreciating art.
- Liaison: Family groupings for fulfilment of mutual wants and for the nurture of children.

### b. Global Culture

Global culture consists of those norms that transcend national boundaries. Two notable examples today would be Western culture or Islamic culture. Global culture has become of particular importance today due to advances in communication and the pervasive influence of the media, and will be examined in more detail shortly.

### c. National Culture

National culture comprises those norms that characterise a particular country. For example, New Zealanders, Australians, British and North Americans are all influenced by “Western culture” but all have their own unique cultural characteristics that affect the way they see life and approach given situations.

### d. Ethnic culture

Within one country there can exist many different ethnic cultures. The worldwide growth in immigration means that no longer are these cultures purely indigenous but most countries have significant groups of “foreigners” who regularly congregate and keep aspects of their national culture alive. Thus in New Zealand we not only see Maori culture but various Pacific Island, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures.

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She is louder and more confident. Jak looks a lot different. Outside of school hanging out with her mates, you realise that you are now standing in her world. Her clothes or hairstyle might offend or amuse you – the style is straight of MTV, or at least as close to it as her resources will allow. If her style offends you, or the other people who make her feel stink, so much the better. Her clothes speak about a connection with a global, black American sub-culture even though it is white America who is selling it to her – at a great profit. It's a game of mutual exploitation: in “her space” Jak has an identity, a world she can participate in and make her own through music and images. It is also a world distinct from those in which she experienced pain and failure. Jak is playing by the rules of her world and it is a game she can succeed in, unlike her involvement in the world that you represent. So forgive her if she isn't very interested in discussing her attendance at school this week, or if she appears a little grumpy at being reminded of it.

- Lloyd Martin<sup>3</sup>

### e. Local Culture

Local culture is those variances in national culture that occur within a given country. Factors driving these differences include:

- Affluence
- Geographical location (inner city vs. seaside resort)
- Population (urban vs. rural)
- Climate

### f. Tribal Culture

Tribal cultures are the various subcultures that exist within society that group people together around a common pursuit or value. These cultures can transcend national culture such as the black American hip hop culture evident among Maori young people in urban New Zealand. More than most levels of culture, tribal culture is subject to change, with new subcultures beginning and old ones morphing or dying. No surprisingly the most diversity in tribal cultures exists among adolescents who are engaged in the process of identity formation. For this reason we will explore tribal culture in more detail later in this section.

### g. Cluster Culture

Within the broad tribal cultures seen in society young people gather in clusters. These clusters are groups of friends that “hang out” together. They tend to be short term in existence and change as the young people grow and mature. Nevertheless they exhibit symbols, behaviours, values and beliefs that mark it out as distinct from other cluster – even those belonging to the same tribe. For example, within a youth group there may be clusters of young people all similar in identifying with a single tribal culture but each with quite distinct cultures within their clusters.

### h. Familial Culture

Familial culture is the culture that exists within a family that defines certain acceptable behaviours and values. Despite the tendency among young people to gravitate towards tribes (peers) and away from families, studies show that the culture established within the family during childhood has a powerful influence upon the adolescent – for better or worse.

Throughout the remainder of this section we will further examine both global and tribal culture which are the most important to understand in working with young people.

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It is absolutely vital for the gospel to be incarnated into the thousands of sub-cultures that now exist in our complex, postmodern, tribalized. Western contexts. It is vital that these multiform people and sub-cultures encounter Jesus from *within* their own cultures and from *within* their own communities, for only there can they truly comprehend him. It is now critical for the sake of the gospel itself that these people experience salvation in a way that does not dislocate them from their organic groups but rather allows them to encounter Jesus in a way that is seamlessly connected with life as they have come to understand it through their own histories and experiences.

- Michael Frost and  
Alan Hirsch<sup>4</sup>

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A friendship cluster is more than just a circle of relationships. It is heart and soul of being young today. It is a place to belong. There is no formal membership. You are either in or you are not. Being in means you share many things: interests, experiences, intimate thoughts, problems, and triumphs of the day. Being in means you tune in to the same music, wear each other's sweaters, and generally just enjoy each other.

- Donald Posterski<sup>5</sup>

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Using the heading below briefly describe some elements of the culture of the young people that are in your youth ministry. Keep in mind that culture is symbols, behaviour, values, beliefs and worldview:

**GLOBAL:**

**NATIONAL:**

**ETHNIC:**

**LOCAL:**

**TRIBAL:**

**CLUSTER:**

**FAMILIAL:**

## Global Culture

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### 1. An Emerging Generation

However we look at it, there is no doubt we are experiencing a time of enormous change. The impact of globalisation is not only changing culture but is doing so at an ever increasing rate. These changes make youth ministry all the more challenging as the paradigms in which we operate alter, calling for new approaches to bringing a timeless message to young people.

The most fundamental level at which these changes are occurring is at the level of worldview. Not only are we seeing an emerging generation behaving differently and adopting different outward symbols, but more significantly their values and beliefs are changing, pointing to an emerging worldview. The popular term for this new worldview is “Postmodernism”. Briefly, postmodernism can be described as subscribing to the following view:<sup>\*</sup>

**As the individual is socially constructed by society, each person’s reality is created by the experiences and insights gleaned from their social environment.**

This tenet leads the postmodernist to the following conclusions:

- i. There is no such thing as an overarching truth meta-narrative that explains everything in a coherent way.
- ii. Each individual must construct their own set of truths to live by based on their own perceptions of reality and discovered through experimentation and pragmatism.
- iii. Other people’s reality must be tolerated and respected. To debate and disagree is foolishness at best and a form of cultural imperialism at worst.

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It is part of Maori wisdom that when one sees the back of the whale breaking the surface of the water, you can be sure that the rest of it is not far away. The whale which rises in our own historical seas is that of postmodernity. The nature and advent of postmodernism is a topic which attracts much confusion and debate, and perhaps it is safer to speak about the emerging culture. While commentators are divided over postmodernity, most are in agreement that Western society is in the midst of cultural transition. It may well be that we are just beginning to see the back of the whale breaking the waters. It is too early to describe in great detail what this surfacing leviathan looks like, but it is too late to deny its presence or proximity. Part of the difficulty of these times is that we live ‘between the ages’, when the previous culture of modernity still holds sway and power, but the emerging culture is present with vigour.

- Mike Riddell<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> For a more detailed description see *Youth Culture*, YouthTRAIN 2000 (as used in Carey Baptist College’s MM670: Mission Within Youth Culture – Workbook 1).

## 2. Emergent Characteristics: I-MORPH

At a global level within western culture this emerging or “postmodern” worldview is reflected in a number of characteristics. These characteristics will impact what follows in this manual as we delve into the practice of youth ministry. While this list is not intended to be exhaustive it does highlight characteristics that have particular significance for us as youth workers and the terms used will continue to appear throughout the course of this manual. To aid in memorisation, the acronym I-MORPH (the changing “me”) is used.

### a. Intuitive

Primary Characteristic:

Intuitive: A reliance on faculties beyond the five senses.

Key words:

Self-reliant: The belief exists that while the insights, experiences and advice of others may be helpful, ultimately the source of truth and understanding lies within and can only be discovered and determined by self. Therefore when we are told something is true, it simply means it is true for that person; it is up to us to determine if it is also true for us.

Subjective: The concept of objective truth is dubious at best and has limited ability to convince. A young person who thinks according to a postmodern worldview will sift information but a key determinant of whether or not they accept it will be their own subjective assessment of it. In other words, if it just doesn’t “seem” or “feel” right they will be reluctant to accept it. Vice versa, if something seems or feels right, even if the evidence says otherwise, they are likely to accept it. In summary, objective assessment will hold some sway but the ultimate determinant is likely to be more subjective.

Experiential: Self reliance on one’s subjective assessment doesn’t come through books and study alone. It comes by experimenting with faith and subjectively assessing the outcome. For example, the young person is likely to think to themselves, “The only way I can really know if prayer works is if I pray. If my prayer seems to be answered then I’ll believe. If it doesn’t I won’t.” All of us will recognise within ourselves this tendency to want to experiment with faith. The postmodernist however will place lesser stock in the experiences of others and more on their own.

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A lot of people seem to think that since modernity was rationalistic, postmodernity must be either antirational or irrational. No, that’s antimodernity, not postmodernity. Postmodernity more likely seeks to integrate rationality with things beyond rationality—things like imagination, intuition, and faith. In fact, if the medieval era is seen as an era of faith (in a Hegelian progression, the thesis), and the modern era as an era of reason (the antithesis), we could expect the postmodern era to be a synthesis of faith and reason.

- Brian McLaren<sup>7</sup>

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Enlightened realists... assert at least in theory that the human mind can grasp reality as a whole and hence that we can devise a true and complete description of the way the world actually works... Postmodern thinkers no longer find this grand realist ideal tenable.... They argue that we do not simply encounter a world that is ‘out there’ but rather that we construct the world using concepts we bring into it.

- Stanley Grenz<sup>8</sup>

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## b. Mystical

### Primary Characteristic:

Mystical: An awareness of a spiritual realm that exists beyond the physical.

### Key words:

Virtual: Increasingly, through the internet, young people have access to, and inhabit a virtual world which they switch in and out of at their convenience. It is the world of chatrooms, instant messaging and blogs. Within this world they can take on other personae and interact with people whom they have never met in real life or ever will. It is a world in which the lines between truth and perception, actual reality and virtual reality become blurred. "Reality" is more than what they see, hear or touch – it exists within a virtual realm. This move away from a purely physical view of reality opens them up to a curiosity about a spiritual world that is similarly "real" yet virtual – a dimension which they can switch in and out of.

Mysterious: Because truth need not be logically and objectively established, there is a greater willingness among young people to embrace and enjoy the mysterious. That which evokes wonder and amazement has always been appealing but in the past has tended to bring with it the desire to understand. The difference now though is that young people find it less necessary to understand in any objective sense. In fact, any objective explanation (if accepted) robs the experience of its mystery and therefore its appeal. They would much rather face the mystery and find their own interpretation – one that brings meaning and satisfaction to them.

Transcendent: The third mystical characteristic among postmodern thinking young people is a belief in some form of transcendent reality – one that goes beyond what they see and experience within the physical. That there is a spiritual dimension is increasingly accepted as is their ability to somehow interact with this realm. God, if he (or she!) exists, is somehow transcendent yet accessible and not just in some theoretical way but in an actual and real way. Young people are not content to simply have God explained – they want to experience Him, and not just as a "best friend" but as a transcendent all powerful Creator and Sustainer.

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Those who turn to the Net in search of such community and a sense of belonging apparently aren't finding it in the "real world." The average teenager with an internet connection spends more than twenty hours a week online, much of it in pursuit of community and relationships. For many N-Geners, online relationships are as meaningful to them as their "real-world" relationships, often more meaningful. Seeking connections that they aren't finding in their offline endeavors and growing up in a fragmented society where true community is becoming more and more scarce, these kids "long to belong" to a community.

- Andrew Careaga<sup>9</sup>

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There is a groundswell of recognition spreading through our culture that all life is at root spiritual; that everything we see is formed and sustained by what we cannot see. People all around us—neighbors and strangers, rich and poor, Communists and capitalists—want to know about God. To ask questions about meaning and purpose, right and wrong, heaven and hell. We may well be living during a wonderful moment in history, as those old frauds, the world, the flesh, and the Devil, are discredited by the very culture they have nearly destroyed.

- Eugene Peterson<sup>10</sup>

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### c. Open-ended

#### Primary Characteristic:

Open ended: A desire to have room to explore and experiment with truth.

#### Key words:

**Sceptical:** Young people in a postmodern society are more sceptical and distrusting regarding what they are taught to believe. They will not simply “believe and not question” for to do so contravenes the belief that truth has a subjective, intuitive element to it. Therefore, when taught something they are more apt to disbelieve and set out to prove or disprove, then to believe and set out to prove or disprove.

**Ambiguous:** Ambiguity does not cause the same frustration to the postmodernist as it might to others. It does not create the same dissonance that exists for the one who operates at a purely rational level and so it does not bring the same level of doubt. In fact ambiguity has appeal. To be able to say that something can at the same time mean two things makes it more intriguing. To narrow it down to just one meaning seems too narrow and closed. A postmodern thinker would rather grapple with ambiguity and explore it, then have it explained to them. The appeal of ambiguity is heightened still further when answers seem paradoxical or when juxtaposition between two opposites is created.

**Non-linear:** Young people seem to have a greater ability to absorb information and think in less linear and sequential ways. Some attribute this to the tendency of television programmes to switch between storylines as well as to the non linear nature of browsing for information on the internet, where searching can become more random and can follow various streams at once. Whatever the reason, linear argument seems limiting to them and anything presented as five easy logical steps is likely viewed with scepticism.

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The acceleration in the rate of change coupled with the acceleration and massification of input has created a state of seemingly permanent paradox. A condition and its negation, a set of data and its apparent contradiction, a course of action and its own anticourse, no longer arrive incrementally or sequentially; they arrive instantaneously and simultaneously, and because they do, there is no time to resolve the difference between them by traditional methods.

- Watts Wacker<sup>11</sup>

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Not only is [juxtaposition] a feature of postmodern art; it is a symbol of the entire culture in its acceptance of proximate difference and even contradiction. Diversity is not feared; if anything it is valued. Opposing symbols, perspectives and beliefs are allowed to meet and interact, rather than being regarded as mutually exclusive. Tension is viewed as creative, with the possibility of opening up previously unperceived elements of experience.

- Mike Riddell<sup>12</sup>

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#### d. Relational

##### Primary Characteristic:

Relational: A desire to connect with other people at depth.

##### Key words:

**Communal:** The lack of a unifying and objective truth meta-narrative which all can subscribe to creates a sense of disconnectedness in which no one can fully share a person's reality because their experiences and therefore their perceptions are different. When community develops people not only experience love and acceptance but they develop communal perceptions of truth through shared experiences. This desire to uncover truth and reality, along with a more general relational disconnectedness brought about through dysfunctional family relationships, creates a desire for some form of communal experience. This desire is more often met through tribalism, in which the community is of a generic nature, making it easier to connect. Yet still young people long to connect with those who are different, especially older people who will accept them, care for them and inspire them. Nevertheless despite this desire they often lack the ability to forge these relationships through a lack of good role models who have taught them the necessary social skills.

**Authentic:** Young people have more than simply a desire for relationship – they long for authenticity in relationships. They seem to have an innate ability to sense when someone is sincere and genuine and have well tuned “hype” alerts. As with all of us there is a desire to know and be known, yet for the postmodern this is not simply for friendship's sake but is for them a means of making sense of life and of discovering meaning in an inherently meaningless world. Again, the experience for them is more theoretical than real, often because they lack the trust necessary to be transparent in their relationships. Many have been hurt by those closest to them and so there is a reluctance to be made vulnerable again.

**Incarnate:** A need for the postmodernist in the area of relationships is for truth to be incarnate – that is, to be made real through the lives of people who hold to that truth. The saying that “young people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care” is more true than ever. For propositions of truth to win a hearing, those subscribers to a truth must meet the postmodern on their turf (literally as well as figuratively), and they must live the truth with passion and commitment.

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In the vacuum where traditional behavioral expectations for young people used to exist, in the silence of empty homes and neighborhoods, young people have built their own community. The adolescent community is a creation by default, an amorphous grouping of young people that constitutes the world in which adolescents spend their time. Their dependence on each other fulfills the universal human longing for community, and inadvertently cements the notion of a tribe apart. More than a group of peers, it becomes in isolation a society with its own values, ethics, rules, worldview, rites of passage, worries, joys, and momentum.

- Patricia Hersch<sup>13</sup>

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Relativism and pluralism are not new. But the postmodern variety differs from the older forms. The relativistic pluralism of late modernity was highly individualistic; it elevated personal taste and personal choice as the be-all and end-all. Its maxims were “To each his/her own” and “Everyone has a right to his/her own opinion.”. Postmodernism beliefs are held to be true within the context of the communities that espouse them.

- Stanley Grenz<sup>14</sup>

### e. Pragmatic

#### Primary Characteristic:

Pragmatic: A tendency to believe in what works

#### Key words:

**Experimental:** In setting about constructing one's own system of truth or reality, it is difficult, if not impossible for the postmodernist to be anything but ultimately pragmatic. If something doesn't work for them then it cannot be true for them. Therefore experimentation is a critical life tool when it comes to discovering truth. It is by trial and error that they construct their own system of truth.

**Participatory:** Rather than make passive observations about truth, the postmodern young person needs to actively participate in life and learning in order to comprehend and adopt truth. It is not easy for them to sit and listen to someone else describe their own truth system as it seems somewhat irrelevant and unconvincing unless they can somehow get involved through interaction or participation. It is through debate or trial and error they begin to clarify what they really believe and own truth for themselves.

**Immediate:** Young people are growing up in an instant society. For example, communication via cellphones and instant messaging is immediate and fast food is quick and convenient. Delayed gratification is difficult and seems pointless to many who engage in credit card binges, piling up of student debt, and premarital sex. This immediacy within society leaves little room for patience and so anything that doesn't work now is discarded in favour of something that does. Truth is seen as something that is fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and unchanging. So if something does not work now it is not true for them now, but that doesn't mean that it won't be true at some point in the future. An example of this is a young person who accepts Christ, but later on rejects Him, saying that Christianity worked well for them when they were younger but now it no longer works for them, or they have outgrown it.

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The belief system maintained by most teenagers is a combination of Christianity, pragmatism, Far Eastern traditions and utilitarianism. They are not opposed to Christianity. They simply see no compelling reason to choose one faith system over another if they don't have to. Why not take the best from each faith group they're exposed to and combine those valued elements into a comfortable, customized religious smorgasbord?

- George Barna<sup>15</sup>

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In the climate of "creating a god that works for you," church, traditional religions and the promise of heaven are out of style. Shared experiences, spirituality and the potential of humanity are definitely in. Absolute truth claims, whether moral or religious, are out. Personalized belief systems and pragmatic moral commitments are in. Discovering a transcendent God who seeks to communicate his will is out. Experiencing a domesticated God who wants persons to fulfill themselves is in. In short, Yahweh is no longer an acceptable God for our culture—he is being left behind in search of more favorable alternatives.

- Richard Dunn<sup>16</sup>

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## f. Holistic

### Primary Characteristic:

Holistic: An ability to see the interconnectedness of life.

### Key words:

**Creativity:** Under postmodernism, truth is viewed more holistically – it is not just about intellectual reason and logic, but it is also about emotive expression and intuitive sensing. In other words, all of life is both a way to discover and express truth. Therefore the postmodernist tends to find the arts more interesting and valuable than the sciences and appreciates variety and creativity as meaningful expressions of truth and reality. The open-endedness of creative expression means that the postmodernist will find that creativity enables them to not only grasp truth more adequately, but also to express truth more fully.

**Symbolism:** Symbolism appeals to the postmodern mind because of the way in which it is open to interpretation. We may both look at the same symbol and draw different meanings, neither of which is wrong, because they are both equally true for us. These meanings which we each subjectively choose to draw from symbols, are a means to finding our own truth and reality about life and faith.

**Activism:** The holistic view of life inherent in postmodernism reduces the gulf between belief and action, narrowing it under the single term, “reality”. Reality must be more than just believed – it must be actively lived. Thus we see a new activism emerging, that is less about changing *the* world and more about changing *our* world. In other words, young people influenced by postmodern thought will subscribe to causes if they can be made to see the way in which the cause will make a difference to communal life.

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Mine is very much an emotional relationship with what is beyond, rather than a cerebral one. I *feel*— and have felt since I was a child, listening to my mother tell me that God was everywhere—that a spirit surrounds us. I feel there *must* be a God. "Jesus loves me, this I know," the song says, and I do feel that love, but only when I let myself feel it. I have to pause and reflect for the feeling to find me. Stuck in traffic, I do not feel the love of God unless I remind myself of God. Stuck in sadness, I do not feel the love of God unless I remind myself of God. My awareness of God's love does not beat within me as automatically as my heart does, nor does it come as naturally as my breathing. I have to open up and let it in. *Then*, I feel it. But if I don't pray or reflect, I could go for days, years, probably the rest of my life without feeling the love of God. In my personal experience, God's messengers do not break down my door. I have to open the doors myself. However, if I do open up, I feel a response. Call me crazy, as some of my friends do when I tell them how I feel about God, but I feel that the spirit, which I call God, is always near us, trying to connect.

- Edward Hallowell<sup>17</sup>

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## The I-MORPH Characteristics

Primary Characteristic	Key Words	Need	The Cry
<b>Intuition</b>	Self-reliant Subjective Experiential	The need to feel	<i>"If I have not experienced it, I question its reality."</i>
<b>Mystical</b>	Virtual Mysterious Transcendent	The need to wonder	<i>"If I can explain it, it loses it's appeal."</i>
<b>Open-ended</b>	Sceptical Ambiguous Paradoxical	The need to discover	<i>"If it is made to seem simple then it is probably simplistic."</i>
<b>Relational</b>	Communal Incarnate Authentic	The need to connect	<i>"If you do not accept me I cannot accept your reality."</i>
<b>Pragmatic</b>	Experimental Participatory Immediate	The need to apply	<i>"If it doesn't work for me now then its not true for me now."</i>
<b>Holistic</b>	Creativity Symbolism Activism	The need to express	<i>"If it is reality then it affects all of life and can be communicated through all of life."</i>

# Tribal Culture

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## 1. Describing Tribal Culture

Various authors have attempted to describe and define what is meant by tribal cultures or sub-cultures:

“A subculture group is a social-cultural formation that exists as a sort of island or enclave within the larger society.”

- Jordaan, W.J. & Jordaan J.J., *Man in Context*, 1984

“Subcultures are meaning systems, modes of expression or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context.”

- Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture*, Routledge, 1985

“Subcultures are distinct clusters of understandings, behaviors, and cultural forms that identify groups of people in the organization. They differ noticeably from the common organizational culture in which they are embedded, either intensifying its understandings and practices or deviating from them.”

- Harrison Trice and Janice Beyer, *The Cultures of Work Organisation*, 1993

“Subcultures are compromise solutions between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference, and the need to maintain identifications to the culture within whose boundaries the subculture develops.”

- Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys*, Glencoe, Illinois: 1955

“Subcultures possess their own meanings, their own way of coping with rules accepted to be valid for the organization, their own values structured in specific hierarchies; they develop their own categorical language for classifying events around them, they create their own symbolic order.”

- Snejina Michailova,

*Professor of International Business, University of Auckland Business School.*

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The common elements of a subculture include:

- a relatively unique values and norms,
- a special slang not shared with society
- separate channels of communication
- unique styles and fads,
- a sense of primary group belonging seen in the use of 'us' and 'them'
- a hierarchy of social patterns that clarify the criteria for prestige and leadership
- receptivity to the charisma of leaders
- gratification of special unmet needs.

- Source unknown –  
quoted by Mark  
Tittley, *Sonlife Africa*<sup>18</sup>

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“You'd really hate an adult to understand you. That's the only thing you've got over them - the fact that you can mystify and worry them.”

- A 16-year-old mod  
from South London<sup>19</sup>

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Here we will use the following definition:

**A youth tribal culture (or sub-culture) is an identifiable group of young people who subscribe to symbols, behaviours, values, beliefs and even worldviews that are discernibly different from those of the wider culture in which they exist.**

## 2. Causes of Tribal Culture

### a. Developmental Causes

Tribal culture in part arises through the two primary adolescent social tasks of identity and independence.

- i. Identity: Tribal cultures provide young people a place to live that accords them a sense of belonging and acceptance, so critical for healthy adolescent development. It gives them a place in which to test out new identities and to receive validation for those aspects of identity they begin to claim as their own.
- ii. Independence: Tribal cultures also act as a means of “separating” from parents by creating a separate culture. It is a means by which young people can say “I don’t belong to you” by not belong to their culture. The greater the rebellion from parental control is, the more likely the tribal culture the adolescent settles upon will contain elements that are the antithesis of parental culture.

### b. Sociological Causes

Early studies into youth subcultures in the 1960’s emphasised the aspect of independence. What subcultures did exist tended to be negative and rebellious. As tribal cultures flourished, sociologists recognised that issues of identity and peer pressure lay at the heart of many. Now there is growing recognition of the fact that the very nature of society is a driving force in creating new cultures – ones that are more than just passing adolescent reactionary fads. More explicitly then, the growing proliferation and diversity of tribal cultures can be attributed to:

- i. Change: The rapid changes in society mean that the world in which the adolescent is growing up is very different from that which their parents knew at their age. Thus, tribal cultures, rather than being simply a reaction against adult culture can also be reflective of emerging cultures which young people feel more at home in (e.g. techno culture, gay culture, computer geeks)
- ii. Consumerism: The second societal change that has contributed to tribal culture is the consumerist environment young people are growing up in. This environment teaches them that life is about choices and about selecting products to suit need and preference. It spawns a smorgasbord mentality in which subcultures are chosen and merged with others to create new ones (e.g. “emo” – an emotive derivative of punk merged with hardcore).

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There is a small band of social scientists who study 'subcultures.' Subcultures, these scholars tell us, develop in response to "dominant meaning systems." They are acts of resistance, protest, refusal which seek to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Plainly some subcultures are devoted to and shaped by resistance, but to see them only in this way is a problem. For the mainstream is losing its centrality. Increasingly we live in a world of coincident communities, a great swamp of possibilities. There is no main stream. There are many streams. The "dominant meaning systems" are coming undone. It is less and less clear what "rituals of resistance" might resist. Subcultures can no longer be seen to be "pushing off" against the rest of culture. Now they can be inspired by other motives, driven by other inclinations. The subculture theorists cannot explain line dancers, golf fanatics, bass fishermen, and other 'subcultures' they have so fastidiously ignored. In the world of plenitude, it is not even clear they can explain oppositional teens."

- Grant McCracken<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Ingredients of Tribal Culture

Tribal cultures tend to develop around a mix of exterior motifs and interior motives. The exterior is more noticeable and yet the interior is more revealing when it comes to analysing and working with the subculture.

#### a. Exterior

There are three main exterior motifs, although, as can be seen in the examples given below, there are degrees of overlap.

- i. Music
  - hip hop, punk, rap, techno, heavy metal, etc
- ii. Fashion
  - grunge, goths, skinheads, labels, etc.
- iii. Sports and pastimes
  - skating, surfing, rugby, bikers, computers, etc.

#### b. Interior

The interior motives that drive the tribal culture young people gravitate towards are more complex and tend to be based on perception and need:

- i. Perception
  - View of self: The more positive, secure view of self a young person has the less likely they are to gravitate into harmful negative subcultures. This view of self tends to be based on factors such as appearance, personality, and socio-economic grouping.
  - View of life: Subcultures are also created around a young person's view of life – be it optimistic, pessimistic, constructive or nihilistic.
- ii. Need
  - Need for security and significance: The two primary adolescent needs are security and significance.\* Young people will gravitate toward subcultures ranging from gangs to youth group in order to meet these needs.

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The sub-cultures as they are illustrated above are not stationary. While they generally emerge out on the fringes, most are slowly being dragged back into the middle by a complex interaction between media, marketing and dynamics within the sub-culture itself. To use an illustration from biology, this journey from the fringes back into the mainstream forms a life cycle that ensures most sub-cultures have a 'use-by' date. This idea of a natural life cycle may help you to make some overall sense of the subcultures that litter the youth landscape in your area. Sometimes, the ones that appear the most weird or offensive are, in fact, the most strategic because they are the future. The life-cycle idea might also explain why a youth trend is over once your employing agency or community finally begins to see 'some good' in it. As a youthworker you should already be looking for, and trying to understand, the next one.

- Lloyd Martin<sup>21</sup>

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\* For a more detailed description of these needs see *Adolescent Pastoral Care*, YouthTRAIN 2000 (as used in Carey Baptist College's MM575: Pastoral care of Adolescents – Workbook 2).

## 4. The Significance of Tribal Culture

Tribal culture has great significance for how we approach youth ministry. Despite variations in these cultures, or perhaps because of them, our youth ministries need to be characterised by four things.

### a. The need to be diverse

The differences between tribal cultures mean that a “one size fits all” approach to youth ministry no longer works (if it ever did!). We need diverse strategies and approaches to present the gospel to youth in a way that is culturally relevant to them. Diversity does not necessarily mean lack of unity though. We will need to find ways to still be one amidst the need to be diverse.

### b. The need to be discerning

In order to be effective in working with various tribal or subcultures we need to understand them. It’s not enough to identify the exterior motifs – the symbols and behaviours. We must probe deeper to uncover interior motives and how they impact values, beliefs and worldview. In short, we need to know how to exegete\* a subculture.

### c. The need to be incarnational

In order to be effective and to impact young people we need elements within our youth ministries that incarnate truth within tribal culture. That means adults who understand and respect the culture and will engage young people in the places where the young people feel most comfortable. This does not necessarily mean that the adult has to adopt the culture. For example, someone does not need to take up skating to reach skaters. What they do need to do is show and interest in the culture and be willing to learn about it without judging it.

### d. The need to be dynamic

It is the nature of at least some tribal cultures to change. What begins as “alternative” soon is made mainstream by the marketers and so the culture changes as young people look to make a statement of identity that contrasts itself with what has become acceptable. Because youth subcultures are changing so must youth ministry. It needs to avoid cultural ruts by keeping abreast of cultural shifts and developments.

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This profusion of distinct subcultures challenges long-cherished ministry models. Gone are the days when churches could be all things to all people by attempting to appeal to the broadest possible audience. Many of today’s emerging Christian leaders believe that, in the future, the ecclesiastical landscape will no longer be dominated by large, monocultural, one-size-fits-all megachurches, but rather by networks of smaller churches, each of which ministers within the context of smaller, more closely knit subcultures.

- Steve Rabey<sup>22</sup>

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If we go with the missiological ‘homogenous unit principle,’ where we basically mingle only with the same kind of people as we are, I believe the underlying ‘hidden curriculum’ message is one of racism, classism, subculturism, and etceterism. A church contextualized for a particular subculture where the church barricades itself off from other Christians or the world relationally is unhealthy.

- Brad Sargent<sup>23</sup>

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\* For a detailed description on how to exegete a culture see *Youth Ministry Philosophy* YouthTRAIN 2004 (as used in Carey Baptist College’s MM674: Youth Ministry Practice – Workbook 1).



To help you better understand the interaction between global, tribal and cluster culture, reflect on a “cluster” that exists within your youth ministry – a small group of friends that hang out together and are clearly delineated from others in your group. Consider the following questions:

Which I-MORPH characteristics are most evident in this cluster? Write those key words that best describe them next to each characteristic

- *Intuitive:*
  
- *Mystic:*
  
- *Open-ended:*
  
- *Relational:*
  
- *Pragmatic:*
  
- *Holistic:*

Describe their tribal culture. Is there a label you can put to it? Use the following headings to help you:

- *Symbols*
- *Behaviours*
- *Values*
- *Beliefs*
- *Worldview*

Describe their cluster culture. How does it differ from the culture of other clusters with the similar tribal culture? Use the following headings to help you:

- *Symbols*
- *Behaviours*
- *Values*
- *Beliefs*
- *Worldview*

## **For Further Thought...**

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Take each of the six I-MORPH characteristics and in a sentence or two describe a way in which each is reflected in the comments and attitudes of the young people whom you lead.



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- <sup>2</sup> Hickford, A. *Essential Youth*, Eastbourne, United Kingdom: Kingsway Publications, 1998 (p.15).
- <sup>3</sup> Martin, L. *The Invisible Table*, Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press, 2002 (p.49)
- <sup>4</sup> Frost, M. & Hirsch, A. *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003 (p.40).
- <sup>5</sup> Posterski, D. *Friendship: A Window on Ministry to Youth*, Scarborough, Ontario: Project Teen Canada, 1985 (p.8)
- <sup>6</sup> Riddell, M., Pierson, M., & Kirkpatrick, C. *The Prodigal Project*, London, United Kingdom: SPCK, 2000 (p.19)
- <sup>7</sup> McLaren, B. & Campolo, A. *Adventures in Missing the Point*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003 (p.252)
- <sup>8</sup> Grenz, S. *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995 (p.41,43)
- <sup>9</sup> Careaga, A. *eMinistry: Connecting With the Net Generation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2001 (p.128)
- <sup>10</sup> Peterson, E. *Subversive Spirituality*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994 (p.33)
- <sup>11</sup> Wacker, W. *The Visionaries Handbook: Nine Paradoxes that Will Shape the Future of Your Business*, New York, New York: HaperBusiness, 2000 (p.17-18)
- <sup>12</sup> Riddell, M., Pierson, M., & Kirkpatrick, C. *The Prodigal Project*. (p.25)
- <sup>13</sup> Hersch, P. *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Ballantine Books, 1998.
- <sup>14</sup> Grenz, S. *A Primer on Postmodernism* (p.15)
- <sup>15</sup> Barna, G. *Generation Next*, Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1995 (p.74)
- <sup>16</sup> Dunn, R. *Shaping the Spiritual Life of Students*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2001 (p.32)
- <sup>17</sup> Hallowell, E. *Connect*, New York, New York: Pantheon, 1999 (p.200,201)
- <sup>18</sup> Tittley, M. <http://www.sonlifeafrica.com/model/subcult1.htm>
- <sup>19</sup> Hamblett, C. and Deverson, J., *Generation X* London, United Kingdom: Tandem, 1964.
- <sup>20</sup> McCracken, G. *Plenitude: Culture by Commotion*, Toronto, Canada: Periph. :Fluide. 1997.
- <sup>21</sup> Martin, L. *The Invisible Table*, (p.60)
- <sup>22</sup> Rabey, S. *In Search of Authentic Faith*, Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2001 (p.51,52)
- <sup>23</sup> Sargent, B., Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary quoted in *In Search of Authentic Faith*, (p.67)