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## *YOUTH CULTURE*

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Any missionary to a foreign country knows that an important step in preparing to do effective ministry is to understand the culture of the people they are intending to reach and disciple. Not doing so can leave the missionary looking and feeling out of touch at best, and irrelevant at worst, to those whom they are trying to reach. Therefore they spend time learning the culture and in doing so they look for a way to take the unchanging message of the gospel and present it in a manner that makes sense to those whom they are trying to reach.

In youth ministry we can sometimes feel like a missionary in a foreign country. Not only might we find the way they dress and behave foreign to our experience, but we look at the way they act and react, and find ourselves thinking, if not saying, "I just don't understand you!"

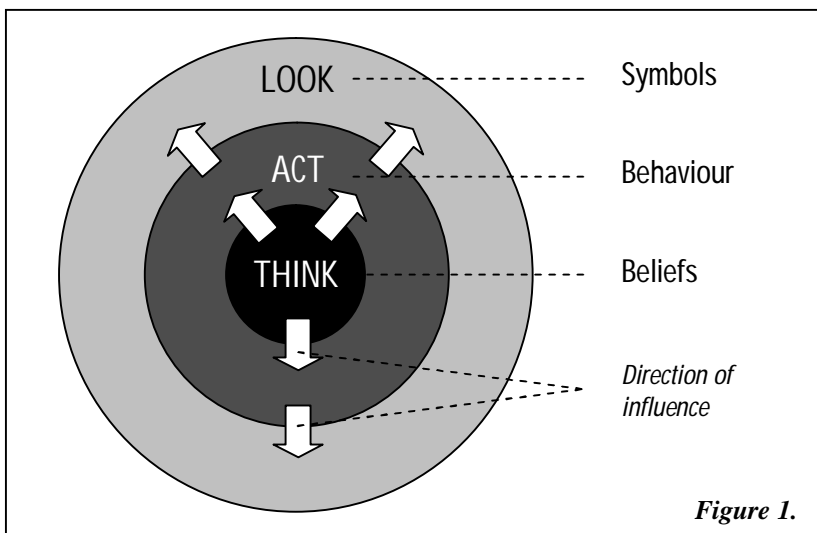
Yet understanding young people is essential if we are to plan strategies and programmes that are effective in reaching them and discipling them.

The first step in understanding a foreign culture is to understand just what culture is. Fundamentally culture exists at three levels. The first level is concerned with symbols and how people “**look**”. These are the outward aspects of culture such as the way people groom and dress themselves, the music they listen to, the movies they like, the sports or pastimes they are interested in, and the technology they are spending their money on.

This first level of culture is constantly changing. What is “in” today can be “out” tomorrow and it is hard for us as youth leaders to keep up with these changes, particularly if we ourselves are well removed from the culture. Fortunately, when it comes to effective youth ministry, being informed on this level is not as important as it is for the other two levels.

The second level of culture is concerned with how people **act**. It looks at what behaviour is considered acceptable or “cool” and what is considered to be illegal, immoral or simply shameful. These aspects of culture change more slowly yet they are more significant than level one because they better represent who a group of people really are.

The third level of culture is concerned with how people **think** – the beliefs which they hold. Here the focus is not so much on actions but on the underlying beliefs that affect actions. This level of culture sees slower change than the other two levels and is significantly more profound because it ultimately affects the other two (see figure 1.).



A missionary understands this. They might begin their study of culture observing the way people look and from there move to understanding various customs and learning what is and what isn't appropriate behaviour. Over time they get to the heart of what this foreign culture is about – the way the people think and the underlying belief systems that they operate out of. Once they truly begin to grasp these deeper aspects of culture they are able to present the gospel to the people in a way that truly "makes sense" to them.

Similarly, effective youth ministry requires more than simply being up with the latest looks, the latest fashions and the latest music. In fact, being familiar with these things is relatively insignificant compared to understanding the way young people behave and more importantly, the belief systems they hold to that govern the way they behave.

This then is the first step in effective youth ministry: to understand the mind of the teenager and the beliefs which govern their behaviour. In this chapter we will look at five very common beliefs which young people today (and probably ourselves too), are heavily influenced by. You will note that each of these beliefs is progressively deeper and more profound.

However, in understanding the way young people think, we are faced with an important dilemma. All of these belief systems run contrary to Scripture and the belief systems of the Kingdom of God outlined by Jesus. So our dilemma is, do we plan, strategise and programme in a way that takes them into account and accommodates them? Or do we challenge these belief systems, confronting their errors and pressing for change?

In short, the answer is we do both. We win a hearing by accepting young people for who they are and entering into their world in a manner which is relevant, while at the same time challenging them to rethink their core beliefs terms through our example and the teaching of Scripture.

This approach is characteristic of what Jesus did as He entered into our world as one of us, having regard for our weaknesses and accepting our failings while at the same time inspiring us to a new way of living. Whether it was the woman at the well, a dishonest tax collector or a woman caught in adultery, Jesus understood their world and then loved them into change.

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*A basic message of effective communication is that the message sender must know the receiver, particularly how and what the receiver thinks. The basic message of God's Word doesn't vary from culture to culture. But the words used in communicating the unchanging Word must always be chosen with deep sensitivity to the receiving culture.<sup>1</sup>*

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# 1. HEDONISM

Perhaps the most apparent belief system held by young people today is that of hedonism. Hedonism is the belief that meaning and fulfilment is found through the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. If you have any doubts about whether or not this describes your young people ask yourself how often they utter the word “boring”! If something is not personally enjoyable to them then it’s deemed of little value.

Those who hold to the *belief* of hedonism exhibit *behaviour* according to three rules. The first rule is the rule of **personal gratification** in which they ask themselves “What’s in it for me?” Actions that bring benefit and blessing to others seem to carry little attraction if they involve personal sacrifice with no sense of personal enjoyment or satisfaction.

The second rule the hedonist lives by is the rule **of subjective gratification** in which they decide whether or not something is personally gratifying to them. It is characterised by the motto “If it feels good do it!” They have little interest in your assurance that they will enjoy something because others did. What’s important to them is their own subjective assessment.

The third rule is the **rule of immediate gratification**. The hedonist looks to receive pleasure in the immediate future – the more immediate the better. Your appeal to the fact that “you’ll be glad you did this later”, is unconvincing at best and irrelevant at worst.

These rules which so many young people live by have important implications for how we approach youth ministry. The question is, do we do fun activities simply to attract hedonistic young people? Or do we do more serious Bible related activities that demonstrate the emptiness of hedonism. Again, my suggestion is, we do both.

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*Students will not respect us if we lure them in with secular music and movie clips, and then a year later in small group they find out that we only want them listening to Christian music and watching “Veggie Tales”.<sup>2</sup>*

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There is nothing wrong of course with having fun. God loves to see young people enjoying themselves. There are two dangers to avoid though. The first is that we simply feed hedonism by having fun for fun’s sake, or that we make fun an end in itself. If a programme is simply designed to be fun and has no redeeming purpose by which young people might eventually find meaning in Christ, are we not simply feeding hedonism?

The second danger is that we use the promise of fun to dishonestly lure young people into our programmes and then once we have them there we revert to our *real* agenda. By all means have fun in your youth programme but never use fun to hide the spiritual dimension to your programme when you promote it. Doing so is dishonest.

So in planning for an effective youth ministry we not only have fun, but alongside this fun we openly offer something that offers greater depth and meaning than what “fun” can provide. In time, the young people themselves come to realise this and hedonism is replaced by a belief system that puts love of God and love of others ahead of love of fun. In short, our strategy is to both recognise the reality of hedonism while at the same time exposing its shallowness and overcoming it.

***From experience...***

*Our weekly youth programme took place on Friday nights. We would meet at 7.30pm for worship and Bible study and from about 9.00pm onwards they were free to play games, eat food and talk. One of our leaders once commented to me “When I first came to youth group I really wasn’t interested in the worship and Bible study. I only came for the fun afterwards.” I replied that I knew that and that that was OK. It may have been that the fun was what was attractive to young people but over time they gradually came to appreciate the value of Bible study and began to enter freely into worship.*

## **2. CONSUMERISM**

The second common belief system young people live by is that of consumerism which broadly encompasses a preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods and the belief that these possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life. Consumerism emphasises three things.

The first is the idea that money and possessions are an indicator of success and thus they provide us with **status**. In other words, it is characterised by the belief that the more a young person has, the more highly people will think of them.

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*With so many choices and forces coming at them from every direction, it is inevitable that today's emerging generations are constantly changing their values and behaviours. Consistently and stability are absent both individually and collectively in a world where there are no absolutes.<sup>3</sup>*

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The second emphasis of consumerism is that money and possessions provide us with **contentment**. Marketing is geared toward creating a sense of need and the belief that a product will meet that need and offer some degree of happiness albeit fleeting.

Finally consumerism is all about **choice** and keeping one's options open. The more options that are available the better, as it allows young people to create experiences that best suit their own individual needs.

This tendency toward consumerism leaves us grappling with a number of issues as we seek to establish an effective ministry to young people. Clearly the underlying philosophy of consumerism is wrong – possessions are *not* the highest good in life. As Jesus Himself said "And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?"<sup>4</sup>

However advertising and choice are part of the culture in which young people live. Neither of these things is intrinsically wrong though there are dangers. In advertising within our youth ministry we must show integrity and be honest about our events. Similarly, we should not offer choice for choice's sake or choice as a lure for attendance when the choices do not contribute to the goal of our youth ministry and the young person's ultimate welfare. Too many choices can simply create a consumerist desire within our young people to have a programme that meets their wants and not necessarily their needs.

In other words, effective youth ministry may take into account the consumerism of young people but it should never be driven by it. What must drive you is the guidance of the Holy Spirit who directs your decision making as you seek to follow Christ, the Head of the Church and therefore the Leader of your youth ministry.

#### ***From experience...***

*I came to realise that keeping young people happy by responding to their stated needs and endeavouring to run programmes that would be popular with them was tiring and unsatisfying. When I made God my main point of reference, the demands of programming became more straightforward. I still listened to young people and their wishes but I was guided by God.*

### 3. NARCISSISM

Narcissism derives its origins from Narcissus, a young man in Greek mythology, who fell in love with his own image in a pool. Narcissism is therefore an excessive preoccupation with one's self. It shows itself in three primary ways: **self centeredness** characterised by the cry to "look out for number one" and the belief that life is "all about me". **Self worth**, in which people seek to prove their worth through achievement, and **self love** apparent through a prideful preoccupation with appearance.

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*If you need any further convincing of narcissism among young people today, look no further than social networking where one writes as much about oneself as possible to as many "friends" as possible and hope for as many comments as possible to be reassured people care.*

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How do we do effective ministry to a narcissistic generation? Again it is a matter of balance. On the one hand we seek to let every young person whom we come in contact with know that they are a person of unique value. We show an interest in even the smallest matters of their lives and offer assistance to them as they navigate the difficulties they face.

Yet at the same time we create opportunities for young people to put others at the centre of their world and to discover the joy that comes in "loving others as we love ourselves".<sup>5</sup>

### 4. EXISTENTIALISM

A still deeper belief system beyond those we have so far examined is existentialism. This is essentially the belief that life has no inherent meaning and that there is no overarching plan to follow. The consequence of this in the lives of our young people is evident in three ways.

The first relates to **intent** or purpose. Either they live purposeless and directionless lives, or they create their own sense of purpose and pursue that, regardless of how artificial and inconsequential it may be.

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*The appeal of video games is not in the fun they offer but in the opportunity for purpose they provide. Achieving a high score and unlocking a new level provide young people with the sense of accomplishment they crave yet may lack in "real life".*

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The second relates to **immediacy** and living in the moment. Since life has no overarching purpose, meaning is best found in the immediate, and so they seek thrills and excitement, even at the risk of personal harm, in order to get that adrenaline rush that makes them feel fully alive.

The third way in which we see existentialism in young people's lives is in their unhealthy sense of **independence**. Meaning and purpose are sought within – not through interactions with others. They see themselves as an island, expecting nothing from anyone and owing nothing to anyone.

Existentialism values experience, and an effective youth ministry will be one in which young people are provided with opportunities to live their faith in real and immediate ways. It will not be faith taught from a book in a church lounge but faith experienced through the immediacy of God's presence in the challenges of life.

Therefore we teach young people that life indeed does have meaning and that there is ultimately accountability to God for the way we live. When they orient their purposes with His they come to experience His reality, and no more powerfully than when they set aside their own independent priorities and step out in risky faith for the benefit of others.

***From experience...***

*Some of the most valuable things we did with young people were mission trips. The reason was that they struck at the very heart of existentialism. Firstly the mission gave young people a sense of purpose that pushed them beyond their independent isolation to work with and for other people. In the process they had to rely upon God in a way that made His presence more real and immediate to them than it had previously been.*

## **5. RELATIVISM**

At the heart of the previous belief systems is a belief system known as relativism which teaches that truth and moral values are not absolute but are relative to the persons or groups holding them. In other words, when we declare something to be right or true, it is only right or true for us based on our upbringing and on our life experiences. Someone else might declare the same thing to be false or untrue and we would both be right.

Relativism therefore is at odds with a Biblical faith that declares certain things to be true because God, in the Bible, declares them to be so. We therefore respectfully disagree with the young person who is likely to say to us "It's true for whoever wrote that, but it's not true for me."

An effective youth ministry will not allow relativism to lead it into compromising Biblical truth. As leaders we will declare what God says is true even if it means that truth is rejected.

However, we will at the same time take into account this belief system and will allow and even encourage young people to explore Scripture for themselves and express their own opinions. Instead of labelling incorrect conclusions as being "wrong", a wise leader will ask questions that help young people uncover inconsistencies for themselves. If Scripture really is "true" then skilful questioning on the leader's part will guide a young person toward drawing right conclusions. In the spirit of relativism they will declare "I believe in faith that the Bible is true, not because my youth leader told me it was true but because I was given opportunity to develop my own convictions."

## CHECKLIST:

- We have fun but ensure that fun has a deeper purpose than fun for fun's sake.
- We are honest in advertising – people know what they are coming to.
- We are driven by the Holy Spirit in our planning – not by consumerism.
- We let young people know they are of unique value by showing individual love.
- We create opportunities for young people to love others as they love themselves.
- We show young people that life has meaning and that they are accountable to God.
- We teach God's Word as being objectively true.
- We give young people opportunity to study God's word and draw their own conclusions.

### ***From experience...***

*Each week in our youth programme time was devoted to allow young people to discuss Scripture and share their opinions, but we would end the night with a brief but clear presentation of what the Bible actually taught, so that no one was unclear as to what God declared to be True.*

## **For REFLECTION and DISCUSSION**

1. If someone accused your youth ministry of being basically about just having fun, what evidence would you present to refute them?
2. What examples do you have of putting your own convictions ahead of the young people's preferences in running your youth ministry?
3. How do you challenge the belief system of narcissism in your youth ministry by confronting self-centredness and developing self acceptance and self worth?
4. What elements of your programming challenge young people to rely on God so that they personally come to see His reality and the purpose that He has for their lives?
5. What do you do to communicate to young people that God's instruction in Scripture is "True" whether they accept it or not?

### **Prayer:**

Which of these belief systems do you battle to overcome in your own life?  
Spend time confessing sinful attitudes and ask God to change you.

### **Practical insights which I will apply:**

## Endnotes:

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### 1. YOUTH CULTURE

- <sup>1</sup> Mueller, W. *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, IVP Books, 2006, p.48
- <sup>2</sup> Jones, T. *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Zondervan, 2001, p.87.
- <sup>3</sup> Mueller, W. *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, IVP Books, 2006, p.99
- <sup>4</sup> *Mark 8:36,37*
- <sup>5</sup> *Matthew 22:39*