

learning from youth culture

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Intro to Ali Campbell. For those who don't know me, I have been involved in youth work for 20 years. 10 years as a volunteer, 10 full time. In 1996, I finished gainful employment and began a course in youth ministry with the OASIS Trust. I worked for a Baptist Church for two years as their youth worker, and then became youth minister at St Paul's in Ealing. For 14 years I was involved in the youth and children's work at the New Wine summer conferences in Shepton Mallet, was an area host for Soul in the City in London in the summer of 2004 and I am a field work tutor for the Centre for Youth Ministry, Oxford. I am married to Lisa with one daughter, aged 2 ½ and another on the way (mid December!)

Find out about others. I am keen that we share the wealth in the room, so let's go round and find out what one another are up to in terms of youth work - and do chip in as we go so this is more like a discussion than a "talk at you" session.

Quote:

"Youth ministry involves entering young people's world in order to plant the gospel and the church there - it is not a bridging strategy but a genuine commitment to new forms of church. It is not a temporary way of holding them in church until they learn to worship properly like the rest of us"

Graham Cray, Youth Congregations and The Emerging Church, 2002

David Coffee, at the time, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of GB, commented in 2002 of the "double shock" some young people (*most?*) experience. Firstly, encountering Jesus and secondly, encountering the Church!

Our Church culture can be so different from contemporary culture that it is a bit like traveling to another country for someone new to faith or new to the church. In our contemporary culture is there a Kingdom presence? Is there a Kingdom dynamic at work? Are there things that God is doing outside of what we would call church? What are some of the things that are going on in contemporary culture that would resonate with the heart of God? We are all made in God's image and, however twisted or warped that may become; His fingerprints can still be discerned.

Can we identify some of these things and, in so doing, find some common connectors between us and those we seek to reach.

- [The Significance of Relationship.](#)

"It is not our abilities that determine who we are . . . it is the choices we make"
Dumbledore to Harry, JK Rowling, The Philosopher's Stone, 1997

10 years of Harry Potter (can you believe that!) Books, merchandise, and a film franchise. What has been the churches reaction? Initially there were a number of high profile Christian writers

and speakers who railed against a series of books which appear to encourage an interest in witchcraft and the occult. Yet, just as "Lord of the Rings" has a focus at the centre of the film on the moral choices of Frodo the hobbit (with a mythical, magical backdrop), the books in the Harry Potter series focus on the relationships between Harry and Ron and Hermione - children, young people and adults alike have been drawn into the world of Harry Potter because they cared about these characters. These relationships.

Can you name 3 social networking websites? Myspace, Facebook and Bebo . . . though there are others. What is the attraction, relationships, connecting with others, sharing yourself.

Can you name the video game just released for the XBOX 360? Halo 3. A first person shoot-em-up that, when you play on your own can be completed in 12 hours (who has a spare 12 hours!), but the real gem of the game is that you can play online . . . with and against your friends and people you have never met from all over the world - almost an infinite number of possible outcomes . . . the point again is social, networking, relationship - you can even use a headset and talk to your opponents and comrades!

Question: In our churches and youthwork, how do we build relationships? We need to remember that for many young people their relationships are not purely geographical in terms of where they live - they go to school somewhere else, they meet with people on the internet, friendships and shared passions are about the network you are in, not where you live. Is our church a networked place? Are we quite focused on the building and the church premises in terms of "church?"

- Good youth work is 80% relationship and 20% everything else. A wonderful programme of activities or bible teaching won't grow and develop your youth work in the long run if you neglect relationships.
- Theology. We don't need stacks of bible references to know that God is a relational God, from "It is not good for man to be alone" - the only thing that God said was "not good" before the fall. To our theological understanding of the Trinity - 3 persons, 1 God - perfect relationship - being made in God's image, "in OUR image" as God says, means we were made for relationship.
- Make building relationships a priority - it will reap dividends with those in the church and those outside.

- [The Significance of Encounter.](#)

When I was growing up, the approach to youth work (in fact, any kind of ministry with an evangelistic thrust) was to convince people of the truth. From C.S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity" to Bruce Milne, "Know the Truth" . . . to present day "Alpha Courses" . . . I am not knocking any of this, it is all good stuff.

However, for many young people growing up without a Christian worldview (this is to do with the world we all live in, not whether they are actually Christians or not) in our "post-Christian" culture and society there is a lack of understanding of who God is, the claims on our lives is Jesus is the son of God etc. We have to start where young people are at, not where we wish they were at!

I have sat in a classroom with some young people and had fired back at me "I don't care if it is true". Convincing young people that the gospel is true is not enough. We need to demonstrate that the Gospel also *works*.

In this sense are we "telling" our young people the truth or "teaching" them? There is a difference. In telling we might be not give space for questions or discussion, because we have the answers - our role is to impart these answers, to fill our young people with knowledge of who

God is . . . forgetting that the key is to *introduce them to Him*. Our young people need to know more than the facts of the faith - they need an encounter with the living God.

A recent Mori Poll conducted for the British Library looked at Faith in Britain today. For those who said they had a religious faith, 92% of Muslims said it made a difference to their lives. Only 45% of Christians could say the same. For the Muslims they put into practice their faith - knowing Jesus should be a transforming experience. We need to walk in Jesus footsteps and model that to our young people.

Going back to the double shock mentioned by David Coffee - the shock is that here is this amazing guy called Jesus, he performed miracles, lived an amazing life, taught some incredible things to his followers. . . and, er, here is the Church. If we don't look a *bit* like Jesus I think that presents an obstacle to this generation. Where is our experience of God? When did we last have an encounter with Him in worship? Do we seek to practice His presence?

Question: In our churches and youthwork, where do we experience God? When did we last encounter Him in our worship? Do we seek to practice His presence?

- Good youth work involves giving young people space and opportunity to encounter God as well as telling young people about God.
- Theology. Building on God is a relational God . . . this relationship is expressed throughout the bible by encounter from the "burning bush", to God made man and dwelling among us (in John's gospel this literally means to "tabernacle" - just like in the desert in the Old Testament), to receiving the comforter, the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth - until the disciples had an encounter with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they could not go out and fulfill the Great Commission.
- Make enabling encounter a priority - it will reap dividends with those in the church and those outside.

- **The Significance of the Individual.**

The Ipod is the classic example of this. Young people walk around with their own personalized sound track for their lives, ripping their favourite bits from albums and chucking it all together. Increasingly, everything is being tailored for the individual. Food, clothing, music, your tescos - with a store card they know you - and tailor stuff they send you by post or email accordingly.

In some of our churches we have emphasized the need for "personal" salvation - but then, in terms of meeting together and doing "church" we have encouraged conformity to a set of norms. What are the norms in your church? By norms I mean those things you do or don't do when you gather that are not "core" essentials of the Christian faith . . . sit in rows? Stand up sit down for stuff? The organ always plays the hymns, the "worship band" plays the contemporary songs? The default position for contemporary worship is "folk rock"?

Note, I am not talking about some "cult of the individual" where it is all about *me*. We need to balance this with building community and needing one another.

Is there variety? Is there the opportunity for personal expression?

"What we do in life - echoes in eternity"
Maximus, Gladiator, 2000

Every young person wants and needs to feel significant. That they count and matter, that it makes a difference whether they are there or not.

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life - in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me."

Philippians chapter 2 verses 12 - 18

This is the life that Paul calls us to. We should be among those that invite young people to join us, to pursue a life not of success, but of significance - making a difference, for the sake of Christ, in those around us.

Question: In our churches and youthwork, do we help young people to feel significant? Are they involved in shaping our times together? Are they active participants or consumers of our programme?

- Good youth work involves participation from young people.
 - Theology. Building on God is a relational God and this relationship being expressed through encounter - we are also invited to participate in the work of God by being part of His Church, everyone has a place, everyone has a gift, everyone can contribute in the body of Christ - this is the priesthood of all believers.
 - Make equipping young people to live significant lives a priority - it will reap dividends with those in the church and those outside.
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