

Young People Today: The Context & Challenge

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Our ministry with young people is often so hectic and fast paced that we are rarely able to step back and take stock of the situation of young people and re-examine our ministerial approach. In this article I'd like to do the following:

- Describe the "context" of youth. We don't minister to young people in a vacuum, so we need to revisit their situation today.
- Offer several "images" of young people as a way of understanding the broad spectrum of young people we serve.
- Identify some of the challenges that the context and these images give to youth ministry.

A Disturbing Context for Adolescent Growth

I'd like to make two observations: first, when I went to write this article, I immediately went to my files (I have files on everything!). I read through my collection of notes, workshops, and articles I've clipped out. I found that many of the needs and the

overall context of young people have changed very little in the past twenty years.

For good or bad, twenty years ago we were identifying the problems of young people and much of what we said holds true today. Certainly there have been shifts. Some things are worse today (the level of violence, rate of teen pregnancy) and some things have improved (overall crime rate is down, use of hard drugs is down, rate of teen volunteerism is up).

However, I was struck by how much the identified needs of young people haven't changed. Socrates wrote long ago: "Our youth love luxury; they have bad manners; contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love to talk in place of exercise. Children are now the tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their food, and tyrannize their teachers." Some characteristics and issues are, indeed, timeless.

My second observation: if you just went by the image of young people as portrayed in the media, one could conclude that every social ill and problem is either the fault of young people or caused by them (e.g., violence, drugs and alcohol, pregnancy, aids, our valueless and direction-less society). Consequently, there is a move to control youth, establish stricter curfews, pass tighter laws

and penalties, and, in a sense, make young people the scapegoat for society's problems.

My conclusion is simply: *They are us!* Knowing what we know about systems and especially family systems, we know that the most vulnerable member of the system often reflects what's happening in the system and acts-out for the system. You've seen this. Have you ever said, upon meeting one of your young people's parents: "So, that's why they act that way."

Young people are us. They are the most vulnerable part of the social system and I think they act-out for the rest of society. The question is not "What's wrong with young people today?" The question is "What's wrong with our society that causes young people to be the way they are?" It's a trap to respond simply or solely to the symptom and ignore the problem.

In an interview in *Parade Magazine* on April 8, 1994, Marian Wright Edelman said:

It is time for all parents and adults to stop our hypocrisy and break the code of silence about the breakdown of spiritual values and parental and community responsibility to protect and nurture our children. While we decry rising youth violence, drug use, and antisocial behavior, the plain truth is that we adults have preached moral and family values we have not practiced consistently in our homes, religious congregations, communities and national life.

It is adults who have financed, produced and performed in the movies, TV shows and media that have made violence ubiquitous in our culture. It is adults who manufacture, market and make available guns to anybody who wants one, including our children. It is adults who have taught that hate, racial and gender intolerance, greed, and selfishness are family values. It is adults who have left millions of children without a healthy start, a fair start and a safe start in life. It is adults who have taught children to look for meaning outside rather than inside themselves --

teaching them, in Dr. Martin Luther King's words, "to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles, rather than by the quality of our service and relationships to humanity." And it is adults -- mothers and fathers -- who must accept responsibility and pledge anew to morally guide, protect and invest in our own children and in all children.

If we really want to have an impact on young people, we must begin to treat the *cause*, not just the symptoms. We must deal with their context: family, society, church, society. However, we can't let them bleed to death while we deal with the cause of their bleeding! We need to blend direct service to young people in need and crisis with ministry to the causes of these problems which lie in the context.

Rabbi Murray Saltzman, writing in the *Baltimore Sun* on September 7, 1993 about World Youth Day in Denver, provides further commentary on the current context:

There is a foreboding sense of intensifying hostility and anger fracturing our national psyche. The more obvious source of this insidious canker sore that poisons the public atmosphere are the hate groups. The skinheads, for example, are outright murderers. They plot to eradicate minorities, Jews, immigrants, non-christians.

Their mindless venom unfortunately spills over to influence those who ordinarily would disavow bigotry. More and more, minorities and immigrants have become targets for exclusions and scapegoats for the economic ills presently suffered by so many.

Match this with an increasing ratio of dysfunctional families and we begin to understand why hostility and anger seep into the lives of children, why our tolerance for diversity and economic stress has diminished. Exploding tempers produce disaffected and alienated employees who kill without reason. Children with guns who kill for sneakers and jackets. This growing callousness,

a shocking indifference to life, testifies to the frustration and anger gnawing at the soul of so many Americans.

If this tendency to violence, self-indulgence, uncontrolled hostility were not so widespread, infecting diverse segments of society, we might less be perturbed. But in suburbs and city, in every economic level, the immature and TV-mutilated intelligence responds to real or imagined exasperation with violent destructiveness.

Adolescents defy their parents and govern their lives by peer-dominated values. Parents and their children attack one another as their lives become submerged with adverse pressures and emotional and spiritual emptiness, leading to quarrelsome anger. Family and home is no longer a comfortable haven or a life-sustaining inspiration. We now face incredible challenges as a civilized nation. Civility and decency are at risk. Common courtesy seems passé.

Nine Key Factors

Saltzman certainly identifies a very harsh reality, for young people and for the larger society. We need to identify some of the factors that have contributed to this situation for young people. I don't pretend to offer the definitive sociological list of factors, but there are several critical issues that surface in many studies. I offer nine (resisting the urge to copy either Moses or Letterman with 10).

1. Cultural Isolation

Thomas Sine says that the most culturally disadvantaged people in the USA will be our young people raised in white suburbs, speaking only one language, and having no cross cultural contact. Further, this isolation breeds bigotry and racism.

2. Wounded Adults

Many parents are wounded adults. Sine says that youth are growing up in the most addicted and dysfunctional families we've seen in our history.

3. Alone and Isolated

Given the collapse of families and increasingly anonymous neighborhoods, children are alone and isolated. John Calhoun of the National Crime Prevention Council says that young people have become disconnected from the normalizing institutions of family, school, church, community, and job future. Disconnection can cause a belief that the social contract does not apply. I think the Los Angeles riots brought home to all of us that the system does not work for all the people.

4. Raising Children Alone

Increasingly parents raise children alone. The African proverb says, "It takes an entire village to raise a child." We need communities of neighbors who care for our children, who are willing to be surrogate parents and role models for young people. I remember growing up in a small town in eastern Pennsylvania where everyone had the right to correct me. In today's society we are afraid to intervene in inappropriate behavior because of the threat of litigation or even violent reprisals.

5. Less Contact with Adults

Children have less contact with adults, so their values purveyors become their peers and the media. TV and advertisers now define success, relationships, and meaning. And that's a problem! Remember how the R.J. Reynolds company during congressional hearings said there is no evidence that smoking causes cancer. The NRA has campaign which trumpets: "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." Grains of truth have become gospel.

6. Poor Youth Role Models

High school drop outs and teen single parents do not tend to make good role models or good parents. Calhoun describes these youth as more likely to live in poverty, more likely to abuse their children, and more likely to face a bleak future.

7. Safety

Children aren't safe. Consider the easy availability of guns, the increase in violence on all levels, child abuse and violence done to children.

8. Inadequate View of Youth

We view youth as troubled. Again, this labels young people as the cause, not the symptom. We seem to be into "fix and cure" approaches, rather than "connecting and supporting." We are more concerned with their deficits, than their assets.

9. Income Disparity

When 25% of children are born into poverty, they are already set-up for failure. This breeds tension and despair and perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Images of Youth Today

The social context is very difficult. Let's look at the young people who grow up within this context. It's impossible to provide the definitive description of young people. Our young people are a diverse group. So I would like to provide eight images of young people as a way of framing our understanding. Our young people will certainly fit into one or more of these images.

Cornucopia Kids

Coined by Bruce Baldwin, this is the term for young people who are over-indulged and pampered by competitive and guilt-ridden parents. He says that 1 out of 5 young people grow up expecting that the good life will always be available for the asking without effort or need for personal accountability. They expect to get what they want whenever they want it, and expect only the top of the line. They do not expect to face consequences for their actions. They have trouble entertaining themselves and become easily bored.

Young people annually spend \$89 billion (\$57 billion from earnings and \$32 billion from allowances) and influence the spending of \$200 billion. (Business Week, April 1994).

Playing with Matches

These are the young people for whom risk taking is the norm. Many young people are engaging in risky

behaviors that give them a charge of adrenaline – something that makes them feel alive, such as drugs and alcohol, early sexual experiences, drinking and driving, driving at excessive speeds, or cutting school. When these behaviors are coupled with their sense of immortality, the combination can be deadly.

Of 28 million young people, 7 million are highly vulnerable and 7 million are moderately vulnerable to the effects of risky behaviors.

Terminally Ill

These are the young people who firmly believe that they will soon die – either because their living situation is intolerable or their neighborhoods are deadly. These are the young people who don't expect to see adulthood, and therefore, live absolutely for the moment.

If there is no "why," then all youth's choices and behaviors are based on "why not." Why not kill for sneakers, why not have babies as teens?

Immediate gratification rules their decision making. Their lack of belief in a future feeds their deep hopelessness, and contributes to their acceptance of violence as a means to an end. For these young people, the social contract doesn't work and social norms are meaningless.

Poor in Spirit

These young people are also known as the nerds, the losers, the geeks, and the outsiders. These are the young people with the low self-esteem and a negative self concept. These young people believe they have no control over their lives. They feel like outsiders, who don't fit into any particular peer group. These are the young people who can't find a niche, a way of fitting in, and so have accepted that they won't fit in. They become alienated, depressed, and often suicidal.



Resilient Survivors

These are the young people who make it in life, when their circumstances say they shouldn't. These are the young people who marshal their resources and somehow survive abusive and dysfunctional family situations, violent neighborhoods, or an obvious lack of personal and family assets. Resilient survivors often display certain characteristics such as: insight (something's wrong – understanding), independence (distancing themselves), relationships (friends, other adults), initiative (push for mastery of problems), creativity (using play and art to work through problems), humor (finding the comic in the tragic), morality (recognizing parents' behavior as wrong).

Searchers

These are young people who are hungry for something more, who search for meaning and purpose, who hunger for connection and belonging. These are young people who are trying to make sense out of their lives, searching for a faith that fosters their relationship with God.

Disciples

These are the young people who are actively living out their faith. These are the youth who offer a vast reservoir of idealism just waiting to be tapped. They are part of the 50% of young people who now spend time each week in volunteer service. They combine elements of the searchers with an experience of community and belonging to something bigger than themselves.

Prophets

These are the young people who challenge society. My favorite definition of a prophet is: "A prophet is one who reminds the establishment what it was established for." These young people bring the gift of their questions to the Church and to society. They ask the why and why not questions. They push and pull, often unintentionally, challenging the Church and society to re-examine our answers to life's tough questions. They continually challenge us to reframe our answers in a language

they understand. They enable us to grow, if we let them.

Were you able to identify young people you know who seem to fit these images?

The Ministry Challenge

Thomas Sine says that we, the Church, have sold young people the wrong dream. We sold them the American Dream – the dream of materialism, individualism, consumerism, and hedonism – not the Jesus Dream as found in Luke 4:18-21:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

The poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed are found today in the Third World, in Rwanda, and in the cities and rural areas of our country. They are found in some of the images of young people we have already identified. They are found in our own lives, for we have all at one time or another been emotionally poor, if not economically so. We have all been captive to unhealthy pursuits, relationships, or values. We have all been blind to the problems of injustice around us or to the presence of God around us. We have been oppressed by unjust systems, others' expectations, and painful experiences in our lives.

To all of us, Jesus proclaims a year acceptable to the Lord, a year of Jubilee. The reign of God is breaking through, a reign characterized by fullness of life with God and fullness of life for all God's people. Young people are yearning for this fullness of life.

Confusing the American Dream and the Jesus Dream has created a crisis of vision. How do young people envision the future? What do they look forward to? How do they see their ability to effect

change – personally, and in their families, society, and Church? Where's the noble adventure? How does the Christian faith speak to this?

Juan Luis Segundo, a Latin American theologian, asks: "Are we afraid for the Gospel? Are we fearful that the Gospel has lost its power and cannot attract the youth of today? Do we believe that the church can speak to and touch the lives of the young people with whom we work the way it touched us?"

Rabbi Saltzman followed his description of the rising levels of violence, materialism, and anger in our society with this insight about young people:

Recently in Denver hundreds of thousands of young Roman Catholics paid homage to spiritual and moral values. They confirmed that young people can transcend a materialistic culture to identify with elevating purposes, disciplines and ideals. They demonstrated a refreshing allegiance to a noble calling.

What an impressive event that gathering was. There is an enormous reservoir in young people of spiritual and moral energy, a countervailing force that can overwhelm the negative and destructive pressures so threatening to all our teenagers of whatever race or creed.

These young people reassured me that given an idealistic summons of an affirmative, optimistic religious conviction, young people can make a difference. We need not surrender to despair when this example of commitment to a moral life and a spiritual quest is so filled with enthusiasm and vitality.

When young people look at the Church, the parish, and individual ministers, do they see something that would make them want to have "our" faith? Do they see this noble adventure of being a Christian? Do they see the fullness of life and the reign of God?

The challenge for all in youth ministry includes at least the following:

Proclaim the Good News, and Proclaim it Again.

Young people need to hear Jesus' message of the reign of God and they need to hear our faith stories and traditions. Young people can be challenged to see the world through the lens of faith and begin to differentiate between society's dream and the Jesus dream. They *are* hungry for a dream that captures their imagination.

Connect Young People to the Life of the Faith Community.

Young people have a need to belong to something bigger than themselves. They have a need and a right to responsible participation in the faith community. They need to be connected to faith-filled adult role models. They need to use their gifts on behalf of the community. Therefore, we need to give them the opportunities and the skills that will enable them to participate in the rituals, celebrations, and life of the community.

Challenge Our Young People to Become Disciples.

Youth ministry must challenge young people to be followers of Jesus and active participants in building the reign of God. We must call young people to this worthwhile adventure, this noble adventure. Upon returning home from World Youth Day, a young person addressed his parish and said, "Tell us more about Jesus and about how to live as his followers." Youth want to be committed. They want to be aligned with a community of committed believers. They want to live out this commitment as disciples.

Give Young People the Opportunity to Serve.

Young people have done extraordinary things for their community through service. Not only does their idealism and almost boundless energy enable them to tackle very difficult issues, but in the process, they increase their self esteem, confidence,

compassion, and enduring belief in the value of service. They begin to develop and live the values of the reign of God.

Collaborate with Those Institutions That Can Communicate Values and Caring.

“It takes an entire village to raise a child.” We must collaborate with the rest of the village: schools, social service agencies, and community youth organizations. A critical element in this challenge is to make kids safe! This will take collaboration with government on gun control, collaboration with community agencies on drug and alcohol prevention programs, job preparation, and literacy programs.

Minister to Young People within their Family Context.

In youth ministry and in the Church's pastoral ministry, the family dimension has been given a prominent role. We need to commit resources of staff, time, programming, and money to make this an effective reality.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with this quote Archibald MacLeish:

The crisis of our time, as we are beginning to slowly and painfully to perceive, is a crisis not of the hands, but of the hearts.

It is a crisis of hunger, but not a crisis created by any doubt as to our ability to feed ourselves.

It is a crisis of cold, but not a crisis of cold created by any doubt as to our ability to put roofs over our heads or clothes on our backs.

The failure is a failure of desire.

It is because we the people do not wish –

It is because we the people do not know what it is we should wish
because we the people do not know what kind of world we should imagine....
this trouble haunts us.

The failure is a failure of the spirit:
a failure of the spirit to imagine,
a failure of the spirit to imagine and desire.

Jesus provided the vision we are called to imagine. It is our challenge now to desire and work for the reign of God, and call our young people to do the same.



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Resources for Staying In-Touch

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