

Billions to be Won!:

Going after the largest mission field in the world--Youth!

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Just three days after the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, I sat in a football stadium surrounded by nearly 80,000 high school students and their leaders. It inspired me as it would any youth pastor, to see the passion in the hearts of these students to re-claim their generation for Christ. I watched thousands of students make commitments to grow in their passion for God. Despite my inspiration, I felt my eyes welling up with tears and my throat swelling. Perhaps in part I was experiencing tears of joy from watching several of my students make commitments. Yet, I also felt this recurring ache from within as I thought about the vast majority of youth in the world who have never even heard about Jesus much less joined thousands of their peers in singing and cheering about Him!

Despite the increased attention stateside youth are getting for their violence, all in all I have never been more excited about what God is doing in student ministries throughout North America. As we embark on a new millennium, youth are leading the way in prayer movements, worship rallies, and outreach endeavors. They are the ones pledging moral purity. They are the ones passionately working to break the chains of generational sin. If God brings revival to North America, I expect it just might start among our youth.

Global Youth

While I could not be more thrilled with the hope that lies in our North American youth, they are a small percentage of the global youth population. Think about it this way. Imagine a gathering of 1000 students, each of whom represent the distribution of youth around the world. Divide them into groups according to where they live. If the first group is for students from China, 250 out of 1000 students will join that group. If we lump the students from India and China into one group, we will have at least 333 students in that group. Of course we want a group just for youth from the U.S., though only 3 of the 1000 students gathered live in the States. Now add to the gathering of students, 100 youth workers (paid and/or volunteer) who represent the distribution of evangelical youth workers around the world. According to where they live, the youth workers join the student groupings. 99 of the 100 youth workers present join the 3 U.S. students leaving the one remaining youth worker for the other 997 students. That was a long way of saying 99 percent of the youth workers in the world minister to 3 percent of the youth. (Youth Ministry International, 1992). That injustice tugs at my heart!

It would be difficult to discern the country of origin for each of the students in this kind of gathering by sight alone. As I meet youth in the Pacific Rim, all throughout Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, many of them look remarkably similar! A New York City-based ad agency videotaped the rooms of

teenagers in 25 different countries. The convergence of what was found in rooms from Los Angeles to Mexico City to Tokyo made it difficult to see any differences. Basketballs were sitting next to soccer balls and closets were overflowing with an international, unisex uniform: baggy Levis or Diesel jeans, NBA jackets, and rugged shoes from Timberland or Doc Martens (Tully, 1994). "In a world divided by trade wars and tribalism, teenagers, of all people, are the new unifying force. From the steamy playgrounds of Los Angeles to the stately boulevards of Singapore, kids show amazing similarities in taste, language, and attitude...Propelled by mighty couriers like MTV, trends spread with sorcerous speed...Teens almost everywhere buy a common gallery of products: Reebok sports shoes, Procter & Gamble Cover Girl makeup, Sega and Nintendo videogames, Pepsi etc (Tully, 1994, p. 90). The common culture global youth share may only go an inch deep however it's noteworthy none the less.

Others are reaching them!

I often have missions colleagues challenge me concerning the viability of global youth ministry. I am in full agreement that we must not export North American models of youth ministry globally; I understand that many cultures and the churches therein will resist making any significant investment in ministry to youth. However, while we meander over the missiological implications of global youth ministry, everyone else is going after them! The world at large is responding to the clear statistic that more than half the people in the world are under 18.

Occult groups are pervasive in many cultures as is the New Age Movement. Governments and educators are targeting youth as the hope of tomorrow. Mormons are aggressively pursuing students by putting youth centers next to many of their churches overseas and by placing Mormon missionaries in the world's major cities to specifically target youth. Many Catholic churches in other cultures pride themselves in blending spiritism with organized religion as a way to draw in youth (Hamilton 1998).

As Tully (1994) describes the global market of teenagers all over the world, he writes, "No marketing challenge is more basic than capturing that beat. There are billions to be earned" (p. 90). Major corporations are increasingly understanding that as good as the teen business is stateside, it is ultimately far better abroad! (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1995). We must take some cues from these groups and penetrate the youth market with Jesus. There are "billions to be won!"

The Potential

Rather than be paralyzed by the overwhelming unreached population of youth, I am challenged to work with others to take the Gospel to youth in every people group, and in turn, to mobilize and equip those youth to reach others. Imagine what could happen around the globe if youth were targeted by evangelicals the way corporate marketers target them. We must allocate resources to meet the need.

Younger leaders as far back as David, Daniel, Mary, and Jesus were faced with seemingly insurmountable problems yet they boldly stepped out and changed all of history. God used them as His agents. Historically, youth have led the way in a majority of the revivals that have occurred. Many of the most aggressive church planting movements around the world today are being led by 18-25 year olds.

Something radical has to be done to win the billions of youth! We must do more than simply rally the same old missions cry--"More people to go...More people to give...More people to pray." Those resources are absolutely essential but we must think and plan proactively to reach and mobilize global youth with the hope of Jesus! Some of the factors which must be foremost in our thinking include:

1. Equip Indigenous Leaders:

Historically the approach to reaching global youth has often been to take cookie-cutter programs that have served well stateside and try to make them work elsewhere. Mass reproduction of products like Coke and Big Macs works pretty effectively when dealing with material items but when seeking to reproduce people, the approach fails miserably. The mission for all of us is clear, whatever the age or culture with whom we minister--Make Disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). What becomes less clear is understanding how to go about doing so in diverse contexts and age groups.

At Sonlife, we've never been interested in simply having our equipping materials translated into multiple languages. Even though our materials are principle-based rather than program-based, we realize that contextualization goes much deeper than just language. Our commitment is to equip leaders with an understanding of the life and ministry of Christ as the supreme example of how to make disciples (as described in our book, *Connecting Your Journey with the Story of God: Disciplemaking in Diverse Contexts*). We depend upon indigenous church leaders or if necessary, incarnational missionaries to determine the implications of following that process of ministry in their respective contexts.

Regardless of the approach, we cannot build colonial youth ministries based upon the personalities and cultural identities of stateside institutions. National church leaders must own the vision from the start and contextualize the appropriate outworking of the vision among their youth.

2. Leverage the Local Church:

More than a few of us have become disheartened by the seeming irrelevance of many local churches all around the world, especially when it comes to reaching youth. Regardless, the church is God's chosen vehicle for making disciples among global youth. We must mobilize youth ministries that are based in local churches for the long-term health of these youth and their communities. This is not optional!

I recently received an invitation to minister at an evangelistic youth crusade in Liberia. More than 10,000 youth were expected to gather in a football

stadium. Given my love for communicating the Word of God to young people, it was all I could do to say "No". The same day, I received an invitation to work with a group of 15-20 national pastors in Hong Kong to help them think through how to go about reaching the youth in their communities. While not nearly as impressive when it comes to "prayer letter material", I'll be in Hong Kong in a few weeks but declined the invitation from Liberia. I'm not about to say God won't use the Liberian crusade in some profound ways. I'm simply saying that for me, there's no substitute for leveraging local churches to have ongoing ministry to reach youth in their everyday lives.

3. Mobilize the Western Church:

Most of the world's youth live in extreme poverty. Bush (1991) writes, "In the cities of the Two-Thirds world, more than 100 million children are growing up on the streets. They have no education, no affection, no adult guidance. Almost a million of them are forced into prostitution. In Bombay's red light district, at least one third of the prostitutes are little girls" (pp. 12-13). Youth with hungry stomachs are not interested in hearing about the claims of Christ. We must "develop leaders who can respond to the physical as well as the spiritual needs of [youth]" (Overstreet, 1995, p. 41). North American youth ministry has enjoyed an entourage of good resources over the last couple decades. We must not be so ethnocentric as to hoard these from the poor who inhabit most of the world.

For too long I have shrugged off the agonizing questions of church leaders in developing nations who have asked, "Dave--how do we go about making disciples of young people who have lost their fathers in battle? What does it mean practically to follow Jesus' example of making disciples with a young person for whom the words 'free time' are non-existent?"...and on and on the questions go. Sonlife is exploring a partnering relationship with World Relief in order to jointly consider how we can equip pastors among the poorest of the poor. Our ministries want to work with Western Churches to develop partnerships that mobilize all kinds of resources, including prayer, dollars, equippers, training, etc.

Churches must seriously consider global youth ministry as part of their strategic endeavors for the 21st Century. That might come by supporting a missionary or national whose primary ministry is facilitating and equipping for youth ministry. It might be through supporting an organization with strategic ministry to young people around the globe. Perhaps it means allocating part of the missions budget to send one's youth pastor once or more a year to coach other youth leaders around the world. Why not include this as part of the plan for your adopted people group? Sister relationships between stateside student ministries and overseas student ministries can also be part of developing a long-term approach to reaching global youth.

4. Synergistic Partnerships:

Just as the corporate sector has placed increased emphasis upon networks and partnering, so too should we realize the strength that lies in strategic

partnerships for global youth ministry. Movements like AD 2000 and others have prioritized strategic evangelism partnerships which seek to reach the most people, in the shortest time, at the lowest cost, among people who have the least chance to hear about Christ (Tunehag, 1997). Despite our different contexts and approaches, we can more effectively build the kingdom among global youth by uniting with others who share a common vision and purpose in ministry. Together, we can generate a tremendous momentum toward getting the Great Commission to all youth.

For example, GYI (Global Youth Initiative) is a strategic partnership joining together a variety of organizations and people around a shared mission. The mission is to mobilize indigenous movements of church-based youth ministry so that every young person in every culture has the opportunity to respond to the claims of Christ. GYI exists for the sole purpose of sharpening and furthering one another's endeavors to make disciples of all youth in all nations. Membership is limited to those individuals who are developing regional and country-wide strategies for reaching youth. Members meet together annually at different locations around the globe. (For more information, contact GYI Chair, Bill Hodgson in Australia at <billhod@ibm.net>). We can do more together than any of us can do apart.

5. Cast the Vision:

I often find myself talking with a high school or college student who is looking for direction in what to pursue as a life-calling. For that matter, many adults, even beyond mid-life, are wanting similar direction. We need to champion the eternal potential of investment in global youth ministry, whether by challenging people to send dollars and/or their children, praying specifically for a group of unreached students, going on a strategic equipping trip at least once a year, or moving overseas to make a career out of youth ministry. People who make a long-term commitment to be specialists in a culture are often the ideal ones to equip nationals for church-based ministry to youth. What part will God have you play?

The above factors are more than reminiscent of the themes we hear throughout missions as a whole these days however my desire is to rally them specifically as they relate to global youth--"the most global market of all" (Tully, 1994, p. 90). Further research and response is needed to maximize the potential that exists in reaching global youth; and of course there's no substitute for awakening the Body of Christ to pray consistently and specifically for global youth.

Conclusion:

Borthwick (1996) asks the question, "Will church leaders recognize that youth represent their greatest challenge as well as their greatest resource?" (p.154). The challenge of youth lies in the more than one billion of them who live where the Gospel has never penetrated. The resource they represent is as "young people come to faith in Christ [they] can be equipped to help complete the Great Commission. History shows that young people have always been a major catalytic

factor in missionary movements" (Borthwick, 1997, p. 154). It would be enough of a calling on my life to think of the youth who can know Christ as a result of global youth ministry; yet the potential lies in not only reaching global youth, but in mobilizing them to go after the rest of the world! My emotions swing from tears to goose bumps as I think about the privilege of being part of what God is doing to bring global youth to Himself!

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