

8-2008

As I See It: Mission to Youth – Begin Where They Are

George Boran

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc>

Recommended Citation

Boran, G. (2008). As I See It: Mission to Youth – Begin Where They Are. *Spiritan Magazine*, 32 (3). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol32/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Mission to Youth — Begin Where They Are

George Boran CSSp

In seeking to identify how we can help young people hear God's call in the midst of so many other voices, it is important that we begin where young people actually are in terms of their personal needs and feelings.

Start with their interests

The new priority they give to needs and feelings is a good thing. Too often in the past the emphasis on a collective ideal led to the repression and masking of personal needs. Human and emotional needs play an important part in a healthy and mature personality.

We can only present the message of Jesus to young people if we first succeed in attracting them and winning their confidence. We are not going to win them over by just talking at them. We need to start with their needs, aspirations and experience. If we do not start with their interests we cannot hold their interest.

Some of these interests are: to love and be loved; to be recognized; to have material security in order to develop other aspects of life; to have emotional fulfillment in interpersonal relationships; to be kind and to be treated kindly; to give meaning to one's life; to transcend oneself; to be part of a

human group and to count on it for dealing with life's challenges and for building a better world.

Today's big cities

The fall away from the church among young people is most evident in big cities where modern and postmodern cultures have their greatest penetration. The fact that many church leaders still work out of a rural mindset and have difficulty in taking on board the positive values of these cultures is one of the principal obstacles to evangelizing young people today. Many church leaders speak a language and



represent a value system that does not appeal to young people.

The phenomenon of 'mega cities' is new in human history. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the largest city in the West was London, with less than a million inhabitants. In Brazil in the 1950s 25% of the population lived in cities and 75% in the rural areas. Today 75% live in cities. Some of today's largest cities are in the Third World. Sao Paolo, for example, has fifteen million inhabitants and Mexico City has twenty million.

A positive force

Cities are a positive force in human history. They have made possible enormous technological and economic progress. City dwellers have access to a large quantity of services, impossible in rural areas: hospitals, schools, universities, leisure facilities, supermarkets, theatres, cinemas, sports clubs and so on. Modern and postmodern cultures find their most fertile soil here. The social control of the rural environment no longer exists.

The city is the place of pluralism, of ideas and progressive movements. In them the young person has many options of both

leisure and serious social commitment: outings, dances, discos, games, visits, pubs, local gangs, music, parties, schools, extracurricular courses, physical fitness programmes, music classes, social organizations, student movements and local groups.

In cities a ministry to youth has to be attractive if it is to succeed. A superficial youth ministry will fail. And if we fail in big cities, we run the risk of remaining with a pre-modern world that is fast disappearing.

The challenge is to engage in mission to postmodern youth brought up on a system that emphasizes the constant use of images, variety, ever-changing stimulation and whose attention span can be tiny. The image that comes to mind is that of a young person 'zapping' in front of the TV. Many church leaders, however, have been trained for talking at people and have difficulty in knowing what to do when they don't have a captive audience.

A successful pastoral experience

We have found that one way of attracting and involving young people in an ongoing conversion process is by promoting concrete programmes that are successful and give immediate results. Initial success creates the motivation to take other steps. Beginners have a low tolerance for failure.

Christian leaders, however, have a capacity for learning from failure and of becoming stronger when faced with obstacles. They have integrated in their lives a biblical spirituality: the seed that must die to give much fruit, the redemptive value of the cross and of the power that lies in weakness, the resurrection that comes through an experience of suffering.

An example of one such programme is our *Training Course for Leaders* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2002), which has been given in Latin America over many years. A variety of exercises guarantees active participation throughout the course, a great spirit is created, people discover their gifts, acquire confidence and learn to relate religion to real life situations. A second level of formation occurs when some of the participants are selected and trained to give the course to others.

An important educational principle is at work here: participants learn important skills and knowledge by being placed in situations where they have to teach others. People learn by doing. The young people then transfer these skills automatically to other situations.

Over twenty courses are given yearly at local level and a national course is given annually for ninety participants to train people who wish to reproduce the programme in different parts of the country.

Two issues to be addressed

One of the first difficulties we encountered was a lack of basic leadership skills. The pre-course phase was marked by a lack of organization, of continuity, of follow through, of communication, of marketing and of experience on how to contact and motivate young people to participate. The best programme in the world will fail if the pre-course phase is faulty and nobody turns up.

Another factor also became apparent. Leadership skills without a strong, enthusiastic belief in the message to be transmitted do not work. One person remarked, "You need to believe, to be enthusiastic, to be passionate about the message you have to transmit."

The word 'gospel' means good news. Good news cannot be communicated in a dispirited way. A salesperson will not sell something he has no faith in. Our message was never more relevant, but in the present climate of a retreating and sometimes crumbling church, enthusiastic belief is not easily come by.

We need to shift from a purely cultic and sacramental church to one that moves out of the sacristy to evangelize young people in their modern and postmodern cultural setting.

No magic solution

Is there a magic solution for evangelizing young people in a modern and post-modern cultural and urban context? The answer is no. However, many doors are open to us — none of which excludes hard work and continuity. The temptation to give up at the many turns in the road will always be present. At each stage one will be faced with the possibility of failure.

Work with young people is not for the weak-hearted. One must be prepared to take risks, but risks that involve careful preparation and planning. This work is the most difficult, the most challenging but the most rewarding mission 'territory' that exists today. Here will be fought the battle that to some extent will determine the survival of the institutional church itself. ■

This article concludes a three-part series.



*If we do not
start with
their interests
we cannot
hold their
interest.*