



Are we, the Church, brave enough to let the lion out of the cage, or do we want to continue believing it is an impertinent little cat? Young people are passionate! They get angry and frustrated; they get upset; they feel pain and disappointment when they look at the world. They are also pro-active and consequently are, as Kenda Creasy-Dean suggests, 'among God's most forthright, frustrating, and often unwitting prophets', and yet, as with the prophets of old, young people are often ignored and marginalised. This unwillingness to listen to young people may be to our peril, and the detriment of God's Kingdom.

Young people not only have motivation and vision to challenge their churches but also, given the right circumstances, power and ability to bring about local and global transformation. 'Well of course he is dangerous' says Mrs. Beaver, describing Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. 'But' she goes on to say, 'he is good'. Maybe it is time we 'allow', or rather empower the young people we minister with to become the un-caged lions they have the potential to be. Is now not the time to let their roars sound in and beyond our churches... the church young people are leaving partly as a result of its perceived passivity?

In this article we will explore how those of us involved in youth ministry may support young people in their mission to transform the world through developing *critical consciousness* and the questioning spirit young people are known for.

Jesus the politician

Becoming aware that the world is a complex place, where there are 'principalities and powers' at work, (political, social, economic, spiritual, cultural) shaping and controlling our interactions and life choices is part of growing-up. Recognising that these 'powers' are manifested through governments, businesses, organisations, ideologies, which in turn are controlled by individuals and groups, is also part of understanding the 'fallen world' we live in.

As we get older we should become more critically aware of the structural forces of power, which shape and influence our lives, and the lives of those around us. Powers that hold the majority of the world population in poverty, fear, isolation or enslavement. To what extent we allow ourselves and others (including young

people), to become aware of these powers and their impact, may be an indication of how seriously we take our Kingdom-building responsibility. The extent to which we challenge these powers, and empower young people to do the same, is also an indication of how seriously we take the life and teachings of Jesus.

The Western cultures that many of us live in seek to protect us from pain and discomfort. Unlike in the Middle East, where news reports of the latest killings in Iraq or Lebanon are shown in graphic detail, we are 'protected' from many of the world's horrors. This may or may not be a good thing. It is easy to lose sight of the experiences of the majority of the world population when we are being convinced that it is our own 'happiness' that is of primary importance. Consumer advertising is constantly trying to make us 'feel good' by convincing us to 'look after ourselves' with the latest items on offer.

Historically young people have been known for their commitment to 'political' causes such as poverty, injustice, war, racial-equality etc. and have demonstrated against governments and powers. They have asked 'why should this be allowed to happen'? Sometimes they, along with others, have been successful in 'turning the tide' of public opinion and winning victories for justice and non-violence, for example. At other times the voices of the young are ignored. In this respect they may have something to teach us about Jesus (see Isaiah 53:5).

Why is it that young people seem to be so committed to challenging authority and power? Maybe it is because they have been at the receiving end of it, and have not always enjoyed the experience. Maybe it is precisely because their voice has had little attention paid to it (in the decision making process in churches, schools, community groups, party politics etc.) that they identify with the weak and marginalised and therefore – given the right circumstances – are prepared to protest on their behalf.

It is easy for those in power (usually adults) to 'write off' the views of young people, citing their idealistic naivety. How many times have we heard the phrase 'when you are a bit older you will understand why things are this way'? 1 Timothy 4:12 says 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity'. Did Jesus not imagine a better future for the world...a world in which heaven and earth would be indistinguishable from each other, under God's Kingdom? Did He not seek to bring about such a powerful realignment of values that the rulers of the time became so scared of the political ramifications of His message that they had 'no option' but to kill Him. Maybe Jesus was not as innocent as we often make Him out to be? Although not guilty of sin, there is no denying the social and political impact of His life and teaching. It was fear of a social and political revolution that led the powers to call for his execution.

Do we want young people (and ourselves) simply to be consumers of a value system that seeks to tame them into a self-engaged passive existence, in which the problems of the world are 'someone else's, or do we want to join in the creation of a better world?

Prophetic imagination Compassion and social reform should go hand in hand. It was Jesus' compassion that resulted in his death, as the authorities were not prepared to accept the social, religious, political and economic reforms the Kingdom of God calls for. As Vishal Mangalwadi suggests in *Jesus the Troublemaker*, (a label more commonly associated with young people) compassion in today's world, may lead to a nobel prize...in Jesus' case it lead to his execution as a political revolutionary. This was because the compassion of Jesus was more than an emotional response to seeing starving children in Africa. His response came from a deep-rooted rage towards the social and spiritual causes of the suffering. Jesus exposed Himself to this suffering and injustice, allowed himself to be affected by it, and then, by exposing (un-covering) the causes, did something about it to transform the system, at earthly and cosmic levels. Jesus was, and continues to be (if we allow him to be) a trouble-maker. He deliberately showed compassion to people by healing them, in public (in front of the un-compassionate religious/political leaders) on the Sabbath, in blatant defiance of social and religious rules (see John 5:1-15). He questioned the authority of the rich and powerful; a move

which will normally lead to trouble.

Jesus asks us to have prophetic imagination. To dream of what a better world could look like...and to work towards the transformation of this world. Young people may be accused of being idealistic, but surely this is better than being cynical and accepting of the world in the state it is in. A world in which children die for want of a 50p vaccination.

So, what sought of things should we, with the young people we *serve* and minister *with*, be questioning? To get the ball rolling...

- Is it right that our food is bought at such a low prices from the large supermarket chains, that it causes the small local producers - in some of the poorest parts of the world - to go out of business, meaning they can no longer support their families with health care, education etc?
- Is it right that many of the clothing brands and trainers we wear are produced by young people in places like Haiti and Sri Lanka, working 14-hours a day for about £1 a day, not enough to cover rent?
- Is it okay that the environment is being destroyed due to a lack of political will to take significant measures against the industries that most negatively affect the planet through their production methods... because it is the same industries that fund those politicians... and maintain huge profits at the expense of the poorest communities?
- Is it okay to spend so much time (and money) arguing about which carpet and chairs we want in our church, rather than actively engaging with our local community of homeless people, or asylum seekers?
- Is it wrong to ask what impact does what I wear, what I eat, how I spend my money and free-time etc. have on other people who are in poorer parts of the world? Are my choices in these areas, as much a part of my worship to God, as my singing on Sunday morning?

'But that's is how a capitalist society works' may be a response. We have been deceived into thinking that capitalism (and its values) are somehow divinely ordained, says sociology professor Tony Campolo, and therefore are not willing to question some of the root values associated with this world-view. If young people began asking questions about the underlying values of capitalism (for example) what might we find out?

Adam Smith, one of the major capitalist thinkers, recognized that capitalism relies on individual's greed and self-interest to increase personal wealth. 'He Never Said' goes the angry, prophetic Martyn Joseph song, 'By any means necessary' or 'God helps those who help themselves'! And so when people (especially the young) ask questions that challenge our assumptions regarding wealth and faith, the situation becomes uncomfortable.

Questions like 'why do we spend so much money on 'church' refurbishments, in comparison to our giving to mission?' may be given little attention because they are asked by young people, who are considered not able to understand - when in actual fact maybe they understand better than most, as their heart for justice may be closer to God's. Maybe it is because we (the rich and powerful) know the way we have used resources in the past didn't glorify God, so don't deal with the root cause of the issue: a love of money and power, rather than love of God and neighbour. Maybe it is because we know that there are no easy answers to many of these difficult questions, and we like to be able to neatly package our opinions and justify our positions. Maybe it is because we know, deep down, that by asking these questions, our lives will be changed, dramatically, and we are not quite ready to make this 'sacrifice'. Some of us, and many young people, have been numbed by all the consumer hype, into not really caring about the plight of others.

A Revolutionary agenda

It is true to say that God, *supports* the positive elements of society and culture, condemns the negative elements of it *and* at the same time pushes towards their transformation into a better system for all. We are meant to be one of the ways in which this happens, and must understand how the society works in order to affirm, condemn and transform it. As Daniel Schipani says, 'the church (including young people) is called to be an effective living witness of liberation, an agent of hope... involved in the struggle against oppression and alienation. The Christian Gospel is essentially prophetic, utopian and revolutionary.'

So, facilitating and empowering young people to have a deeply rooted political agenda is central to an authentic understanding of the Good News. As I once saw on a T-shirt, '*Jesus came to comfort the disturbed, and to disturb the comfortable*'. Psalm 82 asks: 'How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked' and goes on to instruct readers to 'defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked'. How long will we allow consumer-culture to numb young people into passivity and apathy?

What must we do?

All this is well and good, you might be thinking, but aren't you being naive? How can we, with our youth group of seven, somewhat apathetic and unreliable young people have any impact? Instead of focusing on what impact you can (or can't) make on the world, why not start by considering the impact on yourself and the young people you minister *with*. Becoming more engaged with the situations of oppression and injustice in the world around you will lead you and the young people to become more faithful to the gospel you seek to demonstrate. Your worship will become more authentic and vibrant.

Rather than giving yet another 'ready to' list of things that will get young people fired up about a particular issue, I would like to suggest some principles to lead us into a journey of critical engagement with the world, that may lead to some radical transformations in the lives of individuals and communities locally and globally.

Young people must never become too comfortable to question why things are the way they are. Positive social transformation starts through critical questioning. Rather than hiding ourselves away from suffering in the world, saying 'I can't bear to watch, we must deliberately expose ourselves to the realities of this world in practical ways that engage our minds, bodies, emotions and spirituality and cause us to get angry, feel pain, and at times despair. In the same way Jesus 'made His home among us' feeling the misery of the sick, poor, and marginalised, we are called to 'be there' with all people despite race, gender, nationality, social-status etc. This may take many forms from watching the news, to visiting local projects, to going overseas and seeing extreme poverty up close and personal.

At the same time we must expose young people, and ourselves, to the Bible. Particularly helpful are the OT prophets, and the radical teaching of Jesus. Then allow, and encourage, young people to come up with their own conclusions rather than giving them our ideas and strategies of engagement concerning the issues they see. It is easy to get legalistic about not purchasing a particular brand of trainers or clothing, or eating from a particular fast food restaurant. However right these protests may be, we must not patronise young people still further by not allowing them to come up with their own prophetic messages through their engagement with God and the world. The chances are they will challenge us. Are we prepared for this?

There are so many 'causes' that we can be paralysed by the choice of what to focus on. Don't choose a cause; let a cause choose you! As you look at the world, the Bible and engage with God let God use young people in bringing about a radical transformation in our communities.

- In your opinion in what ways is the gospel political as well as 'spiritual'?
- In what ways can we encourage and empower young people to have their voice heard in and beyond the church?

- In what ways do we contribute to numbing young people into consumer silence, rather than supporting their prophetic protest?
- What problems could arise in supporting young people in asking critical questions that relate to structural inequality in the church and in your community / society?
- Reflect on Psalm 82, in the light of 1 Timothy 4:9-14

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