

Moving Beyond Image Toward Imagination

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Madison Avenue sees teenagers as one of their most lucrative markets. As a result, they barrage our students with over 12,000 marketing images... daily. Images are everywhere—on pop-up ads while surfing the web, on the commercials between *American Idol* acts, in the spam filling inboxes, and by the labels worn on shoes, jackets, and shirts.

We see them, we wear them, we breathe them.

We might launch into a rant against global consumerism (a very worthy rant, stay tuned!) but for now, we want to reclaim one of our most important jobs in youth ministry—inspiring imagination (vs. image). The imaginations of our students (and honest youth leaders are often held captive by dreams about more, big, and new—More money, an upgraded i-pod, a trendier wardrobe, and a bigger and more exotic “missions” trip the further you go through the high school ministry.

“Bigger and better” seem equal with godliness.

The problem is, sometimes our youth programs end up being little more than sanitized copies of every other marketing machine that targets adolescents. Money, prestige, and coolness trump service, obscurity and vulnerability.

Imagination gets hijacked by image.

Might we as youth leaders consider if we’ve fallen victim to this, even admitting that we might at times be the perpetrators by image rather than imagination?

First, let’s check our motives. Often we desire to do more and better “for the good of our students,” when in actuality, we’re trying to make a name for ourselves. We want to one-up our predecessor or show-up the other youth group in town.

Image elevates competition. Imagination celebrates expression.

Second, let’s look to our students for help. Often they’re less tainted by the “this is the way it’s done” rut that haunt adults. Just look at them- their hair, their clothes, their music, their words, their expressions, their questions. Their imaginations are running wild, trying to break free from society’s strangle hold of image conformity. Our students’ diversity reminds us we were created for something more beautiful and diverse than any budget or product can harness.

Image demands sameness and exclusion. Imagination embraces uniqueness and diversity.

Third, let’s get really personal for a minute. Maybe tapping into our students’ God-given imaginations will radically challenge the smooth-running, purposeful programs from which we derive comfort, meaning and status. Maybe their imaginations will reveal that bigger, new, and improved is actually a contradiction to the very nature of our image bearing and a challenge to take us beyond our Christian culture’s limited definition of image.

Image restricts. Imagination sets us free to be who we are created to be.

This seems to be what Jesus’ liberating message is all about—giving people living pictures of the best possible way to live—through upside down values where the last is first, and blessing comes to the persecuted, poor, and meek.

Let’s fuel our students’ imaginations by subverting the cultural mantras by giving our students...

- pictures of what it looks like to measure greatness by humility and service rather than power and prestige;

- space to creatively imagine ways to empower the poor in our neighborhoods;
- dreams to be globally and politically active, on behalf of the developing world (such as Darfur);
- vision that fuses careers that bring about ways to improve the quality of life for people worldwide;
- inspiration to use science to develop innovative ways of preserving God's good creation; and
- permission to budding artists looking for ways to reclaim imagination-making through art, prose, dance, and film.

Best of all, let's channel our ministry around ways that get our students dreaming about living a full life with a community that embraces imagination over image. This could change everything. We believe that's what the gospel is all about.

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