

## PORTRAITS AND PICTURES THAT HAVE, CAN AND WILL SHAPE OUR VISION

Imagination. It's something kids have, and adults lose. Put kids in a room full of toys and watch them create an alternative world full of talking stuffed animals, tea parties, or all-out galactic battles. Put a couple adults in the same room and watch them attempt to clean up the "mess."

Where does imagination come from? It really can't come out of nowhere, unless we're prepared to conclude that our ideas are created "ex nihilo"—out of nothing. That seems to be reserved for God.

So our imagination must come from "images" – pictures in our mind that get manipulated or changed to create an alternative world. What a powerful resource! While kids can transform a room full of toys, adults can transform a room full of people called a congregation. Youth leaders can transform a youth gathering into an environment for encountering Jesus. And we as GYI Leaders have platforms for transforming the shape of youth ministry on a much broader scale.

A recurring tension rests in the way we communicate images to the leaders we're discipling and training. Do we use our imaginations, running the risk of making things so messy that the true image is distorted? Or do we keep things so neat and safe so that the true image seems dull, lifeless, and irrelevant? We try so hard to make our ministry relevant to the leaders with whom we're working. And we often end up shaping our training initiatives according to styles, preferences, or traditions rather than upon sound, theological images communicated to us through the Scriptures.

One of our GYI distinctives is "Church-Based". "We focus on the development of healthy, local church-based youth ministries committed to reaching the youth of their communities." It's in our mission statement and we cite it among our values. Being Church-Based distinguishes us from a lot of other global gatherings of youth ministry leaders.

"Mobilizing indigenous movements of church-based youth ministry", as stated in our mission, has all kinds of implications for how we go about serving churches nationally and internationally. But we need to beware of too quickly jumping to the ministry implications of being church-based without first wrestling with the theological images given to us of the church.

While freedom abounds in how to minister to youth, the way we factor in the Church is not something to be done ex nihilo. The way we interface with the local church as we go about national and even continental youth ministry should come from the images provided in Scripture.

We want to approach this crucial value of GYI, "Church-Based", by exploring a couple of the dominant images of the church from the New Testament—The Body of Christ and the People of God. Robert Webber (1999) got us thinking about these images in his excellent book, *Ancient Future Faith*. These images speak to the theology of the church as the presence of Christ in the world. The church, as demonstrated by these theological pictures, is the community of God's presence.

In what follows, we have explored both of these images of the Church—the Body of Christ and the People of God. As part of that process, we've considered some of the implications for us as international youth ministry leaders.

### **The Body of Christ**

First we want to consider the portrait of the Church depicted by the image—the "Body of Christ". Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12). Webber says, "We would have expected Paul to say 'so it is with the church'." But it seems Paul's emphasis is

neither on the body nor on unity for unity's sake. His emphasis is Christ. Christ defines us. We do not and cannot define ourselves.

Our connection in our student ministries does not lie primarily in the beliefs we share. Instead, it's that we are unmistakably unified with Christ. Both our identities as individuals and together as youth ministries are wrapped up in Christ (Gal 2.20).

Suddenly Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12.27, "You are the body of Christ", take on new meaning. Might this be more than a metaphor of unity? Might this actually mean that we, Christ's "body," are *actually* Christ's physical presence in the world today? Could it be that the incarnation of God continues through us, the Body of Christ. We, "Christ's presence," must call people to see Jesus through our very tangible communities.

Think about how this image of the "body of Christ" brings light to...

- Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them (Mt 18.20)
- He who receives you, receives me (Mt 10.40)
- As you did to the least of these... you did to me (Mt 25.40)
- Saul, Saul... why do you persecute me? (Acts 9.4)
- The church is the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1.22b-23)

Christ, now defines you and me...together. Think of the implications for student ministry! To be ministers and students who are actually part of the community of God's presence is to see...

- Our identities in what God declares us to be as his ongoing physical presence wherever we are, whatever we do
- Our holy callings and career choices are discovered best within the body of which we are part
- Our everyday lives are part of God's redemptive plan for the world, established by Christ and continued by Him
- Our unity wherein we welcome elements of diversity as we see the unifying factor of the church is our standing in Christ, not in our preferences. Might unity even look like Christians saying, "We're different and we celebrate that."

All this must be expressed beyond organizational flow charts and ministry initiatives and must flow through a body, being the body, expressing bodily characteristics. As Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper "This is my body." May these same words "this is my body" ring in our ears each time we meet with students, with ministry leaders, and with each other.

### **So what are we doing well?**

#### *From Programs to Relationships*

The temperature of youth ministry in our context seems to be moving away from programming. Big, upfront production does not seem to "wow" teenagers like it used to. Perhaps splashy programs are being eclipsed by students' desire for authentic relationships. This does not mean there shouldn't be any programming. It does mean however, that programming must serve a higher value—a platform for authentic communication, authentic sharing, and authentic truth telling. The leader is the servant, the shepherd, and the conductor of relational activity, rather than center stage.

#### *From Monologue to Dialogue*

The desire for relationship comes through even in the way we communicate. The traditional "youth talk" with lots of funny stories and a wink at a verse in the Bible is being challenged. Good theology and preaching is needed and it can be done in creative and interactive ways. We have seen this value increase— through creating space for students to respond and ask questions; through worship that is not mere performance but rather a platform for students to express themselves in response to God; through multiple art forms for communicating and responding to truth. These steps continue to show us that we do not need to water down truth, but rather explain it well and give hearers a chance to respond.

### **What do we need to reclaim?**

#### *From Individualism to Community*

In the States, we need to continually call for a dependence upon communal authority. Although following Christ calls for a personal commitment from individuals, our American world of individualism has secularized our following away from the sense of following in community with others. It is important for followers of Jesus to be passionate in their pursuits of God and also their pursuits of one another. The result can then be a calling of our world which rests not merely upon tenets of the faith, but a calling to Christ and to his body—the community of His presence.

#### *From Youth Group to Church*

While the strength of the past has been the specialization and attention paid to youth ministry, we must be aware that specialization cannot happen at the expense of considering the whole body of Christ. We're worried about youth groups that are becoming churches and entities in and of themselves. A more holistic approach to youth ministry is a more difficult route, but an essential one if we are truly going to lead young people to grow into discovering their place in the body of Christ. If every group is relegated to a segmented, special interest group within the church, we lose the sense of true community, of history, and the appreciation of the true mosaic that makes up the body of Christ. We need to learn and rediscover ways to make these connections.

### **The People of God**

The other image of the Church we want to consider is the Church as the People of God. This picture is difficult to appreciate unless we take the time to really engage in the whole of God's Story, from Genesis to Revelation.

All throughout God's Story, we begin reading about God's People. Early into the First Testament, God creates his special people by forming the nation of Israel through Abraham. He calls his people to serve as his mediator of blessing and judgment to the other nations.

He further establishes Israel as his special people after the great Exodus event. After rescuing Israel from the palm of Pharaoh's hand, he says to them, *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"* (Exodus 19:4-6).

Many have called this passage the most important summary of God's redemptive plan. God calls his people to join him in playing a priestly role with the rest of humanity. The further we read through the Old Testament, the clearer it becomes that only a faithful remnant of Israel keeps the covenant. But as Jesus comes on the scene, there's whole new hope and identity for that remnant.

Jesus comes to rescue his sheep, the remnant, and it's no coincidence that he appoints 12 Apostles, clearly identifying with the 12 tribes of Israel. Just before leaving earth, he commissions his Apostles, the new leaders of the People of God, to carry on the redemptive role given to the People of God, to all the nations. When you read Acts and the Epistles in light of everything that's been developing throughout God's Story, it becomes clear that the New Testament Church, established by the Apostles, is a renewed expression of God's People.

Even more than a "strategy" or a compelling message, as Jesus returned to the Father's side, he left behind him a visible community of followers—the Church. Though initially a small, seemingly powerless group, the community left by Jesus continues to grow at a rate of about 178,000 more people surrendering to Christ daily. When we connect our students and ourselves to the Church, historically and globally, we become part of a worldwide revolution that cannot be stopped!

Meanwhile, vast numbers of students in our North American churches are leaving the church. The same is happening in the Church in India, Hong Kong, Brazil, and Europe. What is Church to global youth? What is Church to us?

We continue to encounter North American students who long for an identity that is greater than being the youth group with the hottest band in town or the most exotic summer trips. Many of our adolescents are looking a bit longingly toward their peers around the world who believe so much in a cause like jihad that they'll give their very lives for it. What if we truly led youth ministries toward being a point of connection for students with the People of God around the world, past, present and future?

Suddenly the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac, and Joseph, and Moses and David, and Deborah and Matthew and Mary and Peter and Paul take on whole new relevance for us. They are part of our heritage. The Exodus Story is in part, our story. When God came in to rescue the underdog—Israel, from the most powerful empire in the world, Egypt, he was rescuing our people.

The heroes of Hebrews 11 are part of our heritage. They are cheering us on. The believers in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of the same revolution we're part of. And so our identity does not come most from self-actualization, from pride in our country, nor even from our families. Our identity is rooted in being connected with the people of God. And we identify with the people of God, not to further develop our personal maturity individually but so that we, together, may be made complete.

Engaging youth in the compelling drama of God as reflected in Genesis through Revelation is a good starting point. The three point alliterated messages with a verse tacked on in the middle aren't going to do it. But looking at the moving stories of Cain and Abel...David and his Sons... Esther and her uncle...Paul and Timothy...and John's vision while exiled from Ephesus are a great start.

We need to expose our North American students to books like *Jesus Freaks* to give them real-life stories of other adolescents from the People of God who have truly found their identity with the Church of Jesus Christ and have died for it. For those of us who are "protected" from the regular experience of persecution, websites like [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com) are helpful tools for exposing us to some of the current experiences of God's People around the globe.

Students aren't interested in hearing "community" touted as a value or seeing it in the middle name of a church as much as they are in experiencing real-life community with us, their leaders, with each other, with the other generations throughout the church, with the People of God around the globe, and with the People of God who have preceded us for several millennia. No matter how frustrated we might get with the Church, may we never abandon it as God's primary vehicle for redeeming students and all the world.

### **So where are we growing?**

#### *National to International*

Churches in the West are beginning to understand that we are part of an international community. There is a desire (whether effective or not) to connect with international churches and have a relational connection rather than just a project connection. Movements like "See You at the Pole" ([www.youthprayerweek.com](http://www.youthprayerweek.com)) and "True Love Waits" are taking on a global perspective rather than just a nationalist one. Global youth ministry discussions used to be almost nonexistent at most of our major North American youth ministry conventions whereas reaching global youth is now a trendy topic at such gatherings.

#### *Where we are... Where we came from*

Among the students with whom we work, there is a greater desire to understand their spiritual heritage. They're interested in the practice of liturgical worship, the history of Christianity, and the lives of the saints who have gone before us. Reciting the creeds, learning about the theology and

lifestyles of the church fathers, and using candles and incense are becoming regular parts of youth ministry gatherings we attend. Postmodern students are often finding they have more in common with ancient expressions of the faith than they do with the seeker churches starting up around the corner. There's something very redemptive about their longing to be connected to the history of God's people.

### **Where do we need to push the envelope?**

#### *Imperialists to Servants*

There is still a mentality in the West that we can merely go overseas and impart our vast knowledge to our brothers and sisters there. Most everyone who goes agrees on the importance of being cross-culturally sensitive but the imperialistic tendencies embedded in our approaches appear just as strong as they have been for the last couple centuries. Clearly we have something we can offer as Westerners, but there is probably far more for us to learn. If we are going to truly embrace being the people of God, we need to recognize we have more to learn than to teach. What will it take for "successful" Americans to sit at the feet of the international people of God?

#### *A Bigger Gospel Picture*

Our physical needs seem to be met more easily in the West which seems to make us more quick to reduce the Gospel to a belief system rather than an act of hope expressed with word and deed. What does the Gospel really look like in a famine-ravaged place, in war-torn environments, or under persecuted regimes? We will do well to push ourselves toward a dynamic expression of the Gospel rather than making it merely a belief system. Student ministry in the West has much to learn from the Church elsewhere that never considered the option of separating the Gospel from social justice.

### **Implications**

So what does all this mean for us as we go about equipping and training church leaders in international contexts? What does it mean for us personally? As we've wrestled with these concepts and considered what we can do personally, we are exploring the following...

### **Speaking Opportunities**

As much as we are passionate and gifted to speak to students, we are looking for ways to use the speaking opportunities we get as a way to set up the youth leaders and pastors in those contexts to better disciple their students. We're trying to use these platforms to inspire leaders to process truth with their students, to urge them to help their students discover what it means to follow Jesus personally and in community, and to push the leaders to share how they are authentically following Jesus.

### **SEMP and Equip**

In a similar way, we continue to see our SEMP and Equip initiatives as tools that provide a platform for leaders to shepherd their students. We downplay any thought that these events in and of themselves, are central to the discipling focus of a student. Instead, SEMP and Equip are excellent tools, to be used by youth pastors and lay leaders, to expose their students to ministry, discipleship, the church, and the heart of God. The youth leaders and pastors are our primary targets. How can we help them serve and shepherd their students? That's the recurring question we ask ourselves as we go about SEMP and Equip.

### **Emphasis on Calling**

We feel the conviction as a ministry, to be a prophetic voice to the church; but we do not want to take the place of the church. We want students to wrestle with their callings. A calling is more than an individualized preference or option for life. Calling is discerned within the context of being part of the Church. As students begin to understand that, they will begin to realize that calling is not something determined by self, but is something identified and affirmed by others in their respective communities—their local churches. To be truly "called" is to be sent and supported by one's local community of faith.

### **Emphasis on Discipleship over Programs and Numbers**

Depending on one's personality, one can either love big events or love small groups. Both kinds of venues can be evaluated in light of the number of youth attending. However, while numbers are an important indicator, we want to call leaders to assess ministry effectiveness on a deeper and broader scope.

One of the ways we are beginning to evaluate ourselves as leaders in the church is through a grid called TPM (Theological-Personal-Missional). We are trying to call ourselves and others back to a full-orbed approach to ministry and discipling by answering what we believe is the call of Jesus to be theologically sound, personally centered, and intentional in ministry. Shepherding people through this grid, moves us beyond evaluating behaviors and calls people to think.

We're growing in our understanding that "balance" is more than just balanced living and programming around the win, build, equip categories, though those are important. Instead, as reflected in our rewrites of the *Strategy Seminar (Encounter)*, balance is demonstrated in Jesus' life and ministry through His full-orbed approach wherein He came to each situation with careful thought to the theological, personal, and missional dynamics involved.

### **Never Circumvent the Local Church**

As a ministry, we continue to be invited to join campaigns to target individuals, institutions, and nations that factor in the Church but don't make the Church the primary vehicle for the Gospel. Sometimes the invitation is to be part of reaching every school campus in our country or other times its to join an endeavor that goes after political reform.

Most frequent are the invitations to be part of leadership development initiatives for Christian leaders in other nations. For example, we were just invited to be the training vehicle to prepare Christian leaders in Greece for the 2004 Olympics. When we asked how the Greek Church wants to approach this, the response by the group of white, American males inviting us was this—"The Greek Church is directionless and has little leadership. They don't even know how much they need our help." We will not be part of any initiative like this that doesn't make the local church in a region, whether gathered or scattered, a central part of leading what needs to be done in that region.

### **Closing Thoughts**

The Church here and abroad has all kinds of shortcomings. But we are ruthlessly committed to the power of the church, through Jesus Christ, above and beyond all else. Through the church, the incarnation continues in a very real way. The Church is portrayed as a distinct and appealing counterculture. Matthew casts a vision for the Church as a community of people who make the reality of God's reign visible in the midst of the chaos of life. As he writes about it, the community seems less concerned about eliminating the weeds and more concerned about cultivating a wheat of such quality that others will see it "and give glory to our Father in heaven".

May God's image of the church continue to shape our identity, focus our imagination, and elevate a true picture of His church as we seek to call youth around the world to encounter Jesus.

Ephesians 3.20-21. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or **imagine**, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory **in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations**, forever and ever. Amen!"

### **Questions to Consider**

- What do you hear in this discussion/paper? What stands out to you?
- What are the implications of these images for us personally as members of the church?
- How have you observed ministries embracing or not embracing church in how they go about national ministry?
- What makes working in and through the church hard?
- How do you personally keep fresh with local church etc?
- What questions does this raise for how your ministry operates? What does it reinforce?
- How do we keep emphasizing the necessity of youth ministry without neglecting the whole church?
- Some strengths and weakness have been identified regarding the American church. What would be the strengths and challenges in other expressions of the church around the world?

### **References**

Webber, R. (1999). *Ancient Future Church. Rethinking evangelicalism for a postmodern world.* Grand Rapids: Baker.