



# Whitefield BRIEFING

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## *Youth Culture and World View*

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*"The world is passing through troubled times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they know everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness to them."*<sup>1</sup>

Although it could have been written yesterday, the quotation was written some 900 years ago! The relationship between the generations appears not to have changed. Parents still struggle to understand their teenage children, and young people wish their parents would "enter the current century". However, youth culture has changed over the years. We need a thoughtful and dynamic response from the evangelical community if the church is to be relevant to young people in the 21st Century. This paper will seek to chart some of the key changes, to understand the worldview developing among young people and examine ways in which we can make the gospel relevant to the "millennial generation".<sup>2</sup>

### **YOUTH CULTURE IN CONTEXT**

The problems in defining youth culture arise, primarily, because of the range of possibilities open to teenagers today. The result is a plethora of sub-cultures. Which sub-culture a young person belongs to will vary with their age, their outlook, their socio-economic grouping, their academic ability, their family and their desires. What stays the same for all the sub-cultures is that young people are in transition between the onset of puberty and the assumption of full adulthood. They are changing biologically, cognitively, socially and spiritually. Like all generations of young people, those changes and the move from dependence to independence result in their need to assert themselves and to discover who they are.

However, there appear to be significant differences between the values of today's young people and young adults and the values of teenagers in previous generations. For those born in the last sixty years, it is possible to see a number of distinct age groupings. These age groupings appear to have distinct views and show the changes that are taking place. Even though generalisations run the risk of being reductionist, there do appear to be significant shifts of thinking taking place from one generation to the next.

## *GENERATIONAL CHANGE*

Sociologists have suggested that there are three key generations, which can be identified. The generation born up to the end of the Second World War is known as the **Pre-Boom Generation**. They lived through the struggle and sacrifice, and some saw their parents die for their country. A commitment to their country provided part of their sense of identity. They also belonged to their family and to society in general. Society was held together by accepted standards based on absolute moral codes and there was a sense of responsibility for themselves and for one another.

The next group of people form the **Boomer Generation**. This was the post-war boom in births from 1946 to 1964. Their parents wanted something better for them. New ways of parenting became fashionable. Relationships became less formal. Upward mobility was more important, and the young were encouraged to express themselves.

The third group has had a number of titles including Post-Boom Generation, Baby-Busters, and **Generation X**.<sup>3</sup> This group stands in sharp contrast to their immediate predecessors. They do not want upward mobility but a sense of identity which is to be found through relationships. (The TV programme "Friends" is an example of this culture). They have been influenced by post-modernism. Truth has ceased to be a universally accepted absolute. Instead it has become an internalised commodity which can vary from one person to the next. Responsibility has given way to rights, and the idea of giving has been transformed into getting. Image is important - one young American is quoted as saying "Live hard, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse."<sup>4</sup>

I am personally of the opinion that there is a new generation coming through which some are referring to as the **Millennial Generation**.<sup>5</sup> A report issued in 1989 seeking to analyse the future buying trends of this generation of young people was entitled "Spoilt Brats". The authors argued that the coming generation would be the most well off and the least well-behaved generation ever.<sup>6</sup>

A good comparison of the different approaches of the generations can be gained through the basic questions they ask when confronted with the Gospel. In my experience of evangelistic work, I have noticed that, for the pre-Boomers, the question is "Is it True?" The Boomers have a more pragmatic approach and want to know "Does it Work?" Generation X, living in a consumer-driven society, ask the question "Do I want it?", whilst the Millennial Generation are far more concerned with their image and want to know "Will I look good if I buy into this belief?"

## *THE VALUES OF THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION*

Research, such as that found in "Fast Moving Currents in Youth Culture", reveals that young people today feel they need to present the right image, which in turn requires the right goods. Without entertainment they get bored. They are sensitive to unfair treatment which, when detected, produces the complaint "It's not fair". They hang around with their mates because peer relationships matter more than most things. Being part of the experience generation, they experiment with drink, drugs, sex, relationships and the "beyond". They are committed to causes, yet in so many areas of life they lack commitment. They are intrigued by the super-natural and fearful about the future; whenever anything has come up in conversations with young people concerning the occult, they are all eager to describe experiences and "an aunt who saw a ghost" and are intrigued by the mysterious area of the "beyond".

## *THE FOUR FOCI OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORLDVIEWS*

From the values implied and expressed by young people's behaviour, I suggest that their worldview is formed around their response to themselves, their friends, their world, and that which is beyond all of those. We would speak here of a response to God.

Young people live in a culture which lays great value on **SELF**. Fulfilment of personal desires is seen as a primary motive for all action.

Sometimes those desires are altruistic, sometimes selfish. It has affected their social patterns, their approach to sexuality, their drive to consume, and their fear of death - the ultimate non-being.

They also live in a culture where relationships have become a key focus. After SELF, young people are committed to their **PEERS**. It is with those of similar age and interest that they seek acceptance. Image thus becomes part of the process of seeking acceptance, alongside professed sexual activity and their support of football teams and music styles. This value is extremely important to those at the younger end (ages ten plus), but gives way to "one-on-one" relationships.

Young people are concerned about the **WORLD** in which they live. They believe in equality, perhaps reflecting the strong commitment to Equal Opportunities which has been a main emphasis of Youth & Community work since the 1960s. They are concerned for human rights, animal rights, and ecological "rights". Occasionally this is driven by the concern for self: "I should be able to have what everyone else has". It could well be driven by a God-given sense of justice: "Everyone should be able to have what I have". Pressure groups and the music industry have encouraged young people to be concerned for their world, as witnessed by Band-Aid, Comic Relief, Greenpeace and others.

The fourth, and perhaps least of the four foci, is a commitment to that which is **BEYOND**. Whilst the trend over the years has been to denigrate belief in God, Leslie Francis' research has shown a slight up-turn since the beginning of the nineties<sup>7</sup>. Young people are aware that they no longer live in a closed physical universe, and many are seeking answers to life beyond themselves and the world as they know it. Some are looking into pre-modern culture, hence the rise in interest in shamanism, ancient cultures, and Celtic Christianity.

### **CONSTRUCTING A WORLDVIEW**

Young people use these four key foci around which to build their worldviews, the plural being more appropriate to today's culture.

Some young people appear to build concentric circles, beginning with themselves, surrounded by their peers, then the world, with the "beyond" as an optional extra. Herein lies one of the most difficult tasks for Christian communication, because one understanding of an evangelical worldview would be to place God in the centre (the "beyond" in our jargon), then the world and others, with a concern about self being the least important component. (Sunday School teaching about prayer used to concentrate on J-O-Y: Jesus, Others, Yourself.)

### **AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE**

*"Young people who watch MTV, rent multi-million pound budget videos, and attend concerts with stunning light shows and visual effects, are unlikely to be attracted by the offer of bright singing and a glass of orange squash."<sup>8</sup>*

We need to work out a response which will not compromise the gospel, but which will communicate to the millennial generation. And not just to the millennial generation but to the rest of society as well. Many of those who currently attend church admit to being bored and frustrated with what happens. I would suggest that there are a number of approaches, which need to impact the way that we are church together.

#### **Belonging before believing.**

In evangelicalism we have developed an orthodoxy which requires an acceptance of creeds before incorporation into the faith community. For the first disciples, they were called into a community first, and it was through this learning community that they grew in understanding and were able to verbalise their belief. Young people need acceptance and a group to which to belong. The church needs to recognise this and enable and encourage young people to be together and to learn together without placing doctrinal criteria at the entrance.

#### **Demonstrating before declaring**

Evangelicalism has traditionally been committed to declaring the faith. Young people need to see that it works, they need to experience the reality of faith in action before they are ready to accept the underlying doctrine. Young people are impressed by action

and commitment; they want to see the impact of Christianity upon lifestyle and environment. Our Christian faith calls us to action and service, and the lack of demonstrable evidence of Christianity is evidence of the failure of the church to be the presence of Christ in the world.

### **Visualising before verbalising**

Communicating to this generation needs to be initially visual rather than primarily verbal. We live in a society where young people are constantly subject to and responsive to visual stimuli. Educationally it has long been a recognised aphorism that “what you hear you forget, what you see you remember and what you do you know.” A picture really is worth a thousand words, and we need to recognise this, especially in Protestant circles where the sacrament of the Word has held such a high place.

### **Experiencing before evangelising**

Not only do young people want to see the Good News; they also want to experience it. This has both a good and a bad side. The good side is that this was, for example, exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost. Much of the evangelistic work of the Apostles sought to explain what was happening to people as they encountered the dynamic power of God. The problem in today’s society is that people can become spiritual junkies, simply looking for the next new experience. The latter should not make us fearful of the former. Rather, we need to place the experience in its biblical context.

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#### REFERENCES

- 1 St. Peter the Hermit 1098 Quoted in Steve Chalke’s *The Complete Youth Manual Part 1*.
- 2 This is the term being applied by some to the generation of young people who will come into adulthood in the years 2000 and beyond. It was used in a feature in YouthWork Magazine in May 1997.
- 3 For an analysis of the roots of Generation X, see Kevin Ford’s book - *Jesus for a New Generation*.
- 4 Guinness, Os, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds*.
- 5 See note 2 above.
- 6 *Spoilt Brats*, (Gold Greenless Trott Advertising Limited).
- 7 Brierley, Peter, *Reaching & Keeping Teenagers*, (MARC, 1994) p.19
- 8 Quoted from John Allan’s lecture at the Oxford Conference on Youth Ministry 1995.

#### **Further Reading**

Francis & Kay	<i>Teenage Religion and Values</i>	
Ed Francis & Kay	<i>Fast Moving Currents in Youth Culture</i>	(Lynx, 1995)
Pete Ward	<i>Youth Culture and the Gospel</i>	(Marshall Pickering 1992)
David Day/Philip May	<i>Teenage Beliefs</i>	(Lion 1991)
Ed Pete Ward	<i>The Church &amp; Youth Ministry</i>	(Lynx 1995)
Os Guinness	<i>Fit Bodies Fat Minds</i>	
Peter Brierley	<i>Reaching &amp; Keeping Teenagers</i>	(MARC 1994)
Ed David Howell	<i>YFC Position Papers</i>	(YFC 1995/6/7)

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