Challenges Facing Youth Ministry in the 21st Century
Sharlene Swartz and Graeme Codrington

1. Post-Christian

For the past 500 years, Judeo-Christian morality has been the basis of ‘common decency’ which everyone has taken for granted. Although Christianity’s truth claims have been questioned, most people have at least had some grounding in Christianity before asking such questions. Most people who have rejected Christianity have at least known what they were rejecting. But it is not so today. “we have grandparents who had a Christian belief, parents who have a memory of that belief, and now kids who have nothing” (Borgman 1996). Jay Kesler made this comment of present-day American culture. The situation is thankfully not yet this bad in South Africa, but current research into South African youth culture by Bill Price and Associates is showing that it is most certainly going to be true fairly soon. Although 56 percent of young people in South Africa would align themselves with Christianity, and 83 percent of young people consider spirituality to be ‘important’ in their lives, only 52 percent were able to indicate the basis of their beliefs, and just less than half of those young people claiming to be Christians attended church youth groups more than once a month.

Recent research by Jurgen Hendriks (internet) indicates that in 1980, 77 percent of South Africa’s population associated themselves with a Christian Church. It has declined since then. The 1991 figure is 74.5 percent. Unfortunately, more recent figures are not yet readily available. The decline is due to a considerable decrease in church attendance by the white and coloured population groups. The percentage of whites who associated with Christian churches decreased from 92 percent to 78 percent, and coloureds from 87 percent to 64 percent. In the black population group there was a steady growth from 27 percent in 1910 to 75 percent in 1980 and 77 percent in 1991. Denominationally, the trend is even more disturbing. Traditional denominations are losing members, on average 19 percent between 1980 and 1991. This decline is in spite of the tremendous growth of so-called mega-churches in most of these denominations. The only growing group is that of the Independent Churches, which doubled their membership.

Hendriks states that “we must realise that before 1994 the state was responsible for upholding Christian values. There were laws forbidding abortion, gambling, pornography, certain activities on a Sunday, etc. Local authorities endorsed these laws. Furthermore, Christian principles and biblical lessons were taught in schools. In the new dispensation the responsibility for upholding Christian values has been transferred from the state and secular authorities to believers and congregations” (Hendriks 1997).

2. Post Charismatic

Cain and Kendall (1996) speak of a post-Charismatic generation, rather than merely a meeting in the middle of the Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic traditions - a new tradition that has both Word and Spirit, power and truth, spontaneity and orthodoxy. It could be seen as a ‘prophetic word’ for the next generation. Many Christian young people today already have experienced...
the life of the Spirit as a normal everyday part of their Christianity - no longer is 'speaking in tongues' an issue, or accepting a word of knowledge or laying on of hands to heal the sick. Ten years ago all these issues were buried in controversy. Not so on the eve of the third millennium - how much more so for Generation 21! This renewed interest in the move of the Spirit relates to a similar move amongst unchurched young people in a revived interest in the spiritual and the supernatural. For example, a quick search through your television guide will show the following in 1999: Buffy the Vampire Slayer, X-files, Out of Limits, Touch'd by an Angel, Teen Angel (comedy), Nothing Sacred, First Wave, Sabrina the Teenage Witch (comedy), Father Ted (comedy), Mortal Kombat, Strange World, and Brimstone. This is not even to mention the spiritual themes in music, and of course, Hollywood movies.

3. Biblically illiterate

A friend, ministering at a small church in KwaZulu-Natal, recently spoke to someone from his congregation, letting her know that his sermon topic for the coming Sunday was on Samson and Delilah. A shocked look crossed her face, as she exclaimed: 'That's not in the Bible'. It turns out she thought it was part of Greek mythology. She is not alone. Pastors, youth workers, parents, teachers all complain of the same malaise - young people are functionally biblically illiterate. 'They don't memorise scripture like we did in the old days.' 'They don't know the difference between a tenet from the Bible and a sonnet from Shakespeare.' The truth of the matter is - it is absolutely true. And it is that with which we have to contend. Why, one may ask? Modernism lent itself to memorisation, rote learning, recall, focus, hard and long hours of learning, long school hours (including Sunday School) and great discipline (getting up early - spending hours in God's word).

But the world has changed. Time has changed - the pace at which we live life has greatly accelerated. We now have Outcomes Based Education, continuous assessment, interactive teaching and learning, more stimulation than ever before, more things to do, to read, to watch, to experience. These days young people are more often found quoting a line from an Austin Powers movie or a Bible verse. It is not going to change. Imagine Charles Spurgeon as a twelve year old. What did he do if not his Sunday School homework and school work? The world is different, twelve year olds in today's cities earn cash in their spare time, spend time with friends, play computer games, go to the movies, the mall, Imax, Ratanga Junction and play Sony Playstation games. On the other hand, why should one spend time memorising, when hand-held computers contain easy-reference word-search Bible concordances in a multitude of versions. Why memorise when its online?

Instead of mourning the past let us capture the present and use it for the education in Christian values of young people according to the tenor of the times. Computer technology, narrative theology, non-didactic teaching methods and popular media like The Prince of Egypt should all be harnessed creatively. What is really needed is not memorisation of proof-texts, but rather a more expansive overview of God's plan as shown in the Scriptures, providing a much needed moral and theological framework for today's information-overloaded young people.

4. Info-crats

Except for some rural youth and the poor generally, young people in the twenty-first century will know more and have access to vastly greater quantities of information than ever before. They will have far more information at their fingertips than those teaching them. This means they will be less likely to accept authoritative and definitive answers. No longer will 'Because I say so' suffice - especially when the 'I' is an older person who cannot search Encyclopaedia Britannica online; is it not a member of three email forums, does it not read nine daily newspapers from around the globe and does it not subscribe to six of the latest scientific and theological journals from universities as far afield as Boston and Bangkok. Generation 21 have had a jump start - while anyone currently over thirty is still playing 'catch-up' when it comes to Information Technology. Just think who is most capable of programming the household VCR if you don't believe that today it is the young people who are more geared up for the next century than their parents ever will be.

One of the downsides of this information overload is that these new generation info-crats appear to have an ever-decreasing attention span. This is not entirely true, as they are able to concentrate for much longer than many adults - but they cannot focus on one topic for very long. They change from one television channel to the next, watching three or more shows simultaneously. They are capable of doing their homework with both television and radio blaring in the background. They accept information in 'sound bites', and their music and media is equally fast-paced in its visual presentation. Communication is multi-threaded to them, and interactive multi-media is king. They do not know what a flannelgraph or a chalkboard is; and they have only ever known CDs (compact discs) and now DVD (digital video displays). Computer presentations are the norm. Long one-way sermons will no longer communicate. Instead, methods need to be innovative, short and interactive. Methods like Groome's (1999) shared Christian praxis and Cooperative Learning (1994) are the way of the future.

5. Unrecognisable Worshippers

Both personal and corporate worship are going to change. For Generation 21 outward appearance is not going to be a measure of spirituality. Postmodernism is characterised by paradox, especially in its expression. This will be most fully seen in worship, which to truly touch postmodern Christians will need to be eclectic. Individuality in the midst of community will be paramount in worship. We need to be prepared to facilitate this. The Solo Survivior movement in the UK is a good example of this. The fact that many Black churches, whose white counterparts would be very conservative, are mostly Pentecostal and Charismatic in practice although perhaps not in
alternative youth tend to clean up their act in terms of drugs, music, partying, anarchy, degradation, escapism, alcohol-abuse, occult involvement, rebellion, anti-social behaviours, anti-authoritarianism, hatred, defiance, misery, self-pity, terror, selfishness, suicidal tendencies, depression, destruction and condemnation. In the nineteenth century bar room tunes were retained and excellent hymns written to the same tunes. No-one continued to sing the hymns while getting drunk. Wrong and sinful elements of culture become transformed and replaced with a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with people. 'Love God, bear fruit in keeping with repentance, love your neighbour, forget the rest!' should be the exhortation to young people converted out of a specific sub-culture. Long hair does not have to become short and tidy; T-shirts do not have to transform into ties; studded ripped jeans surely do not have to metamorphose into smart Woolworths cotton trousers.

7. Hugely Concerned with Social Ethics

One of the greatest challenges facing Christendom in the twenty-first century will be our response as a community of faith to the multitude of ethical dilemmas already emerging in general society. Abortion, homosexuality, poverty, capitalism and socialism, gender, sexuality, genetic engineering, affirmative action, revolution, ethnic cleansing and all old issues which will assume greater significance as the new century dawns. Postmodernism demands less rigid and definitely less judgemental answers. Christians everywhere must be prepared to give an answer for their faith in a gracious and humble manner. The iron rod orthodoxy of the past is over. It no longer even gets a hearing. If we want to be salt and light - we must be prepared to reopen debates and find answers that truly resonate with a world in need. We will seldom if ever hear long scholastic debates about predestination, charismatic gifts and dispensationalism. Social ethics is now the new issue at hand - and one on which the Christian church and its relevance to youth will stand or fall. The Bible is neither directive nor silent on many of the social and ethical issues with which we are confronted today. There is room for debate and argument. Let us not defend rationalism and modernism as if they are the worldviews that came with the Bible. Let us agree to stop debating the unimportant - how many angels can fit on the head of a pin? and predestination fall into the same category in postmodernism.

8. Aliens to Traditional Family Structures

The church of the twenty-first century needs to be a warm, welcoming and loving family. A place of nurture and not of judgement or of insistence of outward conformity. Most young people would not have experienced the typical early twentieth-century nuclear family. It is currently estimated that one in every four American teenagers will experience family breakdown by the time they turn 21. Bill Price and Associates, doing similar research in South Africa, have found the statistics to be slightly better in South Africa, with only 1 in 3 young people currently experiencing family breakdown, yet the trend
is downwards. Dysfunction will be the norm. The usual metaphors used in understanding the character of God may no longer be accessible to Generation 21. In particular, the role of fathers is disturbing. The high incidence of abuse is well documented in South Africa. Research has also shown that only 25 percent of fathers spend more than 2 hours per week interacting with their children. Family needs to be redefined and modelled in the church and people helped to learn Godly principles of family life both inside the church and in their own homes and partnerships.

9. **Economically Vulnerable**

The Human Sciences Research Council recently released findings that only one in thirty school leavers is likely to find employment in South Africa in 1999 (Natal Mercury 5 August 1999 front page). Throughout the world, the gap between rich and poor is growing steadily. The “rules” have changed - big business and government are no longer the employers of last resort. The key to solving this problem, according to well-known South African forecaster, Clem Sunter (1999), is to develop small businesses and encourage entrepreneurs. But legislative bureaucracy and nervous banks have created a climate that is not suitable for this kind of development in South Africa. Today’s young people are nervous about the future, as they see themselves following their American counterparts in becoming the first generation in modern history to earn less on average than their parents (Hove & Strauss 1993). Soaring educational costs, often financed with student loans that create massive debt traps, rising house prices in recent years which exclude first-time home owners, and the increase in government benefits to older generations add to the financial fears of Generation 21. And when we talk of “averages”, it should be noticed that the cyber-elite are all young and making lots of money on the Internet and in new IT-related growth industries. This means that the gap between those beating the average and those sliding beneath it is also widening. The rich are becoming richer, and the poor poorer.

10. **AIDS Infected**

The AIDS epidemic has not yet begun to take its full toll. Of all the fears South African young people have for the present, AIDS ranks by far the highest. There is no agreed data, but estimates of AIDS infection range from 30 percent of young people to as high as 75 percent of young people in certain areas (in particular, young girls in rural KwaZulu Natal). Generation 21 is going to live through the deaths of their friends over and over again in the next century.

11. **Violence Saturated**

South Africa is a violent country, but until recently violence was not directly seen as a youth issue. However, more and more young people are being drawn into the web of violent crime, as both perpetrators and victims. This is once again following a trend first seen in America, as evidenced by the spate of recent school shootings. President Clinton has made it a personal goal to clamp down on violence in the movies and on television before the end of his presidency. What will happen to a generation that has become violence-saturated? Some scenarios are too frightening to contemplate.

12. **Spiritually Hungry**

Generation 21 is spiritually hungry. This does not mean that they are seeking after the God of the Bible - rather they realise that there is a higher reality, that there is something beyond the purely natural world in which we live. Postmodern young people don’t need to be convinced of the fact that there is a higher power nor of the existence of the supernatural. What they do want to know is why they should choose Christianity rather than any other of the multitude of spiritual options available. As far as many of them are concerned, Christianity was a modernist experiment that has proved to fall short of answering some of the critical questions of postmodernity. This may be largely due to the over-reaction of many traditional Christians to new expressions of faith and culture. The church as we know it cannot function effectively without significant change. It must find its roots again in a truly biblical approach to ministry. We therefore offer some suggested answers to the issues we have raised.

**Some Answers**

As a church we can easily and must resolutely rise to the challenge. We say easily not because it will be without difficulty - but rather because the solutions are basic and will take little more than intentional effort, a conscious understanding and a willingness to adapt. An exception may be in the financial resources required - yet even in this solution, it may mean a redistribution of resources rather than finding huge amounts of new resources. Here are some basic ways to meet the challenges outlined above.

1. **Relational Ministry**

One of the chief characteristics of modernism was the elevation of the individual. Ministry in a postmodern context requires us to once again find the biblically mandated community/relational approach to ministry. George Barna notes that “Boomers (the parents of Generation 21) value a network of relationships and find the transient, utilitarian nature of their associations as completely acceptable.” Barna goes further to say: “[Generation 21] have outright rejected the impersonal, short-term, fluid relational character of their parents. They have veered more toward traditional, longer-term relationships. However, given their cynicism and pessimism, they have lowered their expectations v/s-avis relationships: their potential duration, the number of significant bonds, and their fervor to create a wide pool of contacts. Boomers [ie those born from 1946-1980] sought relational breadth; [Generation 21] seek relational depth ... What emerges are two generations bonded by blood, but separated by emotion and expectation.” I love young people! It's so easy to get through to them. The surface might be rough and tough, but its only a two millimetre thick (or thin!) veneer. Peel it back and there's just marshmallows! So says a Scripture Union Youth Worker. And it is close to the truth. South African teenagers, when asked to list the things that motivated them, rated
example - going to movies and wearing make-up in the early part of the century were thought to be sinful, unChristian behaviour. It was a church norm. Today make-up is acceptable and Christians, rather than not going to movies at all, are expected to be selective in what movies they choose to view. What then does it mean? Simply and biblically, being a disciple means starting a vertical relationship with God, a transaction between two people alone: God and His child. The next question to be asked is: Do we say to new converts simply 'Love God and forget all else'. No, because that is not the complete picture of Christian discipleship, but it is a great place to start. Over time (and with teaching) we challenge our new convert to growth and development. We say 'Love God, bear fruit in keeping with your new relationship with God (Christian character development and personal growth), forget all else.'

As a third step, we look to the horizontal dimension - love your neighbour. The order then becomes 'Love God, bear fruit, love your neighbour'. And then this 'neighbour' takes two forms: the rest of the Christian family and others generally. So you modify your behaviour, temper, hurtful behaviour; then only do you go on to do things which "avoid every appearance of evil", "come out and be separate" (inwardly at first, not necessarily outwardly as well) and avoiding things "which may cause a brother to stumble" (1 Thess 5:22; 2 Cor 6:17; 1 Cor 8:3; 10:32). At this stage the new convert is not even sure of what his new family is like. When listed like this, it is quickly apparent that being a disciple of Christ when you have had no previous Christian grounding or experience, is really a tall order, and a daunting prospect. But not impossible. It just takes more insight, patience and often forbearance. Being radically different means having a heart for God - it does not mean being good or spiritual enough, according to anyone else's standards! Finally, the sense of self, so easily destroyed in Generation Z must be restored. We need to be preaching salvation as adoption into God's family, and becoming heirs of the kingdom of the universe (see Ephesians 1). 'In the past the church, in particular the Reformed school, has rejected the concept of self, and especially self-actualisation, and self-realisation. These concepts have been adopted by the New Age Movement, and in conjunction with secular humanism have taken on a specific form and meaning. It is this meaning and function that the church is rejecting, but unfortunately they have rejected the whole concept with their rejection of the way non-Christians use it. They have, in a sense, 'thrown the baby out with the bath-water'. God has created each one of us as unique and special individuals, with a unique and special purpose, this is what makes up our 'self', and it is this that we seek to discover in Christian self-actualisation and self-realisation. We seek to find the self that God created and that secularisation, and modern philosophy has destroyed. People are showing all the symptoms mentioned above, because they do not know who they are, they have been made into orderly, predictable, individualistic, anonymous, nihilistic, driven things that simply exist with no meaning and purpose. Somehow we, as Christians, have to restore in them a sense of self-worth. This is only truly found in relationship with God, and this is where it becomes a tricky balancing act" (Lottering: internet). Therefore, more than merely relational evangelism the nature of our nurture and the warmth
and acceptance of the nurturing environment is of paramount importance to both evangelism and discipleship of Generation 21. Thus, the greatest commandment is reborn in our churches. The twentieth century church still has a way to go to achieve this.

4. Professionalising Youth Ministry

With an estimated 17 million South Africans below the age of 18, any serious attempt to launch youth ministry programmes must address itself to the vast numerical challenges. 'How many youth workers do we need in South Africa?' rather than the more parochial 'Where can we find a youth worker for our church?'.

SAQA (the South African Qualifications Authority) has already begun setting up guidelines for minimum qualifications for various industries, including youth work. Churches should be involved in this process, to ensure that minimum levels of care are set up to include spiritual input as well. We must also focus our attention on providing the kind of training environment that will ensure that Christian youth workers are the best qualified youth workers in the country.

If we set out sights on a target of 1 youth worker per 10,000 school going young people, we would need 1600 professional youth workers. More ideally, a ratio of 1 youth worker for every 1000 young people would require 16,000 youth workers. This compares unfavourably with an estimated 1000 full time youth workers around South Africa. And not only are the limited quantities of youth workers significant but their levels of expertise and training are sorely inadequate. Amongst other things a youth worker is a missionary, a pastor and a social worker (Bergman 1998). This is a demanding job - which needs great skill.

The church in South Africa needs to envision a youth ministry culture in which qualified men and women in significant numbers make a career out of youth ministry, either in the context of the local church or through parachurch agencies (specialist service agencies). Such a culture requires a considerable infrastructure and more importantly, such an infrastructure needs to be informed and influenced by thinkers whose ideas and writings maintain a sharp edge. Youth work must be recognised as a profession (a vocation) rather than a bus stop while waiting to move on to more 'mature' pursuits.

5. Finding the Resources

The 1996 South African census shows that 34 percent of South Africans are under the age of 15. A total of 54 percent of the population (some 21,929,512 young people) is under the age of 25 years. Research done by youth students at the Baptist Theological College, Randburg, indicates that as many as 75 percent of people who become Christians do so before the age of 18. It is also clear that young people are more open to the gospel than adults. If the Church’s role is to spread the gospel, using limited resources, then it makes the most sense to maximise those resources by using them where they are most likely to be effective: that is, in youth ministry, or on those things that affect young people. Churches routinely deal out their scraps to youth ministry, although there are some notable exceptions. Specialist service agencies, existing solely for the purpose of pursuing youth evangelism objectives, are notoriously underfunded. A whole new mindset needs to be adopted if the necessary youth ministry programmes are to be adequately funded. Giving to churches and mission agencies totalled R900 million during the 1996/7 financial year, of which R65 million, or just 7 percent, was allocated to youth ministry. Set this against the required R1 000 million necessary to fund 16 000 professional youth workers, and one is quick to reach the conclusion that something radical needs to happen. Churches simply have to work towards allocating a much larger percentage of their income to youth ministry, including youth ministry programmes outside of their local church, possibly through specialist service agencies - who may have greater skills in penetrating unchurched youth in various sub-cultures. Individual church members with business influence should seek ways to channel funds into community youth ministry programmes. Joint appointments between churches, or between churches and youth agencies are strategic. Ultimately, funding for mission work comes primarily through God’s people, and sacrificial giving remains the predominant biblical pattern. There is a cost involved towards meeting the challenge of ushering Generation 21 into the kingdom of God.

6. Social Conscience for the Church

A church which has no input into the social life and welfare of the community is a church that is out of touch, and perceived to be out of touch, with the very people it claims to serve. Church was never meant to be a showcase for saints - rather it is a hospital for hopeless sinners. As such, it reaches out to people at the point of their need, allowing the material and physical response to bear testimony to a spiritual solution. Churches need to take up the biblical mandate to be stewards of the environment, to be healers of the sick, defenders of those who have no rights, and helpers to the widows and orphans. It is time for middle class congregations to consider their privileged position seriously in the light of the story of the rich young ruler. God has not called anyone to be wealthy - at best he has called some to be big earners, so that they can be sacrificial big givers. But we are not simply talking of money - the church’s responsibility extends to issues such as environmental concern, community crisis response, disaster alleviation, justice, community law enforcement and a host of other issues that will require time and sacrifice.

7. Changing Methodology

Postmodernism is the context in which we will work to a greater extent as the years roll on. Young people who come to faith need help recognising the current worldview for what it is - not always helpful, but definitely there. They need to be taught ‘faith development skills’ which takes nurture, resources, relationships and professionals. Faith development skills are about making faith work, answering questions, helping young people understand why God’s word says what it says, and how to apply the obvious and work out the implied. It means taking seriously the experiential and the cognitive - not merely answering ‘It is in the Bible and so its true’ - but rather ‘It is in the Bible because its true (and best and it works)’. For example we must help youth see that immoral behaviour hurts people... it hurts their individual
development and it hurts their relationships with others. They need to be taught honesty and integrity when for the last sixteen years they have survived the streets through shrewdness and movie ethics. To say - Do this because God says so' may be true, but not very effective. For faith development skills to take root our methodology must change. Let us not fall victim to the oldest disease on the planet, the eight words that always seem to announce the demise of effective work - WNDTTWB - 'We never did it this way before!'

References


2. In 1998, Bill Price and Associates completed a "Profile of South African Youth and Family", using a statistical base of over 3,000 South African young people between the ages of 13 and 27. The profile covers 28 key attitudinal areas, including areas referred to in this article such as spirituality, home & family, leadership, money and education. More details available at: http://www.youth.co.za/census.

3. Dr Jungens Hendriks is chairman of the (Dutch Reformed Church) megachurch research group, investigating the reasons that some 80 DRC churches have been able to successfully expand in size when the denomination itself declined significantly between 1985 and 1996. This statistic was extracted from a paper entitled, "Megachurch Trends: 1997".

4. Soul Survivor is a church community of largely young people in Watford, England. Matt Redman is the worship leader and Gerald Coates is a sponsor of the movement.

5. Extract adapted from an Internet Illustration entitled Getting Old. Author unknown.

6. Alternative youth culture is a counter-culture, which rejects mainstream trends, and is characterised by (amongst others) a music style that is neither rock nor metal but has a mixture of both elements with a melancholic and dark dress style.


9. The call to return the ministry to the people is one that is consistently gaining volume at the end of this century. One of the clearest books on the issue is Greg Ogden's The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990. In this book, he argues that the last Reformation (which helped usher 'modernism' into the church) was a reformation of theology. He is calling for a new re-formation of praxis (action & practice).