



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

02

Cultural and Social
Contexts for Youth
Ministry

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Lesson Two: Cultural and Social Contexts for Youth Ministry

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

Youth Ministry and Culture
Youth and Ministry Subculture
Youth Ministry and the Neighborhood Community
Youth Ministry and the Household Family
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Youth Ministry and Asset Building

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- understand definitions for terms “culture” and “subculture”
- identify the range of social contexts that shape youth and their culture
- identify strategies for working with youth in their neighborhoods and within their families
- articulate why congregations are vital to healthy youth ministry
- identify the types of assets that help youth grow and mature

Introduction

In every youth ministry, youth find themselves surrounded by multiple contexts:

- The context of culture
- The context of subcultures, especially youth subcultures
- The context of their neighborhood communities
- The context of their household families
- The context of their congregations

Effective youth ministry is aware of and responds to the powerful influence of each of these contexts. At first, this may sound like an overwhelming task. However, by cultivating sensitivity and awareness, youth workers can learn to understand, appreciate, and harness the power of each of these contexts.

Lesson Body

Youth Ministry and Culture

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz believes culture deeply and powerfully shapes every human being. Put another way, culture is like the water in which fish swim. Fish simply take the water for granted, but the fish remain completely indebted to the water for life itself. In a similar way, culture surrounds all of us and affects the way we live our lives, but often without our conscious awareness of it.

Historically, God's people have resisted culture. The apostle Paul put it famously when he wrote, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Certainly, culture does not often reflect the vision and values of the Kingdom of God. At those points we should resist its influence. However, God also calls us to share Christ in a culturally effective way.

Think about it: isn't that what God did in sending Jesus to us? What could be more culturally effective than to reveal salvation to human beings through another human being? God's greatest work did not come through an angel or another "other-worldly" sign. Instead, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). Culture itself is not the enemy of God's people. Instead, it is only some of the sinfully-aimed "powers and principalities" within culture that tempt God's people to do evil (Eph 6:12). Not all powers in culture are evil, because God has created them (Col 1:16). To summarize, God's people should carefully and critically assess culture, determining whether or not to avoid or utilize cultural forces in the name of the Gospel of Christ.

Youth develop a sense of identity—vision, values and commitments—by interacting with opposing forces within culture. They "construct" themselves out of cultural interactions, just as we all have done when growing up. Marketing understands this reality. Subculture themes are carefully mass-produced and marketed to youth who are hungry for identity. Sometimes, we call these subcultures as "popular culture," because they are mass-produced, distributed and exchanged.

The beliefs, social forms, symbols and signs of these subcultures may be touched (such as clothes or toys), spoken (such as slogans or slang), seen (such as corporate logos or cartoon characters), heard (such as music or sound effects), or smelled (such as perfume or food). Culture is like a big field within which subcultures clash and collide. Subcultures define themselves by differing from the greater culture and from each other. Youth often prefer the symbols and language of one subculture over another.

Can you describe the beliefs, relationships, symbols and signs that accompany:

- The subculture of athletic youth engaged in sports?
- The subculture of youth that enjoy computers or other technology?
- The subculture of youth that prefer music and arts?

These are just examples that may or may not always apply in your context. However, there may be other youth subcultures that also rely on particular beliefs, certain rituals or symbols that identify their group.

The apostle Paul seemed to understand the value of contextualizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ within and among many cultures when he wrote:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win

those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:19-23).

The Gospel writers also seemed to understand the value of contextualization. For example, Matthew wrote a Gospel that presented Jesus in a way that easily connected with those of a Jewish context. In contrast, John presented Christ in a way that aimed at those of a Greek mindset.

Within youth ministry, there are good ways and not-so-good ways to present Christ to those of different subcultures. Cultural contextualization requires careful discernment. Here are some “dos and don’ts” to consider in youth ministry contextualization:

- Do take time to watch, listen, and learn about the subcultures of your youth. By doing so, you will show them that you care about the things that matter to them.
- Do participate in the activities of the subcultures of your youth. Try to be “in” their world without being “of” their world.
- Do show patience and do be slow to judge or criticize the subcultures of your youth. They may not be well equipped to tell the difference between criticism of their subculture and criticism of themselves. If something about their subculture needs to be addressed, then ask them to talk and think with you about what they are doing. A thoughtful, careful conversation is generally more effective than scolding or shaming. Your mission is to help youth in thinking Christianly, not to coerce them into pleasing you or pleasing God on your own timetable.
- Don’t assume that a single subculture (especially your own) is better or holier than the subcultures of your youth. The Gospel speaks across all cultures, meaning that it can both work within and work despite any individual subculture.
- Don’t pretend to be an “inside member” of a youth subculture. Instead, play the role of a curious, interested, visitor.
- Don’t assume that all of the members of your youth group belong to the same subculture. If one or two subcultures are dominant, then you may need to go the extra mile to learn and value more about the minority subcultures in your youth group. If you succeed in valuing the minority subcultures in your youth group, then you will teach your youth that everyone belongs in the Kingdom of God.

Youth workers cannot pretend to know everything about youth culture but they can be open to learning and model to youth the ability to judge culture through the eyes of faith. We need to help young people faithfully interpret what they see in culture so they can make connections between their personal experiences and their Christian faith.

Youth Ministry and the Neighborhood Community

Like all communities, your neighborhood reflects culture. It is likely that many subcultures exist in your community. In this case, however, those subcultures may be determined less by popular culture and more by age, ethnicity, and class. Like all communities, your neighborhood cares about its youth. Some members of your neighborhood see youth as a problem to be solved, while others see youth as an investment in the future. In some neighborhoods, congregations like yours take a very active and public leadership role while other congregations tend to focus more on the concerns of their own people.

The neighborhood surrounding your congregation serves both as a mission field and a God-given resource for your congregation. It is a mission field because most certainly there are people in your neighborhood who are not a part of the Kingdom of God and who do not experience the hope of Christ at work in their lives. At the same time, your neighborhood is a God-given resource. According to the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace, God's grace is "freely bestowed upon all people" in your neighborhood, enabling them to embrace righteousness and good works" through Jesus Christ.

In short, God has placed people in your neighborhood who can and will nurture the healthy growth and development of youth—people with whom your congregation should partner. If your neighborhood and your community both care about youth, why not work together? Such strategic partnerships for youth ministry have the potential to build trust between your congregation and your neighborhood. Eugene Roehlkepartain, in *Building Assets in Congregations*, suggests guidelines for building partnerships between congregations and neighborhoods:

- Count the cost: Partnerships require investment, but the potential benefits are worth it.
- Build bridges between nurturing regular youth and reaching out to neighborhood youth. Avoid creating a competitive environment between "our kids" (congregation) and "their kids" (community).
- Tie the partnership to your congregation's strengths and values: Unless your congregation can see that the partnership "makes sense" with its tradition and heritage, it is unlikely to maintain any commitment that it might make.
- Begin by nurturing relationships: Put your early emphasis on listening, understanding and trusting each other.
- Focus on common ground: Focus your early efforts on helping all youth toward health, toward caring for others, and toward responsibility. If you target conversion right away, you will undermine any trust built. In today's culture, evangelism follows careful and loving relationships.
- Involve the youth, the congregation, and the neighborhood in decision making: In any true partnership, all stakeholders must take part in the planning and decision-making processes.
- Commit to the neighborhood: Too often, congregations abandon neighborhoods for "better locations" elsewhere. God has placed your congregation within your neighborhood for a reason.
- Keep it simple: Start with short-term, bite-sized goals. Then build to something bigger.

- Put “neighborhood” into job descriptions: Unless you include “partnership” or “neighborhood” in your ministry leadership positions, it probably won’t be addressed.
- Be willing to change: If you want to help the neighborhood become a healthy, safe place for youth, then the congregation must be willing to change as well.
- Take the long view: All partnerships take time to grow and deepen, especially when congregations are involved.

Increased trust means increased opportunities for ministry, both inside and outside of your congregation.

Youth Ministry and the Household Family

In her comprehensive work titled *Family Ministry*, Diana Garland describes culture as “the family’s story on who ‘their people are.’” Later, she defines culture more technically as “the core values of those who share an identity with a place, a religion or membership in an ethnic or class group.” To Garland, families are social contexts in which their members acquire shared behaviors, values, identity, and meaning. This process, often described as “socialization” or “enculturation”, operates through shared experience, tradition building, and story-telling. Household families generally enjoy greater opportunity to influence the growth and development of youth than any other social or cultural institution, including the congregation.

Parents may serve as a youth worker’s greatest allies in nurturing the faith and lives of youth. Youth workers can also be great strategic allies for the concerns of parents as well! Sadly, however, many youth workers fail to establish effective partnerships with parents for a variety of reasons, including:

- The youth worker’s insecurity before other adults
- The youth worker’s arrogant assumption that he or she understands youth better than parents
- The emotional tension that often divides youth from their parents
- Parental indifference or hostility toward the congregation.

Roehlkepartain suggests that in order to establish close partnerships with parents, youth ministers must shift their thinking from building well-attended programs to supporting the work of families that is already going on. He suggests the following strategies:

- Get to know the families of your youth: This is the first step toward partnership with parents. Learn their stories. Gather personal information from them. And most importantly, present them with a safe and personal “face” that connects them to the youth ministry and the congregation.
- Respect the limits on your parents’ involvement: Parents may not be able to “run the youth ministry” for you. Their family commitments may prevent them—or their youth—from participating in much of the program that you direct. However, if you are able to support, educate, and equip parents to develop a healthier life together at home, then that can be the true measure of your leadership effectiveness.

- Provide opportunities for parents and teens to interact: Do most of your youth ministry events pull families apart into age-exclusive activities, or do you largely provide a safe environment in which parents and youth can develop new and safe ways to connect with each other?
- Empower parents through education: Ask the parents of your youth to identify their critical concerns. Then provide social experiences in which parents can pool their knowledge and experience together.
- Provide support for parents: Parents need each other, because raising youth is very challenging. Help them to form relationships with each other. Direct them to community resources, such as counselors and programs.

When youth worker's and parents work together, youth often grow in a rich culture of love, Christian values, and faith.

Youth Ministry and the Congregation

The congregation is the common denominator between culture, neighborhood, family, and youth group. It is the network that links together all four. A wise youth worker will seek to engage the whole congregation in youth ministry, rather than attempting to organize and lead separate ministries to neighborhood youth, the families of youth, congregational youth, and the congregation itself through an “intergenerational” ministry. In his book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries describes the misguided attempt to lead a youth ministry isolated from the rest of the congregation as the “one-eared Mickey Mouse” phenomenon. He challenges youth ministers and youth workers to integrate youth with adults in all typical youth group settings.

The congregation needs to serve as an intergenerational family for youth. Very early in the Old Testament ministers discover a culture where God's people function as an intergenerational family of faith, nurturing their children together. The New Testament renames the people of God as the body of Christ, an intergenerational means of grace (Acts 2:17-21; 1 Tim 4:12). This intergenerational faith family does not replace the household family, but enriches and empowers it for ministry to youth. The role of the faith community doesn't demean the nature and purpose of the family, the Church exists as a “family of families” that share a mutual commitment to nurture the faith of all its families.

In order to help your congregation, become an effective context for intergenerational youth ministry, community ministry, family ministry and congregational ministry, start by asking this single, simple question: “What can we do together (intergenerationally) instead of doing apart?” For example, can youth invite adults into neighborhood service projects? Can youth serve as teachers and support staff for children's ministry like Vacation Bible School? Congregations that practice this approach to ministry provide as a “crucible” for the spiritual growth and holistic development of youth. Congregations shift their focus from delivering programs to becoming “vibrant cultures” that contribute to the formation of youth. There is no shortcut to intergenerational ministry, only the long road of building partnerships based upon the shared vision with your congregation.

Youth Ministry and Asset Building

When congregations, families, and communities come together for the sake of intergenerational youth ministry, chances are youth grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Those words—healthy, caring, and responsible—reflect the work of the Search Institute in Minnesota, USA since 1989.

The Search Institute devotes itself to identifying the cultural and social contexts of effective youth work—including youth ministry—determining building blocks of sound development so young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Search Institute identifies 40 assets that help youth, clustering them into two groups: external and internal. External assets include positive social experiences that encircle youth with support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time that assist them in making healthy choices.

Support assets	Empowerment assets	Boundaries and Expectations assets	Constructive Use of Time assets
Family Support	Community Values Youth	Family Boundaries	Creative Activities
Positive Family Communication	Youth Seen as Resources	School Boundaries	Youth Programs
Other Adult Relationships	Service to Others	Neighborhood Boundaries	Religious Community
Caring Neighborhood	Safety (youth feel safe)	Adult Role Models	Time at Home
Caring School Climate		Positive Peer Influence	
Parent Involvement in Schooling		High Expectations	

Internal assets incorporate internal strengths, commitments, and values that provide guidance and direction for youth.

Commitment to Learning assets	Positive Values assets	Social Competencies assets	Positive Identity assets
Achievement Motivation	Caring	Planning and Decision Making	Personal Power
School Engagement	Equality and Social Justice	Interpersonal Competence	Self-esteem
Homework	Integrity	Cultural Competence	Sense of Purpose
Bonding to School	Honesty	Resistance Skills	Positive View of Personal Future
Reading for Pleasure	Responsibility	Peaceful Conflict Resolution	
	Restraint		

These external and internal assets are seen as the product of socialization through systems such as neighborhoods, congregations, families, youth groups, and schools. The range of assets may seem large. However, if you will take seriously the idea that effective youth ministry:

- Requires many adults—not just one or two—to get involved in the lives of youth
- Stands strongest when cooperating with the household families of youth
- Cares about all youth, whether inside the congregation or outside in the neighborhood
- Seeks to engage community resources through the establishment of trustful partnerships with neighborhood leaders
- Views the whole congregation as a youth ministry “crucible”
- Takes the long view toward building an intergenerational ministry
- Seeks to help youth become healthy, caring and responsible
- Pursues all of this in the name and the power of Jesus Christ . . .

You will find that working with assets really help. In short, when congregations, families, and communities form active partnerships for the sake of their youth, they can accomplish much more together than they ever could apart. In the final analysis, God has designed your own congregation to function as a spiritual culture that can help youth regain the fullness of the image of God through the power of Christ.

Application

Identify one project that your church could partner with a local neighborhood.

Can you name three places where youth contribute to the total congregation and learn from the total congregation?

Identify assets you recognize in your youth? Which assets do your youth ministry put the most time and attention into? What could your ministry do to address other assets?

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

What aspects of your culture seem to be the most helpful and good for youth ministry? What aspects of your culture seem to be the most harmful and bad?

Can you name and describe any other subcultures that are represented within your own youth group? In your youth group, how do members of one youth subculture tend to treat those of a different subculture? Have you typically seen subcultures as enemies or allies to youth ministry? Explain what you mean.

If you were going to write an advice column about cultural and sub-cultural contextualization in youth ministry, what would you say? How would you describe the culture and subcultures of the neighborhood surrounding your congregation?

What do you need to do to nurture partnerships with parents? What obstacles will you face, and what will it take to overcome those obstacles?

In what ways is my congregation already serving as an intergenerational network that integrates the youth ministry with other ministries?

In what new ways could my congregation function as an intergenerational network for youth ministry?



Nazarene Youth International

