

## Learning the meaning of "go"

*Reaching the youth of the Czech Republic*

The intensity of the emotion I felt caught me off guard. In fact, it stopped me in my tracks. I must have looked strange standing on a corner at Dejvice, staring numbly at the string of busses and streetcars unloading crowds of people onto the walkways.

A series of meetings had brought me to Prague on a Monday morning at the same time as thousands of students were arriving from their weekend at home. For that moment it looked like no one in the city was over 23 years old. Some were gazing into the eyes of a sweetheart, others hastily reviewing lecture notes. With bright faces a group of girls greeted their friends. A clump of young men discussed the recent hockey game. The air was full of energetic conversation and the optimism of youth.

But all I could feel was the crushing weight of eternity. "How many of these young people know Jesus?" I wondered. "Do any have a Christian friend who cares about them?" "What choices are they making now that could empty those bright faces of hope as the god of this world sucks the life out of them. They are at the most open, accessible point in their life. Will it pass without an opportunity to hear about Jesus?"

I couldn't move. All I could do was stand and pray, because the task seemed so huge, so impossible, and yet so very very important.

Will we reach the next generation? Will this new wave of young people, full of potential, unmarked by communism, but powerfully wooed by materialism, have the chance to meet with the living God? I thought of a Psalm that has been a drumbeat in my soul for the past 10 years.

*What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. Psalm 78:3-7*

Hollywood, T-Mobil and MTV have all set their sights on the next generation and are investing millions to capture their hearts. We have a power on our side that they can't begin to understand, but often we don't match the intensity and focus of their efforts. I must tell you with all seriousness that we must become more bold, more energetic, more purposeful or a historic opportunity will pass us by.

We must tell the next generation.

"I understand the need" you may say, "but what should we do?" How should we serve in our churches and youth groups in order to truly reach the next generation?"

First you need to understand one thing. The next generation is not like you. The next generation is not even like you were. They are different and live in a different world than you do. They see life through different eyes than yours.

One reason for this is that the world is changing at a speed unknown in all of history. This change is even more pronounced in post communist countries that are being accelerated into a European mainstream. They are children of this new Europe.

But the other reason is that each of us tend to reinterpret our own past from the viewpoint of the present. We see our earlier years through the eyes of an adult and it looks different through those lenses.

Not long ago I came across some old diaries I had written in middle school. I laughed out loud as I read them. I was worried about such inconsequential things as my hair style and hopelessly lost when faced with the attention of girls. Even my handwriting looked different!

Today I would be embarrassed if you read those entries. But they accurately reflected the mind of 16 year old boy who was struggling to fit in and at the same time develop an authentic walk with God. My view of the world today is altogether different.

So if I am different than this new generation, does it mean I can't work with them? Absolutely not! I know effective youth workers in their 20s and others who are in their 40s. The difference can be a barrier, but one that can be overcome if we recognize one thing.

Youth work is cross cultural ministry.

If they are different from me, than someone must bridge the gap and cross from one culture to another. That someone is you and me. As servants of Christ we are not commanded to wait for them to come to us, but to "go into all the world" – into their world. This is the kind of ministry Jesus engaged in. He left his "comfort zone" to penetrate a lost world at immense personal cost. This required that he learn our language, dwell among us, put flesh and blood on the Word so that we could see and touch it. He used examples from our world, figures from our speech, and shed his blood on one of our trees.

God came near, so near that John declared "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." (1 John 1:1)

This is the first principle of cross cultural ministry. The one who "goes into all the world" goes as a learner. He must learn a new language in order to be understood. He must study the culture to which God sent him. He must learn to see the world through their eyes, understand their ways of thinking, and "incarnate" the message in a way that they can see and touch it.

If we want to reach this next generation we become students again, students of a foreign culture. We need to ask lots of questions, become astute observers, and think long and hard about how to communicate in ways this generation will understand. Speaking our own language will always be more comfortable and natural to us. But the one who "goes" is the one who takes on himself the burden of adaptation.

"Wait a minute," you may say. "This is just what I was afraid of. Youth culture is decadent and self-centered, without a moral foundation and independent. The last thing I want is for our youth leaders to just become like the world."

You are right on all accounts. Here is where we must distinguish between the medium and the message, between form and content. Jesus spoke in the language of his culture, he spoke in a way that was extremely culturally relevant. But the message he communicated was in stark contrast to his setting, radically confronting his culture with God's perspective and priorities.

This is the second principle of cross cultural work. While we may adapt our style of ministry to reflect the culture of this new generation, the purity and accuracy of the message must always be preserved. Often this is a message that young people do not want to hear – that there are absolutes, that they are sinners and far from God, that there is only one way. In an effort to reach this new generation, the truth of Scripture must never be compromised. By its very nature the Word of God will confront and polarize, leaving some offended and others

hungry for more. This is a tension that must not be softened, a stumbling block that must not be removed.

As Martin Luther said, "You can fall off either side of a horse." Truth is usually bracketed by error, flanked by opposing extremes that try to pull us off of center. Youth workers seem to either have a clear understanding of the message, and be out of tune with youth culture, or they are culturally relevant and lose sight of the message. We tend to fall off on one side or the other.

A true cross cultural servant must follow Christ's example of penetration without assimilation. He has one foot in the kingdom of God, and the other foot in the world of young people. He is in the world but not of it, radically committed both to relevant forms and an ancient message.

So what would we find if we entered the world of the next generation of Czech young people and looked around? And how can we bring the transforming message of Christ into their setting?

Obviously the full answer to that question is beyond the scope of this article. In spite of that let me suggest five observations that may help you as you seek to understand and reach this next generation.

### **1. They are more concerned about relationships than you would believe**

If you ask an adult to go on a retreat, they will most often ask, "what will we do?" or "what will I learn?" The first question in a young person's mind is "who will be there?" For them, life exists in relationship and doesn't exist outside of them. They see everything through the lens of relationships.

Youth group should be a place where young people feel loved and accepted, where they feel like they belong and have their place. If that is not true, the program can be wonderful, the teaching great, but they will have a very hard time even noticing it. For a young person, relationships are like air, if it is taken away life itself ceases to exist.

This brings a great opportunity to the youth leader. If we create community in the youth group, honest open relationships filled with love, the group will become like a second family to the young person and exert tremendous influence on them. This kind of loving environment will be a powerful draw for new people, since it provides a very different experience from what they often encounter at home or at school.

On the other hand, if they do not experience close relationships at church, they will look for them in other places. They will be vulnerable to the influence of the world in ways that are hard to resist.

I recently talked to a young man who God had miraculously saved from drugs and then called to prepare for the ministry. After his first year in Bible school he returned to his home town and began to spend time with his old group of friends. Within a very short time he was sitting in a bar with a marijuana joint in his hands. Without a group of Christian friends to be with, the steady pressure of his old relationships broke his walk with God and led him into serious compromise.

When you work with young people, invest as much energy as you can in building open, loving, genuine relationships. Do whatever it takes to build community and bring them together into a close family that supports and encourages each other. You can do a number of other things wrong, but if young people are experiencing loving relationships at church or youth group they will do everything in their power to get there.

### **2. They are more "in the know" than you can imagine**

This generation has access to more information and experiences than any generation in history. Most of them have already traveled to other countries, learned other languages, and surfed to the far corners of the world on the internet. They wander to the far corners of their cities as well, learning where to buy drugs, and how to pick up girls. By a very young age they have been exposed to more information on sex than the last generation could have acquired in a lifetime.

In this huge flood of information they encounter, there are streams that are tremendously enriching and others that are unbelievably destructive. But most of all everything is accessible, only a short walk or a simple click away.

This is something we can't ignore as we seek to raise a generation that is growing toward maturity in Christ. They are surrounded by influences that could destroy their walk with God, and there is no way we will be able to isolate them from these poisons. What we must do is equip them to face them and respond in Biblical and Godly ways.

We need to talk openly about internet pornography at youth group and work together to help them know how to resist it. We need to teach them what to do when their friends start calling up spirits, or dabbling in the occult. We need to prepare them to handle pressure from their schoolmates to cheat on tests, and copy papers.

If they are not provided with some antidotes before they are attacked with the virus it will be very difficult to maintain a healthy spiritual life with all the unhealthy pressures that surround them.

### **3. They are more open to spiritual things than you would expect**

Not long ago I was at an English camp and sat in on the evening discussions. Students were leaning forward, actively sharing their opinions. Some began asking the believers for more information on what it was like to know God. "What do you feel when you talk to him, is it like being filled with peace?" one of them asked. "How did knowing God change your life," added another.

What struck me the most was how willing they were to talk about spiritual things, and how obvious it was that they were seeking a spiritual dimension to their lives. Often they were suspicious of church and organized religion. But at the same time they were very curious about God, and are very open to enter into spiritual conversations.

This is important to be aware of, because often we are much too timid in talking with non-Christians about spiritual things. We assume there is no interest or that the spiritual dimension of life is something foreign and incomprehensible to them. In reality they are extremely open, but want to know that it is real and not just some dry tradition. It often takes time until they understand the plan of salvation enough to be able to respond, but this generation is different in the fact that spiritual questions are not taboo, and that many are hungry for a spiritual reality in their lives.

### **4. They are more influenced by their parents than would guess**

As part of my master's thesis I studied a group of young people and the factors that moved them forward or held them back in their spiritual growth. It was obvious to me that factors such as youth group and an older mentor would certainly rate high on the list. But I was surprised when I finally added up the number to find that the influence of the parents was often as high as all of the others put together. At first I wondered if I had made some mistake, so I dug around until I found some other studies that had been done on the influence parents continue to have during the teenage years. They simply confirmed what I had found, that while young people do not want to admit it, they continue to be deeply influenced and impacted by their parents.

In youth ministry it is easy to ignore the parents, particularly if the students come from a non-Christian home. But the fact is that they are still under their parents authority and are deeply impacted by their perspectives and opinions. One of the ways we can help the students is by building an independent relationship with their parents as soon as possible. Most young people are not a very good channel of information to their parents. What they may hear about you, the church or youth ministry is often very superficial and distorted. You can help protect the young people in your group by communicating directly with the parents, and by using these opportunities to build a relationship and trust.

On the other hand, we must also teach our young people what to do when their parents don't respond to God, but rather begin to actively oppose them and their faith. Helping them develop Biblical principles for knowing how to deal with this is a great gift to them. If we ignore their parents, it often is only a matter of time before they become a roadblock to the young people you are working with.

### **5. They are more turned off to pretending than you would know**

This generation deeply values what is real, what can be experienced, and what touches the whole of ones being, not just the mind. Because of that, they can spot a fake from a great distance, and don't want to have anything to do with someone or something that is just pretending.

By the way, this has nothing to do with style of worship, or culture of the Sunday Service. I have seen traditional services where people put on a face, and others where the quiet liturgy obviously sprung from a deep place in the heart. I have experienced contemporary meetings where the band was incredible not just musically, but also as personal examples, and others where the excitement and enthusiasm felt pushed and superficial.

Are we honest in our prayers, and genuine in our leadership? Do we admit errors, and own our weaknesses? Do we say what is true, or what we think the young people want to hear? The generation is extremely sensitive to pretending, and quick to discard a faith they do not believe is real.

On the other hand, they are drawn to reality and openness, to faith that springs from the heart and a walk with God that is alive. Often we try to win them with fancy programs and fake enthusiasm when what would really gain their trust is openness and honesty. This generation is not asking the question, "is it true" but "is it real". If they become convinced it is real, they are much more likely to accept that it is true.

Before we end, we must return to where we began. Do you see the young people who fill the trains and busses in your neighborhood? Does your heart beat with the heart of God that these precious souls hear the message of salvation and have an opportunity to respond? If so, you must realize that God has called you to a work that is cross cultural. You must observe, listen, and not assume that they perceive the world the way that you do. You must seek to share the message in ways that can be understood. At the same time, the message itself must never be compromised.

And we must pray that the Lord of the harvest call more workers into this harvest field. We must pray that many of those young people crowding the busses will be filling your churches and youth groups. And we must give of ourselves to this crucial work.

Because of our love for God, and for them.