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YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

While the political definition of youth encompasses people from the age of 21 to 40, in the context of this position paper, youth is defined as being people from the ages of 15 to 25 year of age. This period therefore embraces the late adolescence to early adulthood, and bridges both the end of secondary and/or tertiary education and the start of their working life.

The word “transition” best characterizes this critical stage of development. It is a period in which children become men and women, and dependants become independent. The transition can be defined through the following dimensions:

An Intellectual transition

A Physical transition

A Social transition

An Economic transition

A transition of character and personality

A Spiritual transition

The extent to which these transitions are successfully managed will determine the “type” of adult one becomes. Many youths emerge unformed, stunted, unrealized and unprepared for the challenges that the adult world holds for them.

The intention of this paper is to identify the challenges facing Malaysian Youth today, thereby stimulating discussion on the role that the Malaysian Church can play in bringing about godly transformation on this age group.

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES FOR THE CURRENT GENERATION OF YOUTHS IN THEIR CURRENT CONTEXT

Survival

A large number of youth have a high propensity to engage in sensation and thrill-seeking behaviour which often entail a high level of risk. Manifestations of this may include reckless driving, reckless sexual behaviour, illicit drug use, petty crime and other forms of antisocial behaviour like truancy and vandalism. These behaviours often have serious long-term consequences. For example, fatality rate among the youth is disproportionately high compared to other age groups; this in itself is a cause for concern. Dangerous and high risk behaviours can be partially attributed to a high susceptibility to peer influence, a high level of impulsive thinking, and a sense of invulnerability among young people.

The challenge is how for the Malaysian Church can play a role in protecting the young people from these dangers while allowing them the space to express and explore different experiences. Preventive models of youth work have been successfully trialled in different parts of the world. The results have indicated that community groups can help reduce destructive and antisocial behaviours in youths by developing character, inspiring a sense of purpose and ambition, and providing healthy channels and outlets for them to express themselves, e.g. sports and performing arts. These interventions can be scaled up and offered to larger communities of youths. The local churches should target poorer communities in urban and rural areas.

Self-worth

Many youths struggle with their issues of self-concept and personal identity. Developmental psychologists argue that this is the stage of life in which they ask “how do I define myself as an individual?” Related to this are the issues of self-esteem, i.e. how youths value and feel about themselves. Many young people look down on themselves, are unhappy with who they are, and compare themselves unfavourably with others around them.

It certainly does not help that Malaysian parents in general, particularly of the middle income families, have become increasingly competitive when it comes to the performance and development of their children. They seem to be a lot more wary about the speed of their children’s development, to the extent of being overly critical. As a result many children reduce their sense of self-identity to performance and abilities—in other words “what I can do”. This may explain their susceptibility to self-esteem issues later in life.

In my opinion, the tipping point is the parenting culture. The Malaysian Church can play a vital role in changing the culture of parenting by reinforcing the importance of

unconditional love and grace in the parenting process. Leading by example, the church can be a model of holistic parenting that reflects Christian value of acceptance rather than condemnation.

In addressing issues of self-esteem, it is equally important to provide youths with a sense of belonging and connection. Many youths lack a sense of real community. The local church can provide a comfort zone where they can come and enjoy the fellowship of other youths without feeling of being judged or compared to others. It is therefore critical for the churches to examine the existing cultures within their youth groups to check any development of peer pressure and exclusion culture.

Direction and Self Mastery

There is growing concern particularly towards male youths in Malaysia that they lack both the discipline and the life skills needed for a successful transition into the working world. High unemployment rates among both tertiary graduates and non-graduates have been partly attributed to deficiency in basic transferable skills including communication skills. This lack of work skills is coupled with insufficient career guidance and counselling which has resulted in many youth unable to make meaningful and well-weighted decisions about their vocation and training.

The local churches can play a significant role, especially in poorer communities, in providing career guidance and career preparation. They can set up centres that offer short modules on career decision-making and planning, particularly for the youth in upper secondary school. The goal is ultimately to widen the horizons of youths to the many possibilities and options available and to instil in them the confidence that they can achieve a plan of action if they are willing to invest in it.

Communication courses in spoken and written English could also be a form of ministry given that a lack of language skills is perhaps the most significant reason why many youths are unemployed.

In many ways, the model of providing education and training to the community has already been successfully implemented by many churches through the offering of pre-school and kindergarten courses which are tied to various Sunday school ministries. The community in general, realizing the church's traditional strength in education as captured in the history of mission schools, have in the past been quick in entrusting their children's education and training to us.

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH IN MALAYSIAN CHURCHES

In the discussion of challenges facing Christian youth in Malaysia, I have made an important assumption that frames the context—God has a role and a ministry for each youth and He uses this period of their lives to prepare them for the role. Therefore, my focus is on identifying issues that create barriers to youth fulfilling God’s plan and calling for their lives. In other words, what is preventing Christian youth from being God’s agents of transformation in this nation?

Ownership of Faith

There is a growing number of second generation Christians who in their youth lack the ownership of faith. Many have merely inherited their beliefs from their Christian parents and are therefore not having sufficient understanding or personal meaning when it comes to questions of their own faith. Despite active involvement in the church, their participation has been largely fulfilling a social role rather than a spiritual one. This problem is further amplified when a particular church culture focuses on activities and participation at the cost of thought and understanding.

The reality is that all Christians, whether first or second generation, go through phases in their spiritual lives in which they start to question their faith. These phases are important as they present an opportunity to consolidate our understanding of faith. When we deprive our youths of the opportunity to “understand” and “own” their faith, the long-term consequence may be an abandonment of faith altogether later in life when they arrive at a level of social independence from their families and the church social circles.

The church needs to explore how to integrate into their youth ministries the elements of searching, understanding and ownership of faith. There needs to be a healthy balance between participation in ministry activities and a process of “meaningful spiritual growth.” Our young people must given the time and space to understand their faith so that they are able to make personal choices about whether to “follow” or not.

There seems to be a trend of second generation Christians dropping out of church. More systematic studies should be conducted to gain a better understanding of the increasing drop-out rate and reasons behind it.

Apathy and Self-Centeredness

There is a growing tendency among middle income Christian youth to adopt a faith that does not challenge them to reach out beyond their social comfort zones. This form of

social segregation has always been a feature of social class structure in general. People of the same social status tend to stick together. The worrying issue is that many Christian youths are not proving to be exceptions to this rule.

One underlying cause may be a brand of Christian faith that places no emphasis on issues of social justice and social concern. There is a significant population of Christian youths who confine evangelism and the call of the great commission to merely sharing the good news among their limited social circles of friends. Few Christian youths understand their significance on a national level let alone a regional or global level.

Another factor is that many Christian youths have been sucked into the mainstream culture of consumerism. Such culture not only promotes the idea that buying and owning things are a means to happiness, it indirectly encourages us to focus all our energy and resources on the pursuit of our own happiness and joy above all things. These values are of course incompatible with the form of discipleship that is needed to bring transformation to the nation. But the issue runs deeper than this.

The culture “of looking out for number one” is something that is taught and encouraged by many Christian parents. We are the ones teaching our children that the goal of life is to be successful as defined by the world and that academic success will springboard them to the best universities and best paying jobs.

Manpower shortage is one of the obstacles faced in Christian ministries. It is partly caused by parents standing in the way of their children putting the Kingdom of God before their own ambitions. The simple truth is that, to affect transformation in this nation God has a plan to reach out to different communities. To fulfil this plan our youth need to heed His calling to go, wherever that may be. This “followership” inevitably has implications on their decisions about their education and vocation.

Malaysian churches can play a significant role in changing the way our youths define success and failure in life. This can be achieved through changing the mindsets of Christian parents and elders. Our generation needs to be willing to trust God and allow the children to follow His leading even when it involves great personal sacrifice.

It can also be addressed by including into our youth education curriculums the theology of “followership” and what it means to listen, heed and obey God’s calling. Part of this is opening the eyes of youths to the needs in the community and beyond. Many churches have successfully incorporated mission and community development into their youth programs. This is an encouraging development.

Spiritual depth and Understanding

The level of understanding God's word among Christian youths is a grave concern. As part of a global trend afflicting both Christians and non-Christians alike, there is a move away from the discipline of study and reading. The challenges of the "instant gratification" generation are well documented. Many Christian youths do not have sufficient understanding of the basic Christian theology. This is evidenced in their inability to engage in genuine theological reflection which would enable them to apply Biblical truths to everyday issues. Many still confuse cultural practices with biblical teaching. Recently I was invited to speak to a youth group of 19 – 20 years old. At the discussion, while majority of them agreed strongly with the statement that "smoking was sinful," only one person was able to argue from a biblical standpoint—smoking was wrong because the body was a temple of God and therefore anything that was bad for our physical health was wrong. She was, however, unable to explain how smoking was worse off than an unhealthy diet and a lack of exercise, which in many ways is as destructive as smoking.

It seems that many Christian youths are being spoon fed answers without learning how to link or extract truths from biblical doctrine. The outcome could be a generation whose faith lacks the depth of understanding and who may be easily misled or distracted.

There are certainly efforts by some churches to address this dearth. Bible study programs have taken different shapes in an attempt to engage the youth, using a form and media that they are familiar with. Some churches have concentrated their endeavours on a few "elects" who would be future teachers, preachers and leaders, in the hope that the next generation of leaders would have a strong base. More Bible college courses are being adapted for tertiary level students and young adults, which is an encouraging trend. These efforts need to be cascaded down and expanded in reach so that a significant percentage of the population will enjoy its impact.

Enlarging their Worldview

The grand irony is that the majority of Christian youth today understand the importance of working hard towards their goals. Many spend most of their time and resources to ensure academic success in order to achieve their career ambitions. Yet very few would consider preparation for ministry and mission.

I want to say at the outset that God's calling leads our youths in many directions. His plan of transformation for Malaysia includes Christian lawyers, accountants, doctors, entrepreneurs, scientist, researchers, artists, teachers, engineers, government workers, counsellors, pastors, and social workers, among others.

Unfortunately, many Christian youths continue to see a separation between their faith and their career choices. Although they talk about seeking God's guidance in decision-making—what to study, where to study, and what profession to enter into—, many describe these processes in individualistic terms, perhaps best encapsulated in the phrase “God will guide me into the profession that will be best for me, that I will be most happy in, that I will be most successful in.” While there is no doubt that the path of obedience leads to joy, peace and fulfilment, what is jarringly missing is the macro view of God's plan. Few have spoken of understanding God's plan for Malaysia or Asia, and of understanding where the needs are in the community, towns, states, and country. Fewer show any interest in or understanding what God is doing among the Malaysian Church as a whole. Many cannot make a connection between their individual calling and God's macro objectives in the country.

Perhaps Malaysian churches need to do more than just engaging youth and present them a larger worldview when it comes to God's plans and designs. In many ways, they have simply inherited the worldview of our generation, which is small and insular.

Talent Development

Talent management has become a buzzword in corporate circles simply because companies are realizing that people are the most precious resource and that people will leave unless they have a sense of growth, progress and development.

If we accept the assumption that God has a place in His ministry plan for all members of His church, and that He has given everyone gifts that can be used for the extension of His kingdom, then the key role of church programmes should be helping the young people to identify and realize their talents.

The fundamental questions are: Do Christian youths know what their talents are? How do we help them to develop and train their talents? Are we providing them the opportunities to use their gifts? How do we teach them to channel their talents into various ministries and vocations and integrate them into their careers?

Many youths take their talents for granted. In a culture that frowns on “showing off,” many youths choose to hide their talents or self-handicap to avoid standing out from the rest. Churches should provide an environment that encourages a healthy balance of both humility and commitment to develop and celebrate talent. Youths need to be acquainted with the doctrine of “stewardship” of gifts and abilities.

CONCLUSION – SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Christian race is a long and hard one, involving many battles, with victories as well as sacrifices and setbacks. While we often talk about victories and successes, the church hardly spend enough time talking about dealing with losses, pain and failures.

The book of Acts beautifully illustrates the ups and downs of Christian ministry. It reminds us that in order to bring about transformation in this region, there will be both mountain top experiences and low dark valleys. With success comes its share of shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments and stoning.

In a generation that is becoming increasingly more protected and less independent, physically, financially and emotionally, we should pay close to attention to building up resilience in our young people. Youth is a time when many struggle to “tame” the hedonists within themselves. The world cries out, “Just do what feels good!” How is the Church different from this?

Creating a protective bubble that immunizes the young people from pain, hurt and disappointment (including spiritual disappointment) certainly does them no favours in the long run; neither is selling a quick fix brand of faith that involves no inconvenience let alone sacrifices. In our pursuit of “youth market,” have we neglected to inform our young converts about the “cost” of true discipleship? In our desire for numerical growth, have we watered down the “calling”?

We should not underestimate the capacity of youths to appreciate the virtues of perseverance and faithfulness. Many when faced with the call of Christ have counted the cost and have by the grace and power of God stepped into the breach.

The Malaysian church has a wonderful opportunity to provide a place for youth to grow and develop into the young men and women God has intended. We need to balance grace and love with truth and honesty as we facilitate their transition from childhood to adulthood, taking into consideration the larger context of God’s plan for this country and region. In order to pass on the baton, we, the elders of the church, need to capture and take ownership of this vision of “transforming the nation through the local church.” Ω