



WHAT'S ON MY MIND

by Chris Folmsbee

Reculturing Your Student Community

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Several weeks ago I sat in a coffee shop in downtown Minneapolis with fellow youth workers from diverse settings to discuss the changes and challenges that youth ministry has experienced over the last decade.

Discussion surrounded evangelism methods, leading worship experiences, the expectation churches place on their staffs, and the way students view life.

Through our wide range of contexts, one thing was undeniable—in an age of certain change manifesting itself in uncertain ways, it's become increasingly challenging to engage students with God through Jesus. Therefore, we all bear the laborious responsibility of reculturing our student communities.

I care less about how well I can keep the students' attention with my teaching methods and style than I do about how well the students can apply God's Word when it really matters.

Reculturing involves, among other matters, discovering the new ethos that will provide the foundation to reach the distrustfully curious and the faithfully skeptical while taking students beyond the common and traditional discipleship grid into a missional lifestyle. Reculturing also entails shifting mission and values to creatively design a strategy for ministry that seeks maximum impact—that is, the greatest degree of God-honoring, life-long effect.

I believe that as we attempt to engage students with God during these days of change we'll need an ethos characterized by variable movement, range far greater than what we've been able to generate before, and a ministry driven not by results but by mission.

I recently led (and now serve as a volunteer) in a large church setting with a rich heritage of successful student ministry. Feelings of success were primarily drawn from large crowds at events and a consistently participative group at our worship services. Perception and reality often provide entirely different truths. The reality is our ministry is just beginning to move in the needed direction to connect this emerging culture to God.

Our team recently initiated the arduous task of reculturing. We've changed the way we view and implement common youth ministry strategies such as evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development. While we didn't begin this renovation project because the ministry was failing, our preceding efforts weren't achieving maximum impact. We've fought hard to create a new culture. Along the way we've made many mistakes, ticked off a bunch of people, and in some cases cut the strings with many parents, former volunteers, and even some of the local churches with whom we'd traditionally partnered.

We felt it was necessary for us to reculture several of the core segments of our ministry in order to achieve maximum impact. As we studied, we identified the following three:

Our Evangelism Strategies

The last 10 years I'd embraced and endorsed event evangelism. Our ministry teams worked hard to provide events our students could use as invitational tools. These events were designed to wow students with the message of the gospel—using a band or concert event, a sport-based challenge event, a holiday-driven event, or even a theme-driven event. Regardless of the event, it was designed to bring students to us and build a bridge between students and the church. It was designed to present the gospel, call for a decision, and then bring students who "crossed the line" into fellowship with the church. We've seen hundreds of students introduced to the gospel through event evangelism and seen as many students motivated to share their faiths.

From an outside perspective we'd been successful. However, we came to believe we'd failed—especially in the praxis of bridge building. What does building a bridge into culture reveal? It reveals a disconnect—a large separation between society and the church. If we have to build bridges, we're not "in the world" as the Apostle Paul wrote and modeled.

More recently a whole new way of thinking about evangelism has influenced me. I contend that if Christianity is going to effectively reach people it's going to be through the practice of an ancient way of evangelism, as George Hunter talks about in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon,). It isn't going to be through presentation, a call for decision, and then fellowship. People will be engaged with God in community through fellowship, then

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ministry to the lost, followed by a decision to commit to Christ over time.

We've recultured our student community by reshaping ourselves to be less "event driven" and more "in-community" driven. For example, we challenge our students to consider their lives and relationships with others as the "event." We encourage our students to invite their peers to be involved and active in their lives to the extent that it allows not-yet-believers to feel as though they belong to a larger community. This creates an environment where already established relationships grow deeper and students develop a heartfelt desire to care for and serve one another—which allows the not-yet-believer to realize a Jesus-like love that invites her to enter into exploring Christianity and ultimately experiencing God.

Rather than seeing our naturally affinity-assembled small groups of students as *cliques* and feel the need to break them down to be more inclusive, we view these groups like *tribes*, similar to how Patricia Hersch describes in *A Tribe Apart* (Ballantine). Challenging these tribes to live missionally becomes the mode of evangelism and apologetic practice that reaches the greatest degree of God-honoring, lifelong impact.

Our Discipleship Strategies

We've also recultured our strategies for medium- to large-group teaching environments. Over the last 10 years, I've taught Scripture almost apologetically, being careful not to turn off students. I crafted worship services and sermons within an entertainment model. Instead of entertaining, I now seek to facilitate the transferring of Biblical content and principles in a way the students can retain. I've shifted the emphasis on my approach to teaching and placed it on the approach to students' learning, primarily whole process learning as described by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Paul Ray in

The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World (Three Rivers Press). The whole process learning environment is comprised of a variety of instructional pathways—reflection, discussion, investigation, and assessment—which allow students to practice disciplines—either traditional ones like prayer, meditation, study, submission, and simplicity; or contemporary prayer forms like dance, painting, and poetry.

These intentional pathways teach students new insights about God, the Bible, and themselves, which they can integrate into their lives. The integration of these spiritual disciplines leads to personal change and growth that a traditional lecture or "talking head" approach can't. I care less about how well I can keep the students' attention with my teaching methods and style than I do about how well the students can apply God's Word when it really matters. I care less about what students believe and more about how students live.

Our Leadership Strategies

We're also reculturing the way we develop ministry leaders. We're in the process of discovering how to shift from a performance-based leadership model to more of an advisor or coach model. We're trying to move away from verbally communicating (what was once laced with fault and burden) to potential leaders that the church needs committed adult leaders or we'll fail. Instead we less aggressively (but not less expectantly) wait on the Lord to raise up leaders though Spirit-filled prompting and through our dependent prayer. Instead of designing programs that we think are most effective, we allow God to work in the hearts of our volunteers. We wait and watch. When the leaders feel the need for a program, it's designed and implemented—not with our personal preferences, ideas, skill set, and gift mix in mind but rather out of something that

God has birthed in the hearts of those who've volunteered to be used by God. We find great freedom in our efforts to depart from a panic-filled "got to have leaders to keep up with these programs" tone and embrace a peaceful and expectant tone of "if God wants it, the leaders will emerge."

Recently leaders have made statements such as, "I'm a karate instructor. Would it be okay if I offered a free class to our students? I think it would allow me to share Christ in a more significant way." I was once asked, "Can I invite some students to restore an old car with me? It's a hobby that I think I could use to better connect with some teens from our church and my neighborhood."

I contend that volunteers who desire to connect with students in your ministry will always be more enthusiastic and more effective in environments they create and in which they have ownership. So the professional youth workers' role includes empowering, advising, and providing on-going resources for our leaders in what *they* do the best, rather than enlisting them for programs designed around what *we* do best.

The church has put pressure on many of us to define our success by result-motivated programs. The recultured community is a people driven by mission, not by programs and results. Therefore leadership models should drastically change, and we as professional youth workers should no longer be directors of programs but advisors and coaches of people who assist in the overall mission advancement.



I look forward with great anticipation to seeing a movement of youth pastors and leaders reculturing their student communities resulting in God-honoring, life-long impact in the lives of students and adult volunteers. I also look forward to learning from the ministries that reculture for maximum impact in areas such as apologetics, collaboration with faith traditions outside of evangelicalism, spiritual formation, and a "beyond seeker sensitive" mentality into a more inhabitable worship experience style. God bless you and your community as you enter into the trek of reculturing. 🙏