

Be careful of fads that fade (Or, beware of the ‘Christian mullet’)

By Ken Moser

I need to begin my making a confession. As a youth minister of 20 years experience, I am sceptical when it comes to culture. I used to listen to the music the students listened to and I watched the films they loved. These days I have pretty much given up trying to be on top of things culturally. While there may be more, I’ll give you two reasons;

1. I think the real blow came when the new strain of “pop divas” hit MTV. I just couldn’t cope anymore with the screeching and gyrations of the latest queens of the airwaves. Hey, I made it through the hair bands of the 80’s- that was tough enough. This new breed of ‘made for the camera beauty’ has left me cold.

2. Throughout the last couple of decades I have seen my fair share of so called cutting edge culture and the ‘future of youth ministry’. Years ago I read that the ‘next big thing in youth ministry’ was coming. Excitedly I waited for this new revolution. I was shattered when I found out that it was Christian karaoke. I have seen ministry built on tears (the short lived, “lets have a deep and meaningful youth meeting that will end in everyone teary and sobbing” program). I have seen it built on cheers (“give ‘em a good time and then slip in the powerful message”). And, I have seen it built on fears (“With this new European Union of 10 countries the end is coming. I predict 1986”).

I have had to deal with gen X, gen Y, post mods and pre- Goths. I have gone to Christian coffee shops and skateboards ramps. I have heard of Christian motorcycle daredevils and Christian rave parties. I have tried to listen to A-Ha, Pantera, Madonna, La Vida Loca- it never stops.

I am now a self professed cynic. In fact, I don’t really think it’s all that important to be aware of youth culture. Sure, you’ll take one look at me and say, “Hey bald man, of course you don’t worry about keeping up to date, your heyday was in the 80’s!” I can understand your hesitancy to adopt my cynicism. However, please allow me to share a number of thoughts on why it may not be necessary to be a culture vulture.

1. What actually is ‘youth culture’? Is it goth or sk8rboy? Nerd or Prep?

Having visited a zillion churches and worked in a few on two different continents I have yet to find anyone that can zero in on a definitive youth culture. Furthermore just when you find a target audience and sculpt your program around their needs and wants you find that they’ve changed their mind. Just when you’ve spent your hard earned cash on the new Ashlee Simpson cd you find that they now love industrial metal! Following on from this I have found that with a bit of work young people can be easily multicultural. If you survey the kids in every youth group I have run they will always tell you that they want less cliques and more unity. This has led me to structure a program that relies less on being culturally relevant and relies more on principles that are culturally transcendent like holiness, love and kindness.

My goal is to always run a youth programs that reflects the words of the Apostle Paul in Col. 3:11, "Here there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

2. While it may sound as if I have completely turned my back on the study of culture there is one culture I must understand- my own. I must be careful not to let who I am and where I've come from block the reception of the gospel by another culture. This is classic missionary strategy. I am a 40 something man who gets glassy eyed and begins to sway every time 'Sailing' by Christopher Cross comes on the radio (anyone with me here?) and I am trying to reach a generation of iPods and VH1. This is light years away from my Central High School graduating class of 1978. I must maintain a constant vigil to never let my nostalgia or past get in the way. The way I do this is simple. I try to never comment on the music they listen to, the way they wear their hair or the amount of steel inserted into their faces. These things are inconsequential. I never hark back to the good 'ole days or act as if Journey was better than J-Lo.

3. There are some things about young people that never seem to change. They are energetic and apathetic. They love to be detached yet need to be involved. They yearn for community yet cling to the safety of their immediate circle. They want to be an individual- just like her. They don't want to feel unsafe or bored. They want community and crave love and acceptance. If you ask them what they want from youth group they will tell you that they want 'more solid Bible studies' *and* a big screen TV *and* more donuts. Youth culture is slippery stuff.

Therefore I want to commit myself to the things that are unchanging. Studying the Word of God (even when it is untrendy), praying with his people (even when there is uncomfortable silence), trying to develop a unified body who love each other (even when there is public, private and home school present). These are things that I must do whether I am ministering to a sk8rboy or an Eskimo-or even a skating Eskimo for that matter.

In the end fads fade. What was trendy once is now the object of ridicule. That movie star who looked so cool back in the late 80's now looks rather sad with his puffed up mullet. Believe it or not, we will be making jokes in a few years about the 'trousers low, undies high' look that is all the rage today.

Don't build your ministry on cultural fads. Work for the things that don't spoil, fade or rust. Keep talking about Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Keep looking at the word of the Lord that 'stands forever'. Keep striving for love- the greatest thing. These are the things that will never fade.