

# In Quest of Asian Models of Youth Ministry

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The age group defined as "youth" in Asia is often different than the one defined in western countries. In my country, Indonesia, for example, people aged 30 often still live with their parents as long as they're not married. Even when they do get married, traditionally, married young people are never really "released" from their families as well. They're still "their parents' children". Parents - upon becoming grandparents - will take part in rearing their grandchildren. And as parents age, children will be responsible for their parents and take their parents under their care, in the children's homes. The term "empty-nest" takes a whole different meaning in Indonesian context.

Different as they might be from their counterpart in the West, Indonesian youth are also immersed in the same Internet and multimedia influence. The penetration of Internet connection, iTunes and BlackBerry - not to mention the mushrooming cable TV access available at more and more affordable price - ensures that what's happening in the realms of developed world can be well-grasped by Indonesian youth as well. So in one hand, these youth live in an almost totally different socio-cultural setting, but on the other hand they breathe the same digital air of progress and taste the same freedom of mind.

However, the penetration is not equal as the socio-economic gap and education gap between the haves and the have-nots are still great. In Jakarta alone, the capital of Jakarta and arguably the most progressive urban area in Indonesia, we can still find high school students whose daily allowance would add up to several hundred thousand rupiahs - they go to elite schools which delivery language is English, drive their own Mercedes, dine at fancy restaurants - while there are children aged 10 who must wake up at 4:00 am to sell newspapers. In Jakarta urban area, it's not a strange thing to find a 15-year old standing on street corners in daylight doing nothing; their parents can't afford to send them to schools, but apparently not too poor to buy them a BlackBerry or some 3G phone. Cell phone is deemed a pride factor for many Indonesians, while education is just something that puts extra suffering to poor families since that means another child can't support their family living cost, even though many government schools are practically free.

With these in mind, churches in Indonesia face a unique challenge to answer the needs of this group called "youth" but which apparently has many colorful facets among its members. The socio-cultural setting, the advanced technological progress, the society's value and attitude toward education; all of these also influence the church's approach toward answering the question, "How do we stay relevant?"

Despite churches' realization that they need to change to stay relevant for the younger generation, the maxim that "Youth is The Church Tomorrow" (thus, not the church "today") and the reluctance to ask "Who are these people we want to serve?" has hindered many churches to be relevant for the younger generations.

I believe churches first need to embrace that youth - and yes, even children and babies - are part of the church today. They, as well as the older people, together make up the church. And after embracing them as part of the church, the church also needs to ask, "Who are these people we want to serve?" I think we need to produce many researches to find a clear and thorough answer to this question. Many churches have fallen to man-defined categories that the progressive churches are either charismatic or pentecostal while the traditional ones are laid back or even when they realize they need to move forward, they keep on looking back asking, "What did that former (late) pastor of ours do when our church reached its peak in the 1960s?"

Bound by such shackles, the efforts to provide a model of youth ministry that helps the church stay

relevant for today's youth would be done either by opinions which would lead to unguided trial-and-error efforts (thus, lack of efficiency and even reflection to move forward) or by research results done by a Western scholar on Western youth, meant for Western churches. Although I think the latter is better, it's still quite improper to just bring a research result across very different context and apply it without first having a solid data of ours.

Asian youth are in many aspects different than youth in the West, but until now the field of Youth Ministry hasn't grown that much and hasn't become a respected field as well - both in seminaries and in churches. Let's start a quest of uniquely Asian models of Youth Ministry. Let's start conducting a series of researches to draw the map of our youth and find the answer to the question, "Who are these people we're serving? Who are these people we want to serve?" Let's embrace them as part of us - as part of the Church!