

9 TEACHING MISSION TO YOUNG PEOPLE

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The culture we live in is one full of clamorous voices demanding attention: Watch! Listen! Buy! Many of those voices are basically narcissistic, encouraging us to sit back, to consume. Even within the Christian world, there are all too many forces that promote a self-centred Christianity, where we are following Jesus for what we can get out of it.

Effective presentation of the challenge to world evangelism is an essential task of any church leadership or youth group leadership; because all of us are recipients of the Great Commission, and all of us need to be reminded of the task God has entrusted to us. But to present that challenge is to set our faces against those forces in 20th century culture that call us to be self centred and look only to our own concerns.

So the starting point for stimulating global vision must be the deliberate attempt to cultivate a kind of discipleship that is not selfish; a discipleship that is outward going rather than inward looking, and that is oriented primarily to the glorifying of God and the service of the world. That must be fundamental to everything else we do; because people who have learned to see their lives as something God has given them to make use of for his glory and for the needs of the world will naturally be asking, 'Well, where, and how, should I be using my time and possessions and future?'; and, to such people, the needs of the world will speak a clear message. In contrast, someone whose Christianity is fundamentally selfish is not really in a position to respond to information they receive about the world's needs.

Teaching

The question then is, How do we create this outward oriented discipleship? Obviously, thorough *Bible teaching* is a basic answer. We can ask ourselves what Bible passages first helped us to catch this vision of the need to invest our lives in bringing the gospel to a lost world. Primarily, though, the need is surely to get across to people that the God who 'is Love' is an *outward going* God, a God who so loved the world that he gave what was most precious to him for the sake of the lost world (John 3:16); and if we are truly children of God, then a similar concern to give ourselves unstintingly for that lost world must characterize us. Likewise,

our teaching must draw out something of what was involved in Jesus' far reaching prayer 'As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world' (John 17:18). A top priority, then, must be to ensure that our youth teaching programme includes presenting God as this kind of God.

There are other areas of teaching that we shall want to ensure are included in the teaching programme of our youth work. Presumably any youth group teaching programme will include a missions oriented component every now and then; and over a period we will want to cover things like Christ's command to world mission, and also the needs of the world that we live in. Oftentimes missionary concerns seem boring because people have never been given an adequate overview of the titanic struggle in which the church is engaged.

So, for example, we may want to try to give something of a geographic overview, arranging for our group to hear a speaker who is able to draw a basic picture of the overall 'state of play' in world mission. (Or, alternatively, some group members can put together a presentation themselves, drawing on sources like *Operation World*.) This will provide a context in which people can see the place of what they're doing in supporting a specific missionary in a specific situation. It may (for example) be a lot easier to pray for what 'our missionary' is doing in an obscure Indonesian village if we've learnt to see that in the light of the global interplay of the rival claims of Christianity and Islam.

It might also be worth experimenting with presenting the challenge to mission in terms of a cultural overview of what is happening in the West and elsewhere since Europe's 'loss of faith'. It is plain enough that such striking features of European society as rising street violence, industrial strife, AIDS, or the search for and loss of values evidenced in much 'high art' and also in popular culture (eg punk rock) relate directly to our loss of God. The missionary challenge in Europe in particular can be presented in terms of this disastrous spiritual void in our continent, where dechristianization has left us with 'every man for himself', with all the consequences we see around us. And in that situation, God has placed his church as the people who have the answers, in his Word and his Spirit; the 'rivers of living water' in what is, increasingly clearly, a spiritual desert; the 'lights of the world' in a continent where it is rapidly getting dark. Sometimes presenting the need in this way may help people catch the missionary challenge by relating it to other areas that have gripped and concerned them. It may help particularly if—as often happens—their vision of world mission has been too small.

Modelling

But the verbal teaching is only one side of our presentation of the missionary challenge that follows from the outward going nature of the

God we worship. Equally important is the *modelling* of our own lives. As younger members of our fellowship or youth group look at us, do they see a Christianity that is primarily for what we get out of it (eg we get a ticket to heaven and give God some of Sunday as a repayment), or do they see a little of what it means to *live* 'for the Kingdom'? Do they see in us a commitment to material security or to spiritual warfare as primary? In conversation with us, do they get infected by a consuming passion for how the gospel is going forward? When we are discussing events of importance in the world, do they see in us a concern that the all-important dimension is how these events affect the church and the gospel? And when they discuss with us their developing career plans (*and* our own), are they encouraged to put as a primary concern the way one's life is to be invested in God's mission—or to make the kind of career plans that are standard with the 'man of the world'?

Modelling also operates in the way we run our church activities. We know that one of the things that kills world vision is the tendency to docket 'missionary matters' as something separate, pigeonholed away in activities and publications for the specialists who are 'that way inclined'. We know that world mission is rather the context in which *all* our discipleship takes place; that we are all of us missionaries, some called abroad and some called to stay in our homeland, but all missionaries nonetheless; and that all our local church activities are just the local manifestation of God reaching out through his people to the world as a whole. But do our church activities model this realization that world mission is the context for all we do?

Do we build in a 'missionary dimension' to all our activities—our prayer meetings, for example, or our home Bible studies? There are so many ways in which—without using more than a few minutes—we can build in a 'world mission component': a prayer item from *Echoes*, or from *Operation World*, or an Operation Mobilisation prayer card. Or we can write to one of the missionaries we support and ask for (say) eight specific areas of prayer concern that could be used in brief 'spots' in our Sunday evening service or youth group event. A leadership that deliberately builds a 'window on the world' into the majority of the fellowship's activities is modelling clearly to all its members the faith that world mission is the essential context of all our local discipleship.

Exposure

Another question we will want to look at is *exposure*. People growing up in Britain today are bombarded by all kinds of forces that make them have a vision that is too small, a vision that is self centred and narcissistic. What

can they be exposed to, so as to open their eyes to the huge world outside and the huge conflict that is going on in it?

What *people* can they be exposed to? Obviously we will want to think about what speakers we can invite to our youth group that will serve to open people's eyes a little. They don't necessarily have to speak on 'missionary' subjects, either. A man who has spent 20 years serving God in the Third World may be just as much an 'eye-opener' to the realities of the 'wider world' if he's talking on a topic like prayer. (This is particularly true if we can find good speakers who are not themselves British.) And if we invite people like that, we will want to work out how to set up 'exposure' in other ways besides just 'speaking from the front'. Which of our youth group should be invited for a meal with them? Which of our group could come over and spend the afternoon with them?

What *events* can our youth group be exposed to? What are the things we should be going to 'as a group'? We will want to check what good missionary conferences etc are happening in our area—for example the London Missionary Meetings for those who live in the southeast of England—and ensure that we build these into our group calendar. And can we take a group off to a residential missionary conference—events like MISSION '88, or like the conferences run by Operation Mobilisation? The important point here is that we don't just advertise these things, but rather examine the possibility of going as a group. That way, people will go along 'with the group' who might otherwise not be exposed to such things—instead of just the 'keenies' attending.

Or we can arrange this exposure by arranging our own missionary weekend. (Or why not do it with some other youth groups in the area?) It can include things like: a speaker who can give an interesting, realistic picture of what it means to be a missionary (both in talks and over the meal table!); some sort of overview of the world, for those to whom it's all new; perhaps a missionary film like *Yoneko*; and some times of world prayer (getting down to business!) Again, this may be a good time to involve any non-British Christians you know—Christian students from overseas, for example, or believers from abroad working with a group like In Contact.

What *books* can we expose our group to? If we are in leadership, part of our job is enthusing about and passing on literature that will help people 'catch the vision': the classic biographies (Hudson Taylor, C T Studd, *Shadow of the Almighty*, etc); books like those by Michael Griffiths, or George Verwer's *Hunger for Reality*, or Ada Lum's *Hitchhiker's Guide To Mission*. Or missionary magazines like *Echoes* etc. Enthusiasm for a book or magazine that has meant something to us can be infectious; and we can set up a personal library of missions books, and ask the Lord who in our group might be interested in them.

Planning for commitment

In all this we will want to pray that God will lead the members of our youth group to find a *commitment* to some specific areas of missions concern. Having an overview of what is happening in the world as a whole is important, but we need that in order to get down to business with a few places in particular. ('Know a little of everywhere; know in depth about one people/nation/region/ministry', urges Ellie Lau of Hong Kong.) So, if we are in leadership, one of our goals will be to present some specific aspects of mission in which people can become involved prayerfully (Open Doors? Missionary Aviation Fellowship? Far Eastern Broadcasting Associates? Christian student work through the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students or Scripture Union?).

As we present these things, we're aiming to expose people to a broader range of what's going on, to expand their vision. And that's important; one feature of our present cultural situation seems to be that we function as experiential people rather than just on a linear, logical level; and if you want to get people committed to something, you must both present the facts of the situation to their mind and their reason, *and* also help their heart and imagination 'catch the vision' too. However, we aren't aiming only to expand people's awareness, but to lead them into active involvement; so as we present these ministries, we will want to spell out the specific ways in which our members can get involved.

Many of our group members will only get involved in what we do as a group; to begin with, at any rate. And so, as a group, we will want to have some definite commitment(s) to supporting work elsewhere in the world. These commitments don't all have to be permanent; in a youth group, it can sometimes be good to see if we can 'ride the wave' of areas of mission concern that have gripped the imagination of that particular generation of our members. So if we are committing ourselves to something, it may sometimes be good to adopt it for a specific period (eg three years); we can always renew our commitment subsequently. That can help to prevent staleness.

And then let's be creative in the ways we support our missionary. What things would (s)he like, besides the prayers and money we're sending? Maybe they're the sort of person who misses the English newspapers; well, the *Guardian* does an excellent weekly airmail summary of the week's news—what about sending it periodically? Is there any magazine our missionary might enjoy? Or a cassette—either music or Bible teaching (but there are some countries where you need to be careful what Bible teaching cassettes you send in—it wouldn't be at all helpful to send something on new developments in Muslim evangelism to a Middle

Eastern country, for example)? Or a book—Christian, or maybe a mind-stretching secular book—or maybe something just plain humorous? Is there any little luxury you can send your missionary—or your missionary’s children—on her/his birthday?—any luxury food, for example—so long as it won’t either spoil *en route* or create problems or bills at customs? (One missionary family told how they appreciated gifts of Marmite!) Are there any practical things that might be useful—tupperware, for example, or a supply of water filters? And if your missionary has ageing parents, is there any way you could show love to them? (Some of these ideas come from the Evangelical Missionary Alliance book *Love Your Local Missionary*, which has lots of other good suggestions besides.)

There are other ways we can build up our link too. It may be that our missionary works in a fellowship where there are young people of the age of our youth group; and maybe some of these could become penfriends with some of our group, and learn to pray for each other.

As we challenge our group to be creative and imaginative in these ways, it is not just our missionary who benefits. Our group members themselves are being helped to realise that ‘missionaries are people too’, and that missionary concern is not something boring after all.

Dreaming big dreams

Finally, we shall be asking ourselves how we can expose our group to *opportunities* for further service. The Lord has told us to pray that he will send out labourers into his harvest; and if we have responsibility for a youth group, we should be ‘dreaming big dreams’ about where they could be serving God ten years later. As we think like that, we shall begin to present our church and our youth fellowship as being a ‘training centre’: a place where we learn together about God and his Word, and where we develop our abilities to serve him and learn to work with him in evangelism and making disciples; so that in the years that follow we can use our lives to make a real impact for him in a lost world. So, as church leaders or youth leaders, we will be thinking what opportunities to present to our group. How can they use their summer? Could a number of our group go together on a Gospel Literature Outreach summer team, or with Operation Mobilisation? And how do we intend helping with any financial hassles they may encounter?

But we won’t just think short-term. Part of our task will be to present, over a period of time, a range of areas of need that exist in our world, so that people can hear about some of the areas or ministries to which God may want to call them long-term.

And we shall pray that it will all bear fruit. And the Lord will answer

that prayer, because it is one he himself taught us to pray. And from among the youth group in our fellowship he will call out labourers into his harvest.