



## A VEXING PROBLEM

**AS MY TRAIN RUMBLES THROUGH THE SNOWY COUNTRYSIDE OF MORAVIA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, MY THOUGHTS GO BACK OVER A PROBLEM VEXING YOUTH LEADERS FROM ACROSS EUROPE THIS PAST WEEKEND IN BRATISLAVA.**

Research presented at the Pentecostal European Forum of Youth Ministries (PEFY) revealed that the youth ministries represented were losing four out of every five young people to the church as they grew into adulthood. For some reason, youth were voting with their feet against church and/or Christianity.

I sat bolt upright in my seat. This was serious! The Pentecostal churches were supposed to be on the cutting edge of church growth around the world. Yet here in Europe something appeared to be missing in the credibility, relevance or reality of the faith in the eyes of the youth. Four out of every five!

If true for those churches, it was very likely true for other denominations too. We were not doing a good job, it seemed, in discipling youth, and enabling them to engage constructively and critically with today's world.

### PERCEPTIONS

From my own sons' attempts to educate their father, I have understood that the world they have grown up in has been changing more rapidly than our ability as the church to contextualise.

Youth culture and social media have created a world even among church youth of strong 'tribal' loyalties to peers and a 'now' orientation coupled with bleak future prospects; liberal attitudes to sex and four-letter-words yet strong feelings on justice and environmental issues; but with almost no awareness of Christianity's role in shaping western freedoms and values.

For them, the church often seems to be self-centred, living in its own bubble, unaware of real issues of daily life, concerned with the 'spiritual' on Sunday but not with the 'secular' Monday to Saturday.

We may want to object and defend the church with a dozen examples proving the opposite; but what counts is perceptions. Youth are perceiving something that drives them out the back door. Four out of every five!

Recently my eye caught the title of a book on sale at a US airport I was passing through: '*UnChristian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity*'. The name of the Barna Group on the cover told me it would contain reliable research data, while the blurb told me that 'young Americans share an impression of Christians that's nothing short of .... unChristian', or unChrist-like.

While Christians are supposed to represent Christ to the world, something obviously has gone terribly wrong. The frank honesty of youth reflected in the book's title lay behind the figures presented in Bratislava. The problems seemed to be common on both sides of the Atlantic.

Christians, the book claimed, were seen by youth to be hypocritical, saying one thing but living something different. The church railed against some sins, especially of a sexual nature, but not others, such as pride, materialism, injustice and the abuse of the environment. As one young single mother was quoted, 'that made it hard to care what they said'.



### COMPASSION

Jonathan, aged 22, saw Christians enjoying 'being in their own community. The more they seclude themselves, the less they can function in the real world. So many Christians are caught in the Christian "bubble"'. Christians were boring, unintelligent, old-fashioned and out of touch with reality, according to the youth researched.

Christians, they perceive, are anti-homosexual, showing contempt for gays and lesbians. And here we encounter a significant shift in how the young generation views homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle compared to their parents' generation. Shouldn't Christians

show compassion and love to all people regardless of their lifestyle, they ask, without compromising biblical standards?

Ouch! This hurts. It disturbs the comfort of our safety zone. It may even force some of us to ask the question we thought we'd answered long ago: 'How do I truly become *Christian*?' And, 'what does it mean to follow Christ and represent him in today's culture?'

As my train brings me closer to my destination of Hermhut across the border in Germany, I think of the movement of Moravian refugees nurtured there nearly 300 years ago. That in turn inspired other dynamic movements like the Methodists, who captured the imagination of a generation lost to the church with a fresh incarnation of the love, grace and compassion of Jesus.

May God do it again.

Till next week,

Jeff Fountain