



Understanding the Outlook of Youth¹

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The title of this presentation taken from the title given to a research study that was sponsored by Youth for Christ International and carried out by the Human Learning Research Institute at Michigan State University. The study inquired into attitudes and values of teenagers and investigated the roles played by certain authority figures and peers in supporting these attitudes.

The design of the study illustrated a methodology of inquiry that rather well exemplifies the urge to *go beyond* the study of attitudes and inquire into the more behavioral factors underlying those attitudes. The major findings of the research are of great importance to those who intend to work effectively with adolescent boys and girls.

The origin of the study was in the minds of several of the top leaders of Youth for Christ International. After committing the organization to a series of shifts in emphasis and tactics, they sought ways to evaluate those shifts in light of the behavior of American youth, in general, and the young people involved with YFCI specifically.

The major need was for an assessment of the long-term consequences of the “Teen-to-Teen” approach. To an outsider, this Teen-to-Teen language may sound like trite jargon, but inside the halls of YFCI management, it had become a respectable commitment to shift the ways and means in order to keep faith with the original evangelistic goals of Youth for Christ.

So many of today’s needed changes are similarly motivated: insightful people discover that procedures must change if the original objectives are to be achieved in a new era. No concept is more basic to understanding the nature of change needed in the church. The objectives of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are less the issue than the habitual and traditional ways and means of attempting to achieve those objectives. Procedures of communication and education are essentially human creations. As such, they are fallible; they are also relative in reference to time and place. They will accomplish the objectives (eternal objectives, if you please) in one time and place, but not in another.

Perhaps research might have played a more promising role in assessing alternatives among possible changes *before* the decision, but better late than never! Research was to confirm or disconfirm the decision to employ a strategy wherein youth is to attract youth. Thus, the key issue was in the matter of where young people turn for support or agreement with their positions on values issues. It was decided to examine the tendency to claim agreement or disagreement with a series of value-oriented statements. This is a fairly old-fashioned way to look at values and it has basic limitations.

(Most severe is the limitation that all you can assess in this way is the tendency to *claim* a degree of agreement or disagreement with verbalisms.

Note: Verbalisms are not the real stuff of acting out values, or can self-reported data be altogether accepted as honest—we all tend to shade ourselves toward what we see as an ideal or, pathologically, toward an overly dim view of ourselves.)

¹ Presentation for the Bueermann-Champion Lectureship, 1971. Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, OR. Series Title: Creative Christian Communication. (Eight sessions indicated; five documents exist in the Archive.)

Therefore, a behavioral dimension was built into the questionnaire, after making their claims about agreeing or disagreeing with the statements just who would the teenagers cite as most likely to agree with their positions? Thus, what begins as an attitude survey moves into a test of forced choices among persons most likely to agree. The emphasis is shifted to *who do these adolescents claim to be most in agreement with their statements*; to that extent the study takes on a behavioral characteristic.

An issue underlying the study was whether the Teen-to-Teen approach would tend to narrow the socio-economic outreach of YFCI or would broaden it. Surely it would have been inadequate to ask for opinions for attitudes on this matter. Instead, a behavioral test was used: those in population A—the active YFC young people—were each asked to take one questionnaire to another teenager and to solicit his or her confidential responses to the items. Each was encouraged to go to his or her “target teen”—a person who the “YFC active” was trying to get involved in the YFC activities. Thus, a behavioral test was performed. The proportion of “outreach-motivated” persons in the “A” Set was established, and the nature of the target teen audience was determined. Happily, it was discovered that the Teen-to-Teen approach leads toward a more widely distributed (socio-economic) group “B” and that the number of YFC “actives” who could deliver a target-teen’s cooperation was fairly high. Within the fixed period of the study (two weeks in most regions) 1,422 of the 4,777 YFC “actives” brought in a response from a person in Set B.

But that gets ahead of the story. Interpreting the major findings of the study requires more background. Youth for Christ International is not an old organization, but in its first year (1944) what made for a successful church-related ministry to youth was strong support from parents and from the authority figures within the formal institutions of the community. It was important that church ministers encourage their young people to attend, that school administrators announce the meetings, and that parents show support by accompanying their children to the meetings. It was thought that these were the desirable sorts of support, and since they apparently didn’t hinder anything, in practice, they became virtually the pattern. Adults spoke at YFC meetings; the big weekly event was the “rally” and it always highlighted a “youth-directed” sermon from some youth-oriented adult speaker. Teenagers were often included on the program, but usually only those with specific musical talent—and always at the direction of the adult leader.

During the 1950’s, teenagers’ response to adult-oriented and adult-led organizations began to falter, or so it seemed to many, including those most active in YFCI. By the 1950’s, teenagers seemed to be in a different world—responding to what they chose to respond to, with much less predictability. Clearly some new factors were at work. Some observers thought it was the influence of the mass media, specifically television. Others inferred an apocalyptic meaning: the end of the world was around the corner and youth had lost touch with the basic meaning of life. This was the era of the generation gap—the frantic casting about for new points of leverage to regain control of a wondering generation of young people.

But a close look showed that nowhere near all were floundering, bewildered, and “lost.” Quite clearly there were strong and able youth having as much stability and potential for greatness as young people had ever had. The difference was apparently in some sort of shifts in the control mechanisms. Perhaps the reduction in parental influence was wholesale; who could tell? Perhaps formal institutions were less potent—surely the adolescents were complaining that they were “less relevant!” But the fact of culture and the reality of value systems were still there. But where now was the power base? Where were the forces that built and supported values? Who is it that tells a teenager what is important these days?

YFCI leadership men shifted their emphasis in program development and leadership training to build on what they thought they saw in the trend. Even more important than mass media—and certainly more important now than the influence of formal institutions—was the influence of the poor culture. If YFC’s work was to be done, teenagers would have to be the instruments to do it for



each other. Thus was born the Teen-to-Teen strategy. Most simply stated the Teen-to-Teen strategy designs experiences and training for teenagers in order that they might be the agents of influence on one another and on yet other young people.

There were critics of this decision, of course. Some criticized because it seemed to be a forsaking of the old ways without putting up a decent fight for a return to former times. Others criticized because teenagers aren't always the most responsible group; building on them could be shaky. Still others feared that since YFCI's past deficiencies included a tendency to relate mainly to the upper middle class and to those already involved in church-related activities, that the Teen-to-Teen approach would result in an increasingly narrow and in-grown ministry.

Such was the background from which emerged one of the most important sets of questions into which the *Outlook of Youth* research inquired. The study was asked to pinpoint the support structure for youth's outlook and attitudes in five basic areas: purpose in life, religion, moral-ethical values, patriotism, and education. To the extent that the values and attitudes held in each of these areas could be associated with the people seen by teenagers as supporting their positions, it would be possible to assess the soundness of the Teen-to-Teen strategy. Further, if it could be determined exactly what sorts of other young people the teenagers now actively engaged in the Teen-to-Teen process were relating to, it would provide a clearer picture how much this strategy would increase or decrease the socio-economic scope and outreach of YFCI.

The findings of the research were revealing in both of these matters. The data revealed that the value statements of Set B ("target teens") are between those of A and C. In all of the categories of values, Set B is more like Set C than Set A. Thus, the Teen-to-Teen approach is not just involving more teens with the same attitudes and values as those already active in YFC, but is reaching outward into the unchurched world.

The research also examined the respondents' perceptions of the persons' supporting their value statements. Here, too, the Teen-to-Teen approach is seen to be promising.

TABLE 1

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	18.91%	21.33%	30.24%	9.35%	17.03%
TOTAL	Set B	20.78%	21.90%	31.85%	8.90%	12.98%
	Set C	20.57%	23.99%	32.24%	7.66%	12.08%

As we look at the percentage of times (to nearest whole number) teens said various individuals would "most closely agree" with them, we find "*Best Friend*" cited most often, with 30% for Set A, 32% for Set B, and 32% for Set C. Next in frequency of citation as the most likely to agree is *Father* with 21%, 22%, and 24% for Sets A, B, and C, respectively. *Mother* is very close with 19%, 21%, and 21%. *Religious Leader* follows with 17%, 13%, and 12%. Last of the five is *Favorite Teacher* with 9%, 9%, and 8%. By looking separately at each of the five categories of values, it is possible to get a more detailed picture.

TABLE 2

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	17.45%	13.05%	15.35%	2.23%	48.88%
RELIGION	Set B	20.81%	12.65%	19.25%	2.34%	41.36%
	Set C	20.80%	12.18%	19.47%	2.16%	41.36%

On attitude toward religion, *Religious Leader* was chosen 49% of the time by Set A (YFC youth) and 41% by the other two Sets. (This category accounts for most of the citations of “*Religious Leader*” as person most likely to agree.) Second for the Religion category was *Mother* with 17%, 21%, and 21%. *Best Friend* came third with 15%, 19%, and 19%. The Religion category is the only one on which “*Best Friend*” was cited other than as most likely or next-to-most likely to agree. *Father* with 13%, 13%, and 12% was seen as agreeing next to last, and *Favorite Teacher* was identified by only 2% of each group.

TABLE 3

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	12.10%	36.11%	32.18%	8.67%	7.25%
PATRIOTISM	Set B	13.74%	36.63%	32.55%	7.91%	5.44%
	Set C	12.63%	39.40%	33.40%	5.61%	5.18%

Father was cited most frequently as the person most in agreement with statements in the category of Patriotism, where he was selected 36%, 37%, and 39% by Sets A, B, and C, respectively. *Best Friend* was a close second in this area with 32%, 33%, and 33%. The rest were much lower with *Mother* at 12%, 14%, and 13% followed by *Favorite Teacher* with 9%, 8%, and 6%, and *Religious Leader* with 7%, 5%, and 5%. In each of the other three areas “*Best Friend*” was seen as “most closely agreeing” more often than any other individual.

TABLE 4

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	23.58%	13.66%	41.58%	7.44%	10.42%
MORALITY	Set B	22.86%	13.61%	45.45%	7.67%	6.42%
	Set C	21.73%	14.76%	45.57%	7.02%	5.36%

On issues of morality, “*Best Friend*” was chosen 42%, 45%, and 46% of the time. *Mother* was chosen about half as often with 24%, 23%, and 22%. Descending from there was *Father* with 14%, 14%, and 15%. *Religious Leader* with 10%, 6%, and 5%, and *Favorite Teacher* with 7%, 8%, and 7%.

TABLE 5

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	22.05%	20.82%	31.63%	7.56%	15.31%
PURPOSE	Set B	25.27%	22.22%	32.05%	7.81%	9.32%
	Set C	25.51%	26.09%	31.25%	7.24%	7.09%

On statements having to do with motivation or purposefulness in life, “*Best Friend*” was chosen as the person most in agreement by 32% for Set A, 32% for Set B, and 31% for Set C. Selection of parents as agreeing most closely was *Mother* with 22%, 25%, and 26%, and *Father* with 21%, 22%, and 26%. This is significant especially if *Father* and *Mother* citations are combined to represent “family influence.” *Religious Leader* with 15%, 9% and 7%, and *Favorite Teacher* with 8%, 8%, and 7% were at the bottom.

For persons seen as “most closely agreeing” on statements in the Education scale, Sets A, B, and C were very similar.

TABLE 6

Person most closely agreeing:

		Mother	Father	Best Friend	Favorite Teacher	Religious Leader
	Set A	19.38%	23.03%	30.44%	20.84%	3.28%
EDUCATION	Set B	21.23%	24.38%	29.95%	18.76%	2.36%
	Set C	22.21%	27.53%	29.51%	16.28%	1.40%

Best Friend was chosen by 30% of the teens in each set. *Father* was not far behind with 23%, 24%, and 28%. “*Favorite Teacher*” was chosen more frequently here than in any other area with 21%, 19%, and 16%. *Mother* was a close fourth with 19%, 21%, and 22%, and *Religious Leader* was down to 3%, 2% and 1% for A, B, and C, respectively.

From the demographic information, we see some of the consequences of the approach: a person in Set A tends to go to a person his own age and in the same grade in school, but more often to a girl than to a boy. Also those to whom teens are attempting to relate are usually at the same level of academic achievement. Responses indicate that some teens are crossing socio-economic lines in attempting to relate to other youth on matters of race, dating habits, parents’ marital status, employment of self and parents, and church attendance of both teens and parents. On each of these items, Set B young people (the “target teens”) are seen to differ from Set A in the direction of the characteristics of Set C.

From these data, it is reasonable to conclude:

1. The Teen-to-Teen strategy is already having the effect of broadening the socio-economic scope as well as the ethnic-racial constituency of Youth for Christ activities; teens with different attitudes and structures of association are not being overlooked.
2. The Teen-to-Teen approach seems virtually essential in light of the overwhelming evidence that teenagers today, whether church-related or not, draw their support for their outlook, attitudes, and values from their peer-group of friends on three of the five studied categories. Teens value what other *teens* value.

Even when there is respect for the parents or for other persons of authority and greater experience, the influence that counts most with teenagers is that of their fellow young people. For adults—and particularly for parents—it is very hard to accept the fact that young people are apt not to pay attention to wise counsel when it runs in conflict with the judgment or standards of the younger set.

In order to understand the outlook of youth, it is first necessary to accept the fact that there are some advantages as well as disadvantages in young people's increased independence of their elders. Among the more important advantages is the tendency to re-examine traditions and to reject meaningless customs. One bittersweet advantage is the tendency of young people to be critical of hypocrisy: college-age youth are especially quick to spot inconsistency between precept and behavior (what a person says in contrast with what he does.)

Young people are by no means altogether perverse and hostile. Further, the outlook of youth today has been shaped by forces and factors, not all of their own making. Today's youth are the first generation after the communication revolution. They have lived only in the sort of information-saturated environment that gives a false sense of being knowledgeable. Teenagers and collegians today have lived their entire lifetimes in an atmosphere of unsolvable conflict and unwinnable wars. Far more than their elders, young people are aware of the nullifying effect of atomic destruction. More sensitively than their parents, they are aware of the lack of community and the isolation produced by rampant individualism and money-grasping. So different is their outlook that many hear messages within the teachings of Christ that the older generation tends to overlook. They hear Jesus talk about neighbors as being people who are as culturally different as the Samaritan. They watch him eat with publicans and sinners (and get criticized for doing so); they sing about the woman at the well and Jesus' interest in her. They celebrate the effect Jesus had on Mary Magdalene, going beyond the specific words of the New Testament accounts, but remaining consistent with the reality of the God/man Christ. They pick up their guitars to actively participate in worship (haven't we been asking for active participation?), and too often the thanks they get from the "establishment" is a third-degree interrogation about their motives and their sincerity. It is small wonder that many young people today are "turned off" by institutions, in general, and the formal Church, in particular.



A teenager's credibility among his peers is very fragile. It can be disrupted or destroyed by too close an identification with adult values and authority. When adults confer status or provide a platform for an adult-selected teenager, the teenager can lose credibility among his own peers. The adult-selected Miss America has relatively little impact on other youth. The junior deacon may be in a gratuitous role as window-dressing to show that adults think youth are important, but not *very* important. The group leader or study group chairperson who is under the adult leader's thumb may be on their way to oblivion as a budding leader of their fellow teenagers. Young people are often glad to know that older people are with them—in the sense of not being against them—but they aren't generally pleased by adults who are with them in the sense of pulling them along. And any teenager who becomes a dupe to this process is quickly spotted and rejected by the others.

In many cases, adults are unaware that they can destroy a teenager's credibility and influence by obvious patronizing.

Working successfully with young people demands more planning *with* them than planning *for* them. Can you spot the problem in the following bit of overheard conversation?

"Karen, would you ask your mother if she could be at the church Tuesday evening? Several of us parents are going to try to figure out what to do about improving the young people's program here at the church."

Here is a well-meaning but likely doomed effort. Parents and leaders of youth need to plan, but planning *with* young people is much more likely to succeed than planning *for* young people.

“The voice of authority” has less force today than formerly. Various explanations have been offered, perhaps the most reasonable of these is that children today are less dependent on their parents and teachers for information and understanding—other information media, particularly television, now play a more significant role than do the personal media. Thus, children grow up identifying more with one another than with the authority figures of the society. Advertisers understand this—in the television commercials the man in the white coat with diplomas on his office walls makes pitches to mom and dad, but the frolicking kids on the beach sell the pop, chewing gum, and sports cars. Adults often fail even to recognize a message unless it makes its appeal from a base of authority; but young people, on the other hand, are more apt to *reject* a message if it is based on status or authority.

This presents a difficult problem to those who want to confront young people with the claim of Christ on their lives. That the Gospel rests on the authority of God’s Word while the bias of youth is resistant to messages based on authority constitutes the dilemma. As never before, manipulation of the emotions of people to produce the right response will fail; and as always before, prayerful trust in the capability of the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of people will pay off.

The really difficult problem is knowing how to get into the communication pipeline in order to send along the good news. Young people often don’t know how to say things adults will understand. And they seem to get discouraged easily if their efforts at communication are rebuffed. Surely they readily “turn off” anyone who won’t meet them half way. The uncompromising parent who attempts to impose his or her own standards of taste, dress, and hairstyles will learn that it is useless to appeal to the maturity of the teenager while maintaining a stubborn and non-negotiable position.

“Now, Bob, you’re old enough to know that you can’t make it in the adult world looking like that.” And Bob shrugs his shoulders and walks away. The tactical requirement is to be able to give-and-take in communicating with young people. Many young people have well-developed ideas of their own. To listen with respect—and thereby to gain insight—is an absolute necessity.

In order to understand the outlook of youth, it is necessary to bear in mind the vital part played by their friends. Or think of it this way, teenagers give one another the support they need to maintain their stances. A message that reaches young people through other young people is more likely to be heard than one that comes from authority figures or even from parents.

The most practical importance of the *Outlook of Youth* research is in its clear evidence that relating to young people today is a task that must involve other young people.