

## Faith, in a Culture of Fear

There's a lot to be anxious about today, isn't there? Ebola, ISIS, terrorism, crime. Unemployment. Healthcare. And, of course, there are our age-old anxieties about death and love--our own vulnerability, and the future of our children. The media feed on our anxiety—and feed it, with relentless stories of danger and disaster at our doorsteps.

As we see in our country and know personally, fear can make us hostile, defensive, isolated. Suspicious. Over-protective. It can lead us to bury our treasures—to lock ourselves in and lock others out. It tells us that we have to be in control, and that we can't afford to trust—not our leaders, not our colleagues or friends, not our children. Not even ourselves. Or God.

Anxiety has been described as “the inability to be present”<sup>i</sup>—as a state of agitation that draws us away from real people and real life—and from the capacity to trust.

A lot of our culture's--and our church's--anxiety centers around teens. Youth minister Mark Yaconelli observes quite candidly: “Teenagers make adults anxious.”<sup>ii</sup> He speculates about why this is: Teens are fidgety, and unpredictable; they expose weaknesses, raise doubts, and challenge assumed values; they “can make adults feel tired, musty, unattractive,” old. They remind adults of themselves—of their own attitudes, bad habits, wounds, forgotten dreams. Knowing all the things that can happen in life, and remembering all our own mistakes, we adults fear for them—and worry when we can't control them or guarantee their happiness or safety or success.

It doesn't help that adults and youth are increasingly segregated from each other, so that adults—including church leaders—are relying more and more on “experts” and on the media to teach them about their own teens. It doesn't help that we're bombarded by sensationalized, negative images of teens, which lead many adults to sigh the proverbial “kids-today” sigh, or to project an unprecedented crisis.

But that's to miss the *present* reality that, according to Bill Strauss and Neil Howe, “never before has there been a generation that is less violent, less vulgar, less sensually charged than the culture being offered them.”<sup>iii</sup> And that's to miss the *present reality* of the extraordinary teenagers among us, and the extraordinary things they are doing.

Teens have their own anxieties about adults, too, and about adulthood. When Yaconelli invited a group of teens to share their impressions of adulthood, one replied: “Adults have no friends, adults have no passions, and adults are stressed out.”<sup>iv</sup> Teens also report concerns about what adults, and the church, seem to expect from them: to be passive, nice, quiet, controlled. Perfect. They report suspicion that many youth ministries are more about babysitting, entertaining, or even manipulating them, than about inviting them into real ministry.

Then, there's the fact that we have anxiety about God and our own faith. When push comes to shove, we wonder if our faith is enough, if God is enough. And for us parents, if we can really trust God with our children. Deep down, of course, we know that Christian faith is not about playing it safe or protecting ourselves--but rather about spending our love boldly in this world. But that may frighten us even more. So, we opt instead for a sleeping faith that we can control and contain and break down into bite-sized chunks.

The church is not immune to this culture of anxiety. Neither is youth ministry. Indeed, many youth ministries are driven by fear: fear about declining membership, fear that kids will

grow up without morals or faith, fear that the church is becoming more and more irrelevant to younger generations.<sup>v</sup>

And churches tend to respond with one of two extremes. If we give in to *adult anxieties* about youth, we develop programs so concerned about the future that they ignore who teens are today; programs that seek to make kids over into newer versions of ourselves, to conform them to our standards and the status quo; programs that offer moral absolutes and confident answers, as an inoculation against sin and suffering and bad decisions.

Or, if we give into *youth anxieties* about adults, we develop programs that focus only on the now--only on getting teens in the door, and keeping them entertained; programs that mirror popular culture and market Christianity to consumers, promising that Christianity is fun and easy; programs that isolate youth even further from adults and from the life of the church and that show little concern for their vocation as disciples.

On both extremes, anxiety leads us away from trust and from God; and it keeps us from being present to the glorious things that God is already doing, in this case, in and through the very young people we're all so worried about.

Now, I'm not trying to create a new anxiety about anxiety. In fact, if you think we're facing an anxiety epidemic today, take a look at 1 Thessalonians. *Those* were an anxious people, in anxious times. As new Christians, they were worried about Paul's prolonged absence; they were worried their loved ones dying before the return of Christ; and they were worried that they'd miss the return of Christ, or be left behind when he came. They were so worried that some of them withdrew from the cares of this life and just stopped working.

Into this crisis of anxiety, Paul offers words of encouragement: "You know what you need to know: You already know how you're supposed to live," he reassures them, "and you're already doing what you're supposed to be doing: you strive to please God, you love one another, you are *already* children of light and children of the day.

"So stop panicking, and get back to living your lives. Keep doing the good things you're doing, encouraging one another and building up each other. Trust yourselves, trust your knowledge, trust your faith.

"And trust God! For God has destined us not for wrath but for salvation. We and our loved ones are in God's hands, and those hands are sturdy and trustworthy. So in these anxious times, hold onto God, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

This message applies to us today, too, as we wade through our own anxieties, and the changes that bring them to the surface. Trust God, trust yourselves, trust one another. "Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Do you see what you're already doing? To the youth, do you see how God's already working through you? How God has empowered you to care for each other, and for those less fortunate than you--to step out of your comfort zones, into new places like Common Ground, Emmaus House, or, for some of you, *Sunday school*. Do you see how God has emboldened you to step into leadership, by leading a lock-in, or becoming an acolyte or crucifer or usher, or offering to be one of the brave beautiful voices in the youth choir? Do you see how you're inspiring and teaching the rest of us, with your honest questions, and your desire to serve, and your hope for the world?

And, the rest of you, do you see what you're already doing? How you're already doing youth ministry? If you've ever served on the youth advisory board; or trained or taught any of our teenagers, even when they weren't teenagers yet, or worked alongside them at the Pantry or Red Door Festival or anywhere else--if you've ever given one of these kids a ride, or provided food, or hosted or chaperoned any of our events, please raise your hand. If you've ever supported a youth fund-raiser or donation drive, or welcomed a teen you didn't know at church—or if you know the names of at least five teen parishioners... If you've ever risked your life by waking a sleeping teen on a Sunday morning and making them to go church—or if you're a parent, grandparent, godparent, or family friend of one of our teens, please raise your hand. And last but not least, if you are a youth, raise your hand.

*This* is our response to the anxieties of our time. This is what God is doing through us.

So, yes, we live in a culture of fear. But let's continue to respond to it with love, hope, and faith—an expansive faith that allows us to build each other up rather than compete, to reach out rather than withdraw, to trust rather than harbor suspicion. Let's remember that God is good, God is trustworthy, God is working through us and strengthening and equipping us. And let's continue the good work God is already doing in us.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2006), 35.

<sup>ii</sup> 31.

<sup>iii</sup> 34.

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<sup>v</sup> 36.