The Power of Young People to Change our World

By David Wraight

When young people are mobilized in large numbers they have an enormous synergistic capacity to bring about change in the world. Throughout history there have been a number of political leaders who have recognized this collective world-changing potential of youth and have used the youth of their nation to bring about eras of change that have significantly impacted the world. Unfortunately, in nearly every instance where young people have been mobilized to bring about national or global change, it has been under the leadership of despots and dictators whose agendas of control, violence and repression have caused enormous pain and suffering.

Adolf Hitler was well aware of the power of youth. During a speech at the Reichsparteitag in 1935 Hitler declared: “He alone who owns the youth gains the future.” By mobilizing the youth of Germany through a movement called ‘Hitler Youth’, Hitler was able to seize control of Germany, drive his agenda of world domination and genocide and usher in World War II, which ultimately resulted in the deaths of sixty-two million people.¹

Hitler capitalized on the idealism, loyalty and creativity of youth. Using training camps and weekly club meetings he captivated the hearts and minds of the young people of Germany, providing them with a collective vision that focused all of their youthful energy in world changing action. Speaking of his youth mobilization program Hitler stated "My program for educating youth is hard. Weakness must be hammered away. In my castles of the Teutonic Order a youth will grow up before which the world will tremble. I want a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once again flash from its eyes... That is how I will eradicate thousands of years of human domestication... That is how I will create the New Order."²

Mao Zedong is another political leader who mobilized the youth of his nation and through this mobilization was able to wrest power from other political leaders and gain control of China. Fighting an attempt to marginalize him, Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution which circumvented the Communist hierarchy by giving power directly to the Red Guards, groups of young people, often teenagers, who set up their own tribunals of terror and control. Squads of teenage Red Guards would go from house to house looking for potential elements of corruption, using their 'Little Red Book'³ as their doctrinal and behavioral point of reference to assess the acceptability of those they were investigating. The Revolution led to the destruction of much of China’s cultural heritage and the imprisonment of a

² The History Place, Hitler Youth, http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/hitleryouth
³ A collection of quotations excerpted from Mao Zedong’s speeches and publications.
huge number of Chinese intellectuals, as well as creating general economic and social chaos in the country. Millions of people were killed and displaced and many other lives were ruined during this period of youth-driven revolution.\(^4\)

Hitler’s Youth and Mao’s Red Guards provide us with convincing evidence that empowering young people and allowing them to lead can bring about enormous change in the world, either for good or for evil. The young people of Rwanda were mobilized to destroy a nation; they became instruments in the hands of Satan, and perpetrators of horrendous acts of violence and destruction.

If young people of a nation are able to change the course of history acting together with a common vision and purpose under the direction of a corrupt and flawed human leader; imagine what changes will be wrought in the world when a global community of young people start acting together under the direction and leadership of Jesus Christ!

**The Historical Significance Of Young People**

I wasn’t far into my Christian ministry leadership journey before I discovered that if you want to be effective in youth ministry you need to surround yourself with a team of young leaders. So when I was appointed as National Director of Youth for Christ Australia, I was thrilled by the way God gathered around me a team of vibrant, creative and talented young people.

The YFC ministry had been through a rigorous period of soul searching and renewal from which came a new vision: “That every young person in Australia has the opportunity to be a follower of Jesus Christ.” Of course, the very nature of a vision is that it is way bigger than your capabilities and available resources, and in YFC our resources were very limited and our dreams very big.

As we grappled with this vision to reach the young people of Australia, the most significant challenge confronting us was the implication of the phrase “every young person.” If we were to take this vision seriously, how were we going to gain access to all the young people of Australia? We explored many possibilities, but eventually came across a unique opportunity. We discovered that, enshrined in the legislation of every state and territory in Australia, was the provision for Christian Religious Education (CRE) in every secondary school. There was actually a law in each state and territory that required that secondary school students receive 30 minutes of CRE per week!

God had provided a unique way for us to gain access to nearly every young person in Australia in the age range we were endeavoring to reach. So we set out to find the most effective way to take advantage this legislative provision. I presented my young team of leaders at YFC with the challenge of developing a mission strategy that would enable us to make the most of the opportunity to conduct CRE programs in secondary schools across Australia.

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Glenda’s Story

One of the exciting things about young people is that they are largely unaffected by organizational or denominational loyalties. They take a unified and creative approach to mission, drawing upon the collective resources of the Church to come up with innovative, efficient and effective mission strategies. So when presented with the strategic challenge of delivering CRE programs in all the secondary schools in Australia, my team of young leaders immediately perceived that the only way to achieve this vision was to develop a ministry model that maximized strategic partnerships with other missions and the local church, drawing upon the wide variety of resources, specialties and giftedness available in God’s family in Australia.

They started coming up with brilliant, outrageous and—from my perspective—completely unworkable ideas. However, one program we all kept coming back to was an all-day seminar that involved multimedia, film, music, vox-pops\(^5\), small groups and simulation games.\(^6\) The genius of this program was that it actually required local church involvement for it to work, as well as providing ample opportunity for partnership with other youth ministries. It also allowed us to approach schools with an offer to amalgamate all of their mandated 30-minute CRE into a one-day experience for all the students in a particular year level.

The program was called ‘AusLife’, and once it was introduced it took off. The schools loved it, and the churches that partnered with YFC and other youth ministries running the program were overwhelmed with the number of young people they were able to connect with and follow-up. We found that at the end of a one-day seminar, 10 to 20 percent of the students who participated indicated on a ‘react card’ that they wanted to know more about having a relationship with Jesus Christ. These young people were followed-up through further outreach and discipleship programs conducted by the local church.

In the developmental phase of the AusLife program, one young leader on the YFC team stood out as a brilliant and creative strategist with an unshakable and courageous faith. Her name was Glenda. God clearly identified Glenda as the person to lead this ministry, and so I appointed this bold twenty-four year-old to oversee the whole AusLife program in Australia.

Glenda very quickly gathered around her a multi-talented team of young people. This team was soon able to harness all that the latest in technology and multimedia had to offer, and they came up with incredibly creative and relevant programs that greatly increased the popularity and effectiveness of the AusLife program. Glenda brokered numerous strategic partnerships with other youth

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\(^5\) Short spontaneous video interviews with young people in the community.

\(^6\) A simulation game is a mixture of a game of skill, a game of chance and a game of strategy, which results in a simulation of complex real life situations.
ministries to enable us to deliver the AusLife program to schools in all the major cities in Australia. AusLife very quickly became one of the key youth outreach ministry strategies in Australia, mobilizing and equipping local churches to collectively pursue the vision to provide every young person in the nation with the opportunity to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, we soon ran into a major problem. As the program expanded and became more prominent, I was contacted by a number of people who pointed out that by using clips from movies, music videos and TV programs we were breaking multiple copyright laws. It was obvious that if we didn’t change the way we were doing things we would inevitably end up in a serious legal battle that had the potential to cripple the program and possibly even jeopardize the financial viability of the whole organization.

I explained the situation to Glenda and suggested we would have to find a way to continue the program without using video clips. Glenda was horrified. She told me in no uncertain terms that the whole program relied on multimedia and music, and that it would be impossible to connect with the students without using film, music and TV clips which expressed the youth culture and identified the issues that the AusLife program was trying to address.

Glenda said she would find a way around the problem; “After all,” she reminded me, “God had given us this program to reach the young people of Australia…he’ll provide a way through this.”

I countered by reminding her that we were dealing with the law of the land, and we had a biblical mandate to comply with that law. Unless we could address the copyright issue, we had to stop using the videos. Although I encouraged Glenda to continue to explore possible solutions, I started thinking through how we could restructure the program to eliminate the threat.

Glenda started contacting the movie and media distributors to obtain their permission to use the films clips and music videos. It wasn’t long before she came back to me frustrated, but not defeated. She shared with me how much the media distributors wanted us to pay for the rights to use their products. It was huge amounts of money, and because we continually updated and changed the material, it was going to cost us a fortune to comply with the copyright law.

Once again I encouraged Glenda to redesign the program, and once again she refused to even consider this, advocating that using the multimedia material was essential for the AusLife program’s success. She reiterated that God would provide a way to get past the copyright problem. I continued to explore other alternatives.

A few days later Glenda came to me very excited. She informed me that Coral, one of her team members, had found a way to overcome the copyright problem.
We simply had to get the Australian Federal Parliament (the governing body of Australia) to declare Youth for Christ exempt from copyright law for the purpose of their school programs. Simple! I jokingly asked Glenda to get the Prime Minister on the phone right away so we could arrange for parliament to declare us exempt. Undaunted, Glenda left my office convinced she had found a way to solve the problem. I worked even more diligently on planning major changes to the AusLife program.

Very soon Glenda was back in my office. She told me that Coral had been able to connect with a prominent lawyer in Canberra\(^7\) whose job was to write legislation for the government. Although this lawyer wasn’t a Christian, he was very interested in what YFC was doing in the schools and he was willing to help. Over the next few weeks I watched in amazement as this lawyer lobbied on our behalf, and the Attorney General of Australia, with the endorsement of the Australian Federal Parliament, declared a copyright exemption for YFC Australia.

**Empowering Young People to Lead**

This experience, with Glenda’s leadership and the creativity and adaptability of her team, taught me a valuable lesson. I realized that to be effective in youth ministry, it isn’t enough just to surround your-self with young leaders so they can ‘help’ you with your mission. Rather, it is essential that we empower young people by allowing them to truly lead. In fact, as I have continued in youth ministry and mission, I have come to realize that empowering young people is not only the key to effective youth mission, but it is the key to effective mission in any context.

Glenda expressed the simple, uncomplicated and unshakable faith of youth, and the Lord harnessed her youthful naiveté and ‘never-say-never’ attitude to achieve his purposes. Through Glenda’s leadership, courage and confidence in the God of the impossible, the impossible was achieved; the AusLife program was salvaged from ineffectiveness and tens of thousands of young people were reached—and continue to be reached—through this program.

The fact is, when young people are given the freedom to lead, amazing fruit is produced. Their healthy naiveté constantly generates courageous and creative initiatives, and their connectedness to the cutting edge of societal change allows them to be relevant and effective in their mission strategies. They have boundless energy and an unshakeable faith in God. Because of these unique attributes, involving young people at the most strategic levels of mission and ministry is essential for the Church to remain relevant in a rapidly changing society. Allowing young people to lead will open up the potential for miraculous growth and effectiveness in mission.

\(^7\) The capital territory of Australia.
Often young people are seen as ‘future’ leaders, as the ‘next’ generation, and, in one sense, they are the ‘positional’ community and church leaders of the future. But we also need to see young people as leaders for ‘now’, and we need to provide opportunities for them to lead today.

Young people have a vital role to play in leading the worldwide Christian community into new arenas of effective, radical, Kingdom-building ministry. They are the key to the Church being relevant in the world because they are ‘agents of change’, full of hopes and dreams of ‘what can be’ rather than being content with ‘what is’. Living in a world where the pace of change increases every day, we desperately need young people to lead as agents of change in the Church and in the broader community, helping us to be relevant and connected and therefore effective in outreach.

This is clearly supported by a review of biblical history, where we find numerous examples of faithful and courageous young people being used by God to bring about change, renewal and blessing.

**Young Leaders in Biblical History**

*David*

A mere teenager, David courageously fought the giant Goliath when experienced, well-trained soldiers and military leaders were afraid to take on this seemingly impossible task. David had been sent by his father Jesse to take some food to his three brothers who were serving with the Israeli army. The Israelites were camped in the Valley of Elah preparing to fight the Philistines. Every day, for forty days, the Philistine champion Goliath – who stood over nine feet tall – strode out to the battle line and challenged the Israelites to send out one man to fight him, taunting and ridiculing King Saul and his army in the process.

David arrived at the camp just as Goliath was issuing his daily challenge. Astounded at the Israelites’ fearful reaction to Goliath’s taunts, David started asking the soldiers around him why someone didn’t just get out there and deal with this “uncircumcised Philistine”. With youthful exuberance he offered to go and fight the giant himself. Can you imagine what those battle-hardened soldiers thought when a inexperienced teenage shepherd-boy challenged them about their fear and reluctance to fight Goliath and the Philistine army? David’s brothers were furious. Extremely embarrassed by his behavior, they began haranguing him for being such a conceited and naïve young man.

When King Saul was confronted with this teenager’s bravado, he too pointed out David’s naivety, stating that he was “just a boy” and that he had no idea what he was up against. But Saul had run out of options. No one in his army was

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8 1 Samuel 17
prepared to take on Goliath, including Saul himself. And so he sends out a teenager to fight the Philistine champion—without any weapons or armor—obviously expecting him to fail. But David knew that his God was way bigger than this giant; and through the simple and uncomplicated faith of youth he was able to succeed where adults had failed, defeating Goliath with a sling and one stone,\(^9\) and leading the Israeli army to victory. The story of David and Goliath is a classic biblical example of how God uses the naivety, idealism and unquestioning faith of youth to achieve his purposes.

**Josiah**

When he was only 20 years old, King Josiah instituted a great reformation in Judah.\(^10\) Due to some misguided and ungodly leadership the nation of Judah had drifted into a period of idol worship and complete neglect of God and his ways. At the age of eight Josiah was appointed king. As he grew into his leadership role he started to discover that the religious practices of his people were a long way from what God required of them. In fact, when God’s Law was first read to him Josiah was so distraught that he wept and tore his clothes.\(^11\) Simply applying the values of God’s Word and Law to his life and leadership, this young man became an agent of change in his nation. Josiah’s youthful passion, absolute commitment to the application of God’s truth in his life, and willingness to go against the flow of cultural norms and traditions, resulted in him leading his nation—at a very young age—into an extended period of obedience and service to God.

**Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—three young men who were most likely under the age of 20 at the time of their confrontation with the King of Babylon—refused to bow down and worship an image of King Nebuchadnezzar.\(^12\) The King had set up a ninety-foot golden statue of himself in the plain of Dura, and had gathered together all the officials and servants of his Kingdom for a time of worship before his image. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were in training to serve in the King’s palace, and so they were required to attend the image-worship event. But they were Jews and followers of the one true God. They refused to worship anyone, or anything, except their God. And so when the music played and everyone else bowed before the image, three people were left standing.

The King was furious. He threatened to throw the three young men into a blazing furnace if they continued to defy his command. Yet, even faced with the threat of being burned alive, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remained true to their commitment to God, declaring that their God was more than able to deliver them. But they also acknowledged God’s discretionary power over their lives, stating

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\(^9\) 1 Samuel 17:50  
\(^10\) 2 Chronicles 34  
\(^11\) 2 Chronicles 34:19,27  
\(^12\) Daniel 3
that even if their God chose not to deliver them, they would still worship and follow him.\textsuperscript{13}

So the King had them thrown into the furnace, and to Nebuchadnezzar's amazement, God not only delivered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but he—or one of his angels—also appeared with them in the flames. We are told that, when they came out of the furnace "the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them." When Nebuchadnezzar witnessed this miracle he praised the God of these three courageous and faithful young men.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted God implicitly, never doubting his character and care. They also acknowledge God's sovereignty over their lives, and were prepared to die for him, if that was what he required. Through their faith and testimony to God's character, these young men were able to introduce the King of Babylon to the one true God and change the spiritual focus of the most powerful nation in the ancient world.

\textit{Esther}  
Esther was probably in her teens, or—at the most—in her early twenties, when she willingly risked her life for the sake of her people the Jews.\textsuperscript{14} Haman, a corrupt leader serving in the court of King Xerxes, had convinced the king to exterminate all the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon. As the favored wife of Xerxes, Esther was the only one who had any chance of appealing to the King to save the Jews. Her strategy was clever, creative and very dangerous. After fasting and praying for three days with her people, this young queen of Babylon approached King Xerxes in his inner palace court. By doing this Esther was taking an enormous risk, knowing that she faced certain death unless the King himself chose to ignore this break in protocol and save her. But Esther's prayers—and those of her people—were answered, and God miraculously intervened. Instead of having her killed for approaching him in his inner court, the King held out his golden scepter to Esther, providing her with immunity to enter his court and make her request. She simply invited the King to a banquet in his honor, which he attended. It was at this banquet that Esther was able to expose the duplicity of Haman and prevent the annihilation of God's people.

\textit{A Few Others}  
When Jeremiah was called to be a prophet in Judah, he pointed out to God that he was not qualified for the job because of his youth, saying "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."\textsuperscript{15} But it would appear that God wanted Jeremiah in spite of—or maybe because of—his youthful exuberance and fledgling faith; a faith that was clearly evident when Jeremiah was still prepared to take on the

\textsuperscript{13} Daniel 3:17, 18  
\textsuperscript{14} Esther 4:16  
\textsuperscript{15} Jeremiah 1:6
difficult assignment God had given him, even though he believed that he was way too young for the job. Like many young leaders in the Bible, Jeremiah’s faith and belief in God was much bigger than his faith and belief in himself.

Mary was a girl in her mid-teens when she was chosen by God to give birth to the Savior of the world. She simply trusted and accepted God’s will for her to have a baby out of wedlock, never once questioning God’s plan for her life, stating “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.”

Although the ages of Jesus’ disciples were never revealed in the New Testament, most biblical commentators concur that the disciples were young men—probably in their 20’s—when they were called by Jesus to follow him and establish the early church. The disciples certainly exhibited all the attributes of young leaders—naiveté, exuberance, faith, commitment, idealism, passion—which God consistently deploys in achieving his purposes.

**Young Leaders in Church History**

As with biblical history, the history of the Church is replete with examples of young people being used by God to lead miraculous and strategic initiatives in mission and ministry.

*James Hudson Taylor*

At the age of 17, after reading an evangelistic tract, James Hudson Taylor gave his life to Christ. A few months later Taylor committed himself to missionary service in China and spent the next three years preparing for his ‘calling’, studying medicine, Mandarin, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. On September 19, 1853, at the age of 21, Taylor departed England for China driven by a vision to reach a nation for Christ. During his 51 years of missionary service Taylor established the China Inland Mission (CIM), was responsible for bringing 800 missionaries to the China and along with his fellow workers was credited for leading 30,000 Chinese nationals to Christ by the time he died at age 73.

Taylor was known for his youthful exuberance and innovative and creative approach to mission. As with many young Christian pioneers, he was soundly criticized and rejected by the church leaders of his time, but he doggedly pursued the vision that God had given him. He was renowned for his cultural sensitivity—wearing native Chinese clothing even though this was rare among missionaries of that time. Under his leadership, CIM was unapologetically non-denominational in practice and accepted members from all Protestant groups, including individuals from the working class and single women as well as multinational recruits.

Ruth Tucker summarizes well Taylor’s accomplishments in her book *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*:

16 Luke 1:38
“No other missionary in the nineteen centuries since the Apostle Paul has had a wider vision and has carried out a more systematized plan of evangelizing a broad geographical area than Hudson Taylor.”

The Protestant Missionary Movement

One of the greatest missionary movements in church history was the Protestant Missionary Movement of North America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thousands of missionaries, most in their early twenties, ventured out from North America to the far corners of the world, eventually resulting in the gospel being shared with tens of millions of previously ‘unreached’ people. This movement was initiated by an impromptu prayer meeting held when a group of five students at Williams College in Massachusetts hid together under a haystack to shelter from a storm.

In this ‘haystack’ prayer meeting, these zealous young students focused on the need for awakening interest in foreign missions amongst their peers. Their leader, Samuel Mills, exhorted his companions with the words that later became their motto: “We can do this if we will.” They committed themselves to foreign missionary service, and they challenged other students on their campus to commit their lives to mission along with them. Then they traveled across the US, going from campus to campus sharing their vision for missions. The movement grew exponentially until the whole Church in North America was affected by their missionary vision.

Other young mission pioneers

Throughout the modern mission movement students have been at the forefront of pioneering missionary efforts. The Student Volunteer Movement sent out thousands of college students from North America and Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their catch-cry was: “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”

Another example of a youth-led mission was the great student revival in North America in the 20th century, when students from colleges like Asbury College traveled all over North America sharing what God had done in their lives and triggering revivals wherever they went.

Today’s modern mission movements such as Youth With A Mission, Youth for Christ, Operation Mobilization, Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ were all started by young leaders in their early twenties – Loren Cunningham, Torrey Johnson, Billy Graham, George Verwer, Dawson Trotman and Bill Bright.

These young courageous leaders—along with a host of missionary firebrands of the past two hundred years—were all marked by their absolute commitment to reaching the un-reached and to establishing God’s Kingdom in the remotest and farthest corners of the world. They were literally prepared to give their lives in

pursuit of the call of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations.” In fact, in the early 1800's many missionaries shipped their goods to the mission field in coffins because they knew they would most likely die abroad from disease or at the hand of the people they were trying to reach. Such passion, sacrifice and love for those without Christ resulted in an unprecedented growth of the Church worldwide and ultimately the salvation of hundreds of millions of un-reached people.

The Next Wave of Mission
As globalization and modern technology shrink our world, we are presented with a new landscape that contains amazing possibilities for communicating the love, grace, forgiveness and hope of the gospel. We live in a global society that is experiencing a famine of unconditional sacrificial love; a world where people have lost the art of relationship; a world that is rife with relativism and in which absolutes and foundational truth are often rejected because they either have no place in post-Christian humanism, or they are associated with repressive regimes or leadership.

People are searching—they are searching for the truth; they are searching for love; they are searching for relationship; they are searching for meaning and purpose; they are searching for security—they are searching for Jesus! In the words of Jesus “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

The world is ready for the next ‘wave of mission’; and in the context of globalization and modern technology, the potential impact of this building wave is inestimable. In the same way young people were at the forefront of all the major mission movements of the past, I believe that once again they will be at the forefront of a tidal wave of mission that is going to sweep across this planet in the next few decades.

18 Luke 10:2