

LEADERSHIP SHORT

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TEACH THEM TO FISH A VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION OF A GENERATION

We've all heard the axiom- 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a life-time' (or something like that). In the past few decades, models for mission in a cross-cultural context have rapidly changed. No longer is there a sense that western *Christendom* has all the answers and can simply come in and 'fix' the issues of the developing world along with bringing the gospel. The image of the 'great white hope' is an archaic idea that no longer has any legitimacy and has passed away with safari suits, wax moustaches and the colonising powers of Europe.

Mission into cross-cultural environments understands the priority of partnering with indigenous people, to train and release local leaders and to equip and empower people to bring about change in their own lives and communities. In short, handing out fish as an answer to hunger is doomed to failure, and creates a culture of dependency, disempowering those who could bring about true change. The missionary organisation's role is no longer to be the answer, but to be alongside those who can bring about legitimate and long lasting change.

Rolland Allan, a missionary to China writing at the turn of the 20th century, wrote an influential text on the nature of mission called "*The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder it*". His opening lines provide a provoking picture of 'teaching men to fish':

"Many years ago my experience in China taught me that if our object was to establish in that country a Church which might spread over the six provinces which then formed the diocese of North China, that object could only be attained if the first Christians who were converted by our labours, understood clearly that they could by themselves, without any further assistance from us, not only convert their neighbours,

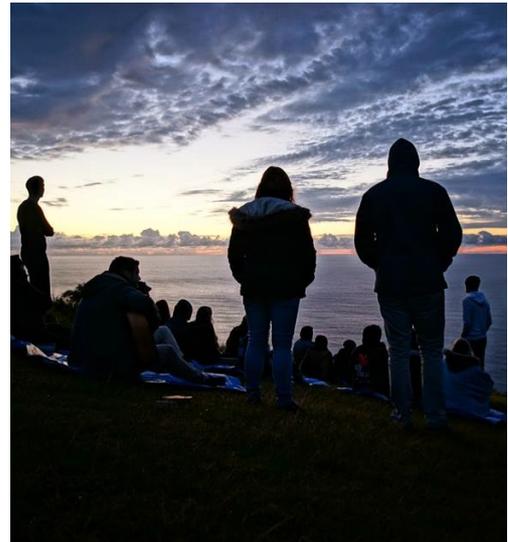
but establish Churches. That meant that the very first groups of converts must be so fully equipped with all spiritual authority that they could multiply themselves without any necessary reference to us... our removal should not at all mutilate the completeness of the Church, or deprive it of anything necessary for its unlimited expansion."

So what does this have to do with youth ministry you might ask? Everything! The Youth culture that we strive to reach is an entirely 'other' culture to our churches. In Australia, young people between the ages of 15-29 are the largest 'unreached' people group in our nation. Their representation in our churches is vastly disproportionate to their representation in our society- under 4% are involved in church on a regular basis. Youth ministry has been well established in Australia for over 30 years and is a well accepted part of every 'contemporary church', however, our efforts have struggled to stem the outward-flowing tide of youth from our churches.

I wonder if this has to do with our vision for youth ministry? I wonder if our models of 'ministry to' youth are equally as guilty of disempowering and creating dependency as the old outdated models of cross-cultural mission were? Have we somewhere along the way convinced ourselves that what is needed is to hand out fish, rather than teaching them to fish for themselves? R. Allan's vision was that the first group of converts might understand that they themselves are full of the Spirit and can themselves multiply this faith without the missionary. In fact his hope was that '*our removal should not at all mutilate the completeness of the Church of deprive it of anything necessary for its unlimited expansion.*' What would happen if we stopped running our programs, if we stopped leading our small groups, if we were no longer able to meet with young people to 'give them fish'- would they have been taught enough to 'fish for themselves' so that the gospel might continue to grow in their schools, families and communities?

The answer to the unreached people group that is 'Youth and Young Adults' in the Australian context is not better models of 'ministry to' youth. The answer lies in teaching young people to 'fish'. Its ironic that Jesus' invitation to his first disciples was to 'Follow me, **and I will make you fishers of men!**' yet our dominant models of ministry today fail to prioritise equipping disciples to fish. How deeply we have missed this in our youth ministries! Any vision that has at its centre Youth Pastors running youth groups and ministry 'TO' youth, will never come close to reaching the 4 million 15-29 year olds in Australia. Only a movement of young people, taught to fish, to be Gospel messengers and disciple-makers themselves, will reach the youth of this nation.

So for those in leadership over young people in church- How are you doing at teaching them to fish? What opportunities do you provide for young people to engage in mission in their sphere of influence? What would it take to disciple a generation of disciples who would continue on the mission regardless of whether we were there or not?



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