

Heritage Sunday: May 25, 2014

# Christian education for the NOW GENERATION



Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.  
-Ecclesiastes II:10

Ah but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.  
-Bob Dylan

Christian education in the late 1960s fundamentally changed its approach to youth. More than just adopting the design habits of the day, the curricula strove for empathy rather than attempting to pull adolescents into the behavioral modes of adults.

By far the hippest proponent of youth-centered Christian education was Dennis C. Benson, director of Youth Ministry of the Council of Churches of the Pittsburgh Area. In his *The Now Generation* (1969), Benson identified the barriers between adults and youth as a communication failure. Just as Christ spoke in the “accent and cadence of the common tongue,” so Benson wrote in the culture of the now.

Benson’s *Electric Liturgy* (1972) followed him as he quit his job because of mental overload – “The emotion circuitry of the electric age breaks apart when forced through channels which are too rigid”—and prepared a youth liturgy for his church. Along the way, he embraced his relationship to worship as performance and as community.

In a different approach, the Rochester Area Council of Churches pooled its efforts in 1968 into Project RISK, which undertook youth outreach in storefronts and coffee-houses, where adult RISK workers made themselves available for conversation. RISK’s 1969 report, published by Geneva Press as *A Design for Ecumenical Youth Ministry*, made clear that the work of plain listening was difficult, and that the ultimate reward – bringing youth into the fold – was hazily glimpsed. “[Youths’] exodus from the church will not be stemmed by an intellectual debate or by any book that presents our theology in ‘hip’ terms [...] Ours is not to convert, ours is to communicate. A decision is the person’s, and if you will, the Spirit’s to make.”

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