

# Paying attention to youth culture

by [Charles R. Foster](#) in the [December 9, 1998](#) issue

*By Josephine A. Long and Carl I. Fertman, Youth Leadership: A Guide to Understanding Leadership Development in Adolescents. (Jossey Bass, 243 pp.)*

*By William Finnegan, Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country. (Random House, 481 pp.)*

*By Tom Beaudoin, Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X. (Jossey Bass, 210 pp.)*

Three provocative books challenge our concept of youth ministry and question our capacity to transmit the faith across generations. In *Youth Leadership* Josephine Long and Carl I. Fertman take up a topic that many churches, schools and other youth-serving organizations have ignored since the late 1960s. Long, director of the Leadership Development Network at the University of Pittsburgh, and Fertman, executive director of the Maximizing Adolescent Potentials Program at the University of Pittsburgh, explore patterns of leadership in teenagers and examine how leadership is nurtured.

The authors frame the discussion with two theoretical perspectives. The first is that of developmental psychology, an approach that dominates the literature on youth ministry. Drawing on the insights of Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan and others, Long and Fertman note that while young people begin to engage in leadership at a very young age, their involvement intensifies rapidly as they move into the teenage years. They are busy acquiring information about leadership and forming attitudes toward leadership in these years. They learn to communicate, make decisions and manage leadership roles. The authors identify three distinctive stages in this effort: awareness, in which youth self-consciously begin to identify ways to function as leaders in various social contexts; interaction, in which they explore and test their growing knowledge and skills of leadership; and mastery, when they begin to develop a vision of themselves as leaders and take responsibility for preparing to be leaders.

Long and Fertman's second theoretical perspective is drawn from the research of E. P. Hollander, J. M. Burns and J. V. Downton, which emphasizes leadership as "transactions or exchanges" that take place between the leader and the one who is led, as well as the transformation of "self-interests for the good of the group, organization or society." The transactions are the skills and tasks associated with leadership, while the transformation of self-interests describes the act of leadership itself. From these two perspectives, the authors locate the impetus to leadership in the developing capacities of teenagers, who respond to the situations in which they find themselves and practice leadership.

The task of developing youth leaders is a matter of creating environments that will nurture capacities for leadership. This changes the role of adult leaders. Instead of *teaching* people to be leaders, they are to *nurture* their potential for leadership. Parents become partners to youth leadership efforts, while teachers and other adults "support," "empower" and "facilitate" their developing capacities.

The authors suggest ways to create these conditions and give examples of leadership-nurturing environments. They challenge the value of youth ministries that don't meet these conditions, including those that isolate teenagers from children and adults in the congregation, those that emphasize entertainment, and those that prefer charismatic adults who direct youth over adults who nurture youth capacities.

The youth in *Youth Leadership* are familiar to most church people. They are active in school and community, live at home with at least one parent and accept the basic values and perspectives of society's dominant social institutions.

We are not familiar, however, with the young people we encounter in *Cold New World*. William Finnegan introduces us to disenfranchised young people whose families seem overwhelmed. Schools do not hold these young people's attention. Their skills do not translate into success in the job market. With the exception of some rural African-American youth, these youths find the institutional church irrelevant. Yet many of the deepest issues of their lives are inherently religious, especially when they are trying to make some sense out of the violence and hostility they experience.

Finnegan presents the lives of African-American young people in a New Haven neighborhood through the eyes of a teenage drug dealer. He presents Mexican-American youth in Washington State who struggle with the experience of

immigration, and white supremacist Anglo-American youth in the Los Angeles suburbs. All of these youth are experiencing the downward economic movement of their families; all of them have had repeated encounters with direct, overt and systemic violence.

Finnegan researched this book by living with these young people. He ate with them, attended their gatherings, interviewed family members and community, business and school leaders who touched their lives. He returned to visit the youths over the course of his research, and on several occasions intervened in their lives.

Despite the grimness and violence of their stories, the youth reveal their resilience and their capacity for tenderness and compassion. I found myself hoping that these young people would find a way to improve their situation, give some socially acceptable response or find enough institutional or personal support to escape the downward spiral of their lives. It does not happen. Their environments do not contain the resources to alter this tragic course. And most of our congregations are unaware of or inattentive to their quests for meaning and place.

The young people in *Virtual Faith* represent another group that has had little contact with the church--GenXers, or those middle-class, educationally successful young people born between 1961 and 1981. This book is a generational autobiography of their quest for religious meaning. According to Tom Beaudoin, a GenXer and theology student, the distinguishing feature of the GenX experience is the influence of the images and values of television and popular music.

Wade Clark Roof observes that Beaudoin "takes us on a romping, eye-opening voyage through GenX culture--its music, its fashion, its imagery, its spiritual quests." Many readers will consider that culture to be not only irreverent, but sacrilegious. It turns the authority of tradition upside down, relativizes religious imagery and symbols, and celebrates theological ambiguity. Beaudoin contends that unlike previous generations of students and young adults, who contested secular culture with critiques found in religious tradition (Beaudoin's mentor Harvey Cox would be one good example), he and his peers embrace pop culture as the primary source of and catalyst to faith. They then turn to religious traditions to confirm, support and energize symbols and myths.

Beaudoin models the "ministry imagination" he espouses by leaping back and forth between the religious themes of an MTV clip and the exegesis of a biblical passage.

This, he says, is the GenXer's way of nurturing "virtual faith." By this term he means that "Xers live religiously in real ways (involving real faith, real practice and a real spiritual journey)," while simultaneously imitating "real faith and real practice, simulating what they expect institutional religion and real religiousness to be." They want both the "real thing" and an "imitation" of the real thing--the "genuine and the posture, the authentic and the artificial."

The GenXer is suspicious of institutions, especially religious institutions. He focuses on personal experience in the spiritual quest, and on a sense of suffering expressed in a psychological and spiritual crisis of meaning. The GenXer also accepts the ambiguity that may be found in the fusion of sacred and profane, spiritual and sensual, orthodox and blasphemous in popular culture. He does not reject or dismiss faith tradition or religious institutions, but they are not the only sources of spirituality. The implications are clear: If traditional Christianity is to engage the spiritual quest of the GenXer, it must attend to the ways in which these young adults draw on the church and popular culture.

Read together, the three books suggest that the range and diversity of youth and young adult experience in the U.S. is much broader and more diverse than is evident in most congregational ministries. The labels we use--"youth culture," the "silent generation" of my own college years, or "GenXer"--do not describe the experience of many youth and young adults. The teenagers in *Youth Leadership* and the GenXers in *Virtual Faith* have possibilities that are distant to the young people in *Cold New World*. While the racism and classism that weigh heavily on Finnegan's youth may represent intellectual or political issues for some of Beaudoin's GenXers, it hardly catches the attention of the youth that Long and Fertman describe. The teenagers they describe do not share the suspicion or disregard of institutions--including the church--that is found among GenXers and the disenfranchised young people in *Cold New World*. The traditional values, symbols and practices that provide the context for nurturing youth leadership for Long and Fertman function only as backdrop for the imaginative reconstructions of pop culture undertaken by Beaudoin's peers, and they may generate negative self-images for Finnegan's youth.

Our lack of attention to the range and diversity of the experience of youth and young adults inevitably limits our capacity to speak truthfully and faithfully to these people. Consequently, many simply do not find a welcoming place in the congregation.

We have left the task of defining what it means to be a youth to the youth themselves. As a result, they are picking and choosing images, symbols and values from media, religious and other social institutions, as they try to produce meaning for and give shape to their lives. In this process, the church becomes another boutique in the shopping mall of options for personal and group identity.

We have also abandoned the notion of the interdependence of the generations in congregational life. Few adults see themselves engaged in a communal effort to sponsor, nurture and mentor young people. Indeed, few pastors identify this as a central role in their ministry.

A 1984 study found that few teenagers in an affluent suburban high school had an adult--other than their parents--with whom they could discuss important matters. Another study found that 70 percent of high school students are "generally ignored and poorly served"--i.e., "unspecial" in the system. Adults are certainly present in the lives of young people. But the well-intentioned parents, grandparents, teachers and social workers in *Cold New World* are unable to create environments that nurture socially acceptable norms and practices; meanwhile, many of the parents described by Finnegan and Beaudoin acquiesce to the dominant role of television and media in their children's lives.

Mentoring in youth ministry tends to be individualistic rather than communal or strategic. Youth ministry literature has not yet challenged the practice of letting youth ministries be directed by adults. Long and Fertman need to emphasize the reciprocity of youth and adults--of possibility and experience, imaginative exploration and wise reflection--in the leadership development of the group or community. Youth need to be viewed as full members, and challenged accordingly.

The churches need critical perspective on the influence of contemporary media and the values of consumer capitalism. The authors of these three works document the pervasiveness of consumer capitalism and media in defining the young people's experience. These forces may take diverse forms: the market economy of the "drug culture" and the appeal of the violence in the "media culture" in Finnegan's study, the MTV "pop culture" for Beaudoin's GenXer, or the middle-class values implicit in the patterns of leadership promoted by Long and Fertman. Common in each book are themes of individualism, competition, ambition and success, and consumption.

Fashion, entertainment and possessions are identity markers for the youth in all these books--although the object of consumption varies. The youth of *Cold New*

*World* may have little vision of their participation in a democratic society, but they certainly do see themselves as full participants in a consumer culture. The "irreverent spirituality" of Beaudoin's GenXers more easily aligns itself with Newt Gingrich's anti-institutional vision of economic well-being than with the ecological visions of justice and stewardship of the earth.