

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Justice for the Uncool

By: Lem Usita

Lem Usita was in local church youth ministry for about decade. He currently teaches youth ministries in the biblical studies department at San Diego Christian College. He's also working on a doctoral dissertation at Biola University.

It's easy to program justice in another country, over the border, or in our communities, but how do we teach—or even better, live out justice—in our youth ministries at home?

I mean, we've gotten relatively good at programming events and activities to help and serve the poor and the forgotten. Students and parents alike are attracted to them. Many will raise thousands of dollars as part of justice campaigns outside of the safety of the youth room.

But what about inside the youth room?

What about those who feel marginalized in our youth groups? Those who've been told, directly or indirectly, that they're not spiritual, not accepted—not cool? What if we've created environments of injustice in our own youth ministries?

My "Cool" Youth Ministry

The dynamic period of adolescence finds many students experiencing crises, exploring, and searching for their identities. They long for inclusion in their social circles. And they're on a constant hunt for what is cool; therefore, I've programmed events and services that were upbeat and full of energy. Cool.

I reasoned that in order to be heard and in order for my students to like me or my youth ministry, so I needed to focus on what was cool. In doing so, the cool kids became engaged in my youth ministry programs. And then my youth ministry became cool. So I kept programming to make everything cool—a cool name, a cool logo, a cool ethos.

I also found that I programmed everything for a specific personality: The extrovert, the vocal ones, the student leaders. I believe, in fact, that we tend to program to church extroverts in general: We sing loudly, play music loudly, force interaction midservice by shaking hands with random people, play more loud music, encourage people to join this small group, shake more hands with random people after the service ends, etc.

I didn't realize it at the time, but my programming communicated to students that in order to be spiritual, they needed to behave as extroverts in this very cool program that I created. And if you weren't loud or an extrovert, you weren't spiritual. We would have small groups, and make special announcements for our "leadership" kids, who all happened to be extroverted, loud kids.

And the introverted kids? They didn't generally become leaders because either they were too shy or they weren't dynamic enough. I had created this ethos and was unintentionally communicating to our students that extroverted expression was true spiritual expression.

In fact, the ministry team would often pray for the "fringe kids"—i.e., the ones who didn't jump up and down and weren't quite loud enough at our events. We judged the introverts and then prayed that Jesus would somehow "reach" them because they weren't "getting it." They were disengaged—and, of course, our perfect program couldn't have been the problem.

An Ironic Ethos

Ironically, this ethos models a lopsided spirituality, not a holistic one. In other words, we tend to program for extroverts, but when it comes to spirituality and developing their "walk," we tell our students to undertake introverted practices such as quiet time, alone time, going into the closet to pray, shutting your eyes, stillness. Extroverts do well when they're in small groups, dialoguing with others, and jumping up and down—but many of them struggle with quiet times and similar practices because it's hard for them to be alone and silent.

Extroverts don't need quiet times; they need "loud times." Because they're extroverts, they need dialogue with others to process what they're taking in. So praying with someone is more helpful to them than quiet, alone time.

Introverts on the other hand might have a hard time with small group interaction and even jumping into the mixer or big game, but when it comes to the talk, since they were created to process alone, they comprehend the ideas better. They don't need dialogue with others to process. They get what you said, and the extroverted kid still needs to ask you questions because she's still processing through your ideas.

What's even crazier is that we might never know any of this. In fact, students can come to our ministries for years "under the radar" because

they aren't the type of kids we program for. They just might not be cool enough.

Many youth ministries program for the cool kids. But no matter what, uncool students still show up. They're the ones you see all the time, even though you might not know their names. They're goofy. They might not have the cool shoes or clothes. They rarely go to the activities because they can't afford to—and if they do go, they're loners the entire time.

The Cool/Uncool Struggle Is Ancient

Most programming is for the cool kids. It shouldn't be, but it happens. In fact, it's not a new issue. Ever since there was church, leaders programmed for cool.

The end of the first chapter of James' epistle describes what kind of attitude we should have—to look after orphans and widows in distress and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. James provides an excellent framework for justice in our churches—in our youth groups. And earlier in chapter one, James challenges us to not merely listen to the Word of God, but to actually do what it says.

Then, right at the start of chapter 2, James tells us to not show favoritism. When someone cool walks in, blingin' with all the coolest gear, we shouldn't make the uncool person give up his seat for the cool person. When we do so, we discriminate and judge against the uncool (James 2:2-4).

And God loves the uncool.

A Kingdom Perspective

Our youth ministries need to reflect a Kingdom perspective on justice—to think as God thinks—for God has chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom promised to those who love the King (James 2:5).

Programming outside of this Kingdom perspective shows favoritism and is sin. It's insulting to the uncool—and to God. You can have a really cool program, and be doing so much for everyone else, but if you sin even only in this way, you're guilty of it all (James 2:8-10).

When many of us think of justice, we think of *fairness*—especially when it comes to those judged for breaking the law. But true justice also means social engagement for the marginalized and the oppressed, along with the orphans and the widows described in James 1:27. But it also means simply paying attention to the kids falling through the cracks in our own ministries.

James challenges us in our meeting places, not outside of our meetings. James challenges us in our youth rooms, in our gatherings—not some trip they took or somewhere outside of their community. James says to love the poor (the uncool)—but to start with the ones in our meetings. Start with the

ones in your youth ministry, the ones that are showing up now. Think as God thinks about the uncool in your youth ministry.

Youth Ministry for the Uncool

How do we do this? How do we care for the uncool? Well, that depends. Every ministry context is different. In some youth ministries, the cool ones are athletes; in others, they're the Christian school kids. While skaters may be cool in your youth ministry, across the Interstate it's the surfers. How about the band geeks or the gamer nerds? Even their nicknames are marginalizing and uncool.

But whomever the uncool are in your ministry, God loves them.

This means that we program for introverts as well as extroverts. This means that we teach and model getting into God's Word and spending time listening and praying, but we do so according to how God made us—organized or spontaneous, with someone or by ourselves.

This might even mean teaching "loud times" as a spiritual discipline for many and "quiet times" for the rest. It might mean extra effort to help the uncool kids assimilate into your youth ministry—or even focusing more on the uncool kids since the cool ones may not need so much of your attention.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't program outreach events, mission trips, and social engagement opportunities. Continue those. But we have to remember James' credo—that showing justice needs to happen in your meeting, in your youth ministry, in your church.

True justice happens when we think rightly about everyone, even the uncool. True justice happens when we love our neighbors as ourselves.