

Group Magazine

Second Century Youth Ministry

by Rick Lawrence

Cultural historian and Church futurist Leonard Sweet takes a crack at where youth ministry is headed in the new millennium.

[Leonard Sweet](#)¹ bowled his way into my life about three years ago when I met him at the [Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry](#)². Len was one of three featured speakers at the Forum-participants had to choose between his three day extended seminar or two others. I chose Len's "Future-Fitting Your Church."

The first day, I'd say there were 40 or so attending. Len spent that session talking about what he'd learned as leader of an advisory group of Christians working with [Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenburg, and David Geffen](#) on the making of *The Prince of Egypt*. He said things I'd never heard before about culture and ministry and how the past drives the future. In fact, it's more accurate to say I'd never even thought of the possibility of some things Len talked about.

The next day the buzz had circulated about Len's workshop, and our ranks grew by 10 or 15 people who'd booted other workshops for his. About half of us seemed semi-mesmerized by Len's mental-spiritual rock-skipping, and the other half looked a little, well, angry at him. But even the angry ones came back for more. By the last day, it was standing-room-only.

In sum, Leonard Sweet sees things others don't. He leans into the corners so he can peek around them. I can't think of a better person for a brain-picking session on youth ministry's second century. That's why we asked him to point his mental browser at today's young people and tell us what he sees. Enjoy!

group: When you think about what's urgent regarding the church's future direction, what has immediate application to ministering to young people?

sweet: First of all, I really have problems with that whole term "youth ministry." I think it has a musty smell to it. I look at myself as being in mid-youth. Middle age is now 38 to 80. So I have definitional problems with the language the church is using to talk about one of its most important missions-to pass the baton of faith from one generation to another.

group: Have you thought of good alternatives?

sweet: First of all, we should be using the language of generational cultures.³ What "youth ministry" suggests is that youth is a fixed category that doesn't change over time. But we've got at least five, six, sometimes even seven generational cultures that we're dealing with. Boomer youth were different than GenX youth, who are different than NetGen youth.

The question is, 'What are the peculiar characteristics of this generational culture with which I'm entrusted?' And that culture is going to change every five or six years. To do this kind of generational ministry, we must keep ahead of the curves-to keep updated, to keep going to conferences, to keep learning, to keep listening.

group: What you're saying is that the term "youth ministry" assumes "youth" is the same from generation to generation, and that creates a kind of bulwark against change for youth ministers.

sweet: Right.

group: So what kind of training or preparation for change would you recommend for a youth minister today?

sweet: One is that you tailor your learning to the context. So you look at what NetGens like to do most, for example. Their favorite pastime is going to the movies, their second favorite pastime is surfing the Net. Well, immediately that tells me something. If you do not understand that film has been the major cultural dynamic of the 20th century, and you are not constantly learning and getting film and media savvy, you cannot communicate to this generation.

Secondly, if you have no idea what online life is about-if you only have an offline life-you do not know that, for this generation, the Internet is their soda fountain or their water cooler. These kids are saying to us: "You want to communicate with us? You want to speak our language? You gotta know about film and Net."

group: I see youth ministers leaning into two broad camps. One camp dips into the waters of kids' culture because they have a compelling desire to understand and connect with them. These people are seen as somewhat dangerous by the church.

sweet: Well, there's no understanding without standing under. And that's what these people are willing to do. They're saying, "To understand these kids we gotta stand under their culture."

group: But the other camp says, "The Bible has unchanging truths, that's where I start from. There are dangerous things in this culture, and my primary goal is to subtly, and not-so-subtly, drag kids from the precipice of their culture using these unchanging truths."

I see nuggets of truth in both camps. Some youth ministers in the first camp jump into the culture so deeply that there are no distinguishing characteristics between them and their kids. People in the other camp have no real relevant connection to the kids they're trying to bring these unchangeable truths to. How would you advise people in either camp?

sweet: They both need to hear opposite ends of the same truth. One camp needs to hear that there are unchangeable truths that the message is unchanging but the methods of communicating that message change. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, but Jesus is fresh every morning.

The problem I've got with this rescue mission notion—that we're on a rescue mission to save kids and bring them to dry ground—is that they're going to miss the boat. I mean the boat is where Jesus is. It's a fear posture. God did not give us the spirit of fear. And it presents Jesus, too, as a Savior from the world, not a Savior of the world.

In Jesus' final commission to all of us, he told us what to do, not how to do it. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." That's what we're going to do. How we're to do it changes constantly. And by the way, I don't believe youth ministry involves ministry to kids—it's ministry *with* kids. The primary function of a youth minister is to get these kids to do youth ministry themselves.

group: Talk about some of the stumbling blocks an adult might see in handing over ministry to young people. Some might be reluctant to hand over ministry to kids because they don't fully understand the basics—they've been branded as biblically illiterate...

sweet: Hello, it's not that way with adults? I heard a speaker say we've got a lot of Bible-believing churches with members who don't read the Bible. According to [\[George\] Barna](#), the level of biblical illiteracy in Bible-believing churches matches the general population.

There's been a radical shift in learning styles. Most adults learned by trial and error; teenagers learn by trial and success. In other words, we were taught that until we can get it right, don't do it. Until you get all your right beliefs down, until you understand this thing fully, you can't participate in ministry. For these trial-and-success kids, there's no concept of error. They learn by doing. How do you become a disciple of Jesus? You learn by doing.

So the church has got to have a greater toleration for mistakes, falls, failures, misconceptions, and miscues. Young people will learn to be leaders by doing it.

group: I think many churches have a huge fear about kids having no concept of error. They fear that kids don't know right from wrong, and the statistics seem to back them up. They believe the real issue is that we've lost our way—we've stopped teaching kids boundaries, we've stopped teaching them hard truths, and we've allowed them to determine their own truth. So when you say kids have no concept of error and it's okay to let them learn by doing, that raises red flags.

sweet: Moderns define truth propositionally. Postmoderns define truth relationally. This is huge. The truth is... both. Truth is part proposition. But let me tell you, postmoderns are helping us rediscover the way in which truth is relational. Jesus didn't say, 'Come follow me and I'll give you propositions.' No, he said, 'I am the way.'

Biblical truth is a relationship. The modern world lost that. We boiled down biblical truth to four spiritual laws. That's how we tried to lead people to Christ. No. These kids are so fight about this—truth is fundamentally defined in relationship terms. Jesus, who majored in relationships with the disciples and others, did teach doctrine. But the propositions came in the context of a walk *with* a person. God didn't send us a set of propositions, God sent us a person. And it's the person of Jesus.

Kids are in this relationship, struggling with what it means to love Jesus and show the love of Jesus. That's why WWJD is their cry. Don't give us these laws and regulations. We want to know what Jesus would do." Their whole understanding of truth is much more first century.

group: What do you mean "much more first century?"

sweet: Postmodern culture is "back to the future." In the modern world you had basically two kinds of space-outer space and inner space. But in the medieval world you had three different understandings of space-outer, inner, and spiritual space. We're living in one of the greatest rediscoveries of the soul in the last thousand years and its totally taken place outside of Christianity. Well, why? We're totally not understanding what the soul is about for postmodern's relationships and rituals.

group: We just ran an article [in the July/August issue of group] about [Mark Yaconelli's](#) quest to introduce kids to ancient Christian rituals and practices. Kids are powerfully drawn to this ministry style because they're not just talking about God, they're actually connecting with him.

sweet: This is the difference between modern and postmodern ministry. One asks, "What do you think?" It tries to help kids think the right thoughts. The other asks, "What do you feel? What are you experiencing?" It tries to create rites and rituals that can help bring about right experiences.

group: For many youth workers, thinking always trumps feeling.

sweet: Postmoderns are exactly the opposite.

group: So there's an immediate conflict between the adult trying to lead and the kids trying to follow.

sweet: Right. When I was growing up in the church, I learned a doctrinal poem that went: "Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving. Our warrant is the Word of God, none else is worth believing." So I was taught to distrust and fear feelings, to pooh-pooh experiences. But postmoderns feel their way forward, they do not think their way forward. I'm not trying to repudiate thought here, but we're talking about how to reach them.

I saw this lived out after every school shooting-kids were basically inventing their own grieving rituals. You had the standard ones going on inside the buildings-these were for the adults. But the kids created their own rituals. And the difference between the two says everything. Postmodern kids didn't repudiate the sanctuary rituals of remembrance, but they created their own EPIC rituals. [EPIC](#) is an acronym for experiential, participatory, image-based, and communal.

When I started out in ministry as pastor of a church, I did a funeral and did the whole thing-it was a one-man show. I couldn't get anybody to help me out. Now think about the funeral that followed the most famous traffic accident in history-[Princess Diana's](#). You had a good percentage of the population on planet earth watching that funeral service at Westminster Abbey. Now, who do you remember speaking at the funeral?

group: I remember her brother speaking.

sweet: And you probably remember Elton John singing and Tony Blair reading [1 Corinthians 13](#).

group: Right.

sweet: You didn't even mention the archbishop.

group: No...

sweet: This is what I mean. When you do funerals now, you can't shut people up. It's a shift from representation to participation. What we've tried to do is represent truth and God to our kids. But, unless they can participate, it can't be their own. So they're creating participatory rituals for their grief-including signing the caskets with notes!

In terms of discipleship, you can't tell them they have to learn what is right and wrong before they can walk with Jesus. No. The whole methodology is participative trial and success. Participative structure is at the heart of the learning process.

Also, remember the flower rituals that were a part of Diana's mourning rituals and the aftermath of the school shootings? Notice that in each case, the grieving young people had to have a symbol of the person who died—a palace gate or a car, for example. They chose some relic as a kind of shrine. And then they pile on these flowers. Did you notice anything about these mounds of flowers?

group: They were all in individual bundles.

sweet: Yep—what about the individual bundles? How were they bundled? I mean, it's so obvious. But it's profound.

group: They were wrapped in cellophane.

sweet: They're wrapped in plastic. The plastic says everything. You've got flowers stacked on top of one another, but all you see is plastic. It's ugly. You can't smell anything. But it's beautiful because ... let me back up a little bit. The medieval world had no concept of the individual. It was all communal. So when they did memorial services, each person took their flower and stacked it on top of the pile. They had these huge communal mounds of flowers.

The modern world rediscovered the individual and kind of suppressed the community. Everything was "I." We had individual vases. We took our individual flowers and put them in individual vases.

So what do postmoderns do? These kids want the communal again, but they can't give up the individual. So they're returning to stacking their flowers, but they want to be individuals at the same time. I'll put my *individual* bundle on the *communal pile*. I call this theological dyslexia—me and we. Flip over me and you get we. Me needs we to be. And they sense that. They want to be unrepeatable, irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind disciples of Jesus, but in the context of a wider community.

These rituals of remembrance they've created are experience-based. They're participatory. Image replaced the word. And finally, they're communal.

We've got a lot of people in power who have modern understandings of what learning and faith formation is all about as they try to deal with postmoderns. And that's why we're having such a dismal record of keeping our kids.

group: Let's say you've got a traditional youth ministry model that has a charismatic leader at its center—that person is the focal point for young people and for the adult leaders who help in the ministry. This person really drives the ministry, and that leads to great personal satisfaction ("Look what I've done") and also tremendous burnout ("Look what I can't do"). This traditional model bumps up against your EPIC model of learning—what are the changes that must happen for youth leaders wanting to turn the corner?

sweet: The biggest one is their need to give up the ministry. I tell youth pastors, "Your major job is to give away the ministry to your kids. You must decrease that Christ may increase in their lives." These kids need mentors. They do not need pied pipers.

This is the first generation in history that does not need authority figures to access information. But wait a minute—they need authority figures all the more to process all that information. They don't need us to get the truth—what they need is mentoring. "Now that I can get it, help me. How do I live it? How do I perform it? How do I pray it?" That's the mentoring model. It's much more low-key but high-powered.

You can learn this from [Star Wars](#) for crying out loud. These Jedi knights are spiritual masters. That's what we need—knights of faith that can show our kids what it means to be a master of the spiritual disciplines, a master of the spiritual life, a master of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

group: All the things you're talking about—moving from propositional to relational, moving from pied piper to mentoring, becoming a faith master for young people—that's quite a threatening path for many youth leaders because it's such an intimate path. It means that who I am is my most important ministry tool. And I don't have time to hone that ministry tool. What I have time for is propositional truths that I can deliver to kids so I feel like I've done my job.

sweet: Well, we've been so serious about all this. The truth is, what work was to the modern world, play is to the postmodern world. Our ministry tool box had better become a toy box. You don't work a violin, you play a violin—and young people want their lives to make music. They want their relationships to sing.

Ministry needs to become much more an art form-the relational arts. We're working too hard at it-instead, play at it. Joy and laughter and delight are now at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The joy of the Lord is our strength. So many churches are weak because they have no joy. And postmoderns know that.

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1 Leonard Sweet is vice president and professor of postmodern Christianity at [Drew University](#) in Madison, New Jersey, where he is also Dean of the Theological School. Among the many books he's authored are FaithQuakes(Abingdon Press), chosen one of 1994's '10 best religion books,'*SoulTsunami. Sink or Swim in Now Millennium Culture* (Zondervan), and the recently released AquaChurch (Group Publishing). He's both a historian of American culture and a futurist advocating Christ-centered innovation in the church.

2 The [Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry](#) convenes every spring in Princeton, New Jersey. You'll hear speakers there who sometimes have no apparent connection to youth ministry, but end up saying out-of-the-box things that deeply apply to youth ministry. For more information on the next Forums, call or write Kay Vogen at (609) 497-7914, PO. Box 821, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 085420803 or e-mail her at kay.vogen@ptsem.edu.

3 For a riveting analysis of how generations cycle through wide-scale personality changes, read [The Fourth Turning](#) by Neil Howe and William Strauss (Broadway Books). Subtitled "*An American Prophecy*," the book examines recurring generational cycles in American culture and predicts what's on our horizon as a result.