Reflection on Peer Pressure and Adolescence in Youth Ministry

by

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1. Introduction

Dealing with adolescents and peer pressure is a significant challenge in youth ministry. It involves directly the social, moral and religious education of teens, who are neither children nor adults. In this essay I would like to focus on two perspectives:

- The perspective of an ethical and moral challenge for a Christian adolescent on how to relate to peer pressure and to come to his or her own decision. Primarily for an adult, it is important to understand the roles and functions of peers in youth cultures and the existence of positive and negative peer pressure.

- The perspective of a youth worker or parent on how to interact with adolescents. It is not easy to give a teenager good advice. One’s own understanding of adolescence, spirituality and the way to make decisions have an impact on how we deal with our teens. As youth worker or parent “we need to put ourselves in our teen’s shoes and remember our own adolescence”\(^1\).

Therefore, this essay is not a guide or a “how to do” in ethical education or moral learning, but a reflection on my own ethic standpoint as a youth worker and parent. Generally, I would like to recognize that teenagers go through a time of physical, familiar and social change (journey), have unfulfilled expectations of God (wilderness), but are still searching for acceptance and love (community).

2. Adolescence and Peer Pressure

Peers are people of the same age, social background and interest. Teenagers interact with peers at school, in their neighbourhood, in their soccer or basketball team, or at church or in their pathfinder club. Everywhere peers influence each other, just by spending time together. In cliques and crowds adolescents spend their free time discussing “topics of major interest as the activities of other members of the group, aspects of popular culture, such as the latest fashions, recent record and film releases, and television programmes”\(^2\).

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\(^1\) Mueller, Walt: *Understanding today’s youth culture*, Tyndale. Wheaton, 1998, p. 31  
For adolescents peer groups are a source of affection, sympathy and understanding as well as a place for experimentation. “Peer relations are an essential component of adolescent identity development. Adolescents are exposed to different norms and values when they interact with peers both within and outside their own peer group.”³ Thus, friendships and peer relations serve several important functions for an adolescent.⁴

On the other side, peer groups have very different values and norms and “affiliation with a certain peer group implies identification with the values and norms of that group.”⁵ Because teens want to belong to their group, they are under the pressure to accept the values and norms of their peers. Peer pressure can be extremely strong and hard to resist. It influences the adolescents’ individual choices because everybody makes the same choice either it is correct or wrong. So, the “most common pressure facing our teens is the pressure to conform”⁶.

Even if there are a lot of values and norms adolescents have to conform with, Mueller lists some main pressure points all teenagers are faced with regularly such as to have a perfect body, to be dressed and groomed properly, to be socially active, to drink and use drugs, to have premarital sex, to get good or bad grades.⁷ Teens give in to peer pressure because they want to be liked, to fit in, or because they worry that other peers may make fun of them if they do not go along with the group. For parents or youth workers it is important to be aware of the powerful pull of negative peer pressure because in the adolescents mind “moral dilemmas entail more than right or wrong. They are about acceptance or rejection by peers during a life stage when acceptance is more important than it ever was or ever will be again”⁸.

Christians at this point face an ethical challenge. All teens want to belong to a group and be accepted. But a negative peer pressure can cause adolescents to participate in destructive and non-Christian behaviour. Peer groups will dictate

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³ McLellan, Jeffrey A. / Pugh, Mary Jo V. (eds.) : The role of peer groups in adolescent social identity: Exploring the importance of stability and change, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Fransisco, 1999, p.55
⁴ Erwin describes some functions like friendship motivation, a training ground for relationship skills, confidence in intimacy, exchanging and testing social knowledge, stimulating social cognitive development, companionship and social support, emotional buffering – Erwin, p. 5-9
⁵ McLellan, p. 56
⁶ Mueller, p. 210
⁷ ibid, p. 220-227
⁸ ibid, p. 229
dress, brand and appearance. The predilection of a particular type of music or even the mere willingness to listen to other music may depend upon the judgement of other peers. Male adolescents derive peer prestige for “scoring” with girls.\(^9\) To be cool and popular becomes one of the main purposes. Thus, “belonging to a group will have important costs and benefits in terms of the child’s subsequent social development and behaviour.”\(^{10}\) People in groups act differently and do things they would never have done on their own. Challenged to make decisions, teens ask questions like “Why should I care about something if no one else does?” or “What could be wrong if all my friends behave this way?”.

As a father of two teenagers and youth worker I am confronted with this front line every day. In order to limit and generalize the broad topic of adolescence and peer pressure in Youth Ministry through a concrete situation, I would like to take the example of a 14-year-old male teen; let’s call him David. Further, I would like to reduce the points of peer pressure to the question of smoking as an aspect of coolness.\(^{11}\) David comes from an Adventist family, visits regularly Sabbath morning worship and takes part in the pathfinder club on Sunday. During the week, he is in contact with peers at school and in his neighbourhood. He does not smoke but his peers at school start to do it. Although he knows that smoking is an unhealthy and dangerous habit, he finds it still attractive because of the touch of coolness. While his friends invite David to smoke, he experiences a strong peer pressure and has to deal with it.

3. Adolescence and Journey

3.1. Talk about “Journey”

Without doubt, all that life is about is like a journey. Life at every moment is moving. Life is not static, everything moves forward, grows and dies. Men grow not only physically, but also emotionally, intellectually, socially and

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\(^{10}\) Erwin, Phil: *Friendship and peer relations in children*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1993, p.157

\(^{11}\) Adler list several factors for boys’ popularity which are important for adolescents: athletic ability, coolness, toughness, savoir faire (know-how), cross-gender relations, and academic performance. – Adler, p. 39-45
spiritually. So, it is not sure whether the standpoint I will take tomorrow is the same as today; whether the way I will think tomorrow is the same as today. We are changing continually and will never be able to claim completeness.

This is also true for the individual at church. Speaking about the founding of Christianity, Sheldrake mentioned “a faith that expanded through missionary journeying throughout the breadth of the Roman Empire”.\textsuperscript{12} Paul, Peter and the other disciples were witnesses of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem and all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth (Acts. 1.8). “The theology is of a people on the move. Christians are \textit{people of the way}. The most characteristic lifestyle of the recorded heroes is the journey.”\textsuperscript{13} But, while on one side Christianity spread in the entire world through the apostles, on the other side Christianity changes people individually and personally. For each person there is a journey of conversion, moving from a non-believer towards one who believes in God.

The church does not only have a missionary responsibility but also a social one. To describe the journey of conversion we can take a scale from 0 (non-believer) to 10 (committed believer) as in the chart below. So, every move from one step to another, whether it is before or after baptism, is a change in the individuals’ life the church is challenged with.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c}
 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 \\
\hline
non-believer & & & & & & & & & & & \\
baptism & & & & & & & & & & & \\
committed believer & & & & & & & & & & & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textit{Scale of the journey of conversion from a non-believer to a committed believer}

Helping a smoker to become a non-smoker may be the first step toward changing his life, whether he will be baptized later or not. Care for foreign immigrants is one step toward a new home, whether they will join the church

\textsuperscript{12} Sheldrake, Philip: \textit{Befriending our desires}, Novalis, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, 2001, p.139  
\textsuperscript{13} ibid, p.140
community or not. Spiritual growth of a church member after baptism is also one step further in the individual journey toward God’s Kingdom because the journey of conversion does not end with baptism. Therefore, going along with adolescents in a time of changes in their lives is one important step in the journey of conversion.

3.2. Journey and Peer Pressure

As a young person moves into adolescence, rapid physical, emotional and social changes begin. “The hormonal changes lead to feelings and drives you’ve never had before; members of the opposite sex become more attractive to you. Friendships and family relationships change. Emotional changes cause you to feel more but understand less.”14 Teenagers start to think in new and different ways.

Adolescents begin to question the standards of adults and the need for parental guidance. Erwin states:

“The entry to adolescence is a time of dramatic changes. The child is changing physically with the onset of puberty, psychologically as more abstract patterns of thinking are developed, and socially in terms of new roles, new patterns of relating and becoming a part of the prevailing youth culture. This time of great changes has been characterised as a time of great psychological turmoil and social upheaval for adolescents, a time when they rebel against the adult and family values that were imposed on them throughout childhood.”15

On this journey through adolescence and puberty, young people will be confronted with peer pressure for the first time. “Adolescence is a time filled with pressure of all kinds.”16 Observing this journey as a “journey of conversion”, parent and youth worker are challenged with less influence than the peer group. Peer pressure can influence someone to change his mind from what he has known for sure to be a correct answer to the incorrect answer - just because everyone else gives the incorrect answer.

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14 Mueller, p.16
15 Erwin, Phil: Friendship in childhood and adolescence, p.72
16 Ibid, p.210
3.3. Adolescence and Journey in Youth Ministry

Realizing that the peer pressure to smoke is also a spiritual battle, it seems to be important to discuss with David questions about health, responsibility for his body and a positive image of God. God wants the good for men. God wants men being healthy and also physically and spiritually strong. To begin smoking on the journey of conversion is a step in the wrong direction. Sure, we are not allowed to neglect the desire of belonging to his peers and being cool but we are challenged to help David build up a God-centred self-image.

By the way, smoking is not really an expression of coolness. Only advertising makes us to believe it. But nobody in real life is riding on a horse like a cowboy. This is not what coolness is about. Further, to be cool does not mean to do what everybody is doing. Fitting in is not being cool. In the mind of David coolness stands for being somebody special. Therefore, defining the journey of adolescence as a spiritual battle, it is important to show that David is unique in the eyes of God.

Youth Ministry has to help adolescents to know themselves. Knowing themselves gives them the strength to remain strong under pressure, stay true to their values, and make the right personal choices. When David knows which values he wants to stand for, what he is worth in the eyes of good friends, parents and God, it will be easier for him to resist the pressure of some peers to smoke with them. The journey of conversion is a journey of self-understanding and acceptance of a loving and caring God.

4. Adolescence and Wilderness

4.1. Talk about “Wilderness”

Without doubt, the journey of life has ups and downs, happy moments and sad moments. For a Christian, an experience with God strengthens his faith and increases his trust in God. But, what about times in which Christians experiences a silent God? There are questions without answers. There is a desire for God but we cannot find him. Beside sunshine in our spiritual life there are also sometimes
clouds around us and sometimes it is dark. We experience our spirituality like wilderness.

“God, where are you?” or “God, why happened this to me?” are questions arising in situations of wilderness. Looking for orientation, we miss the answer from God. We want to solve some problems immediately but they still frighten us.

Questions are the characteristics of wilderness; questions about God, his love and his church. Questions that we only ask when we are in trouble, looking for a little light in the darkness.

4.2. Wilderness and Peer Pressure

Nipkow and Schweitzer, two German scholars, implemented a research about the issue of God as considered by adolescents. Statements of students led them to the following general result: “Most students had challenging questions about God that frequently irritated them and moved them to seek answers.”

In adolescence, beliefs and doubts about God and the church are often experienced in terms of fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations. There are several expectations teens have of God, but the first expectation “considered God as helper and as guarantor for the goodness of the world.” In a state of change adolescents are looking for orientation. Revealing their identity, teens disengage from the parents and their values and beliefs. Valid or binding standards, moral values and faith of their parents and church are questioned.

A problem arises with unfulfilled expectations because “for many of the students, the issue of God was almost exclusively related to experience of personal and pragmatic assistance in daily life, for example, ‘I do not believe in God. In the past when I prayed to him because I was in a jam, he never helped me’.”

While for adolescents the influence of their parents decreases, and they have not been able to experience God so far, peer groups get more and more important for their orientation. The wilderness of adolescence supports the

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18 Ibid, p.92
19 Ibid, p.92
influence of peers and intensifies the pressure to conform. Therefore, the experience of wilderness strengthens the problem of peer pressure for adolescents.

4.3. Adolescence and Wilderness in Youth Ministry

Realizing that the peer pressure to smoke is also a spiritual battle, it seems to be important to discuss with David questions about prayer, God’s care for men, his trustworthiness, his blessings in our daily life, and the problem of compromises and patience.

For a teen it is not easy to learn to pray. Prayer requires a relation to God. But as an adolescent, David is still searching his own relationship to God. Therefore, it could be an amazing experience for David to pray together for the decisions he has to decide in every day’s life. Youth Ministry has the task to teach children and adolescents how to pray.

On the other side, very often we ask questions even if we still know the answer but we are looking for an alternative. Driven by the desire to belong to the group of cool peers, David is looking for alternatives or compromises. David asks if smoking is really unhealthy, uncool and dangerous although he knows exactly the answer. In this way, God’s silence often is men’s own illusion because he does not recognize the given answer or he does not want to accept the answer.

Patience is something everybody needs, especially adolescents. Normally they are used to get everything immediately, right now. But one thing Youth Ministry we have to teach is patience toward God and the difficulties with compromises.

5. Adolescence and Community

5.1. Talk about “Community”

Without doubt, life in general is not individual or isolated. Everybody belongs somewhere. We belong to a spouse, family, school class, neighbourhood, football team, church or another community. Each individual is part of a community. Life means belonging.
Sometimes communities are exclusive, so it is not easy to belong to a certain group even if you want to. There are rules, selected recruitments, difficult applications or careful membership screening. Processes of inclusion and exclusion may be painful, mainly when people are introverted.

Thus, relationships are important for us. Loneliness is one of the great problems of our society, especially for children and old people. Loneliness is like a wilderness in relationships that we have to take seriously, because only in community life is complete. Further, we are also belonging to God. God as our creator laid the foundation for a relationship between us and God, a collective and an individual community. So, life also means belonging to God.

5.2. Community and Peer Pressure

The community in which an adolescent lives has a major impact on how he or she will pay attention to other young people. But belonging to a group always means conforming to the group. Everybody who does not conform will be an outsider. “The benefits that accrue to the individual as a result of being part of a group can produce powerful pressures to conform to group norms.”

Obviously, the community of a peer group has much influence on and power over their members, and adolescents are forced to accept the pressure. “Groups do not only validate the individual’s identity, they actually tend to make their members more similar to each other and different from the out-group.”

Further, in each peer group exists a clear leadership. “Cliques have a hierarchical structure, being dominated by leaders, and are exclusive in nature, so that not all individuals who desire membership are accepted.” The leader can decide whether a teen can participate in the activities of the group or not. And “those children who don’t fit in or conform to the majority’s standards are excluded from playground activities and included when it is convenient for someone to use them as the butt of a joke.”

Thus, peer pressure in connection with belonging to a community is not merely a matter of acceptance of different values and norms. It is rather an ethical

20 Erwin, Phil: Friendship in childhood and adolescence, p.78
21 Erwin, Phil: Friendship and peer relations in children, p.157
22 Adler, p. 56
23 Mueller 210
challenge because in the teen’s decision “there is potential for discrepancy between individual values and those of the crowd”\textsuperscript{24}.

\textbf{5.3. Adolescence and Community in Youth Ministry}

Realizing that the peer pressure to smoke is also a spiritual battle, it seems to be important to discuss with David questions about real friendship, confidence, church as a community of believers and the relationship with God.

David has to understand that friendships connected with conditions are not worthwhile. A friend is somebody he can trust in. A good relationship is based on confidence. To experience the pressure of smoking, however, in order to get friendship is a high price. If such friends change their minds, increase their requirements or want something else, friendship proves not to be true.

Adolescents normally belong to several peer groups. Youth Ministry’s concern is to get teens like David involved in a positive peer group. Pathfinder club, Teens club or Youth club are important possibilities of offering a Christian environment where Christian values and norms are represented. David will find that his stand and effectiveness is boosted by being in church or participating in youth activities.

Youth workers and parents must be aware of being good role models regarding their life of discipleship. Adolescents like David will find a trustworthy role model to be a helpful orientation for resisting peer pressure and taking his own view. Furthermore, parents should open up their home to their children’s friends to have an insight about a positive peer relation at home.

May be an interesting task for David is to discover that he himself is also a peer with influence. We tend to think of peer pressure as only reacting in one direction. But in fact, David who has decided not to smoke will influence those around him with his attitude. He can also have a positive influence on other peers. Here, Youth Ministry has a real missionary challenge. Christians are people with clear values and norms they have to share with others.

\textsuperscript{24} McLellan, p.56
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