

## Ministering to students from Eastern/Central Europe

The major focus of this resource is to raise some issues related to ministering to students from Central/Eastern Europe (yet to be defined) and to help the reader work out for him/herself how best to engage with students from this part of the world. More “how to” approaches and hands-on resources can be found in other sections of the Friends International resource website.

With globalisation, students from everywhere have a much more common mindset than any earlier previous generation of students. The challenge is therefore to work out “regional” differences.

### Definitions of Eastern Europe

- Geographical. This is based on the fall of Communism in 1989/90. This means countries formerly part of USSR belonged to Eastern Europe, with the Iron Curtain being the divide between East and West. This definition is most likely to be held by those who have lived through both these eras.
- Political. This is based on countries which are currently outside EU membership (though aspiring to it), and which used to be part of USSR e.g. Ukraine, Moldova.
- Religious. This is based on whether one is Roman Catholic or Orthodox by background. Orthodoxy more clearly represents Eastern Europe (with the exception of Serbia in southern Europe).
- Personal. For example, someone living in London might well classify the Czech Republic as part of Eastern Europe. But someone living in Prague would understand his/herself to be living in Central Europe.

### Profile of Generation Y

Those born between 1980 – 2000. They are also known as: “tethered generation” or Millennials. The term tethered has two aspects which are worthy of mention:

- a. The UK media’s focus on abduction and paedophilia in recent years has made the world seem a more frightening place in some western societies. Parents are increasingly worried about their children...where they are at all times...potentially in constant contact via mobiles...using the car for the “school run” rather than children walking/travelling on their own etc. One outcome of this may be a greater emotional dependence on parents by their children.
- b. The significant rises in the cost of university education, student loans replacing grants, the cost of university education leaves some students more financially dependent (tethered) on their parents...without mentioning higher property prices, increasing mortgage rates and decreasing state pensions which await them after graduation.

Other elements in a profile of Gen Y are:

- Fascinated by new technologies. “We have grown up with the internet, broadband, wi-fi, Google, CD, DVD,MP3, SMS. This multitude of choice, this freedom, this constant connectivity, this speed of globalisation is all we’ve ever known.” “Gen-Yers are incredibly techno-savvy and use their over stimulated brains to their advantage.”
- Distrusting “institutions” (authority)
- Gravitating towards group activity.
- Wanting experience not just facts – and holding experience to be as valid an authority as fact.
- Needing but not necessarily wanting boundaries
- Identifying with parents’ values & feeling close to parents
- Spending more time on doing homework and less watching TV (does not include watching TV on a laptop!)
- Believing it’s cool to be smart
- Multi-task, yet less concentration than previous generations
- Inflated confidence

- High expectations

### **Possible profile of students from central/eastern Europe**

To build a potential profile of students from a particular country, you might want to reflect on the following factors:

- Changes in Central/Eastern Europe in the last 25 years. What was the blend of religious and political ideologies pre-1989? How has this country changed since the fall of Communism and entering the European Union?
- The varied and complex aspects of Generation Y. Which aspects are most apparent in the students? Which aspects are latent, in that many countries are still catching up with developments in new technologies?
- Related to the previous point, how connected are the students with the attitude/culture of previous generations? For example authoritarian/hierarchical mentality of Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism or Communism. Although students may be of “millennial” age, their schools, colleges, universities, teachers and teaching methods often reflect passive (versus interactive) learning models of an earlier generation. This might show itself in the readiness of students from Central/Eastern Europe to listen to lengthier gospel presentations, contrasted with western European students whose concentration/tolerance level is often lower.
- Greater dissonance with parents’ generation through lack of shared memory. This represents a significant difference to western European students, whose family histories have not been chopped in half by political upheaval.
- Limited financial base. Not many students from Eastern Europe will be financially affluent. University students will generally be more financially stable, since they can benefit from EU grants. Language students will often have tighter financial budgets, as they have to pay for their own courses. Some may come as au pairs where the host family agrees to pay language course costs.
- Interest in spirituality and not religion. Religion means institutional denominational religion, normally the majority religion of the country concerned. An interest in spirituality might be in eastern or western spirituality or a blend of different elements.

### **Ministering into consumerism**

Does it work for me? What do I get out of it? Does it feel good? Below are some central tenets of consumerism:

- Choice. An individual might want to look carefully at a range of options, before coming to an activity/event. Commitment to regular attendance might also be an issue.
- Novelty. The expectation of constant innovation...”restless quest for stimulation.” Students will have an almost innate desire for things new, which may put the organisers under some pressure.
- Obsolescence...talks, songs, approaches with limited shelf life. This is the flip side of the novelty factor.
- Hedonism. The need to be happy. Happiness is considered a more important value than whether something is true or not....making it difficult for some Yers to identify with the darker side of human experience, sin, suffering etc... and with the notion of a crucified God, where God’s love and justice are satisfied on the cross.

- Leisure. Self rather than other oriented.

### **But the need for...**

Having outlined leading aspects of a consumer culture, each individual still strains after identity, community and meaning. Generation and geography apart, human beings' spiritual DNA still craves a sense of identity, a need for community and some sense of meaning.

- Identity. The question "Who am I?" never goes away. Under God it is always possible to bring his truth to bear on this question, even if communicating this presents a constant challenge.
- Community. Here is a useful quote from *Mission Implausible* by Duncan Maclaren, p133. "Community is yearned for...this points to the paradox of contemporary individualism. People only seem to prefer to act as individuals. Individualism only goes so far, eg fashion advertising is an invitation to individual self expression. "Be someone who stands out. Be unique. Shape a new image. Carve out an identity." The practical reality of fashion items is very different. Fashion items are mass produced and targeted at particular social groups, who appear together to be dressed almost identically. Designer clothing is little different from school uniform. Beneath the rhetoric of individualism lies a strong collective mentality, a thirst to belong."
- Meaning. Although any concept of objective, absolute truth may have been long abandoned, or was never part of the equation, people need meaning in their lives, even if they have to create their own meaning. This gives a unique opportunity to introduce Christ as the giver of ultimate meaning.

### **Ministry within friends international to students from central/eastern Europe**

Some issues to reflect on & some examples

- Finance. Costs of trips and activities need to be modest so that those on limited budgets can participate.
- Language students and time. This group may not have so much time, depending on how intensive their courses are. If they are au pairs, they may be short of time for leisure/interest activities and a flexible approach needs to be taken when arranging things for them. Erratic attendance may be a factor which organisers have to consider.
- Connecting. The primary means of communication are texting and Social on-line networks e.g. facebook or Bebo rather than email. Setting up local Facebook networks may help to keep people in touch.
- Examples. As mentioned in the introduction, other parts of the Friends International website will give many useful practical suggestions. Some key tips are: Involvement in, rather than spectators at activities is good for creating ownership. Cultural activities, where students can proudly present aspects of their own country, are usually enjoyed.

### **Presenting Christ to students from Roman Catholic/Orthodox backgrounds**

The resources on Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy give a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Roman Catholicism and how best to reach students holding these beliefs. However, some useful starting points are below:

- No anti-attitude. God loves all, Jesus died for all.
- Present Christ as Lord. Encourage (just like Jesus did with Jewish leaders) them to exercise trust in God through the Scriptures

- Persuade of the authority of Scripture. Need to encourage people away from a complete trust in Church and traditions towards complete trust in Scripture
- Familiarise with truth of salvation, i.e. Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross is essential, rather than them having to complete the suffering for their own sin through penitence, purgatory or spiritual progress in the hereafter
- Importance of individual decisions. Explain this as a biblical principle, rather than the Church making moral / ethical decisions for them. Importance of knowing how to find God's will in Scripture and act on it
- Emphasise prayer and praise. If formalised prayer and prayer are sterile, it can be substituted by privilege and joy of intimacy with God through Jesus the Son.

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