



MISSION AND YOUTH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AFTER 30 YEARS

BY TYLER PATTY

When the walls fell, the youth led the way. Over 30 years ago, the social and political landscape of the former Soviet bloc changed dramatically as nations shed the yoke of their communist overlords and fought for democratic renewal. For a country like Czechoslovakia, the bloodless Velvet Revolution of 1989 was sparked by student protests, which were themselves inspired by a student uprising in 1968.[1] These youth called for a radical break with the past, a reckoning with past injustices, and the appointment of leaders with high moral character. Although thrust into politics unprepared, young people set the tone and agenda for the renewal of society.

The opening of the borders brought new opportunities for Christian mission. In 1993, Dave and Connie Patty and Dan and Laura Hash moved to the Czech Republic and Poland to begin a ministry called Josiah Venture. Inspired by European youth movements and the biblical story of reformer king Josiah, they formulated the ministry's vision as "a movement of God among the youth of Central and Eastern Europe that finds its home in the local church and transforms society." [2]

By 2002, the ministry had outgrown its original organisational structure and was established as an independent mission organisation. Currently, Josiah Venture has over 300 staff in 16 countries across Central and Eastern Europe, partnering with over 750 local churches to disciple the next generation of Christian missional leaders.[3]

After nearly 30 years of ministry in the post-communist European context, Josiah Venture can offer a unique perspective on mission. This article will explore two dimensions of mission and youth in Europe: Christian mission directed to unbelieving youth, and Christian mission performed by believing youth.

Mission to Youth

Evangelism has been a central component of mission to youth since the beginning of Josiah Venture's ministry. While the spiritual context differs from country to country, the secular anti-religious agenda of the communist regime left a significant mark on society. In the early years, Josiah Venture missionaries encountered young people who had

perhaps never met a born-again Christian. The challenge, as well as opportunity, was to evangelise with little to no preconceived ideas about the Gospel or Jesus Christ. Using English as a bridge to spiritual matters was a strategy that worked particularly well in the early years, with summer English Camp ministry being launched in 1994. Students were invited to attend a week-long intensive in conversational English led by native speakers in partnership with a local church and were slowly introduced to the Gospel and encouraged to engage in dialogue on spiritual topics.

Rachael Davison, Josiah Venture's current International Camps Director, says that the spiritual landscape has changed significantly since those early years. "Fifteen years ago, we would not even mention God on the first night [of camp]. But now, in all our countries, young people are willing to engage with the Gospel."^[4] With the increase in exposure to different cultures and viewpoints, students are more curious to hear about another person's spiritual journey. This makes evangelism both more honest and more personal. Students seem to be wary of manipulative attempts at spiritual engagement, but value a straightforward and respectful invitation to engage in reflection on God. Students also rarely experience significant transformation after only one encounter. Ongoing connection with believers and the church is critical in the spiritual exploration of young people. In an internal study conducted 8 years ago, the Camps team found that 90% of the students who stayed connected had been personally contacted within 3 days of the end of camp.^[5] While the specific data may have changed

since then, the principle of follow-up still plays an important role in mission to youth today.

While Josiah Venture's early evangelistic attempts used tools like English as a gateway to spiritual conversations, their outreach ministries take a more holistic approach today. Alongside English language, other so-called "Evangelistic Highways" include Sports, Arts and Music, and Schools. ^[6] When Casey Yorman, Josiah Venture's International Sports Director, trains youth leaders to run football clubs, he encourages them to not separate skills-coaching from spiritual coaching. "Having a relationship with God is the best thing for young people. But it is also honouring to God to build people up as good athletes."^[7]

Yorman notes that young people are rediscovering the relationship between their body and their soul. They are increasingly motivated to grow in holistic ways. Students coming out of the pandemic with mental health crises are realising that they need physical solutions to their problems: exercising, going out and being with friends, putting their phone down. Sports ministry has been particularly fruitful in war-torn Ukraine, where students are desperate for personal agency and community. Missionally-minded Christians need to reflect on how the Gospel relates to the whole person, which includes their spiritual, emotional, and physical lives.

As part of a renewed holistic vision for mission, Josiah Venture considers evangelism as the first step in one's spiritual journey toward maturity in Christ. The goal in mission is not just conversion, but an ongoing walk with Jesus in community. Discipleship and disciple-making has always been a core part of Josiah Venture's ministry

strategy but became crowded out in the 2010's by the efforts required to develop evangelistic programmes. Dawid Werner, national missionary in Poland, reflects: "We realised that what we were doing for the last 10 years was Plan B. We decided we need to go back to the roots, back to discipleship."^[8] Thanks to the new capacity created during the pandemic, they returned to "Plan A." They resolved that all missionaries on the Poland Team would prioritise one-on-one discipleship, building into a "Timothy" twice per month, as well as finding a "Paul" to guide them in their own walk with Jesus. Teams in other countries have made similar shifts in the past four years. The team in the Czech Republic has moved away from a "programme-first" approach in partnership with local churches and focuses instead on training up regional leaders to coach and be a resource to youth workers in their region. In 2020, this allowed the Czech regional team to be personally invested in 229 youth leaders in 108 churches.^[9] These types of shifts in practice are essential to keeping discipleship as a core missional commitment.

Mission by Youth

At its core, Josiah Venture sees itself as an equipping organisation.^[10] The goal is to find, disciple, equip and release young European leaders for mission. Josiah Venture utilises a five-part model to conceptualise the discipleship process as modelled by Jesus in the Gospels: "'Come and see' (EXPOSE), 'repent and believe' (EVANGELIZE), 'follow me' (BUILD), 'I will make you fishers of men' (EQUIP), and 'I am sending you' (SEND)."^[11] Mission is not the responsibility of so-called professionals, but is the challenge to every follower of Jesus (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). This framework





offers the Josiah Venture team and their partners common language when helping young people progress from unbelief to maturity in Christ.[12] The goal of maturity is not perfection, but participation. Alongside the fruit of the Spirit and abiding in Christ, a sign of a healthy disciple is that she/he makes multiplying disciples of Jesus Christ.

Toward the end of the pandemic, Josiah Venture piloted an innovation called Youth Ministry Recharge as a means of encouraging youth groups to restart their disciple-making activity. In lieu of gathering youth leaders from across Europe to a single location, missionaries organised day-conferences for youth leaders in their vicinity. The 2021 Recharge had over 1200 participants in 79 locations across Central and Eastern Europe.

Ela Muhameti in Albania reported that “Recharge has been manna in the time of a desert... People have recovered the passion for discipleship, and it has taught them to love youth again, and to understand the vision for the ministry.”[13] While these Recharge events had formal teaching, they also provided ample space for ministry teams to discuss, reflect, pray and plan. This

encouraged greater ownership over the mission fields of the participants. Personal ownership of mission is a key part of releasing young people for mission in Central and Eastern Europe.

But equipping young leaders for mission also has its challenges. Based on her work with Summer Camps interns, Davison has noticed a tension between young leaders’ missional desires and the demands of education and careers. Often, emerging European leaders are only able to commit to being an intern for one summer, so as not to limit their career options for the future.[14] The benefit is that they are forced to integrate their call to ministry and their everyday life, but this is not always successfully achieved. This tension is heightened in contexts that are more economically deprived, such as Albania, where disciplined young people often move outside the country in search of career opportunities. Another challenge is in the case of a first-generation believer, who may experience pressure from her/his parents to minimise engagement in Christian vocational ministry.

Full-time ministry positions are already quite limited in this part of the world, which means that a large number need to engage in bi-vocational ministry. Jakub Vejmlka, Assistant Director of the Czech team, says that the average length of service for the main youth leader is about

3 years.[15] There is a lot of turn-over in bi-vocational youth ministry, and burn-out is not uncommon on ministry teams. This challenge presents an opportunity to help these leaders engage in a more holistic and integrated approach to mission. Reflection on the role of human flourishing, suffering and Sabbath could be significant in articulating a broader Kingdom view of mission.

Mission to young people will always involve meeting them where they are. Young leaders need to be equipped to think not only about the Bible and theology, but also about the cultural context of their mission field. This is one reason for the partnership between Josiah Venture and ForMission College to launch the European Online Campus, through which European Leaders can study for a BA in Theology, Mission and Ministry while staying rooted in their local context.[16] But not every youth leader can enrol in a BA degree. Leaders will need to be equipped with tools for contextual missional effectiveness, and that will likely require some on-the-ground research.

There are two examples I would like to highlight. In the summer of 2020, the team in Croatia conducted research on the attitude of youth regarding their future, motivations, influence, and spirituality. After several years of experiencing roadblocks in ministry to unbelievers, the team realised they needed to get a pulse on the current generation. By using targeted Facebook ads, the





missionaries were able to meet 40 students over Zoom with whom they had no previous contact. Ema Kreko reflects, "I would spend maybe 3 hours with students, and they would open up with all sorts of details about their life... Young students want to be heard."^[17] Students seemed to exhibit a large degree of spiritual confusion, regardless of their religious background.

Many shared that they had rarely been asked questions about spiritual matters, and don't feel like they have anyone to talk to about the deep questions of life. Creating a safe space for spiritual conversations could be a significant missional opportunity in this part of the world. Similarly, but on a larger scale, Josiah Venture's Czech team recently partnered with a social research firm to conduct a qualitative study on the religiosity of Czech youth.^[18] The study showed that religious sensibilities are very low among Czech high school students: 76% exhibited signs of low religious engagement, 19% average religious engagement, and only 5% strong religious engagement. However, nearly half of the respondents claim that they are searching for life's meaning. Additionally, half exhibit agnostic beliefs, claiming that there is a higher power, but they aren't able to say for sure what it is. While at first glance Czech youth may seem closed to religious topics, these findings give some suggestions for bridges to spiritual matters.

Conclusions

After 30 years of missional activity in Central and Eastern Europe, Josiah Venture still believes in the potential of youth to change society. In order for youth to lead the way forward,

mission must first start with evangelism. Evangelism must be done in a bold yet relational way, and follow-up plays a key role in the long-term commitment of spiritual seekers. It will become increasingly important for missionaries to relate the Gospel not just to the soul, but to the whole person, and to articulate a broader Kingdom vision of the Gospel. Additionally, recovering disciple-making as a core practice is essential to setting up the next generation of young leaders for missional success. If these leaders are able to become disciples who make disciples, integrate mission with their everyday lives, and grow in their understanding of the context of their mission field, we just might see another revolution.

End Notes

- [1] Konvička, L. and Kavan, J. "Youth Movements and the Velvet Revolution," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 160-176.
- [2] "Vision," Josiah Venture, accessed January 22, 2023, www.josiahventure.com/about/vision.
- [3] "2021 Annual Report," Josiah Venture, accessed January 22, 2023, www.josiahventure.com/assets/upload/media/Josiah-Venture-2021-Annual-Report.pdf.
- [4] Rachael Davison, interview by author, Frýdlant nad Ostravicí, January 10, 2023.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] "Evangelistic Highways," Josiah Venture, accessed January 22, 2023, www.josiahventure.com/about/highways.
- [7] Casey Yorman, interview by author, Frýdlant nad Ostravicí, November 29, 2022.
- [8] Dawid Werner, interview by Mel Ellenwood, Josiah Venture Messengers of Hope Conference, September 29, 2022. "Plan A" was conceptualised and organised by Daniel Eifling ("JV November Webinar," accessed January 22, 2023, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/648946157>).
- [9] "Výroční Zpráva KAM 2020," Křesťanská akademie mladých, z.s., accessed January 22, 2023, https://kam.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2020_Vyrocní_zpráva_KAM.pdf.

[10] "Vision," Josiah Venture, accessed January 22, 2023, www.josiahventure.com/about/vision.

[11] "Strategy," Josiah Venture, accessed January 22, 2023, www.josiahventure.com/about/strategy.

[12] Adam Löffler, "Ścieżka rozwoju ucznia – od niewiary do duchowej dojrzałości," Falaport (2022), <https://fala.net.pl/sciezka-rozwoju-ucznia-od-niewiary-do-duchowej-dojrzalosci/>.

[13] Ela Muhameti, interview by Dave Patty, JV, November 2021 Webinar, accessed January 22, 2023, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/648946157>.

See also www.youthministryrecharge.com/international.

[14] Rachael Davison, interview by author, Frýdlant nad Ostravicí, January 10, 2023.

[15] Jakub Vejmlka, personal communication, January 25, 2023.

[16] For more details, see www.formission.org.uk/european-online-campus/.

[17] Ema Kreko, interview by Dave Patty, JV Webinar, September 2020, accessed January 22, 2023, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/456166876>.

[18] FOCUS Marketing & Social Research and Křesťanská akademie mladých, "Religiozita mladých: Závěrečná zpráva ze sociologického výzkumu mezi středoškolskými studenty v ČR" (2022), unpublished.

