

Labels Are For Jars

A lesson plan to talk about cliques.

Introduction

Every youth group seems to have the same problem--cliques. This problem doesn't seem to be just a problem for small youth groups or for large youth groups. It is in all youth groups. Newcomers feel like outsiders. Certain youth feel they are always left out. There are continual relationship crises to solve. And youth workers feel like pulling their hair out because this problem is so constant and prevalent that it gets blamed for the group not growing and for the hindering of what God could do with this youth group, everything the youth workers want to see happen and work hard to facilitate. Cliques are like this forever ceiling.

Many books on this subject have been written to help youth workers. Many group studies have been developed to help youth groups to get beyond this ceiling. And occasionally, and they are such memorable times, a breakthrough happens. Often at retreats or some other away from the norm location. What a breakthrough it is and for that long moment, there is growth and time is not wasted on relationship crises. But it is only a moment. Welcome to working with teenagers who are in the midst of their adolescent development.

A brilliant little book has been written by one of those teenagers. Her name is Aisha Muharrar and she was 18, just getting out of high school, when she wrote her first book, *More Than a Label: Why What You Wear and Who You're With Doesn't Define Who You Are*. This book should be in every youth worker's library. We have taken her outlook and her survey which she gave to over one thousand teenagers and converted it to become a lesson or two for a youth group. Understand this first, most of the brilliance of these lessons comes from 18-year old Aisha Muharrar and we want to give her full props.

While the problem of cliques and labeling are prevalent in your youth group (and pulling your hair out), we recommend you take the approach to these lessons as to what is happening in school, not your youth group. This is a prevalent problem in school too and can make the school experience one of happiness or misery, one of regret or terror. This is a stressor that all of your youth are going through. It is large (much larger than the problems at a youth group) because they do spend so much of their

time in and around school--and they are required by law to be there. It would be very appropriate (and about time) that it gets addressed in a way that brings their faith near and direct to it. Addressing this would bring their faith circle into their school circle so hopefully the two can mix more.

Also as sick as you are of constantly addressing this problem of cliques and labeling in youth group, your youth are too. They may be tired of hearing about it. By coming with the angle of what is happening at school and bringing faith near and direct to it, the same principles will be caught for your youth group. So now you've addressed a school stressor with faith and have addressed the youth group problem. How clever of you.

Whether you have read the book or not (and you should but you just may do it after you read this and do these lessons because you can't wait), here is a lesson plan you can incorporate with your personality, creativity, and insight to teach your youth group.

You may want to go through this all in one night or one Saturday or over several weeks. That is up to you. A first thought may be to do this in a retreat setting, but we caution against that. Community building and clique-breaking stuff happens naturally on a retreat. Use that special time to teach something deeper. Use this during the mundane of the youth ministry schedule which is when your youth are dealing with this more.

What is Labeling?

Although the premise of this lesson is on cliques, we will be focusing on labeling. As defined by Aisha Muharrar, a label is "a word used to define or make assumptions about an individual. Labels are usually based on how someone looks, dresses, acts, or talks--or who the person hangs out with."

Labels are everywhere. Labels are simple words but they have a powerful impact. Labels are so fixed in everyday speech that you may not even think twice about them. But we need to. Through labeling, we limit our impression of each other. Through labeling, one word describes a "type" but that type is still an individual created by God who's identity goes way beyond one word. It is labeling that your youth face every day at school. Those labeled "preps" may control the benches by the courtyard. Those labeled "geeks" may congregate in the downstairs hallway. Those labeled "thugs" may get the teacher's attention first when there is trouble in the room. Whatever you get labeled at school depends on where you sit for lunch and how you walk through the hallways. And most often, labels prevent students (and us) from really getting to know people. The very same people who may become your best friend after high school.

True to Wild Frontier style, this lesson is in a question format so you can get your youth talking. They talk about this stuff anyway so why not in youth group under your direction with your added wisdom. Of course, we will also add wisdom which you can use to add to your wisdom. Hopefully when you use this lesson your youth will talk a lot and you will have loads of opportunities to bring faith near and direct. And your youth will walk away thinking, "Wow, I see stuff clearer now which makes me see people differently now and now I know more how to be a Christian at school. And how did (you) know so much about what I'm going through?"

Some of your youth may have strong opinions and may be very vocal. Some of these youth may be your quiet ones. You are giving them an opportunity to open up about something that is keeping them down and may bring them some healing. Be ready for that--both for the conversation hogging and the healing.

Part 1

Question #1 - List the labeled groups at your school.

Using a whiteboard, have your group list the labeled groups at their school. We have included for you a list of labels that Aisha Muharrar came up for you to use as a resource for yourself, Appendix A. Some of these labels will not be in your schools at all. There may be some not listed that are unique to your schools.

Next have your group **define** each label. This will be an interesting discussion. Take notes in your mind as you've just been given a window into the teenage mind.

Then ask the question, **Does each label really define an individual?** Your youth will probably provide many testimonies of how they are more than their label. And other youth may find out that some "jocks" really do study and try to get good grades.

Note: One label that may be asked to be on your list is "Jesus Freaks" or "Jifs" or some other Christian slang. This is actually not a label but a slur. You, or your youth group's, first thought maybe that it would be great to be labeled a Jesus Freak but do you really want to be known as a separate group from the rest of the school? Or would you rather be a "jock who is a Christian" or a "goth who is a Christian?" If youth are truly going to influence their friends and their school, they need to be a part of the school and not a separate subculture. You need to encourage your youth to be a great student or a great dramatist and be a Christian while they are striving.

Plus there really is no pride in being a Jesus Freak. To others, that is just a clique of Christians who think they are too good for everyone else. Is that how you want your students to be known as? How will those students impact their school and their friends? Take this opportunity as this discussion will come up to encourage your students to be Jif skaters and Jif geeks.

Hand out the question sheet **Labels are for Jars, Appendix B**, and have individual students fill out their individual answers.

Question #2 - Ask for a show of hands, have you ever been labeled? Ask for volunteers to list their labels.

Ask how did you feel about the label(s) you were given? Ask also

do you like your labels?

Some of your youth will freely admit that they like the labels they have. Some probably even have worked hard to gain those labels. For those who have, ask them why they have done that. There may or may not be a right or wrong answer here but their testimonies can be insightful to your other youth.

Some may have labels which they don't like and may become intimidated by those who like their labels. These youth also need to share but will need great encouragement to do so.

Ask is labeling a positive thing?

Now you will get down to some meat and hopefully loads of discussion. Remember to keep this in the school setting. The obvious comparisons to the youth group will become even more obvious now but keep it in the school setting until you are ready to transfer the conversation to the youth group (which is coming right up).

Some of the negatives for labeling (to help you keep balance in this conversation) are it prevents people from getting to know one another. Some labels automatically hurt people or their reputations. Some labels leave people feeling rejected or left out. Some labels lead to feelings of anger, anxiety or depression.

Ask do you label your peers? Yes or no or a show of hands is all you need.

Ask do you label yourself? Yes or no or a show of hands is all you need.

Ask do you react a particular way toward people who have certain labels? Some painful confessions may come out of this question. Some of the pain may be felt by those in your own youth group. Those who have been hurt may share those hurts right now as they believe they are victim of how other youth react to certain labels. Those who have treated people differently because of labels may now understand how others feel and how they have inadvertently hurt people. Now is the time to be a minister of healing.

Question #3 - Do you think girls are labeled more often than guys, or vice versa? Or do you think that labels affect girls and guys equally?

This question will generate loads of discussion. You may have already broached this topic earlier but hopefully you read and prepared ahead and knew to curb this until now. In all truth, there is no right or wrong to this question. Everyone will have

strong opinions and that will be good to hear on all sides. It is a good opener question to get your group talking for the upcoming deeper questions.

Take a break.

Part 2

Gather your group back together, whether it is a week later or 30 minutes later. Make sure they have their individual sheets with them.

Question #4 - Are there popular and unpopular groups at your school?

Your assumption may be "duh, yes" but that may not really be in the schools that you minister to. Things are different these days from when you were in school. Be careful not to color your assumptions with your school experiences. There are still schools who run on the cheerleaders/preps are on the **A**-scale and geeks/nerds are on the **F**-scale and so on. But more and more, these groups are changing up. Cheerleaders no longer run schools and are often mocked. Geeks/nerds are the ones getting the higher paid high school jobs and putting together the cool websites so they are gaining popularity. And everything in the middle of those two major label groups are wherever and often don't care with being popular.

This is not just our opinion from our national travels as well as from our local work in our local schools, here are some quotes from real teenagers. After the Columbine tragedy, a senior from Columbine, Eva Greenwald explained to *Newsweek*, "This isn't like a pyramid with one group on top. Think of us as living in a lot of different bubbles." (*Newsweek*, May 10, 1999) In another *Newsweek* story, the one about the Gamma Girls, Jennifer Teschler who is 15 and one of those Gamma Girls, had this to say about popularity, "Popularity is a funny thing. The people who consider themselves 'popular' seem most unlikable and shallow to me, yet somehow the way they act defines them as 'popular.' Popular, that is, among themselves. There are a few 'popular' people that I actually like and are depthful enough that I am friends with them, but mainly they seem like snots." (*Newsweek*, June 3, 2002) Be careful to not have preconceived ideas here based on your school experiences. This discussion about popularity can go in different directions for your group. Be ready. This is just a discussion onto which you will build something.

Question #5 - Do you feel like you "fit in" at school? Why or why not?

Try hard to keep this question on how they feel about school. Remember that you are building to something that will minister to your youth and thus your youth group. However if the Holy Spirit opens doors here, what are you going to do?!

Question #6 - If you could change one thing about the social scene at your school, what would it be?

Clear the whiteboard and make this list. No answers or action points from you yet. Just make the list.

Hand out **Labels are for Jars, Part B, Appendix C**. Give everyone time to fill this out.

Question #7 - Does your school have cliques? Yes or no or a show of hands is all you need.

Questions #8 - How do you define or describe a clique?

Ask individuals what their answers are. Use their answers to add to your part as you now get to do some teaching. Go over with your group the characteristics of a clique which are:

- C **Conformity** - Everyone in a clique generally wears the same type of clothes, talks the same, and likes the same people. Crushes on others outside the group usually aren't allowed.
- C **Leaders** - There's often one person (or a mini group of people) clearly seen as being in charge. The One in Charge sets the standards and has the power to make others behave a certain way or be dismissed from the clique.
- C **Restrictions of members** - Only a certain person can get into the clique. The people who are chosen are a lot like the people who are already in the clique.
- C **It's a friendship, but...** - People in the clique may be best friends, but the fact that they're in the clique plays a key role in their friendship. It's kind of a chicken and egg situation. Which came first--the clique, the labels, or the friendships?
- C **An attitude of superiority** - You know, "Ha, ha, you're different, so we'll make fun of you." There's a mentality of power in numbers when it comes to cliques.

Question #9 - Why can we not have these characteristics with our friends at school?

Open the floor again for some great responses.

Ask Why can we not have these characteristics in our youth group?

You should receive the same great responses.

Ask So now what are we going to do? In school and this youth

group? Go back to your whiteboard and cover the list and specifically how to put it into action. Do what you can to put these ideas into achievable action points.

Other actions points you can bring up are:

- a. Identify people by their actual names.
- b. Learn to cope with your feelings in positive ways.
- c. Focus on your life--not other people's lives.
- d. Make decisions about your own life.
- e. Nix your negative self-talk.
- f. Try not to use someone's physical appearance as a judge of character.
- g. Ask yourself, how would you feel if you were labeled as such?
- h. Ask yourself, how do you feel when people stereotype you?
- i. Put what you assume aside and give a person a chance to be known for who he/she really is.

Question #10 - We have yet to bring up anything that has to do with the Bible or living as a Christian. Why or why not?

The simple answer is because this is how everyone should treat everyone.

Question #11 - What are our responsibilities as Christians to this problem of labeling?

Clear the whiteboard again and make a list. Ask for Bible verses to be the source of this list. You can prepare a list ahead of time but this is also a good time for your teens to dig in their own Bibles and Bible helps section to find these answers. Have one of your adult volunteers record this list for a future use (coming up).

Closing

Question #12 - What is something new you have learned about labeling?

Have as many individuals as time allows answer this outloud. This provides a great recap and reminders about this complete lesson. It also calls for a time of reflection and commitment. After hearing these responses, have a time of silence allowing each teen to commit to what he/she has learned. This time can go as long as necessary.

Do not be surprised if a time of forgiveness between youth group members breaks out. Let it. Go with it.

After this time of ministry has ended, hand out **Uniquely Me, Appendix D**. Have everyone fill out. These are somewhat similar to what one would post on MySpace or Facebook but yet different. Collect. Tell the group that you will post these around your youth room and they will be up for a few weeks.

Pray a closing benediction.

The Few Weeks After

Immediately after the meeting, take the list that your volunteer compiled of everything mentioned about what our responsibilities are as Christians. Clean this list up and post it on your website, post it on your Facebook, post it on your youth room walls, post it everywhere. Let this serve as a reminder to how your youth group committed to live in this area of their lives.

Post all the **Uniquely Me** sheets around your youth room at a readable height. Keep these posted for the next several weeks so everyone gets a chance to read them.

After this time, take them down, and mail (with an actual stamp) each youth their own sheet back. Include a personal note thanking them for being unique and a part of the youth group.

The Labels List

- Abercrombie** - another name for a prep
- Altie** - nonconformist, likes alternative music
- Cheerleader** - athletic, shallow, **P-E-R-K-Y**
- Ditz** - like a teen queen, really dopey
- Drama Kid** - performer, diva attitude, "deep"
- Floater** - "in and out," fits anywhere
- Freak** - not ordinary, multiple piercings, dyed hair
- Gamer** - like a player or into video games
- Gangsta** - influenced by gangsta rap, troublemaker, criminal
- Geek** - expert in something, loves to learn, ignores popular trends, possibly dorky
- Goody-Goody** - honor student, volunteer, teacher's favorite
- Goth** - black clothing, black makeup, quiet and pensive
- Hip-Hopper** - likes hip-hop music, baggy clothes
- Hippie** - '60s look, free spirit, protest buttons
- Homie-G** - tough, likes rap, wears baggy clothes
- Indie** - bohemian clothes, au natural, most likely to be voted unique
- Jock** - strong, athletic, could be dumb
- Loner** - no clique, few friends
- Loser** - the word speaks for itself
- Nerd** - smart, awkward, shy, may be a loser
- Player** - a.k.a. "playa," goes out with more than one person at a time
- Poser** - fake, like a wannabe
- Prep** - short for prep school, "old money," lacrosse games/tennis matches
- Punk** - likes punk music, rebellious
- Raver/Raverz** - goes to rave parties, associated with **Ecstasy**
- Scrub** - unkempt, not worth anyone's time, broke
- Skank** - think bare midriff and short skirts, overly flirty, would have sex
- Skater** - into punk culture, skateboards, long shorts, and big bright **T**-shirts
- Slut** - like a "skank," rumored to have slept around, looks like someone who sleeps around
- Stoner** - on drugs, laid back, mellow but totally lazy
- Straight-Edge** - into rock music, but not sex and drugs
- Surferchick/Surferdude** - likes to surf, tan, and hang out
- Techie** - likes to play with computers, watches **Star Trek**
- Teen Queen** - pop music fan, shopper, trendy, a ditz or teenybopper
- Thug** - dangerous, a bully
- Wannabe** - tries too hard to be a certain label, completely

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Labels are for Jars

Using the labels from the board:

- A. Have you ever been labeled? ____yes ____no
- B. Which of the labels, if any, have you been called or associated with? Please list:
- C. Were you called any label not listed above, and if so, what was it?
- D. How did you feel about the label(s) you were given? Please explain:
- E. Describe why you think you may have been labeled in these ways. For example, do you the labels seem to be connected to your appearance? To your racial or ethnic background? To your family's financial background? To a stereotype? To your level of popularity? Please explain:
- F. Do you label your peers? Why or why not?
- G. Do you label yourself? ____yes ____no
If yes, see the next question. If no, please explain here:

- H. If you do use a label to describe yourself, how does the label make you feel about who you are? Please explain:
- I. Do you think girls are labeled more often than guys, or vice versa? Or do you think that labels affect girls and guys equally? Please explain:
- J. Are there popular and unpopular groups at your school? ___yes ___no
- K. If yes, which label(s) is(are) most associated with popularity in your school?
- L. If yes, which label(s) is(are) least associated with popularity in your school?
- M. Do you feel like you "fit in" at school? Why or why not?
- N. If you could change one thing about the social scene at your school, what would it be?

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Labels are for Jars, Part B

- A. Does your school have cliques? ___yes ___no
- B. How do you define or describe a clique?

- C. Do you consider you and your friends a clique? Why or why not?

- D. If your school has cliques, what do you think draws them together?

- E. Do you think labels, popularity, and cliques are related? Why or why not?

- F. How does your social life at school affect other aspects of your life and how you see yourself?

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Uniquely Me

My full name is:

The meaning/significancy of my name is:

I've always wanted to:

My favorite time-waster is:

My favorite movie is: And why?

My favorite book is: And why?

My favorite thing to do is:

Songs that could be included in the soundtrack of my life are:

At school, I'm involved in:

At home, I always:

In church, I always:

The accomplishment I'm most proud of is:

Something I love about myself is: