

REACHING THE *NEXT* **GENERATION**

Strategies for Evangelizing
Today's Youth

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REACHING THE NEXT GENERATION:
STRATEGIES FOR EVANGELIZING TODAY'S YOUTH
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to *Miss Rosemary Clark*, a missionary with Child Evangelism Fellowship who ministered in my home town, and to *all the children's and youth workers at my home church, Bridgewater Baptist Church of Montrose, Pennsylvania.*

Miss Clark loved children and young people, and she longed to reach them for Jesus Christ. She shared the gospel with me when I was five years old.

I also want to share my deepest thanks to all of my childhood Sunday School teachers and youth workers at Bridgewater for putting up with me and ministering to me during my formative and growing years. Their impact for Christ continues to this day in my life as I attempt to challenge other churches and youth workers to reach students for Christ.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my thanks to four groups of people.

My wife and family. First of all, I sincerely thank my wife, Peggy, and our three kids for their support of this project. My wife has taught me much about the subject of evangelism. Her boldness in sharing her faith has been an example to me. I also want to say thanks to Kristi, Todd, and Travis for their love for people and their commitment to share the gospel.

The youth workers who participated in my survey. Next, I want to thank the four-hundred-plus youth workers who participated in my survey on evangelism. I am thankful their input and ideas. I was encouraged to see so many youth workers who are burdened to reach the next generation for Christ.

The youth group at Heritage Baptist Church. I also want to express my thanks to the members of the student ministry at Heritage Baptist Church of Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. I have been blessed to hear their testimonies of opportunities they have had to witness for Christ. It is exciting to see students with a burden for their unsaved friends.

The production staff at Regular Baptist Press. Finally, I want to say a heart-felt thank you to the editorial and graphics departments at Regular Baptist Press. You are dear friends, and I appreciate your hard work to make writers look good in print. Thank you.

Introduction

TODAY'S TEENAGERS may be more open to the gospel than at any other time in modern history.

I can certainly vouch for the validity of that statement in my lifetime. I have been actively involved in youth ministry for almost thirty years. I witnessed the Jesus people/coffeehouse movement of the 1960s. I ministered during the “bus-’em-in” craze of the ’70s. I watched the anti-humanism, pro-Christian-school emphasis of the ’80s. I appreciated the push in the ’90s to reach out to public schools through on-campus Bible clubs and prayer rallies. Now I am seeing the emphasis upon religion and spiritual things in this new millennium.

I have not only seen these trends take place, but I have also taught youth ministry classes on college and seminary levels for more than twenty years. I have studied the historic and visionary youth rallies, which were led by men such as Percy Crawford and Jack Wyrzten in the 1940s, and the rise of youth and children’s clubs, such as Young Life and Awana, in the ’50s.

I have also traveled around the United States

enough to observe how churches use youth ministry programs such as Word of Life and Pro-Teens to reach teens for Christ and to build Christian kids in their faith. I have served as a youth pastor in a local church, and I have worked with numerous other churches in the calling and hiring of their youth pastors. A few years ago I helped start a youth ministry organization that exists to train youth workers. I have also served as a youth speaker at numerous youth conferences, camps, retreats, and rallies. In addition to my role as a developer and writer of youth ministry curriculum and other resources at Regular Baptist Press, my wife and I currently serve as youth workers in our home church, and I help lead a small group of senior high guys. I am also actively involved in mentoring and discipling others.

I relate all of this information to emphasize that even though the last several decades have featured many ways to reach young people with the gospel, we may now be living in the most wide-open time in history to reach teenagers for Christ.

Even though I work hard to study youth ministry history and to observe youth ministry trends, I cannot predict with certainty what the next emphasis to reach teenagers for Christ will be. Unquestionably the new millennium has brought a great deal of interest in worship and music. Concerts and praise festivals abound. Something along those lines may ultimately be the next great youth ministry trend. Sports certainly have a vice grip on our culture; churches may realize that athletics can somehow be the next wave of

youth ministry outreach. Mentoring is also a current hot topic. This adult-teen connection may be the way to reach Millennial kids for Christ. (For additional thoughts on the subject of mentoring, see my book *Mentoring the Next Generation: A Strategy for Connecting the Generations*, published by Regular Baptist Press.) I also agree with contemporary writers such as Josh McDowell and Ravi Zacharias, who believe that “relational apologetics” may be the tool that God will use for personal evangelism in our postmodern culture.¹

Today’s church needs a wake-up call for youth evangelism. We cannot rely on the trends or methods of the past, and we dare not relegate our responsibility to reach students for Christ to parachurch ministries or professional youth ministry organizations. The church’s mandate is to evangelize the lost; it is “crunch time” for the church to develop and initiate creative and culturally effective means to reach today’s teenagers with the gospel.

NOTES

1. For more information, visit www.gospelcom.net/rzim and www.josh.org.

Why Reach Teenagers?

God may be giving us the greatest opportunity we have ever had to see teenagers come to Christ. Today's students are open to the message of the gospel. God is at work in the lives of this generation, and the church has an open door to reach teenagers for Christ.

Here are seven reasons why I believe our churches must make youth evangelism a top priority in this millennium.

1. Teenagers are a large and needy mission field. The

year 2000 brought a cultural shift that is having an incredible impact around the world. That shift is the rise of the Millennials, or the Millennial Generation, which I define as those who graduated from high school during or after the year 2000. According to

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researchers Neil Howe and William Strauss, “Already America has well over 80 million Millennials. By the time future immigrants join their U.S.-born peers, this generation will probably top 100 million members, making it nearly a third bigger than the Boomers.”¹

We have more teenagers now than we have had for several years.

“Yes, millennials are numerous. Swelled by a resurgent fertility rate and by the large families of a record immigration surge, they indeed are a giant of a generation.”² The sheer size of this generation cannot truly be grasped until

we realize that “well over one third of all the people in the world are teenagers or younger.”³

The magnitude of Millennials means that today’s teenagers will continue to have a huge impact upon society for years to come. The Millennial Generation will present ample opportunities for churches to reach out into their communities via youth ministry. The fact that we have more teenagers now than we have had for several years should provide multiple open doors for evangelism.

Another reason for reaching out to the Millennial Generation is that many of today’s teenagers have tremendous needs. Sin is rampant. Youth are struggling with moral purity and sexual issues, substance abuse, parental and family crises, violence, and numerous other challenges.

Being a teenager today is difficult. But believers in

Christ have hope. Remember that in the darkness of this society, the light of Christ can shine brightly. We must teach Christian students to stand up for the Lord, and we must teach them how to share their faith in Christ with others.

American teenagers are a large and needy mission field, and it is important that we look at them that way. Effective ministry to teenagers is a cross-cultural experience. Our churches need to develop creative, culturally relevant yet Biblically based youth ministries to reach this large generation for Christ.

The vast majority of people accept Christ as Savior before they reach the age of eighteen.

2. *Most people accept Christ before the age of eighteen.* Another reason why churches must make youth evangelism a top priority is because the vast majority of people accept Christ as Savior before they reach the age of eighteen. According to the Barna Research Group, six out of ten people make their decision to accept Christ before age eighteen.⁴ However, a survey by Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, the authors of *Contagious Faith*, indicates that almost 92 percent of Christian adults accepted Christ before they turned eighteen.⁵

In preparing for this book, I surveyed more than four hundred youth workers in a variety of conferences and seminars around the country. My quick, albeit unscientific, survey revealed that close to 85 percent of

today's youth workers accepted Christ before they became adults. Rahn and Linhart substantiate this statistic by concluding that "many veterans in ministry would agree that the teenage years are when a significant number of conversions to Christianity take

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place."⁶

3. *Today's teenagers are open to religion and spiritual things.* Churches should make youth outreach a priority because today's students are interested in religion, and they are open to spiritual things. In his book *The Bridger Generation*,

Thom Rainer made this statement: "History may remember the bridger generation [Rainer's term for the Millennials] as the most religious group America has ever known. Their generation is being raised in a time when the Gallup Organization reports that religion is playing a more important role in the lives of Americans. . . . Church attendance has held steady for most age groups, but is increasing among the bridger generation."⁷

Brief samplings of current media show a religious resurgence in modern culture. One prime-time television lineup contained a program geared for teenagers about a student who has a personal relationship with God. Religious books have dominated best-seller lists. Movies with religious or spiritual themes (for example, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Harry Potter movies, and *The*

Passion of the Christ) are often the most popular among teens and preteens, and countless news reports show that young people from all over the world detonate suicide bombs under the guise of religious fanaticism. One church growth consultant mused that today's Millennials may be the first generation since America's founding fathers to consider religion and involvement in church to be culturally acceptable or cool.

If these cultural indicators are indeed true, then we have an incredible opportunity to encourage and motivate Christian students to be bold in their endeavors to witness to their friends and to invite their unsaved friends to church and church-related outreach events. This openness to spiritual things gives your Christian students unparalleled opportunities to share their faith with others. We should work hard to make sure our students know how to share the gospel with their friends, coworkers, family members, neighbors, and classmates. (See chapter 3 for more information.)

4. *Reaching young people now means that you can impact the future.* I have often stated that the most important reason for reaching teenagers is that they will grow up someday. Many of my colleagues in youth ministry have said that youth aren't just the church of tomorrow; they are part of the church today.

Encourage and motivate Christian students to be bold in their endeavors to witness.

I certainly believe that statement is true. However, it is imperative for our churches to invest in Millennials because we are investing in our future. History is lined with the stories of churches and religious movements that became weak and ineffective because they did not

It is critically important for today's churches to protect their future by strategically reaching out to Millennials.

make reaching young people a top priority. If we fail to reach the next generation, our churches will face an aging membership that will ultimately pass away. That is why it is critically important for today's churches to protect their future by strategically reaching out to Millennials.

By the end of this decade, the Millennial Generation will be moving through high school, out of college, and into the work

force. They will be making adult decisions in a world that will be dominated by their peers. It is critical that we invest in the future and reach this generation now.

5. A strong youth ministry can reach parents and families. Another reason for making youth evangelism a top priority is that teenagers have the ability to reach their parents and other family members for Christ. I know of several instances where this scenario has happened. Students who have come to Christ through various means of local church outreach have been

burdened to follow up their decision by telling their loved ones about their newfound faith. Not too long ago I had the opportunity to lead two young people to Christ at a youth rally in the Midwest. In the first few months following their conversion, both students shared their faith with unsaved family members. And both of them had the great privilege of seeing those family members come to Christ. A few months earlier, I had spoken at a youth conference on the West Coast. That weekend several teenagers came to know Christ as their Savior. I have received word that one of those students had the opportunity to lead both his parents to Christ.

Teenagers have the ability to reach their parents and other family members for Christ.

6. Many spiritual revivals have started with students. “At the turn of the twentieth century, American psychologist Edwin Starbuck concluded, “This much we can say with certainty, that spontaneous awakenings are distinctly adolescent phenomena.”⁸

God has used students in unique ways as catalysts for spiritual revivals. These events occurred during great historical movements, such as the Great Awakening, but they also continue to take place in smaller ways in churches around the country. A multitude of reasons contribute to these events, but I think that

teenagers' idealistic outlook on life gives them the confidence that God can indeed use them to accomplish something great for Him.

A modern example of an adolescent revival may be the student-led national prayer movement, See You at the Pole. In early 1990, a youth group from Burleson, Texas, returned from a weekend youth conference with a burden for the public high schools in their community. They met the next week at the school's flagpole to pray specifically for friends and the school. Within a few weeks, the story of this youth group's burden spread throughout Texas and to other surrounding states. By September 2001, almost one million teenagers from around the country were meeting at their schools' flagpoles for a time of prayer and worship—and a movement was born. In 2003, more than four million high school students met for See You at the Pole on the third Wednesday of September.⁹

It may not be a genuine revival, but God has a way of using youth to bring life and energy into stale environments. I witnessed such a revival when I was a youth pastor in Michigan. God used a small number of our students to impact the whole church. After the students made personal and public commitments to Christ, their overwhelming desires were to live for Him

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and to tell others about Him. Some of the students started Bible studies and prayer groups in their public schools. Soon several adults followed the lead of the students and made public commitments to live for Christ. Over a period of several months we saw God do some great things in our youth group and church as more and more students made commitments to follow Christ.

Undoubtedly other youth workers could share their own stories of how the Lord has used students to impact entire churches for evangelistic outreach.

I have also had many opportunities over the years to hear how God has used teenagers who made decisions or commitments at camps or conferences to influence the adults in their churches back home. Youth evangelism must be emphasized because of its potential for spiritual revival throughout the whole church.

7. *The Bible gives a mandate of evangelism.* Of all the reasons why it is essential to reach teenagers for Christ, the most significant reason is that God has given us a mandate to share the gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ gave this New Testament directive in the Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo,

God has a way of using youth to bring life and energy into stale environments.

I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:19, 20). The imperative in this passage, of course, is to make disciples. However, the text assumes that “Go” is understood. In other words, Christ’s Great Commission could be stated this way, “As you are going, make disciples.” Christ’s last words to His followers gave them the marching orders for outreach and evangelism.

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This mind-set continues in Acts 1:8: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Again we have a basic assumption. Christ did not tell His followers to go out witnessing. He told them that they would be witnesses. Witnessing would happen naturally as they went about their day-to-day responsibilities of living for the Lord. Being a witness for Christ was assumed.

The apostle Paul’s letters to the first-century churches contain passages, such as 2 Corinthians 5:18–20, which demonstrate that evangelism is a major priority for all believers. God in Christ “committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” We are “ambassadors for Christ.”

The responsibility for outreach was given to church leaders in the Pastoral Epistles. Second Timothy 4:5 instructs young church leaders to “do the work of an evangelist.” Certainly the great task of outreach requires diligence and hard work.

The apostle Peter also spoke of the believer's responsibility for outreach in 1 Peter 3:15: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

These verses are just a sampling of the Biblical priority of outreach and evangelism. But another priority in Scripture also relates to this subject. I am referring to what I call the "Next Generation Principle." (For additional comments on this topic, see my book on youth discipleship, *Impacting the Next Generation: A Strategy for Discipleship in Youth Ministry*.) God's Word gives numerous examples of His people who made

"spiritual reproduction" in the lives of the next generation a priority. Examples include Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Barnabas and John Mark, Paul and Timothy, even Christ and His disciples. These individuals substantiate the importance of reaching the next generation.

I earnestly believe that one of the most important priorities for any church, or fellowship of churches for that matter, is to impact the next generation. It is the

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very nature of what the Lord left His followers here on earth to do. We must make youth evangelism a top priority in this new millennium. God has given us a great opportunity to reach this generation for eternity. I believe we need this wake-up call. Churches need a call to action. It's time to get going. It's time to reach students for Christ.

NOTES

1. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College* (Great Falls, Va.: American Association of Collegiate Registrars, 2003), 35.
2. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York, Random House, Vintage Books), 14.
3. Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Contagious Faith: Empowering Student Leadership in Youth Evangelism* (Love-land, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2000), 18.
4. See www.barna.org/cgi-bin/MainArchives.asp.
5. See www.groupmag.com/articles/details.asp?ID=3987.
6. Rahn and Linhart, 19.
7. Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 151.
8. Edwin D. Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*; quoted by Dean Borgman in "A History of American Youth Ministry," chap. 4 of *The Complete Book of Youth Ministry*, Warren S. Benson and Mark H. Senter III, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 62.
9. Visit www.syatp.com/Info/History.html for a brief history of the See You at the Pole movement.