

## C H A P T E R 1

# Why Reach Teenagers?

**G**od 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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“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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.

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*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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

place."<sup>6</sup>

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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."<sup>7</sup>

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

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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 bur-

dened 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.

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*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.’”<sup>8</sup>

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

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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.<sup>9</sup>

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

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, I

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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.”

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Christ’s last words to His followers gave them the marching orders for outreach and evangelism.

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* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2000), 18.
4. See [www.barna.org/cgi-bin/MainArchives.asp](http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/MainArchives.asp).
5. See [www.groupmag.com/articles/details.asp?ID=3987](http://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](http://www.syatp.com/Info/History.html) for a brief history of the See You at the Pole movement.