

EVANGELIZING YOUTH

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A Paper

Presented to

Dr. J. D. Payne

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 32030

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by

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August 10, 2007

## EVANGELIZING YOUTH

### **Introduction**

Half of the world population is under the age of twenty-five.<sup>1</sup> The church must target young people with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Youth Ministry materialized as a separate discipline over the last fifty years as one answer to reaching the next generation. Groups such as the YMCA and Young Life specifically targeted adolescents for salvation and spiritual maturity. Church and organizations practiced many methods of evangelism over the history of modern Youth Ministry. The church must put a heightened focus on young people, seek to understand them, and as a result evangelize them appropriately. This paper will discuss reasons why the church should focus on young people, current crisis and situation, and local church strategy for reaching youth with the Gospel. The terms young people, adolescents, students, and youth will all refer to the same set of people ages twelve to twenty five.

### **Why Focus on Young People?**

When the church has such a large, God-given task in reaching the entire world with limited resources, the church must prioritize. Any church that takes the Great Commission seriously should make youth a major priority in evangelism because of their receptivity, application of the Homogeneous Unit Principle, and the Word of God.

### **Receptivity**

The receptivity principle asserts that there are times and places where some groups of people are more receptive to the gospel of others. At some point the Church must acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Global Population Profile: 2002*. Accessed 17 April, 2007, <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/world.html>; Internet

this principle to get anything done. If one never encounters a receptive person that God has prepared, then that person will not lead anyone to Christ. Most people come to Christ when they are young. Take an informal survey of Christians anywhere and observe an overwhelming majority of people came to Christ before turning twenty-five. Studies suggest that ninety-five percent of Christians come to Christ before the age of twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> At this point in life, teenagers are making decisions that will affect their entire life; the transition of mind and body into adulthood is “fertile soil” (Matthew 13).

### **Homogeneous Unit Principle**

McGavran proclaimed, “People like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>3</sup> The principle is not intended to be a formula for effective Christian interaction, but merely an observation. Missionaries apply the principle through seeking to eliminate cultural barriers to the gospel. Missionaries commonly refer to homogeneous units as people groups. Using the Lausanne definition of a people group<sup>4</sup>, youth could be a people group because of the common affinity for one another mainly because of a shared situation, which creates a distinct culture within the larger group of adults. On a smaller scale, youth also share the same residence (school), occupation (student), class (under adults, not children), communication preference (secondary orality), and jargon. However, youth as a people group lack a specific geographic area and they are always in context of a larger adult culture. Therefore, they are a people group per se because of their affinity. Evangelistically, youth reach other youth more effectively even when crossing normal ethnic barriers because of the preeminent global youth culture, which establishes an immediate similarity. The church should

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<sup>2</sup> This statistic is taken from many Youth Classes at Boyce College and is used in much promotional material for Youth Ministry International. Most literature in Youth Ministry corroborates the assertion. Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 163, asserts that 85%-95% of all Christians accepted Christ before 19 years of age.

<sup>3</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 198.

<sup>4</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism and International Orality Network. *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*. (Bangalore, India: International Orality Network, 2005).

put more resources toward youth because the cultural barriers are greater for adults attempting to penetrate the youth culture. Youth Ministry and evangelism is cross-cultural.

### **The Bible**

Church Growth analysis might yield the conclusion to target youth, but the Word of God provides the surest footing. Throughout Scripture, one observes a distinguishing aspect of society for those in transition from childhood to adulthood. The Hebrew term for youth is “na’ar” and is first used in Genesis 37:2 (translated “youth” in the NASB) describing Joseph at age 17, pasturing his father’s flocks.<sup>5</sup> The term is used of a newborn but never a person over twenty; however, the origins of the word come from the ideas of instigator, mischief, and rebellion.<sup>6</sup> The attitudes described sound like teenagers. The Hebrews distinguished specific ministry needs for this transition time. The first nine chapters of Proverbs are written directly for youth to practically live out the Torah (Pr 1:4). Educational in nature, the easily remembered proverbs provided direction in the tumultuous times.<sup>7</sup>

Though the Bible says much more on the emphasis on youth, God commands the church to reach the next generation. “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (Ps 78:4). For Israel, the main responsibility for teaching the next generation remained on parents, but the community also shared weight. How much more does responsibility lie on the church, which people are not born into? The church holds the “most glorious deed of the Lord” in the sacrificing of the Son for the world. The church is the family of God seeking a spiritual heritage that follows the Lord. Every church is just one generation away from not existing.

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Almon, “The Biblical Basis For Contemporary Ministry” (Seminar handout, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, August 2005), photocopy.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## **Current Crisis and Situation**

The impetus in creating the youth culture is compulsory education, which is steadily becoming a worldwide reality. Because of compulsory education, adolescents are a distinct and separate culture that changes continually. The world context for the evangelization of youth is complex. To understand the modern youth world one must be familiar with globalization, the unique demands on adolescence, and their search for identity.

### **Globalization**

Globalization is often thought of as the shrinking of the world. Economics drives globalization with companies like Coca-Cola recognized literally everywhere. The creation of the internet now creates a social network for business, entertainment, and youth. The internet medium facilitates interaction with more people beyond the imagination of previous generations. This creates a tension between “traditional” and “global” society. “Young people are in one sense citizens of a global culture but at the same time struggle for a sense of acceptance in the societies in which they live. For youth, this is the ultimate paradox of globalization.”<sup>8</sup>

The global corporate marketers are targeting youth and reaching them. David Livermore shouts, “While we meander over the missiological implication of global youth ministry, everyone else is going after them!”<sup>9</sup> Occult groups, government “secular” education, and corporations bid for loyalty. MTV has 33 channels worldwide and reaches almost 375 million households<sup>10</sup> and now is in Turkey. MTV knows there are billions to be won! If the church does not reach them, others will.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, “Young People in a Globalizing World” in *World Youth Report 2003*, (New York: United Nations Publications, 2003), 304.

<sup>9</sup> David Livermore, “Billions to be Won,” *Evangelical Mission Quarterly [EMQ]* 37 no.3 (2001): 332.

<sup>10</sup> Kerry Capell, et al. “MTV's World” *Business Week Online* (February 18, 2002: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.), Internet.

## Unique Demands on Adolescents

Adolescents are changing in their physical and psychological dimensions. Still, the strongest influence on a teenager's life is the family.<sup>11</sup> However, unlike previous generations, the cultural demands are different, and natural maturing brings changes in their physiology. The following section focuses on American teenagers.

Writers call this generation many things from Generation X, to Mosaics, to Bridgers. "Bridgers" signifies the generation that bridged the millennium and was first introduced by Thom Rainer. He lists many generational demands. As a generation, the Bridgers reject absolute truth. Their source for authority is themselves instead of the Word of God. They are the first, as a majority to be raised by day care instead of mother's care. The demands require them to adapt to many different situations and different people quickly. They are the first significantly fatherless generation. Many Bridgers grow without a father to aid in development. "They are stressed out about finances, sex, school, crime, and AIDS."<sup>12</sup> Bridgers are the first to grow up with computers, and they are heavily influenced by MTV, video games, and other media. With these factors in mind juxtaposed to the heavy demands of material success in American society, one can perceive why adolescences need specific and strategic attention in the church.<sup>13</sup>

The student's physiological development brings unique demands both relationally and cognitively. The onset of puberty between nine and thirteen carries these changes. Students begin to develop mentally from concrete to abstract thinking. Their mind can handle more complex systems of thinking, where earlier they only knew what they saw with their eyes. Students, especially middle school students, are more impressionable than any other time. "Two out of three born again Christians made that commitment to Christ before their eighteenth birthday"

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<sup>11</sup> David Adams, "Youth and Family Ministry" (classroom lecture notes, *YM 451- Youth and Family Ministry*, Spring 2005, personal notes), notes.

<sup>12</sup> Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> The distinctive of the Bridges is from the book already quote Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*.

and nearly half before age thirteen.<sup>14</sup> The culture's ever-rising obsession with sex, combined with the maturing adolescent, forces unrelenting pressure on teens unlike previous generations. Youth are not adults. The previous lists are not exhaustive, but are a summary of pressures while adolescents seek to find their identity in a continually falling world.

### **Search for Identity**

The Christian's identity is in Jesus Christ. In evangelism, one seeks to offer another a new identity. Throughout the era of time people most often found their identity in their family. Now with the breakdown of the family, youth find identity elsewhere. "Young people are in the process of establishing a sense of identity in what is essentially an insecure world, and this underlying instability may serve to magnify the tensions and lack of control they experience on a daily basis."<sup>15</sup>

Adults have rejected youth. "This rejection, or abandonment, of adolescents is the root of the fragmentation and calloused distancing that are the hallmarks of the adolescent culture."<sup>16</sup> Abandonment of parents, teachers, adults, and the church forced a retreat to the "World Beneath"<sup>17</sup> This world is a unique and defended social system concerned with one major feature, safety. The world beneath is a haven where truth is relative, morals are underdeveloped, and sexual promiscuity rampant. Teenagers who are part of this world are "slaves to sin" (Rom 6:16-17) and "the god of this world has blinded their minds." Therefore, youth find their identity in many things other than God, but they do long for healthy, sincere adult relationships to show

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<sup>14</sup> George Barna, "Evangelism is Most Effective Among Kids" *Barna Updates* (Ventura: Barna Group: 2005) [on-line]; accessed 2 May 2005; available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=172>; Internet.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations "Young People in a Globalizing World", 293.

<sup>16</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-63.

them where human true identity exist.

### **Local Church Strategy**

God instituted His church to carry out the Great Commission. Knowing that the priority to reach the youth of the world is great and the challenges of relating to them difficult, how does the local church proceed in evangelizing youth in their realm of influence? The church must understand the cultural barriers involved in reaching youth, develop a comprehensive program strategy, and go incarnationally to students.

### **Four Cultural Barriers for the Local Church<sup>18</sup>**

In general, the church has four cultural barriers in ministry and evangelism with youth. First, the church vs. unchurched barrier. The vast majority of youth are unchurched. Rainer's research estimates that at current pace the church will only reach four percent of this American generation.<sup>19</sup> Second, in the Western World, is the modern vs. post-modern divide. "Today's youth has a postmodern sensibility and traditional ways of explaining the gospel message typically do not answer the questions that many youth have."<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, there is a technology gap because the internet and computers changes the way people think and the church has not consistently kept up. Fourthly, a generational gap exists that means translating the gospel into forms understandable to youth is of the essence.

### **Program Strategy for the Youth Ministry**

To attain the overall goals of youth ministry including evangelism, an effective youth ministry uses a program strategy. The advocated program strategy consists of five levels. With each level, fewer people are involved in that program. If a student is involved in higher

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<sup>18</sup> "The 12/25 Challenge Reaching the Youth Generation" *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 52*, (Online: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2004), accessed at [www.lausanne.org](http://www.lausanne.org), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> "The 12/25 Challenge Reaching the Youth Generation" *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 52*, 11.

programs, he or she is typically more spiritually mature. One can visualize the five levels of programming in the shape of a pyramid.<sup>21</sup> They are relationship building, evangelism, Bible study, leadership development, and leadership reproduction. Evangelism and discipleship must be intentional and purposeful.

A relationship-building program is one patterned after Christ in Matthew 9:9-13. Christ is just “hanging out” with unbelievers. At these events, no one preaches. The purpose is interaction to build relationships. It focuses on youth who are not involved and unbelievers. Going to play paintball is a relationship-building program. These programs provide the first contact point for unbelievers.

Next, an evangelism program centers on the unbeliever. The key event here is that the gospel is presented (Romans 1:16). Lost people must be present at the event and there is a time for response. The gospel is presented in the context of relationships. These programs can be events or accountability structures for contacts and campus outreach. An example of an evangelism event is a lock-in where the gospel is shared.

Bible study is most likely what a church does best. Most churches have Bible study through a program like Sunday School. A Bible study event or program must teach the Word, not preach the Word. The goal of a single Bible study is to have the students leave the study transformed or changed by what the Word of God says. The ultimate goal is for the participants to become self-feeders, meaning they can grow in knowledge of the Word on their own (Psalm 1). All the levels so far are open groups, meaning anyone can participate.

Leadership development is the first closed program. Here students make a commitment and, in our culture, sign a contract. Adults mentor students and aid them in developing spiritual disciplines. Ministry teams, that the students try out for and commit to, are a type of leadership development program. The team is supervised by adults, but since God made

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<sup>21</sup>See Figure A1 in Appendix 1

each of us for a different purpose (Ephesians 4:11-12), the youth chose to serve in one capacity or another.

Leadership Reproduction is the next level. Here, the youth is now able to supervise others. Adults still oversee, but the student leads the work. Now the student is serving and reproducing leaders as a leader himself. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Timothy starts reproducing others after his instruction from Paul. Christ was also in the business of reproduction as He trained His disciples to continue the work after He was gone. In this last level, the student has demonstrated responsibility and spiritual maturity. A program where youth teach others to witness, or leading a Bible study, or are administrating some part of technology used in an assembly, are examples of leadership reproduction programs. This brief outline of program strategy shows where evangelism fits in the total ministry. Evangelism independently will create an unhealthy balance of baby Christians. Without maturation all the new Christians will remain anemic and may not ever become responsible church members.

### **Incarnational Evangelism**

“Meet kids where they are at” is popular youth ministry jargon. The phrase takes literally the Great Commission of going. Carey did not wait for India to come to him, but he went to India. Likewise, the church should go to the lost and not wait for them to hearken at the door to be let into the holy fortress. Jesus is our best example of going. He came from heaven and became flesh (John 1:14). His example is the model of evangelism to youth.

Most churches or organizations do youth ministry one of two ways, inside-out or outside-in.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority practice inside-out where the leader gather a group of young people already connected with the church. Outreach happens when the group has ongoing relationships with non-Christians and then brings them into the group. Outside-in focuses on the youth worker going to “be with” non-Christian students. Relationships develop where the gospel

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<sup>22</sup> Pete Ward, *God at the Mall* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 13-20.

is shared and a nucleus group is formed and brought into the church. Both approaches have advantages and difficulties. A church should seek a balance of equipping and commissioning students and adult leaders going themselves. Leaders must model incarnational (outside-in) evangelism, if they want the students to follow (inside-out).

The incarnational approach centers on relationships. Lausanne calls for “a rediscovery of the relational dimension of the gospel.”<sup>23</sup> Being incarnational is all about love. Barry St. Clair speaking on campus evangelism says the qualification for success is love.<sup>24</sup> Demonstrating love for students unconditionally can mean a time of testing sincerity to see if you are trustworthy. “The best evangelism starts with a relationship, not a program.”<sup>25</sup> Youth ministry literature contains a wealth of events, programs, and detailed strategies of evangelism. However, the best strategy is incarnational: real flesh, unconditional love, huge sacrifice, and cross-cultural.

### **Conclusion**

Youth evangelism is missions. The church must seek to reach a separate culture across the kitchen table. The church must put a heightened focus on young people, seek to understand them, and as a result evangelize them appropriately. Youth culture has changed and continues to change. Through the Holy Spirit, the church must become incarnate to communicate the gospel effectively to the coming generation. Whatever the challenge, the gates of hell will not prevail (Matt 16:18). May the church tell the next generation of salvation through Jesus Christ “so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (Ps 78:7).

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<sup>23</sup> “The 12/25 Challenge Reaching the Youth Generation” *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 52*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Barry St. Clair, *Penetrating the Campus* (Norcross, GA: Reach Out, 2002), 21.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, *The Youth Builder: Reach Young People, Strengthen Families and Change Lives Forever* (USA: Gospel Light, 2001), 88.

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<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/world.html>; Internet

Ward, Pete. *God at the Mall*. London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997.

APPENDIX 1  
PROGRAMMING PYRAMID

Figure A1

