

“I’ve been in student ministry since I was a student myself. After 35 years, I realized how much more there was to learn about Gen Z when it occurred to me that my two sons were part of it. Thank God for Tim McKnight! He has been more than a trusted friend to me. He’s become a voice in reaching Gen Z with the gospel. He is respected by his peers and those who lead teenagers (and those who influence them) as one of the foremost leaders in preparing youth pastors to disciple a generation that seems to be so distracted by screens and social media. But what Tim does in these pages is lay out a biblical framework for helping students see who Jesus is, understand the good news of his kingdom, and become true followers of Christ. This book is a gift to the church.”

—Clayton King
Founder, Crossroads Summer Camps
Teaching Pastor, Newspring Church

“I read Tim McKnight’s new book *Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry* from cover to cover with this question in mind: ‘Is there anything new under the sun to inspire kids to love God and impact their world?’ He more than answered my question. The ‘raised bar’ Tim champions is the ancient wisdom of caring parents, rites of passage, strong, Christ-centered families, passionate youth leaders that model servanthood, a lifestyle of evangelism, and Bible-centered discipleship. The great thing about this book is that Tim demonstrates how to make that happen. Read it thoughtfully and be prepared to change your parenting and grandparenting.”

—Ron Boehme
Elder, Youth With A Mission
Professor of Leadership and Intercultural Studies, Faith International University

“The vast majority of people who surrender to Jesus as Lord and Savior do it before the age of eighteen. Because of this truth, the youth ministry in every local church must be empowered and equipped to be the front lines of our evangelism and mobilization efforts. That’s why *Engaging Generation Z*, by Tim McKnight, is such an important and timely book. Let this resource help guide you in reaching Gen Z, because I truly believe they are the generation in which God could spark the next great spiritual awakening! Therefore, every pastor, next gen leader, parent, and student needs this book.”

—Shane Pruitt
National Next Gen Director, North American Mission Board (NAMB)
Author of *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*

“We do youth ministry best when we know our students and our Bibles well. In this book, Dr. Tim McKnight combines a rich knowledge of Scripture with a wealth of insights on the experiences and perspectives of Generation Z to deliver a blueprint for revitalized and effective youth ministry. This is an invaluable and deeply encouraging resource for anyone navigating the intricacies of student ministry in our current context.”

—Greg Stier
Founder, Dare 2 Share Ministries

“In his new book, *Engaging Generation Z*, Tim McKnight offers a great challenge in leading youth ministry to an ever-changing culture. Tim asks great questions to get you thinking, makes strong statements to give you a push, and offers great ideas to help advance youth ministry. Youth leaders and parents need to work through *Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry*, so together, we can raise the level of excellence for the students we serve.”

—Randall J Davis
CEO/Executive Director, National Network of Youth Ministries

“In every era of student ministry, there is a resource that accurately assesses the landscape of the culture, identifies the unique characteristics of the current culture, and provides the practical insights necessary to faithfully serve youth and their families. In *Engaging Generation Z*, my friend Tim McKnight provides this generation’s resource for ministers, leaders, and parents who are investing in today’s students. His balanced approach is biblically rooted, historically informed, culturally relevant, and practically instructive. This work will be the benchmark in student ministry for years to come!”

—R. Scott Pace
Vice President for Undergraduate Studies and Dean, The College at Southeastern
Johnny Hunt Chair of Biblical Preaching

“Eager to inspire and activate your young disciples? Your search is over. In this book, author Tim McKnight coaches pastors and parents with historical perspectives from his work as a scholar and real-life narratives from his heart as a parent. Most importantly, his wisdom and encouragement come from God’s Word. Prepare to see your ministry and results change as you engage Gen Z.”

—Kenneth S. Coley
Senior Professor of Christian Education
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

ENGAGING GENERATION

Z

Raising the Bar
for Youth Ministry

TIM MCKNIGHT



KREGEL
MINISTRY

Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry

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FOREWORD

I've always been a big Bruce Lee fan. His lighting-fast kicks, one-inch punches and amazing nunchuck skills left me in awe when I first saw his Hollywood-produced movie *Enter the Dragon*.

The first thing I did after seeing the movie was to go out and buy myself some nunchucks. I wanted to swing those two chain-connected pieces of wood so fast that they would sound like a small army of angry hummingbirds to all the imaginary opponents I would soon be “fighting” in my room.

The problem is that I was never trained by someone who actually knew what they were doing. Over the course of countless months, I endured several self-inflicted injuries. From hitting myself in the back of the head to clunking the inside of my elbow bone to the much-dreaded nunchuck-to-the-groin, I spent half of my time on the floor of my room groaning, moaning, and trying to recover.

But I persisted in spite of the bumps and bruises. Over the course of a few years of trial, error, and injuries, I got relatively good. Though not at the Bruce Lee level of nunchuck excellence, I can make those two pieces of wood, now hanging in my office, hum.

In many ways, learning nunchucks is like learning youth ministry. It goes much better if you have a skilled sensei training you than just trying to wing it and learn it on your own. Someone who knows both God's Word (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and “understands the times” we are living in (1 Chr. 12:32) will take you to the next level of youth ministry without nearly as many bumps, bruises, and self-induced knockouts.

That's why I'm thrilled that you have chosen to read *Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry* by my friend Dr. Tim McKnight. In this book he will teach you the basics of what it's going to take to reach, disciple, and mobilize the next generation for gospel advancers.

His mastery of God's Word will ground you in a biblical approach to youth ministry. Every chapter is soaked in Scripture (the ultimate youth ministry manual) and built on the timeless foundation of God's Word.

Tim does an excellent job of stretching your thinking when it comes to building a gospel-advancing ministry that both reaches the lost and disciples the believers. He calls moms and dads to be the primary youth leaders without forsaking the necessary reality of youth ministry in a fatherless and broken-home culture.

But the other side of the nunchuck is equally balanced. He "understands the times" and unpacks the challenges, temptations, mindsets, and strongholds that Gen Z is facing. You will finish this book knowing the extreme challenges teenagers face today and the amazing opportunities they have to reach their world and this world with the hope of Christ like never before.

To top it all off, Dr. Tim McKnight not only teaches youth ministry; he holds a second degree black belt in karate. His Instagram name is @peacefulwarriorllc. And he teaches Kenpo Jiu Jitsu on the side!

Although these facts may not help you do youth ministry any better, they may help you pay a little closer attention to his book just in case he asks you about it!

By reading this book, you are allowing Tim to be your sensei in youth ministry. When you're finished with it, you may not be able to wield nunchucks like Bruce Lee, but you'll be able to do youth ministry a lot more like Jesus.

—Greg Stier

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Numerous people deserve my thanks for their assistance in writing this second edition of *Raising the Bar*. I first want to thank the author of the first edition, Alvin Reid, who had the vision and foresight to raise the bar in youth ministry and say things that youth ministry educators and youth pastors were just beginning to discover to be true. His fingerprints and content from the first edition are still evident in this second edition. I appreciate the opportunity and trust he extended to me in inviting me to write this second edition of the book.

My colleagues in youth ministry also contributed in numerous ways to this volume. I've benefited from conversations with youth ministry veterans like Ken Coley and Richard Ross. They've spoken with wisdom and insight in numerous conferences gatherings of professors and leaders in youth ministry that I've attended. Clayton King is a consistent friend and encouragement in the ministry. He invited me to be one of the speakers for Clayton King Ministries. In that capacity, I interacted with a number of youth pastors and students across the country. These interactions helped fuel the chapters that follow and gave me great encouragement for what the Lord is doing in youth ministries across the country that are raising the bar. Greg Stier is a catalyst for evangelism in youth ministry, whose belief in the potential for students to reach their peers with the gospel and to spark a national revival is both inspiring and contagious. I appreciate his friendship and willingness to write the foreword for the book.

The administration, faculty, staff, and students of Anderson University's College of Christian Studies and Clamp Divinity School are a consistent blessing in my life. I thank my boss and dean, Dr. Michael Duduit, for his encouragement during this project and for his willingness to allow me to carry a lighter semester during its final stages. My colleagues in the college and divinity school are an inspiration to me as shepherds of their classrooms and scholars of the highest

order. They encourage me to stay sharp and to pursue excellence in the classroom. The students I have the privilege to teach are such a blessing, especially my youth ministry students. They serve faithfully in church youth ministries while carrying heavy class loads. They display a genuine love for the teenagers, parents, and adult leaders they serve. It's such a privilege to walk with them during this stage of their journey in ministry.

My youth pastor from my first years in a youth group, John Riley, showed me what the love of Christ looked like. He was the person God used to start drawing me to Christ. I'm eternally grateful for the love that John consistently showed us as our youth pastor. He raised the bar for me regarding what it looks like to be a great youth pastor.

I'm thankful for my mom and dad. Thanks, Dad, for showing me that a Christian man can be humble and love Christ while at the same time being a noble warrior. Thanks to Mom for always caring and seeking to show God's plan for me and how he could use me in ministry. It was such a privilege to have my mom as my youth minister my senior year of high school.

Thanks to my in-laws Richard and Connie Heintzelman for raising such a great woman of God who would become my wife. I appreciate your consistent love and encouragement for whatever wild-haired project your son-in-law tackles. You are both a blessing!

To my children: Noah, thanks for your encouraging words. Micah, thank you for your tender heart. Karissa, thank you for those rides back from preaching events singing '80s music together. MaryAnna, thank you for the joyful spirit you always bring.

Angela, you are my greatest earthly treasure, my soul mate, and my partner in ministry. Thank you for saying, "Yes."

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I am nothing without You. Thank You for saving me through your infinite grace and mercy!

INTRODUCTION

EVERY GENERATION MUST BE TAUGHT ANEW

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
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.
He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

—Psalm 78:1–8

In this psalm, Asaph expresses his concern that the people of Israel pass down their faith in God and knowledge of his redemptive acts

in their history to the next generation. He mentions that parents, particularly fathers, must teach their children the Word of God so that the next generation will trust in God and keep his commands. Asaph hopes that such instruction and modeling by parents and members of the faith community will grant the next generation a firm foundation and help it avoid the sins and rebellion of previous generations.

It is easy to resonate with Asaph's concern. We want our children to know the redemptive work of God and to have their lives transformed by the gospel. We pray they walk in obedience to God with hearts motivated by love for him. We hope they will discern false teaching, opinions, and behaviors that are destructive and contrary to Scripture and God's will for their lives. We understand that the years of childhood and adolescence are critical for their spiritual development.

The teen years, or the years primarily targeted by youth ministry, are in many ways the most important years of a person's life. More seeds of ministry are sown in youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen, more relationships forged that affect their future, more choices made with long-term implications, than arguably any other period in life. According to one Barna survey, 76 percent of Christians accept Christ before the age of twenty-one.¹ Young adults are beginning to think about issues that will influence the rest of their lives. These are the days when they develop their own worldview and their own faith and spirituality.

Are we doing a good job preparing them? This book doesn't indict contemporary youth ministry. Rather, part 1 discusses how the evangelical church is doing in preparing youth, students, or young adults (I will use the three terms synonymously) to face the adult world. And more than that, how are we doing in preparing them to cross that line in the sand? This book does not present a surefire formula for creating the ideal youth ministry of the twenty-first century. Rather, part 2 suggests areas in which the potential of youth may be unleashed.

1 George Barna, "Survey: Christians Are Not Spreading the Gospel," GeorgeBarna.com, November 30, 2017, <http://www.georgebarna.com/research-flow/2017/11/30/survey-christians-are-not-spreading-the-gospel>.

Youth are not finishing childhood; they are young adults preparing for adulthood. They will rise to the bar we set for them. We can give them encouragement through a word of praise, a pat on the back, or a hug. But sometimes the best encouragement is a kick in the pants.

Sometimes, however, it is we, the leaders, who need the kick in the pants. Whether you're a pastor, youth pastor, youth worker, parent, or any combination thereof, may the words that follow challenge you to get out of your comfort zone in working with and discipling youth, encourage you about the quality of young people today, and help you reevaluate how you see the youth in your life.

This new generation is poised to make a difference—to *change* the world to the glory of God. May we serve as Christ followers who raise the bar for the students following us.

And let's start *today*.

PART 1

TEST TIME: DOES YOUTH MINISTRY PASS?

Imagine Jesus taking his disciples up to a mountain. He gathers them around and teaches them for a while, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are they that search for justice.”

Then Simon Peter asks, “Do we have to write this down?”

And Andrew asks, “Will this be on the test?”

And Philip says, “I don’t have a pencil.”

And James asks, “Do we have to turn this in?”

And John says, “That’s not fair. The other disciples didn’t have to learn this.”

And Judas asks, “What does this have to do with real life?”

Then one of the religious authorities standing nearby asks, “Where is your lesson plan and the teaching outline of your major points? Where is your anticipatory set and learning objectives in the cognitive domain?”

And Jesus wept.

In a perfect world, students would never have to take exams or quizzes. Professors would never have to grade tests or papers.

Because students would be so motivated to learn that they would devour their assignments and miss class only for an appendectomy or a concussion.

But this is not a perfect world. We need to conduct tests to ensure that students are ready to meet the challenges of adult life. Suppose, for example, that a member of your church has a brain tumor. The young surgeon tells you prior to the surgery, “I’ve read the books, watched some operations, and have complete confidence in my ability . . . but no one’s ever tested me to see if I can, in fact, successfully perform the surgery.” Would you want that young surgeon to operate on your sick member?

Suppose, now, that your dear uncle Joe is unsaved and that you’ve been praying for him for twenty years. A young person says to you, “I’ve attended youth meetings since grade school, and I’ve participated in the usual church activities for youth.” Would you want that young person to witness to your uncle Joe?

Ministry deals with eternity—a matter more vital than even brain surgery. You may or may not agree with much of what this book has to say about youth ministry, but consider this: outside the church students are tested both academically and physically. Does it not make sense for youth in our churches to take spiritual tests to prepare for entering fallen world as capable adults?

Youth in church are underchallenged and treated like children. We need to raise the bar to produce biblical champions.

If we gave spiritual tests to the students in our churches, tests with a standard comparable to a physical fitness test or an academic exam such as the SAT, the vast majority would probably fail miserably. And the fault would not lie with them. Many parents complain about low academic standards in some of our public schools. But has the church considered what kind of standard we are setting in preparing a generation of young adults?

I issue a challenge. We can raise the bar for this generation. But we can’t do it unless we admit that the bar has been set too low for too long.

1

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED, BUT THE GOSPEL HAS NOT ANALYZING THE CURRENT CULTURE OF STUDENT MINISTRY

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.

—Romans 13:11–13

In February 2003, the unthinkable happened. Jesica Santillan was wheeled into an operating room at one of the most prestigious hospitals in the world. She'd been sick from infancy, but Jesica and her family believed that the complicated operation, involving a rare heart-lung transplant, would give her weakened body new life.

The transplant seemed to go well. Then the horrible mistake was discovered. The transplanted heart and lungs were of the wrong blood type. Days later, following a second attempt at a transplant, Jesica died. Having the right hospital, right doctors, right procedure, but a wrong match spelled disaster.

Something has gone wrong, too, in the hospitals and operating rooms for the soul. Across America today, many gifted, committed youth ministers and workers, as well as pastors and parents, long to see youth thrive. This current generation of youth has the potential for

revival, for renewal, for change. But the church faces a problem—the youth-ministry approaches we have been using are the wrong match. They have failed to develop the potential of youth. We cannot say that, over the past two decades or so, we have raised up a generation of students who have changed the world for Christ.

Over the past few years, I've met with student-ministry leaders on the local, state, and national levels. In every one of those meetings we discussed the trend of students leaving church youth groups across the nation. In the book *You Lost Me*, David Kinnaman laments, "The ages eighteen to twenty-nine are a black hole of church attendance; this age segment is 'missing in action' from most congregations."¹ Kinnaman was writing about trends among Millennials, yet the statistics regarding Generation Z students are equally disturbing. Ben Trueblood, director of student ministry for Lifeway Christian Resources, notes, "We found that 66 percent of students who were active in their church during high school no longer remained active in the church between ages 18–22."² Though we rightly have shifted away from event-driven youth ministries to focus more on family-equipping youth-ministry strategies, more than half of the students in our youth groups still leave the church. The numbers become more staggering when we consider how effective we have been at reaching unchurched students.

About a decade after youth ministry improved by focusing more on parents and the family, the situation has not changed a great deal. We have failed to produce a generation of young people who leave youth groups ready to change the world for Christ. Rather, 66 percent of them leave the church after graduation.

Now, before you decide that we need to shift away from a focus on families and parents, let me say quickly that I don't think a family-equipping approach to youth ministry is responsible for the continued exodus of high school graduates from churches. Yet the failure of contemporary youth ministry to make a positive impact on

1 David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 22.

2 Ben Trueblood, *Within Reach* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2018), 12.

youth culture cannot be ignored. *If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we're getting!*

This book will not list everything wrong with contemporary youth ministry or present a quick fix for the problem. But my research and experience reveal a common denominator: churches across America treat teenagers like fourth-graders rather than disciples. As youth ministers and parents, we need to set a new example and a new standard. We can grow disciples who advance the gospel and the kingdom of Christ while they are students and after they graduate. We can mobilize students who have a kingdom mindset and pursue a kingdom mission.

The Power of God

Have you ever lived in a town where half the residents became radical, fanatical followers of Jesus in a couple of years? Have you lived in a neighborhood where instead of sports, clothes, or cars, the subject of conversation for almost everyone was Jesus?

That was the kind of world in which Jonathan Edwards found himself about 250 years ago. In the eighteenth century, God shook the American colonies in a revival movement known as the First Great Awakening. Edwards wrote the treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* to describe and defend the movement. This young pastor noticed something most ministers have failed to recognize since: when God begins a new movement of his Spirit, he often uses young people at the heart of it. Note Edwards's comment about the great revival he observed:

The work has been chiefly amongst the young; and comparatively but few others have been made partakers of it. And indeed it has commonly been so, when God has begun any great work for the revival of his church; he has taken the young people, and has cast off the old and stiff-necked generation.³

3 Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England, and the Way in Which It Ought to Be Acknowledged

While the present-day potential for revival is promising, let's face it—student ministry can be just plain hard. Youth leaders today have incredible love for young people and a passion to see them grow in Christ, but they often report being worn out from ministry. Greg Stier summarizes what I hear often from youth pastors:

Maybe it's the complaints about the stains in the carpets or the holes in the walls in the youth room. Perhaps it's the struggle of the juggle—the constant juggling act between parental and pastoral expectations. As a result of those difficulties and a thousand others, many youth leaders eventually give in or give up. They give in to the counter-biblical challenge to reel in their students' exuberance instead of harnessing it and focusing it. They give up on going for the optimum, on stirring the pot, and on swinging for the fences. . . . The result is that youth leaders often slowly transform their roles from passionate visionary to skilled event-coordinator, from mission-driven general to sanctified baby-sitter.⁴

Many youth ministers are simply sick and tired of being sick and tired. But as a professor who enjoys critical analysis, playing the devil's advocate, and the opportunity to evaluate movements or theories, I'm increasingly unimpressed with some of the attitudes and approaches used in youth ministry today.

Don't get me wrong—I see good in many youth ministries, and I love youth pastors. I teach some of the finest people studying for youth ministry on the planet. But one thing is clear: most youth pastors learn youth ministry from youth pastors who learned youth ministry from youth pastors. Such inbreeding does not encourage serious reflection

and Promoted, Humbly Offered to the Public, in a Treatise on That Subject,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., ed. Sereno E. Dwight (1834; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), 1:423.

⁴ Greg Stier, *Outbreak: Creating a Contagious Youth Ministry through Viral Evangelism* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 17.

on ministry practices. Add to that the rapid growth of youth ministry as a separate discipline in the modern church, and it is little wonder that neither the opportunity nor the time has been afforded for the church or for youth ministers to analyze this field critically.

It is time to assess the state of youth ministry. An honest, straightforward critique of basic presuppositions and attitudes is needed, as well as an evaluation of the impact that the many cottage industries, various parachurch organizations, and youth ministries in churches across America are making in the real world where youth live.

In a nutshell, we must evaluate how the church relates the truth of Christianity to culture. In Romans 13:11, Paul challenges us to be aware of our culture. His saying, “And now, *knowing the time*,” does not mean we should be looking at our watches. The Greek term he uses refers to an intimate, personal knowledge of the season, or the climate, in which we live. In other words, just as preachers of the Word must be able to exegete Scripture, so too must leaders in the church be able to analyze culture.

Contemporary popular culture treats youth as children, not young adults. Popular culture—from YouTube to movies to video games—thrives on maintaining a distinct youth culture for marketing purposes. In the church, attitudes are not much better. Christian publications and church or parachurch youth ministries deal with the particular, most pressing needs of the times—how to say no to sex, dealing with peer pressure, and so on. They address behavior rather than the heart, furthering the trend of moralistic therapeutic deism seen in many churches and church student ministries.⁵

All of these and many more issues are vital, but none of them addresses our basic philosophical approach to young people. Do we

5 Christian Smith and Melinda Denton state, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one’s health, and doing one’s best to be successful.” Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.

see young people as children finishing childhood and thus in need of activities to keep them occupied, or do we see them as young adults who are disciples ready to engage the challenges of a complex world?

God has assembled an army of young adults. He has opened a door before the leaders of the church today through which to see a generation of radicals ready to be unleashed on the culture. Yet today, they are the most overlooked army in the church. Consider this: youth are

- utilized by cultists (look at the thousands of young people who take an annual Mormon mission, for example), but ignored by the church;
- enlisted by our government in times of war, but too often left on the sidelines of spiritual conflict;
- chosen to represent nations at the highest level of athletic endeavor, but pushed aside into secondary status in the body of the Christ;
- often challenged academically in school, but fed spiritual baby food in church;
- poised to live for Christ, but too often told to stay out of the way.

Why should you focus on youth ministry? *First*, as already noted, over the years there has been an exodus of youth out of the church.

Second, a historical study of spiritual awakenings has raised the question, “Why hasn’t more been written on the role of youth in the activity of God?” (Perhaps because adults write church history texts?)

Third, discussions with colleagues and others led to the conclusion that current youth ministry has not been effective. The cottage industries related to youth ministry are, although financially lucrative, spiritually anemic. Thousands of students attend various inspirational events, but those events have not been effective in taking students from an adolescent mindset to focusing on doing great things for God and to advance the kingdom of Christ. Youth ministers—including many in my classes as well as scores with whom I have talked over the past

few years—indicate a growing dissatisfaction with the present state of youth ministry. Who can blame them, with a church culture that treats teens like fourth-graders and youth pastors like babysitters?

Fourth, if all politics is local, then everything spiritual is personal. I have four teenagers at home: Noah and Micah (both 18), Karissa (16), and MaryAnna (11). I can write and preach and teach and make all sorts of bold declarations, but I have only one chance to raise my children. Across America, millions of Christian parents feel the same way. Focusing on youth ministry, then, not only analyzes a subject but also represents the effort of a fellow pilgrim trying to find God's best for his children and the children of others.

Evaluation Is a Healthy Thing

Louie Giglio has been a strategic leader in a movement called Passion that has helped many students rethink worship. His thoughts on youth ministry offer a succinct overview of what I have also observed:

First, we need innovative leaders, those who blaze a trail with fresh creativity and *not just a rehashed imitation of the current culture*. Second, *we must have a belief in our students' capacity to grasp more. . . .* Third, we as leaders must . . . *“show the way” and not just “tell the way.”* And fourth, we must have a clear strategy so that at the end of the day we don't just have a pile of extended energy but rather the assurance that we've accomplished the goal.⁶

The meteoric growth of youth ministry in the church over the past generation calls for analysis, evaluation, and reflection. Why? Note the following excerpt from an article by Mark DeVries:

Although her family was only nominally involved in the church, Jenny came to our youth group faithfully throughout

6 Louie Giglio, foreword to Andy Stanley and Stuart Hall, *The Seven Checkpoints* (West Monroe, LA: Howard, 2001), x, emphasis added.

her teenage years. She went on mission trips and attended Sunday school; she was a regular fixture in our program. We had been successful with Jenny, or so we thought.

Jimmy, on the other hand, never quite connected with our youth ministry. We really worked to get him involved with our youth programs. He had no interest in retreats or mission trips; Sunday school bored him, and youth groups seemed a little on the silly side for his taste. He sometimes attended another church across town. On my little scoreboard of kids we had been effective with, Jimmy was on the “lost” side.

But Jimmy had one thing going for him—every Sunday, he was in worship—with his parents at our church or with his friends at another church. Jimmy didn’t need our outrageous and creative youth ministry to lead him to faith maturity.

But for Jenny, our youth ministry was her only Christian connection. Unlike a real family, the youth group “family” forced her to resign when she was too old to fit the requirements. She now looks back on her youth group experience as . . . a fun, even laughable part of her past, but something that belongs exclusively in the realm of her teenage years.

There is something wrong with the standard of success that prematurely rates a leader’s work with Jenny as the example of success and Jimmy’s as the example of failure.⁷

More than a few youth pastors say that the above story is not a rare one. The following e-mail has become familiar:

After 11 years of youth ministry I say that [DeVries’s story] is not an exceptional example. I sit with tears in my eyes

⁷ Mark DeVries, “What Is Youth Ministry’s Relationship to the Family?,” in *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, eds. Richard R. Dunn and Mark H. Centers III (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 484–85.

as I think of all my Jennys. Their names are different . . . but it hurts all the same. DeVries is so on the money when he says we must tie [our youth] to the family—first, their nuclear family, and then the family of God—in a much more meaningful way. If we don't, they simply outgrow their faith. I am working to change the trend and raise the bar here! —Cliff

The Barna Group reports, “The percentage of people whose beliefs qualify them for a biblical worldview declines in each successively younger generation: 10 percent of Boomers, 7 percent of Gen X, and 6 percent of Millennials have a biblical worldview, compared to only 4 percent of Gen Z.”⁸ This same study of students further concludes, “Many in Generation Z, more than in generations before them, are a spiritual blank slate. They are drawn to things spiritual, but their starting point is vastly different from previous generations, many of whom received a basic education on the Bible and Christianity.”⁹

While these statistics and trends pose a challenge, I see an opportunity for parents and people serving in student ministry. Having lived in Okinawa and on the Gulf Coast, I've encountered a number of typhoons and hurricanes. These storms do not develop independently. Several natural forces converge at just the right time—or, if you're in the path of the storm, the wrong time.

As in the development of a hurricane/typhoon, several forces seem to be converging on the church. *First*, over the past several years I've met youth pastors all over the nation who feel much the same—they love youth ministry and youth, but they are frustrated with the current state of youth ministry. Many recognize the need for a reformation of youth ministry, yet most I meet have more questions than answers.

The *second* force is the new generation, Generation Z, the largest generation in the history of our nation.

8 Barna Group, *Gen Z* (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018), 25.

9 Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 26.

The *third* force arises from my generation. A growing, foaming, tsunami of parental passion has expressed itself in an explosion of everything from Christian and home schools, to parenting seminars, to the shift to family-engaged student ministry. Parents of youth and preteens want to get it right with their kids.

The *fourth* and *final* force comes from what we know about God. The forces above are not lost on our great God. He is never caught by surprise and is well aware of coming trends. In the past, God has used generations of young people in times of great revival. Might he be preparing a new generation to use in similar fashion?

One thing is certain. God *is* at work. Will we, like Barnabas in Acts 11, seek to see the hand of God in a new generation? By perpetuating the status quo, by ignoring the evidence, by failing to seek him for wisdom, or by failing to model biblical discipleship, do we honor God and help a generation?

Teenagers have power today. Barna gives examples:

- Teenagers largely define the values and leisure endeavors of our nation.
- The family is the foundation of the universe, and much in society is impacted on how youth prioritize the family.
- Finally, the future of the church will be determined by this generation's faith and commitments.¹⁰

Current research regarding church attendance among young people is a mixed bag. The Barna Group reports that “while a majority of teens still self identifies as ‘Christian’ (58 percent), only 43 percent have recently attended church, and just one in 11 is an ‘engaged Christian,’ with beliefs and practices that put faith front-and-center in their lives.”¹¹ The bad news is that the shift from event-driven youth ministry to family-engaged youth ministry over the last generation has failed to produce spiritual giants.

10 George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 113.

11 Barna, *Gen Z*, 26.

These trends and statistics clearly indicate that “business as usual”—sometimes busyness as usual—in youth ministry is not making the desired impact. A pragmatic approach that ignores a biblically based, gospel-centered, family-engaged, kingdom-focused student ministry strategy will not be a “quick fix” to solve these issues. Parents and student-ministry leaders must do the heavy lifting theologically necessary to build a foundation upon which we can found effective youth ministries. We must set the example in evangelism and discipleship that our students can follow. For students to raise the bar, we first must raise our expectations of what healthy kingdom-focused, biblically based, missionally mobilized students look like. Then we must model what we want them to replicate.

A Personal Journey into Youth Ministry

Years ago psychologist Abraham Maslow developed what he called a hierarchy of needs. Everyone—no matter what background, nationality, or economic situation—has certain needs, such as food, shelter, and a sense of safety. Maslow was right but didn’t go far enough. Everyone has another need also—to know God and to make a difference with her or his God-given life. Mathematician Blaise Pascal describes that need as a God-sized vacuum, or a God-shaped hole. Only Jesus can fill that hole. He does more, however, than fill it. He gives each person who receives him a passion to live out God’s purpose.

Students across the country are searching for purpose and meaning in life. Parents and student-ministry leaders have the privilege of helping young people find God’s purpose for their lives. We can help them live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission in middle school and high school. They are looking to us as models for what it means to be a disciple. We can show them how to walk with Christ and lead others to do the same. God can use parents and leaders in student ministry to raise up mature disciples of Christ who demonstrate the gospel of Jesus through their words and lives while they are in middle school and high school. We can help them see what it looks like to walk with Christ and actively engage in his church after they graduate.

In Deuteronomy 30, Moses addressed the nation of Israel at a critical time. Nearing the day of crossing into the Promised Land, the new postwilderness generation needed firm spiritual footing on which to tread. Moses challenged the people with these words: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life” (v. 19).

The people of God stood at a crossroads, and so do we. We stand at the brink of the post-Christian world. We are not leaving the wilderness; we are entering it—a world of uncharted territory that promotes same-sex marriage, relativism, pluralism, a self-focused lifestyle, identity confusion, and tolerance (as long as we do not teach or preach that Christ is the only way to God). As you stand before a new generation, challenge them to choose life—the life found in Jesus. Challenge them to follow his way and embrace his truth. Challenge them to spend their lives in advancing the gospel and the kingdom of Christ around the world. Parents and student-ministry leaders, it’s time to raise the bar!