



FEED PHILOSOPHY

Youth Ministry
to Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

The Commission

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, **“Feed my lambs.”** Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, **“Take care of my sheep.”** The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, **“Feed my sheep.”**
– John 21:15-17

Fifty eight percent of U.S teens today self-identify as Christian, the lowest percentage that the Barna Group has ever studied.¹ This new generation – Generation Z – is, so far, the least religious generation we have ever seen. Researchers who have been tracking the religious attitudes of American young people across a nearly 50-year span say that in general, “recent birth cohorts report less approval of religious organizations, are less likely to say that religion is important in their lives, report being less spiritual, and spend less time praying or meditating.”²

HOW CAN WE AS THE CHURCH RESPOND?

We share with you a sense of urgency and significance to rediscover Truth for the next generation; to feed the sheep to whom God has called us. Young people today are in pursuit of who they are in a pluralistic world of competing ideals. Even more, they are challenged to navigate this journey without a true point of reference, which can only come from God’s Word. In this present day and culture, the Church is grappling with how to equip young people to discover Truth. To be fed. This requires rethinking outdated systems and habits, and discovering new ways of doing things and new thought processes. The Church is called to lead the way in renewal.

Feed exists to help local church leaders shepherd youth on their journey to know Christ and become like Him. Our prayer is that these pages will spark meaningful conversation and spur us to build solutions together that will serve to meet the heartfelt needs of young people, and will build His Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

¹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, “ Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation ” (Ventura, CA: Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018),

² Jean M. Twenge, Julie J. Exline, Joshua B. Grubbs, Ramya Sastry, and W. Keith Campbell, “ Generational and Time Period Differences in American Adolescents’ Religious Orientation, 1966-2014 ,” Brock Bastian, ed., PLoS One 10:5 (2015). <http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0121454> Differences.”

THE CONTEXT

Generation Z

“They are not an embittered, angry generation shaking their fists at the heavens,” writes one report about Gen Z. “They just don’t think looking up is all that important.” This study has closely examined disaffiliation trends and warns that more than 35 million U.S. young people who were raised in Christian households may walk away from a life with Jesus by the year 2050 unless the Church takes action today.”³

Feed is committed to developing youth ministry contextualized to reaching Generation Z. This must include discipleship that engages “head, heart, and hands,” that is culturally engaged, and that helps youth navigate their callings and vocations.

What do we know about Gen Z? There is a lack of consensus around official birth years for this generation, but in general researchers are identifying Generation Z as those born between 1995-2013. As such, Gen Z’ers may currently be as young as four or just graduating college. More importantly, every member of a youth ministry right now is a member of Generation Z.

Describing a generation always requires generalizations, and Gen Z is still developing and being defined. But there are emerging trends.



GOALS

Gen Z exhibits a strong focus on hard work and educational attainment that is causing some researchers to call them a conservative generation that is reverting back to traditional values embodied by the Baby Boomer generation. They also demonstrate a focus on personal achievement and on enjoying life.



TECHNOLOGY

Gen Z has the distinction of being a generation of digital natives who grew up on the Internet, mobile natives who grew up with smartphones, and they are now being called the first generation of true “social natives” who also grew up on social media. But researchers are starting to notice an emerging willingness to vocalize the negative effects of an always-connected digital life.



WORLDVIEW

Certainty about faith is declining at the same time that teens are growing up in a culture of relativism where absolute truth is not necessarily a value. Whereas 85% of Boomers would

³ Joshua Crossman, director and CEO, Pinetops Foundation, “The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050” (Seattle, WA: Pinetops Foundation, 2018), 55.

say that someone can turn out to be wrong about something they sincerely believe in, only two-thirds of Gen Z agree with that statement.⁴ This points to a growing minority of young people who seem to think that sincere belief makes something true.

At the same time, equality is emerging as Gen Z's non-negotiable value.⁵ Fifty eight percent of U.S. teens agree that it is important not to offend other cultures or ethnicities,⁶ and 69% agree "it's acceptable to be born one gender and feel like another."⁷

THE VALUES

The new reality of Generation Z is both a challenge and an opportunity for local church leaders to engage in a Spirit-led rethinking of youth ministry. To see fruit in evangelism and discipleship among the next generation, youth ministry must become more *missiological* – more contextualized to the unique realities of every church and community. Rather than a new youth ministry "silver bullet" to be replicated from church to church and tweaked around the edges, youth ministers need a new way of thinking that can help them discern how to develop their ministry best in their local context.

Feed believes three values are essential to fruitful ministry among Generation Z: open and honest dialogue, robust Scripture engagement, and outcome-based ministry models.

OPEN AND HONEST DIALOGUE

Open and honest conversations create an environment that allows teens to discover truth. Strong faith that carries teens forward into adulthood is established in discussions about God, the world, and ourselves. This is a space designed for teens to feel welcome to bring their hard questions and doubts. Led by the Holy Spirit, these conversations can evoke teens to trust God.

“*[High schoolers] want to discover meaning and learn best by processing out loud. . . through open debate, multiple perspectives, and applied reasoning. That’s why self-expression and community are essential for learning in this phase.*”

- Reggie Joiner & Kristen Ivy, *It's Just a Phase So Don't Miss It*, 2015

⁴ Barna & Impact 360, "Gen Z," 65.

⁵ Leah Swartz, Skyler Huff, and Jason Harper, "Getting to Know Gen Z: How the Pivotal Generation is Different from Millennials," Joe Cardador and Karen Faith, research leads (Kansas City, MO: Barkley, Inc. and Futurecast, LLC, 2017), 13.

⁶ Sensis and Think Now Research, *We Are Gen Z Report* (2018).

⁷ Barna & Impact 360, "Gen Z."

Conversation is a key teaching approach throughout the Bible to help individuals develop deeper faith. Jesus engaged in a rabbinical teaching model throughout his ministry, using questions and answers to help his disciples understand Scripture in new ways. Recovering open and honest dialogue as a central practice in our youth ministry both follows Jesus' example and connects to the needs of Gen Z in a uniquely powerful way.

“*Young adults with Christian experience say the church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that sometimes Christianity does not make sense. In addition, many feel that the church's response to doubt is trivial.*”

- *“Six Reasons Young Christians Leave the Church,” Barna, 2016*

ROBUST SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Word of God is foundational to a young person's faith and calls for meaningful engagement. Teens are invited to actively engage with Scripture, moving from biblical knowledge to competency to influence in the midst of a post-truth culture. Whether it's with a group of friends or individually, young people are called to understand and join God's Story rather than asking God to bless and join theirs.

The Attitudes and Behaviors of Youth (ABY) project, a four-year benchmark study from OneHope, shows that “Bible engagement—more so than any other religious text—provides the strongest influence of positive teen behavior.”

“*Teens who have a high level of Bible engagement are 5.5 times more likely to recall a time when their religious beliefs changed the way they behaved.*”

— *Attitudes and Behaviors of Youth, OneHope, 2010*

The challenge of biblical illiteracy is acute among the Generation Z, and the research shows that biblical illiteracy leads to shallow faith. Centering our youth ministries on engagement with God's Word – not only preaching, but teens reading and wrestling with Scripture themselves – is a critical practice for fruitful youth ministry in an increasingly post-truth culture.

OUTCOME-BASED MINISTRY MODELS

All leaders desire to be faithful and fruitful in their youth ministry. We celebrate how God brings the growth in ministry – yet recognize we are tasked to plant and water intentionally. We affirm the value of using biblically-shaped goals to design our ministry activity, measuring progress and failure.

Churches measure what matters – and if fruitfulness is the goal, measurement needs to accompany it. While every youth ministry agrees attendance is not the most important measure of health for their ministry, many struggle to meaningfully measure other types of outcomes. But it can be done! “The research shows that exemplar churches track discipleship much more closely and consistently than other churches. They are intentional about assessing progress . . . Approximately half of exemplar churches also use surveys or self-assessments.”⁸

What outcomes should churches pursue? Every church will have a different idea of what spiritual health looks like in their congregation. However, generally speaking, churches should pursue some form of biblical knowledge, biblical competency, biblical influence, and biblical faith formation in the lives of their students.

Assessment should be more Fitbit than report card. It’s about measuring health rather than declaring success or failure. As faith grows, the manifestation of it should touch every area of life with milestone markers along the way. Assessing progress – or lack thereof – toward these milestones helps leaders make sharper decisions about the efficacy of their ministry.

THE AUDIENCE

Local Church-focused

The local church is God’s plan to bring hope to the world. We desire to see churches become champions for reaching the next generation with the Gospel. Non-profits and parachurch ministries are invited to serve. The expertise and leadership of local church practitioners plays an important role in strengthening the Church.

“The ABY survey shows that “the influence of religious texts, positive family experiences, and involvement with a faith community make up ‘trifecta’ that produces spiritually vibrant teens.”

– OneHope’s Attitudes and Behaviors of Youth project

Feed is exclusively committed to the strengthening of local church youth ministry. We believe that by engaging youth in local churches, we are providing the best soil for following Jesus for a lifetime. Every tool created by Feed is designed with and for local churches, to integrate into the rhythms of their youth ministry.

⁸ State of Discipleship, Barna, 2015

WHAT'S NEXT?

The challenges facing youth ministry in the United States are daunting – but the opportunities are exciting! Feed exists to serve local church youth ministry leaders as they follow the leading of the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel with Generation Z. The Feed community continues to develop new tools and resources – shaped by the thinking briefly discussed in this paper – to practically equip local church leaders in their work.

To join us on this journey, visit feed.bible