

TEACHING STRATEGIES TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S LIVES

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Perhaps you have heard about it: 300 teenagers in youth Bible study; 250 teenagers for the ski retreat that costs \$350 per person but teenagers only have to pay \$50 as the youth budget covers the rest; or 100 teenagers head to Europe, Africa or Jamaica for the church's youth mission trip. Yes, some churches do that and more. But successful youth ministry does not have to be that way. Successful youth ministry involves changing students to become followers of Jesus Christ...and that happens one by one!

In a recent discussion, eight youthful church members from a small church youth ministry described what they liked about their church. The answers were not surprising: "You can know everyone"; "We have this youth group"; "Members are closer to each other"; "We have good worship"; "I like the activities." New Millennials (teenagers and children who watched the year 2000 roll around) want to "experience" life. A small church offers a family experience to them...and because generally youth groups are smaller in small churches, the number makes for ease in providing great experiences.

Several characteristics distinguish these "New Millennials":

(1) **Civic Personality**—Although the results of September 11, 2001 have resulted in a resurgence of patriotism and civic responsibility, this set of teenagers was already at the forefront. Volunteerism by teenagers has been on the rise for the last several years.

(2) **The "Good" Generation**—Compared to the GI generation (those who came through WWII), they seem similar in their working for the good of others in contrast to the stereotyped "selfish" *Baby-Boomers* (born roughly between 1946-1964) or "lazy-slacker" *Busters* (born roughly between 1965-1980).

(3) **Conservative**—this tends to describe many of this generation both politically and religiously. Interestingly, they may

express conservative views but their behavior may not coincide with their views.

(4) **Cooperative**—A team spirit seems to permeate this generation. They can work together for a common cause more easily than their parents. Their pronoun is "we" not "I".

(5) **Openness to religious values**—As a part of this, however, they lack a concept of absolute truth. "What Susan believes is right for Susan; what Abdul believes is right for Abdul" seems to be the outgrowth of the diversity they have around them. Tolerance is a key word.

(6) **Techno-smart**—The joke is, all adults need a 13-year-old to help them with their computers! Information both helpful and harmful is at their fingertips...and at lightening speed!

Ron Hutchcraft, in his book, *The Battle for a Generation*, suggests twelve statements that define New Millennials: (1) loneliness is their heart; (2) relationships matter most to them; (3) music is their language; (4) self-worth is their struggle; (5) anesthetic is more important than cure; (6) they know no boundaries; (7) they want authority; (8) their *now* matters more than their future; (9) the world doesn't interest them; (10) commitment is too risky; (11) sex is expected...and confusing; and (12) these teenagers are *post-Christian*.

Think and Do: Discuss these statements with other youth leaders or with the parents of your youth. Which of these statements are true for the youth you know? Or with their friends?

Although present day teenagers are distinctive generationally, they still develop in certain patterns like you did. These developmental characteristics have a bearing on how teenagers learn. Let's take a quick look at the following. As you read, mark in the margin a memory or feeling that you recall as a teenager.

Physical: Puberty strikes when the hypothalamus gland sets it in motion.

Although adults laugh at this, to teenagers who are in the middle of it, it is no laughing matter. Generally, a preteen begins to grow at the feet...like a tree with roots spreading out. There is uneven growth which causes extreme clumsiness and sometimes even whimsical appearances for a few months. Younger teenagers have to adjust to a rapidly changing body. To complicate matters, teenagers begin this process at various times...never all together with friends in the same grade! To be an “early bloomer” or a “late bloomer” causes consternation.

Older teenagers, at the other end of the spectrum, must recognize that their bodies are what they are!!! The young girl who wanted to be a ballerina develops to a hefty 5’9”; the guy who wanted to be a basketball star tops out at 5’5”. Reality sinks in for older teenagers.

For the youth leaders: *The physical changes of the teenage years means they do not sit still and listen well to others “talking”. Activities need to move them around to stretch those fast-growing bones and muscles. Some teenagers cannot sit on the floor well. And they need to eat! But, remember, sugar will hype them up so think of snacks that are healthy and nutritious. Also, help teenagers feel good about themselves regardless of how they look!*

Think and Do: Find pictures of yourself in 7th grade and 12th grade. Were you an early bloomer or late bloomer? Can you recall your feelings about yourself? Look at the covers of magazines for teenagers. Do the teenagers you know look like that?

Emotional: Due to hormonal changes in males and females during puberty, great emotional fluctuations are present in teenagers. An easy way to understand this is to name any emotion you have ever felt and multiply it by 10! That’s the way teenagers feel about anything from a phone call to a TV show to a sandwich to a shoe. And, from the time it takes a teenager to get out of a car and walk into the house, their emotion may have

changed.

Younger youth, in particular, have difficulty controlling certain emotions such as crying and anger. As they age, this generally levels out. However, emotions are the last part of the child to develop into adulthood. And, if a teenager has abused drugs and alcohol, their emotional development is arrested at the stage at which they began using. You probably know 25 year olds who act like they are 13!

For youth leaders: *Be alert to the emotions present in your group. Be understanding of tears and long sob stories but also gently call it to cease. Anger is a difficult emotion for teenagers so don’t let it get out of hand. Anger management is important for this age. Model how to react as a Christian.*

Socially: Of vital importance to teenagers, social relationships take on expanded influence during the teenage years. This is more than just having friends to do things with. Developmentally, teenagers need to explore how to make decisions and the influence those decisions have on themselves and others. Teenagers learn who they are and what they think by watching other teenagers do life. What parents and youth leaders desire is to have teenagers who decide for themselves by what their parents and church leaders have taught rather than trying everything that comes along. A church youth group can be vitally important by being a sounding board of discussion as well as providing teenagers with friends of similar values. Because *New Millennials*, have such a diverse world—ethnically, ethically, spiritually, politically—it is important for them to have a secure base of Christian values. Christian friends can provide this for each other.

Another important social phase regards the opposite sex. It is a must, developmentally, for teenagers to discover they are attractive to the opposite sex. When that process goes awry, teenagers find themselves in situations and relationships they

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are not mature enough to handle emotionally. Parents and youth leaders want to provide healthy opportunities for teenagers to relate to one another plus giving good advice on how to respect each other, set limits, and postpone the “dating” concept until they are mature enough to handle it...which young teenagers are not.

For youth leaders: Discourage pairing up among younger teenagers; consider a motto of “just friends in youth group” that will help them draw boundaries. Also, provide some same sex events so that a male leader can level with the guys and a female leader can be honest with the females .

Mentally: Early teenagers are beginning to change their way of thinking. Children tend to think *concretely*. If you ask a 12-year-old to describe your church, she will likely describe the brick building with the pews, windows and a piano. A high school senior might respond by describing the body of people who meet regularly to worship.

Young teenagers tend to make their worst grades in middle school. It is as if so many physical changes are taking place in their bodies they simply can’t concentrate on ideas and school work. They do better with lots of physical activities during learning times.

Older teenagers are still developing mentally. Amazingly, a teenager can figure out a difficult algebraic equation but not be able to tell that he is going to hit the side of the garage while backing out the car. It seems to be a spatial concept and future research will help us discover more about this in the years to come.

Think and Do: Are teenagers smarter today than two generations ago? Everyone has an opinion. It seems to depend on what you are measuring. Yes, they are smarter about computers and digital objects, but what have you noticed that they *don’t* know?

For the youth leader: When choosing learning activities, remember younger youth think more concretely so give them assignments they can handle. Older youth can probably handle the more abstract ideas. Ask yourself: what “spiritual” concepts might the older teenager be able to

understand which the younger teenager might struggle to grasp?

Spiritually: The teenagers of today are surrounded by spirituality. There is no lack of spiritual slant in any form of media. This is confusing to teenagers of this generation who don’t recognize an *absolute* truth.

The teenage years are a wonderful time for commitment to Christ. Teenagers can think for themselves, make a decision to follow Christ, and live out that decision in their lifestyle choices. Teenagers who were children when they made their decision to become Christians may either continue in their commitments, growing stronger in their faith, or they may put it on the shelf for a few years, not appreciating what the faith can mean to them. Some doubt their earlier decisions (remember their emotional level during adolescence) saying they aren’t sure they knew what they were doing. They might say they don’t “feel” like a Christian. Youth leaders and parents need to be sensitive to these expressions of their faith walk and to help guide them into security of their salvation.

Adolescence is a time of high emotion which is frequently carried over into their desired ways of worship, prayer and ministry to one another. Many times teenagers will complain that worship doesn’t mean anything to them, or they do not understand that worship must encompass all age groups, interests, likes and dislikes in the church. Special retreats, concerts and camps can give teenagers the type of experiences that are geared especially for them.

For youth leaders: Be prepared to explain to a teenager how to become a Christian. Practice this without using “churchy” language. A simple format is:
A—Admit you have sinned. (Romans 3:23)
B—Believe Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins and rose again. (John 3:16)
C—Commit your life to following his teachings. (Romans 10:17)

How Teenagers Learn

In light of these characteristics, how do teenagers best learn about spiritual truths? What teaching techniques will they

respond to best? Remember they cut their teeth surrounded by media...particularly television. And on TV, the images change every few seconds, gluing them to the screen. This means two things: 1) teenagers learn more with a variety of learning activities and 2) the teaching plans need to be sharp and well-focused from a planning perspective.

Everyone learns in a variety of ways. Some are *visual* learners; others need to *hear* it to remember it; some prefer to *research* on their own; and others want to *talk* about it. Still others would rather *create* by drawing, composing, singing or dancing. Of course everyone learns by *doing*! The best advice is to vary the teaching technique every ten minutes to keep youth involved in learning.

Good youth literature will incorporate a variety of teaching methodologies which draw from all the different learning styles. Don't

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be afraid to try something you don't like (it may be one student's preferred learning style!).

Teenagers today need to be involved in their learning, making it an experience. And, to reach each teenager in your group, you will need at least three different approaches for a teaching session. Here are a variety of teaching techniques grouped under categorical headings for ease of use:

Videos—As already noted, this generation is connected to television. But, not just anything on a screen will reach teenagers. TV programs have changed from one plot with slow action in a 50's sitcom, to multiple, fast-paced plots weaving in and out of characters' lives in sitcoms today. This has produced a generation of teenagers who are more sophisticated in their expectations of media. This brings a warning: choose media that fits today's teenagers or be prepared for laughter and/or an "unengaged" attitude. If you use something from another decade, explain why and what you want them to discover.

● There are Bible videos that act out the

Scripture. Some are better than others. These can be found in Christian bookstores. However, they are usually expensive. Perhaps you could borrow some from the public library, your associational office, or another church. These videos are a good way for teenagers without a Bible background to get an idea of a literal scripture passage.

● Christian videos on a variety of subjects are available at a Christian bookstore. The down side of buying these is after one showing, they lose their effectiveness. However, you can re-use a really good video by varying what you tell teenagers to watch for in that showing.

● Christian music videos are easy to re-use as background music. Sometimes it takes

more than one viewing for the full impact of the film to be felt. Sometimes you can get free music videos from offers available on the Internet at Christian web

sites. (Your teenagers can help you find these!)

● Video clips from popular movies or TV shows are an inexpensive way to connect your Biblical point to the lives of teenagers today. Of course you would NEVER want to use a film clip that glorifies evil, or is too violent, or has nudity or strong language. There are some movies and shows that can be edited for good use.

The book, *Videos That Teach*, by Doug Fields and Eddie James gives the exact places to stop and start the movie, scripture passages to accompany the theme, and discussion questions. It is available from Youth Specialties or visit their web site at: www.youthspecialties.com.

You can make your own videos, too. If a video camera is available, teenagers can video themselves, their friends and even conduct "person-on-the-street" interviews. Newer cameras even help edit the video for a final product.

Music—Teenagers today love music and enjoy a variety of styles which are popular. Interestingly, any style of music your students listen to is available in Christian music, too. Here are some ways you can use music to teach:

- Group singing—even if your group is small, there are still some who will enjoy singing together. If it is really weak, sing along with a tape or CD.

- Have a teenager (many are in band or orchestra at school) play an instrument as praise music or for a prayer time.

- Listen to the words of a Christian song and discuss the thoughts and images being communicated.

- Read the texts of hymns or songs you use in worship.

- Write lyrics about a particular Biblical theme to sing to a familiar tune.

Art—Now before you get nervous, you don't have to be an artist to lead these learning activities. The product is not as important as the process.

- Montage/collage—Use cut-out pictures and words from magazines and newspapers to fit a theme. Glue them all on a large sheet of paper and have teenagers explain their choices.

- Murals—Put out a roll of shelf paper and give teenagers a Biblical narrative to draw (even in stick figures). The parables work well this way. Also Old Testament stories will be seen in a different light, such as the seven days of creation; the plagues of Egypt; or the meaning behind the Ten Commandments!

- Cartoons—Cut out a simple cartoon strip from the Sunday funnies. Remove the words by cutting out the balloons above the heads. Glue this onto a sheet of paper and ask teenagers to compose words for the characters concerning the theme you are teaching.

- Make thank-you or sympathy or any-occasion cards to mail to absentees, or church members who need a lift.

- Take photos of teenagers and mount them on poster board...or ask a teenager to do this for the group.

- Use playdoh, pipe cleaners or craft sticks to re-create the actions or feelings of Biblical characters.

Drama—truly one of the best ways to “experience” the Bible. Try one of these activities:

- Monologue—write and read (or tell in first person) the experiences of the person

you are pretending to be. Include feelings and even misunderstandings or worries that the person may have experienced. Here are some good opportunities for the use of monologue: (1) Peter recalling the day he tried to walk on water; (2) Mary when the angel visited her about Jesus' birth; (3) Elijah after the experience on Mt. Carmel; (4) Ruth as she left her homeland; and (4) Esther as she went to the king. Now use your own creativity to find other scenes from the Bible for use with your teenagers.

- Act out the Scripture—this can be as simple as reading the dialogue from the Scripture and using one person as narrator to read the in-between parts, or as elaborate as staging the entire passage. The parables lend themselves to this very well.

- Modern Bible—have teenagers take a Biblical passage and put it into today's situations, language and attitudes.

- Interview a Biblical personality—bring in a deacon or a pastor or another adult to be the character you are studying and let the teenagers interview him or her.

- Choral Reading—Use three or more voices to read any beautiful passage from the Bible. Vary the solo voice with all voices for interest. When you have gotten good at a passage, consider including it in a worship service for your congregation.

Verbal Activities—these include reading, listening, talking and learning. Teenagers do not learn by listening to adults talk; they must have a way to say it for themselves in order to incorporate it into their lives.

- Lecture—use sparingly and for short periods—say 3-5 minutes—keep it interesting!

- Question and Answer Discussion—have trouble getting kids to answer the questions? Hide them around the room or under their chairs. Let them work in pairs and then share their answers. Give a piece of gum to each who answers his/her question. Unless you give them a verse in which to find the answer, don't ask for specific knowledge until it has been reviewed. You can, however, always ask for an opinion. For best discussion, never ask a question

that has a “yes-or-no” answer. Ask “why” questions, or “what would you do if”...questions. Create an environment for “reflection” by the way you ask your questions.

●Debate—have teenagers come up with points for both sides of the question! This will enable them to consider other aspects of a given situation beyond the obvious ones present in the story.

●Case study—this method can be very effective if not overused. This tells the problem of some un-known person so all get to give advice yet no one is singled out personally.

Paper and Pencil Activities—these are used frequently and can be applied to just about anything you are teaching. Here is a list to help you remember but they need little explanation:

- Crossword puzzles
- Word searches
- Acrostics
- Diary/Journal entries
- True-False
- Matching lists
- Worksheets
- Timelines
- Charts
- Graphs

Games—This generation of teenagers enjoys playing games. There are a lot of new game shows on TV today. Using the information from any Bible passage, you can create a game to make the learning fun. Here are a few suggestions of game shows which can serve as a model to format your games during teaching times. If you don’t remember how to play, some of the teenagers can help you with the rules.

- Pictionary
- Who Wants To Be A Millionaire
- Tic-Tac-Toe
- Trivial Pursuit
- Charades
- Scattergories

There are also learning games which take a great deal of planning and more than an hour to play but are great at putting teenagers into “virtual reality” situations. These may be found in experiential learn-

ing books or in game books.

A few rules apply to the use of these activities: (1) use the activity if it enhances the learning of what you are trying to teach; (2) try the activity yourself first to see how it works; (3) when introducing the activity to the teenagers, you participate, too; and (4) get all the supplies needed in advance.

Planning Ahead

In order to make teaching a life-changing event for teenagers, it must be well-planned and well thought-out. It is helpful to have a co-teacher to assist in the planning. Or you can ask a teenager to help with the session ideas. Here are some other clues to avoid the “last minute” blues:

Choose a literature resource and stick with it for a full year so you do not have to re-select every few weeks. This can wear out a teacher and tends to send one to a

variety of topics but with no real focus or direction.

Use a literature resource which provides a variety of teaching methods so you don’t have to start

from scratch each week. You can vary their suggestions, but at least you’ll have somewhere to begin.

Plan your session using a variety of learning activities. Have more than enough to fill your allotted time. You can always save what you didn’t get to cover and use it during another session. Check to see if you are using at least three different learning activities to account for the variety of learning styles present in your class.

Always have a plan B ready if all of plan A is over; or if something doesn’t work the way you want it to; or if the children’s class took the VCR; or if your assistant doesn’t show up...you get the picture!

Get all possible supplies together *in advance*! Practice any art project, game or pencil/paper activity to see if it works the way you intend.

Pray. Of course that should be first order of business as you begin your preparations, but pray also for the participation

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of the students and for *your* attitude. *YOU* will sell the idea of learning something new and applying it to their lives!

Go with an attitude of “I can be used of God to help change the lives of teenagers!”

What About Your Learning Environment?

There are great youth groups that meet in the church kitchen, or the top of a stairway, or at the front of the worship center which they share with three other groups! Take what you have and then make it work!

If you don’t have a room assigned to you regularly, don’t panic; be creative! Carry your youth room in a box, or in a big tote bag, or on a pushcart, or even on a wagon. Your most needed items will be: Bibles, pencils, markers, paper, tape, scissors and glue. Add a tape player or CD player and a few of their favorite songs.

If you share the room with other groups, choose a corner and have teenagers face the wall. Put up something of interest on focal the wall that directly relates to your unit of study at the time. You can even define your space with a big blanket or tablecloth on the floor. Don’t forget to use the windows, floor, or ceiling as well (in addition to the focal wall) for items to capture their attention.

So, what if you don’t have a perfect setup in your classroom and you are hearing two other lessons at the same time. Remember, teenagers have the ability to overlook these minor annoyances and hone in on what interests them. The more likely scenario is that the other groups will complain about *your* group being too loud. Simply explain that youth are loud learners, and aren’t they lucky to have teenagers who choose to come to a Bible study?

If you have an assigned room, take a good look at it. Is it clean and uncluttered? Can you vary the set-up so teenagers see something new each time they come to the class? Are their appropriate posters or items about the current session you are leading or is their stuff

from last Christmas still around? Be up to date!

If your room needs a little sparkle, have an artistic teenager draw something to display. A teenager adept with computer graphics could type scripture verses in an interesting manner. Posters are inexpensive. Perhaps the teenagers could even paint their room or cover it with fabric or...whatever your imagination can conceive and the facilities committee allow! But, remember, lighter walls are best for classrooms. Lighter colors allow the room to “feel” larger than with darker colors.

Having music or a video playing on arrival for teenagers is important. From the moment the teenagers step into the room, they should hear and see that something important, fun and meaningful is about to happen!

Folding or stackable chairs are best to allow variety in the room set-up and to provide for optimum usage of space. A table for youth to sit around is great for writing and art activities. A huge plus for any classroom is to have a closet or shelving for the storage of teaching supplies.

This storage area should include some basic supplies such as: large sheets of paper (or a butcher roll), notebook-sized paper, pencils, markers, highlighters, glue, masking tape, clear tape, stapler, scissors, construction paper, push-pins, and paper towels. A dry erase board or a chalkboard is a great addition as well. Chalk or dry erase markers and erasers are also necessary items to have in your resource room.

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The Best Strategy

A great learning environment is truly an asset to good learning experiences, but the best set up in the world will not effect change in students’ lives. That’s where *youth leaders, parents* and *youth ministers* come in. It is an opportunity for them to be used by the Holy Spirit and to watch the Spirit work in the lives of the teenagers in your group!

Teenagers of this generation are looking for relationships that are trustworthy.

You have the opportunity to become a friend to a younger person and connect him or her with God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. And you don't have to dress like a teenager, talk like a teenager or even eat like a teenager! But, you DO must have a growing spiritual life that oozes out God's love to this new generation.

The same Holy Spirit who energized Peter, Paul, Timothy, C.S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lottie Moon and countless other heroes of the Faith, is waiting to strengthen you as you lead a new generation to Jesus Christ, one by one!

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