

Student Ministers to Address Spiritually Speaking to 20-Somethings September 27

By Jonathan Brooks

Student ministers are taking notes:

- Observation: In general, churches seem to invest a great deal of resources in ministry to children and youth, but not in ministry to college students or young adults.
- Statistic: A Barna report last fall indicated that only 20% of twenty-somethings who were church-ed as teens are still spiritually active at the age of 29.
- Observation: Churches continue to lose generation after generation of young adults after having invested so heavily in them as children and youth.

How do churches stop the mass exodus of college students and young adults? How do churches bridge the gap between high school and college or young adulthood? How do churches communicate to young adults what it means to follow Jesus in a way that makes sense to them?

"Speaking of Spiritual . . . What Evangelistic Conversations Sound Like to the Next Generation" is one option to begin addressing those questions. The forum is scheduled for September 27 at 10 a.m. at Union Baptist Association.

"If I was new to the idea of ministering to college-aged individuals or if I happened to look around last Sunday morning and wondered where all the college students were, then this seminar would be a good starting point to address that concern," said Tamara Brooks, Baptist Student Ministry Director (BSM) at the University of Houston, and one of the organizers of the event.

Brooks also noted the importance of addressing how to connect with young adults. "The church has worked hard to lay a spiritual foundation for children and youth. If we do not do something that bridges the gap between high school and college, we will be wasting those efforts."

According to Erick Gunter, BSM Director at San Jacinto Community College and another facilitator for the event, one of the most important aspects of the workshop is that participants will experience what it is like to live in the technology-driven world of today's twenty-something.

"The hands-on experience we will provide will give participants insight into how college students function. At the same time, these multi-taskers may be talking to friends, typing on their computers, listening to their MP3 players, and text messaging on their cell phones while watching a movie in the background. They are bombarded by stimuli. What may not be acceptable or considerate to some generations is the social norm for this generation."

Gunter added that until pastors and church staff can understand this difference, little they try will succeed. "You cannot address the problem by bringing in a cool worship band or a new program. It is a much deeper issue than that."

"Students are more connected than anyone has ever been in history," asserted Andy Dennis, BSM Director at Rice University and the Medical Center and an event facilitator. "There, of course, are two innovations that have made it possible to be so connected: cell phones and internet. For the most part, these are the ways that you have to be able to communicate and understand if you want to connect with the younger generation."

Dennis also noted that in the midst of such connectedness there can also be a profound disconnectedness. Even though students are more connected by technology, there is less meaningful face-to-face interaction.

"I have found that churches that have been most successful at reaching students have given them a place and a feeling that they belong somewhere. Such churches see students as a valuable investment for the kingdom and not as a group that does not tithe or will not be there long term. This generation is able to detect when someone is not being genuine or to see through something that is just a 'program'. This generation is so fluid that what works today will likely not work five years from now. Ministry to students must be organic and relational," he added.

"Basically, one should approach ministering to this generation of students (and every generation of students) in the same way a missionary approaches ministering in a new culture," said Bertha Vaughns, BSM Director at Texas Southern University. "For example, we have used incompatible communication styles or formats when preaching and sharing the Gospel with them. We communicate in way that they do not hear or understand."

Vaughns, also a facilitator, noted that twenty-somethings must be reached as one would any other people group. The church must seek to understand their language and their worldview so it can best discover how to relate to and connect with this generation.

According to Dennis, some of these students will also need a place to question everything that they know. If the church will allow for some questions and seek to patiently and peacefully answer those questions, students will likely embrace the church. "College years are often times when students will question all of the things they have been taught throughout the years. We [the church] have to be willing to walk with them through these times instead of abandoning them to find answers outside of the community of Jesus."

"Obviously, we will only be able to scratch the surface in two hours," emphasized Brooks, "but this will at least get the conversation started and begin to address questions."

The free workshop hosted by the UBA and the Houston Area Baptist Student Ministry will be at the UBA on September 27 from 10 a.m. to noon. Houston area Baptist student ministry directors will lead the workshop.