



## Engaging a New Generation

Frank Mercadante

**I**n the 2007 motion picture *The Invasion*, Nicole Kidman plays Carol Bennell, a Washington, DC psychiatrist who observes changes in the personality of a client, her ex-husband, and finally the general population. In the course of what appears to be a routine morning, Bennell is uneasy. She says, “Something is happening. I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it.” She then turns to her companion and asks, “Have you noticed anything?”

We could ask the same question about 21st century teens! Although the teens physically resemble adolescents of the past (excluding expansive ink and multiple piercings), do they seem to think and see life differently than those of a generation ago? When it comes to church activities, does it seem like what was “tried and true” for teens is now “fried with few?”

Feeling less sure, and a bit off balance may well capture the pulse of the times for many of us. Something has distinctly changed among 21<sup>st</sup> Century teens. We can’t always name it or articulate it profoundly, but we can feel it.

The world has changed. Teens have changed. Their responses to our past programs have changed. However, many of our congregations, their faith formation approaches, and youth ministry offerings have remained the same.

Over the past several decades, two tributaries of change have formed and converged into a Niagara Falls’ force of transition. First, we are experiencing an epistemological transition. Our world is moving from a modern to a postmodern understanding of truth. Secondly, we are knee deep in generational change. We are transitioning from youth ministry and faith formation practices founded on Baby Boomers and Gen X teenage sensitivities to approaches and practices rooted in a Millennial Generation understanding of the world.

Whether we are a professional or volunteer leader, making sense of these foundational cultural changes can help clear the haze around the disconnect many of today’s young people

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**Frank Mercadante** is the executive director of Cultivation Ministries where he has trained thousands of youth ministers in over 85 Catholic dioceses internationally. He has consulted with several hundred parishes nationwide on growing disciple-making youth ministries. Frank has authored *Growing Teen Disciples*, *Positively Dangerous*, and *Make It Real* (St. Mary’s Press) and *Disciples in Mission Small Group Leaders Guide for Teens* (PNCEA). His website is [www.cultivationministries.com](http://www.cultivationministries.com).

are experiencing with the church. Moreover, it paves the way for an effective pastoral response to a new generation. This article attempts to overview each of these cultural transitions and their related ministerial implications.

## From Modernism to Postmodernism

On March 27, 1964, the largest recorded earthquake in North American history ravaged Alaska. Lasting a full five minutes and measuring a 9.2 on a seismograph, the earthquake not only caused extensive damage, but also twisted the terrain. Neighborhoods located off the coastline before the quake boasted of ocean views afterwards. Similarly, over the past several decades, an epistemological earthquake has shaken our understanding of truth, our views, and our life perspectives. As our culture is transitioning from a modern to a postmodern world and as a result we are seeing and understanding the world very differently than before.

Postmodernism can be best described as a worldview or lens in which one understands and interacts with the world. Originating in Western Europe after World War II, postmodernism is a rejection of modernism, the dominant worldview for the past 500 years. After two world wars, the threat of nuclear destruction, the Jewish Holocaust, and industrial pollution, the means and promise of the modern age were being questioned. The world was not uniting in agreement and progressing in the most important arena of life: the service of humanity.

Postmodernism emerged from the apparent failures of modernism as a means for human progress and a moral framework for culture. Postmodern thinkers challenged the tenets of modernism by replacing reason for experience, absolutes for opinions, universal truth for diversity of truths, certainty for

humility, propositions for realities, and linear thinking for random thought.

Because postmodern truth is based in practical reality, it is also related to a preference for authenticity. Instead of focusing on what one should be, and therefore, creating distance between one another, people should deal with their honest realities and open the door to experience greater connection and intimacy. Post-moderns are not looking for something to believe in as much as a community in which to belong.

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges to reaching the younger generation resides in the fact that we are living within an epistemological parenthesis. Our culture runs on two operating systems, an older modern platform and a newer postmodern version. Generally speaking, young people tend to be the early adopters, while older folks may stay with a system that's familiar and comfortable. More specifically, although highly concentrated in present day teens, post-modernism's cultural influence spans multiple generations. With two languages to describe and understand the world, the present generational disconnect should not surprise us.

## An Emerging Spirituality

As challenging as this epistemological shift is to the church, it equally brims with opportunity. The struggle to reach a changing world is a reoccurring theme throughout the church's history. In his book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch demonstrates how the theology of mission was defined and redefined with every paradigmatic shift over history.

A new spirituality is emerging as we increasingly view our world through a postmodern lens. In the book, *Finding Faith*, Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller describe this emerging spirituality among Post Boomers as "expressive communalism."

Expressive Communalism places an emphasis upon embodiment and community. People desire a deep, personal faith experience within the context of a close-knit and meaningful physical community. There is a hunger to belong, serve within the community, and serve others through social outreach outside the community. Moving away from a strictly rational faith, many Post Boomers hunger for a more holistic expression of faith that makes cognitive sense, but is more an embodied experience through worship, teaching, and concrete forms of service. Valuing organic grassroots leadership, they respond well to a participative style.

Addressing the contours of this emerging spirituality requires a retooling of our modern forms of evangelization. Perhaps, we move from modern evangelizing to postmodern *immanuelizing*.

## Immanuelization

Framing a new evangelization around the concept of the “Immanuel” (“God with us”) is critical because it fundamentally roots its expression in the theology of incarnation. The incarnation is so profound and radical, it becomes the primary impulse for all God’s working in the world. As it defines Jesus’ mission, so it gives shape to the church’s continuation of that mission today.

Modernity led by abstraction. Postmodernity leads by concretizing. To incarnate, actually means to make something concrete and real. The word literally means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh. Because postmodern truth arrives through the world of experience, the church must communicate the gospel experientially. In other words, we must operate as the embodied and experiential presence of Jesus. We can’t just talk about God’s love; we’ve got to *be* God’s love.

Immanuelizing means coming to grips with the fact that *the medium is the message*. It means living up to our billing as the Body of Christ. Jesus said the world will know us

because of our compelling lives of love (John 13:35). It means as individuals, and even more so as communities, taking on the character of Christ by exemplifying the fruits of the Spirit in all our dealings with others (Galatians 5:22, 23). In other words, our presence to the world is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

## The Shift from Modern Forms of Evangelization to Immanuelization

Additionally, moving from modern evangelization to immanuelization entails several essential shifts. (Note: *By shift, I mean added emphasis, not substituting one for the other.*)

Modern Evangelistic Expressions	Postmodern Immanuelization Shift
Individual belief as evangelistic entry point	Community belonging as evangelistic entry point
Emphasis upon rational argument as the primary apologetic	Emphasis upon the life of the church as the primary apologetic
Emphasis upon individual questing (Good news for me)	Emphasis upon service evangelization (Good news for others)
Appeal of “having it all together”	Appeal of being together in our brokenness
The mission and agenda of evangelization	The mission of accompanying people

### Entry Point Shift

In a postmodern world, there is a shift from a focus on individual belief to community belonging as the evangelistic entry point. A modern evangelistic approach primarily leads with an emphasis on the individual and personal belief. The individual made a choice of personally accepting Jesus and then moved into full membership in the community. The map to a modern expression of faith often followed the sequential route of believing, belonging, and behaving. Driven by

personally believing a certain set of religious truths, one then joined a community that shared the same individual beliefs, and then adopted the behaviors of the community.

As much as community is in the very DNA of Christianity, we had the theology but often lacked the experiential reality. Over time we adopted an understanding of community as a disembodied theological truth that mostly fell short of authentic experience. Practically speaking, many of our congregations became assemblies of individuals rather than authentic experiences of community.

Our evangelistic approach needs to shift from believing, belonging, and behaving, to belonging, behaving, and believing. If belonging is the evangelistic entry point, then evangelization must be rooted and expressed through the life of the community.

In the past, we've followed the believing, belonging, and behaving sequence: One embraces the faith in a rational and cognitive way, sacramentally joins the community, and then adapts the behavior of the faith community. Mission or service was on the tail end and a mature response to one's belief.

However, in reality, a faith journey is too rich and complex to be artificially packaged into a neat, predictable order. Young people today tend to hyperlink their way through life. Evangelization is not confined to particular evangelistic activities, but occurs in every corner of parish life as one is welcomed and participates in the overall life of the faith community. Because young people seek belonging, possess an embodied spirituality, and a propensity towards active participatory activities, concrete and communal acts of participation and service may be the most effective evangelistic activity.

### **An Apologetic Shift**

A second shift is from rational argument as the primary apologetic to the life of the church as the principal defense of the truth of the Gospel. This is not to say that we no longer need a reasoned argument for our

faith. We do. However, even if we win the day intellectually, most people will ultimately reject our message as a result of our inability to embody or live our truth.

When it comes to discerning truth, today's young people speak a new language. The Christian Church, as "the treasury of truths" leaves many of them shrugging their shoulders. Truth has to be real or work in real life to be true because they place more confidence in what they experience than what is merely said. In other words, truths are not judged by words and what makes rational sense, but by how well those words match up with real life experiences. In order to effectively evangelize young people today, the life of our congregations must become our most convincing apologetic. The credibility of our message is directly tied to the quality of our love. Jesus was definitive about our identity and reputation in the world. He said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. *"This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34, 35 italics mine).

The early church understood that it was impossible to love and serve God without loving and serving God's creation. In the second century, the Christian apologist Aristides tried to win over the emperor Caesar Hadrian with the conduct of the Christian community. He spoke of how the Christians lived honestly and upheld the highest moral standards by comforting their oppressors and even making them their friends, doing good to their enemies, reaching out to widows, advocating for the safety of orphans, carefully burying the poor who have passed from this world, treating strangers like family, ministering to the prisoner; and fasting several days in order to get enough money to feed the hungry. If that wasn't amazing enough, he added that the Christians never announced their good deeds in public, but actually tried to conceal them, trusting their reward would come from their Messiah. He concluded by saying, "And verily, this is a new

people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.”<sup>1</sup>

Who can deny that there was something divine about these Christians? They so embodied the life and teachings of Jesus that he was truly present through them—the Body of Christ on earth. They were immanuelizing.

### **Service: The New Face of Evangelization**

A third shift is from emphasis on individual questing to service evangelization. Evangelical campaigns in the seventies and eighties featured slogans such as “Born Again” or “I Found It.”<sup>2</sup> The messages of retreat movements and evangelistic conferences primarily appealed to the individualism of the age. Even the U.S. Army understood this, recruiting with the motto, “Be All You Can Be.” Evangelization was primarily about “you” as an individual, and about your getting your eternity and inner self in good order.

The spirituality among young people today moves away from the individual questing that characterized many of the evangelistic approaches geared toward Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. The inner spiritual focuses hold less meaning, especially if outside the context of an authentic experience of community and concrete expressions of one’s faith. Today young people prefer to express their faith in concrete and embodied ways. Inclusivity propels the heightened concern for justice among young people today. Justice and service provide teens with opportunities to address the needs of those pushed to the margins of society or those who have no voice. As a result, service is becoming the new face of evangelization.

Teens profoundly encounter Jesus in two ways as they serve. First, through the eyes of those they serve. With intentional theological reflection before and after serving, many teens recognize Jesus in the engagement—and are powerfully transformed as result. If evangelization is about facilitating an encounter with Jesus, there is no better place

to find him then in the poor (Matthew 25:37-40).

Second, young people fall in love with Jesus through his mission. They find the Great Lover as they love alongside of him. While joining him in his mission, they discover he’s the real deal, the one Person who has truly placed everyone else before himself, and they can’t help but fall deeply in love with him.

### **From Eternal Kingdom to Present Kingdom**

Earlier forms of evangelization catered to an individualistic spirituality. The evangelistic content was centered on the individual finding God’s plan for their life and securing their own eternal salvation. The Enlightenment placed the human mind at the center of truth and removed religion from the public square of life. In turn, religion leaned towards a rational, cognitive understanding of faith and a focus on the heavenly Kingdom. Believers worked towards their eternal destiny, understanding their faith through universal propositions, and expressing their faith through personal morality. The “spiritually together” person was so caught up in the heavenly realm that they were unaffected by and independent of their surrounding historical circumstances.

Today’s teenagers do not want to be evangelized to a set of ideas or rational truths, but to a practical reality. A faith that’s mostly about you and your eternity isn’t communal enough or concrete enough to warrant much interest. It’s not that young people are uninterested in heaven or don’t care about eternity. Rather, a life with little investment in loving and serving those around you seems pretty unworthy of heaven. The Kingdom of God is as much a present reality as an everlasting one. An evangelistic message that calls young people to sacrifice on behalf of others is an authentic message worthy of investing one’s life.

## Connecting On Brokenness

Modern teens accepted a humanity characterized by independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. These highbrow notions trickled down into everyday cultural expectations. Fonzie, from the 70s television series “Happy Days,” was the poster child for the “together individual.” The Fonz was cool, confident, and independent. He had it all together and had little need for others. Any fears or insecurities he may have harbored were safely masked beneath the image of his black leather jacket and Harley. The church had spiritual Fonzies. Holiness was defined by possessing a personal spiritual togetherness that separated you from others. Being holy meant having it all together, or at least projecting it. The holy person was busy with heavenly matters and less concerned with the contingencies of everyday, earthly business.

When gathering as a community, we connected on what we should be, not on what we were. One had to possess evangelistic credibility in order to bring people into this life-changing experience. That meant projecting an image of “having it all together” in order to attract those who didn’t. Evangelization was about pretending you were complete in order to attract others to a “community” that pretended the same.

Instead of being transformed into the “together individual,” the emerging spirituality seeks to be “together with others.” Instead of connecting on being ideal believers, today’s young people connect on their common brokenness. They lean away from overconfidence and certainty, and towards humility and mystery. Any display of religious swagger or moral superiority garners negative reactions. Practices that secrete even the slightest trace of religious arrogance—even with a benevolent exterior, are dismissed as toxic. Furthermore, any evangelistic approaches joined with narrow mindedness or intolerance are quickly shown the door. Equality and allowing everyone a place at the table is one of the highest postmodern values.

Our brokenness keeps us all on a level playing field.

## From Agenda Driven to People Driven

Finally, there exists a shift from a mission agenda to one accompanying people. I had a friend during my college years who was so focused on the achieving the “great commission” that he was oblivious to his own “great omission” —the care of the very people at the center of his ministry. He loved evangelization more than the people he was evangelizing and they knew it. People often felt they were a means to end, secondary to something greater, an achievement of *his* work. They felt quantified, objectified, and in the end emptied by the experience.

His approach was not uncommon. People were reduced to numbers, and programs replaced relationships. Furthermore, relationships were a means for “more important” agendas or were treated as a prerequisite for evangelization. Relationships, established as strategies of influence, left young people feeling demeaned as “projects.”

Today’s youth insist on inserting humanity back to the forefront of ministry. “Drive by” approaches have to give way to establishing genuine and trusting relationships with young people. Skeptical of ubiquitous marketing, many young people smell insincerity or ulterior motives in a stranger’s attempt to strike up a spiritual conversation. Instead of just inviting teens to our programs, we need to invite them into our lives. The immanuelizer is present and accompanies young people. The agenda is to love and walk with teens within the context of an embodied faith community. Proclamation occurs as a natural result of genuine accompaniment. A person remains loved whether they become a friend or enemy of the gospel.



## 2. From Generation X to the Millennial Generation

In addition to an epistemological revolution, we are transitioning generationally. The Millennial Generation teens (born from 1982 to 2002) arrived in high schools in 1995.

The fact is Millennial Generation teens are very distinct from their Boomer and Generation X predecessors. Many of our common assumptions don't work with this cohort. Furthermore, many of our established and current youth ministry practices (built on those assumptions) were developed during the late Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960) and Generation X (born 1961-1981) teen years. The result is the polite disinterest and disconnect from our present ministerial efforts.

The Millennial Generation heralds an impressive array of descriptive titles such as the "Good News Generation," the "Sunshine Generation," and the "Next Great Generation."

The "Good News" title is not without warrant. Most of the negative trends of previous teenage generations have declined with Millennials. Actually, it should come as no surprise.

The Millennials arrived during a time when America was quite positive about children. The "No Children Allowed" warnings surrendered to the minivan alerts of "Baby on Board." Many educational and social initiatives were launched in order to reverse some of the negative trends that besieged the youth of previous generations. Churches got on board by hiring youth ministers and developing youth ministries. Schools developed policies that ensured that every student had equal access to an education. The Millennials enjoyed unprecedented focus, protection, and positive opportunities.

## Core Characteristics of Millennial Teens

So, what makes the Millennial Generation different? There are some core traits of Millennials that distinguish them from past youth generations. The following section will describe three characteristics and the practical implications for those ministering to youth. It must be noted, however, that these are general traits and may not be true for every Millennial teen.

### 1. They are Special and Hovered Over

Millennials have been conditioned to feel special. They routinely received trophies for participation. They are accustomed to being hovered over by their parents, and American society as a whole. They grew up during a period when children were the dominant political agenda and over time they absorbed that message. Not surprisingly, many Millennials have come to understand and expect that the parents' purpose in life to be centered around the child's well-being, education, and future success.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Millennials grew up during the advent of reality television. Celebrity became accessible to commoners through shows like *Real World*. Throw in *YouTube*, and everyone's a star!

### Implications

For many Millennials, going to church and sitting passively is not enough. A part of being "special" is having a special purpose or role in the community. Millennials believe that they have an important individual and collective purpose in the world. Parishes who fall short of offering teens ample opportunities for meaningful involvement will find an increasing number of disconnected youth. They are not content to wait until adulthood to be active in their faith communities and world.

Most parishes are failing to capitalize on the Millennials' collective call to make a difference in the world. Let's face it—teens are not bursting out of our pews, complaining, "You are asking too much from me!" We are guilty more of under-challenging teens—asking so little that we've bored them out of the church. Successfully connecting with today's teen means planting seeds for big dreams. We need to challenge young people, giving them a platform and the tools to be world-changers.

Furthermore, teens are not impressed or persuaded by impersonal and routine invitation, which tends to be convention for many churches. Their parents and much of society—who've paid special attention to their needs, have conditioned them to higher expectations. When a church doesn't behave similarly (or a step above), teens may perceive it as uncaring. Our invitations must be personal and even better, given within an established relationship.

## 2. They Are Close To Their Parents

Millennials tend to like their parents! More than one in three teens (35%) characterize their relationship with their mothers as "extremely close." Over 41% of teens report feeling "extremely close" to their fathers (Christerson, et al., 32). Their parents are more likely to be reported as their heroes than any other person. Most identify with their parents' values. Contrast that with the teenage Boomers, when in 1974, a whopping forty percent said, "That they would be better off living without their parents" Christerson, et al., 42).

The conversations parents are having with their teenage children are not the same conversations they had with their own parents when they were teens. Today, parents and their teens more freely discuss issues and topics that almost seemed taboo when they were growing up. A 2008 Teens Research Unlimited survey reported that 75% say the "like to do things with their family" and 59%

say family dinners are "in" (USA Today, April 14, 2008).

## ***Intergenerational and Family Ministry***

Much of present day youth ministry is functioning on a Boomer and Gen X teen assumption: youth are rebelling against adult and parental authority and need a place to gather with one another in their own subculture. Segregating teens from the adult population is an unexamined, default practice for many churches. However, Millennials are not a rebellious generation who are seeking freedom from out-of-touch adults. From early childhood their lives were highly organized, supervised, and coached by adults. They have grown accustomed to their parents' involvement and adult presence in their lives. The Millennials are a generation who are more open and receptive to intergenerational and family-oriented programs. Most parishes would benefit by offering more of these kinds of activities. Additionally, we should include opportunities for young people to get involved in roles of leadership and ministry that have been primarily reserved for the adult population of our parishes. This might include roles within councils and committees, and worship, service, and educational ministries.

## ***Ministry to Parents***

Few youth research studies have had the kind of earth-shattering impact as the *National Study on Youth and Religion*. A key finding of the NSYR's is that teenage faith generally mirrors parental faith. Again, this should come as no surprise. Millennials share a strong connection with their parents.

Yet the implications are clear: The borders of youth ministry need to be expanded to include outreach to parents. It means collaborating with the pastoral staff members in order to more effectively equip parents in their role as primary religious educators of their children. It means working together to



better evangelize the entire parish community. It means not doing youth ministry in an adolescent vacuum. Instead of building disciple-making youth ministries, we need to work collaboratively to grow disciple-making churches.

### 3. They Are Stressed Out

Millennials are high achievers. They spend more time studying and take heavier course loads in school than previous generations.<sup>4</sup> They are painfully aware that their present performance directly impacts their future opportunities. Past generations were anxious about nuclear war, violence, and AIDS. Today, the greatest source of anxiety for teens is their grades and getting into a good college.

With fierce competition for the best colleges, many teens overload on a four-course menu of academics, extracurricular activities, sports, and volunteerism. Many teens choose their multiple involvements based upon how it will look on their college resume.

The amplification of involvement and achievement has come at a cost: tension and stress. Combining the pressure to get into the best colleges with today's technological opportunities, a concerning number of teens resort to academic cheating. A 2010 survey of 40,000 senior high students, reported that 59% admitted cheating on a test at least once in the past year, while 34% did it over two times. One in three reported that they used the Internet to plagiarize an assignment.<sup>5</sup>

In 2010, UCLA's annual freshman survey found the self-rated emotional health among incoming college freshman to be at its lowest point since they began asking the question in 1985. Almost one in three seniors reported being frequently "overwhelmed by all I had to do." Young women reported experiencing stress in greater numbers than young men. Only 17.6% of the boys reported feeling "frequently" overwhelmed, while 38.8% of the girls felt this way.<sup>6</sup>

### Ministry Implications

Many teens suffer with tension, pressure, and busyness as constant companions in their lives. It's critical that we don't multiply their stress by heaping on more meaningless demands, burdens, and requirements. In a similar context, Jesus said to a spiritually overburdened audience, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

***Maybe the best way to evangelize Millennials is by personally introducing them to a God who is bigger than their successes and failures within an authentic church community that offers refuge for their weary bodies, minds, and souls.***

Additionally, a contemplative prayer tradition maybe the best remedy for a busy and stressed-out teen. Not only do overstressed and under-rested Millennials need the spiritual rooting that a deep prayer life provides, but also cultivating these practices during the teen years is one of the most significant factors in developing a strong and committed young adult faith later. Christian Smith with Patricia Snell in *Souls in Transition* write, ". . . Emerging adults who as teenagers engaged in frequent and regular personal prayer and reading of scripture prove more likely than those who did not to continue on as more highly committed believers, more capable of resisting countervailing forces and mechanisms that would reduce their religious commitments and practices" (Smith and Snell, 235).

Taking the time as a community to learn, develop, and support one another in spiritual practices such as solitude, silence, centering prayer, adoration, Sabbath-keeping, *lectio divina*, etc., may be the most important investment we make for producing present and future dividends.

## The Crossroads

Youth ministry stands at a crossroads. As we stand at the intersection, may we be reminded of Jesus' words, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) Trying to go back to an earlier era and save the Church as we know it may mean losing a generation that doesn't relate any longer to our approaches and methodologies. In many ways we are presented with an incredible opportunity to become more real, loving, tolerant, community-oriented, and service-focused. Leonard Sweet poses the rhetorical questions "Will we live the time God has given us? Or will we live a time we would prefer to have?" (Sweet, 47).

### How will we respond?

#### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher*, cited from [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Many Baby Boomers were evangelized through campaigns that with slogans such as "born again" or "I found It." Even the U.S. Army utilized a similar approach with a "Be All You Can Be" recruiting slogan. Such approaches appealed to the individualism of the times.
- <sup>3</sup> This is more true of white Millennials than African American, Latino, Asian teens, who tend to carry on with greater reciprocity. See: Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Richard Flory, *Growing Up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 13.
- <sup>4</sup> Comparing 1980 to 2002 in amount of time doing homework. In 1980 29% of students did more than 5 hours of homework per

week. In 2002 that percentage jumped to 63%. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section3/table.asp?tableID=697>.

- <sup>5</sup> Josephson Institute for Ethics. Accessed at: [http://charactercounts.org/programs/report-card/2010/installmento2\\_report-card\\_honesty-integrity.html](http://charactercounts.org/programs/report-card/2010/installmento2_report-card_honesty-integrity.html).
- <sup>6</sup> The American Freshmen: National Norms Fall 2010. Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Educational Research Institute at UCLA. "The percentage of students reporting that their emotional health was in the "highest 10%" or "above average" when compared to their peers dropped 3.4 percentage points from 2009, from 55.3% to 51.9%. Women were far less likely than men to report high levels of emotional health (45.9% versus 59.1%, a difference of 13.2 percentage points), although both dropped similar amounts from 2009." Quoted from page 6.

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# Getting Practical with the New Generation

Frank Mercadante

Based upon both epistemological and generational cultural shifts, here are several practical expressions for engaging a new generation.

1. **Concrete expressions of faith speak to young people with a postmodern perspective.** Look at service from an evangelistic lens (in addition to a catechetical and outreach ministry lens). Integrate evangelistic reflections into each service event by asking questions such as: Where did you see Jesus or sense God's presence in this experience? In what ways is Jesus speaking to you through this service experience? How will you respond? Integrate prayer responses to these reflections.
2. **Millennials hunger for and respond to relationships.** Intentionally build a friendship culture within religious education and youth ministry gatherings. Integrate into every gathering an opportunity to meet new people and build on existing relationships. Treat relationships as a concrete expression of formation by setting standards such as making warm eye contact with the person sharing, or learning how to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn during life and faith sharing (Romans 12:15). Treat the process of forming a genuine Christian community with the same intention as faith or catechetical content.
3. **Intentionally foster the development of a rich, intergenerational affiliative faith** by making meaningful connections with families by capitalizing on every opportunity as early as possible, such as marriage preparation or baptism. These

events in their lives represent critical access points into the faith community. We not only need to make a connection from families to pastoral leaders, but from families to families, and children to children. For instance, baptismal preparation should include intentional community building within any classes or gatherings. Keeping those connections alive by later organizing baby-sitting co-ops, small groups, annual baptismal anniversary celebrations, and activities for their children will contribute significantly towards transforming a parish from being event driven to being community driven.

4. **Because parents are the greatest influence in children's faith lives, it's essential that we build an active ministry with, to, and for parents.** Whether an arm of the youth ministry or by way of collaborating with other parish ministries, we need to expand our borders beyond a age segmented approach. We can do this in three specific ways:
  - 1) Support parents in their role as primary evangelizers and disciple-makers of their children within the context of everyday family life. Consider hosting gatherings and supplying resources that help mentor, support, and develop skills in parents.
  - 2) Provide practical, family-friendly, take home or downloadable resources and ideas that parents can use in their homes.
  - 3) Promote parent-teen relationships by offering gatherings, programs, service opportunities, and retreats that deal with common parent-teen issues, help develop productive communication, and provide

opportunities to grow in their faith together.

**5. Young people hunger for a purpose worthy of their energies and efforts.**

Youth hunger to experience the adventure of Christianity. It's not enough to go through the motions of religious education or Confirmation. Teens need a compelling vision—a spiritually discerned, visual picture of what God desires for their community and world—and practical avenues to live out this mission. Establishing local outreach and/or connecting to larger missions will appeal to young people's desire to make a difference in their world. Fostering vision, and building youth-led ministries will also result in deeper investment and ownership

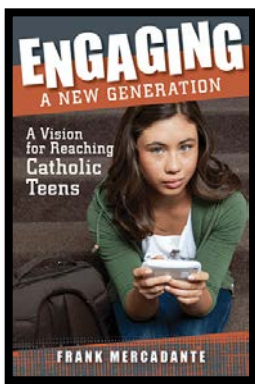
**6. Today's young people understand truth as more personal and practical, than objective, and propositional.**

When experience serves as the primary sifter for truth, real life becomes the lab for determining it. In other words, young people want to know if this stuff works. The onus is on us to demonstrate that it, indeed, works. Taking this position doesn't mean that we embrace the notion that "truth is simply what works." Nor does it imply that we do not recognize God's innate authority. It simply means providing teens with a good look under the hood of God's ways, helping them

recognize that love motors all of God's motives. For instance, when speaking of God's commandments, we might address young people's need for practical truth by saying, "Behind every negative commandment of God stand two positive and practical purposes: protection and provision. Every "No" is undergirded by a big, fat, emphatic "YES!" Yes, God wants what's best for us. God's commandments, like riverbanks, provide protective boundaries. When a river flows within those boundaries, communities flourish. When waters exceed their boundaries, like a flood, they wreak pain, havoc, and destruction." We might then provide practical examples of God's protection and provision undergirding the specific commandment.

**7. While preparing for meetings with teens, we would do well to ask ourselves "So what?" and "Who cares?"**

The very act of asking these difficult and challenging questions prepares us beyond any catechetical resource. They drill through to our own being, penetrating the depths of our hearts, striking and releasing the wellspring of our own passion for what we believe, and the stories that incarnate those beliefs. Rather than pontificating on impersonal truths, we witness to their personal reality in our lives—a perspective young people need today.



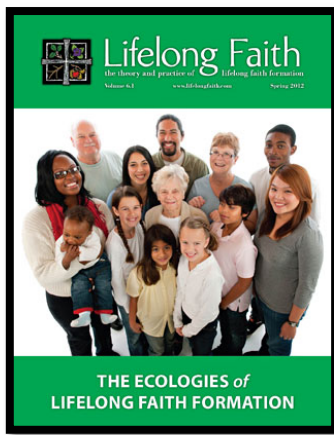
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