

# Reaching Millennials Who Leave the Faith



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



# Practical Ministry Skills: Reaching Millennials Who Leave the Faith

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## REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH

### Leader's Guide

*How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.*

*Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.*

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This theme on reaching young adults is designed to help your church strengthen its evangelistic impact on the tough-to-reach demographic of 18- to 34-year-olds. You may use it for a training session or give it to key people involved in evangelism. Simply print the handouts needed and use them as necessary.

To gain an appreciation for the severity and scope of the trend of young adults leaving the faith, read "The Ones Who Walk Away" (p. 3) and "Getting the Drift" (p. 7). To explore ways that you can connect with these disaffected young adults, read "Six Kinds of Leavers—and How to Reach Them" (p. 9) and "Bridging the Generation Gap" (p. 11). "Churches that Connect with Millennials" (p. 12) provides a glimpse of practices used by churches that have demonstrated success in reaching disaffected young adults.

We hope you find this theme eye-opening and useful as you and your congregation seek to call a generation back to faith in God.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

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**REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH****The Ones Who Walk Away**

*Young people are fleeing the faith and many may not return.*

Hebrews 3:12-13

The statistics are grim. According to Rainer Research, 70 percent of youth leave church by the time they are 22 years old. Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be “disengaged” by the time they are 29 years old. Unlike older church dropouts, these young “leavers” are unlikely to seek out alternative forms of Christian community, such as home churches and small groups. When they leave church, many leave the faith as well. Barna Group president, David Kinnaman put the reality in stark terms:

*Imagine a group photo of all the students who come to your church (or live within your community of believers) in a typical year. Take a big fat marker and cross out three out of every four faces. That’s the probable toll of spiritual disengagement as students navigate through their faith during the next two decades.*

**Strangers from Our Midst**

Kinnaman reports that 65 percent of all American young people report making a commitment to Jesus Christ at some point in their lives. Yet, based on his surveys, Kinnaman concludes that only about 3 percent of these young adults have a biblical worldview.

Kinnaman translates the percentages into real numbers: “This means that out of the 95 million Americans who are ages 18 to 41, about 60 million say they have already made a commitment to Jesus that is still important; however, only about 3 million of them have a biblical worldview.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean that there are 57 million young ex-Christians in the country. Only the most theologically lax would count anyone that makes a pledge or says a prayer as a genuine disciple of Jesus. On the other side of the coin, not having a biblical worldview doesn’t seal your fate as an unbeliever. Ultimately the precise number of young adults leaving is beyond human knowing. Still, such research shows us something very valuable about young people outside the faith. As Kinnaman concludes, “the vast majority of outsiders in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually *dechurched* individuals.”

In other words, these are not strangers, some mysterious denizens of a heathen underworld. Rather, most unbelieving outsiders are old friends, yesterday’s worshipers, children who once prayed to Jesus, even if they didn’t fully grasp what they were saying. Strictly speaking, they are not an “unreached people group.” They are our brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, and our friends. They have dwelt among us.

**Won’t They Just Come Back?**

Some hold out hope for a mass return, believing that once these young people settle down and have families, they’ll come back to faith. And indeed, in past generations, people raised in the church who leave do tend to come back once they establish careers, marry, and have children. However, there are reasons to believe that this return will not automatically occur with this generation.

First, there’s reason to believe that today’s young people are leaving the faith at a greater rate than young people of previous generations. Reporting on the latest studies, Harvard professor Robert Putnam and Notre Dame professor David Campbell note: “Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of 5 to 6 times the historic rate (30–40% have no religion today versus 5–10% a generation ago).” Comparing today’s young people with their parents may be like comparing apples and oranges.

Second, young adulthood is not what it used to be. For one, it’s much longer. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith describes this new extended phase in life: “The transition from the teenage years to fully-achieved adulthood has stretched out into an extended stage that is often amorphous, unstructured, and convoluted, lasting upward of twelve or more years.” This is important because some of the defining milestones of adulthood, such as establishing a career, getting married, and having children are also factors that tend to drive people back to religious involvement. Past generations may have returned after the leaving during young adulthood. But coming back after a two or three year departure is one thing; returning after a decade or more away is much more unlikely.

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It may be comforting to view what's happening with young adults as a temporary phenomenon, a short-term hiatus, and assume that they will automatically return en masse. Let's pray that they will. Unfortunately, such thinking may do more harm than good by giving us false hope and luring us into complacency.

— DREW DYCK; excerpted from *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith...and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Press, 2010). Used by permission.

### Discuss

1. What are some of the major factors behind young people leaving the church? What can be done to address these issues?
2. Has your congregation seen young adults leave? What are some creative ways you could reach out to them?
3. What do you think causes young adults to leave the faith? How can we change what we're doing in the church to retain them and call the ones who have left back to God?

**REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH****Postmodern Spirituality**

*Lessons learned in evangelism and Christianity while serving a cynical generation.*

1 Corinthians 4:2

Daniel Hill holds a steady part-time job working one or two shifts a week at Starbucks. It's hardly a career-track position, and it's not that he needs the extra cash or battles a secret caffeine addiction. It's the people. Purple hair, belly-button rings, tattoos, black-painted fingernails—those people.

For Hill, whose day job is ministering on staff with Willow Creek Community Church's Axis ministry, Starbucks provides a context to build meaningful relationships with postmodern, Gen-Next twentysomethings who are far from God.

"Nothing has been more transforming for me than working at Starbucks," says Hill. "These people matter to me."

But the moonlighting gig isn't a free pass to easy evangelism. His coffee colleagues are like a good cup of triple espresso—plenty of steam, a little bitter, and enough kick to knock you on your backside if you aren't careful.

With fingers pointed at Christians, we're obliged to identify the underlying accusations and offer a response. Three questions are at the core:

**1. Why should I trust you?**

Anyone who claims authority today—politicians, parents, or pastors—will face the question of trust.

Rick Richardson, author of *Evangelism Outside the Box* and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's national field director for evangelism, observes: "When people ask questions about homosexuality, for instance, we're tempted to think they're asking questions about right and wrong. But they're not. They're asking questions about dominance and oppression."

In other words, the answer requires more than words. Christians, with PowerPoint presentations and four-point evangelistic outlines, have mastered the art of proclamation. But words alone aren't going to answer the trust question. Trust is built by actions, not words.

One of the most fundamental ways to represent God's kingdom is by being kind to the disaffected, even when we have genuine disagreements with the way they choose to live. In whatever way we respond, the one thing we can't do is ignore the trust issue.

**2. Isn't that just your reality?**

The Starbucks-serving Daniel Hill says that the "whatever works for you" mentality is a foundational part of the postmodern mindset. Still, he says, it can be fruitless to engage that argument directly.

Hill calls the postmodern mindset "kind of the air they breathe" rather than a deep-seated philosophical barrier to faith.

"I've never been able to persuade someone intellectually to abandon the relativistic mindset," he says. "That's never the doorway I get someone to walk through. What's more likely to happen is that they'll see the power of a transformed life in another Christ follower and be transformed."

Hill says we also do well to remember that relativism has its plus side. "People are open to Jesus," he says. "They just don't consider him the only way. I try to engage them in who Jesus is rather than prove that the others aren't correct."

**3. What good is Christianity?**

Richardson calls this the question of utility and relevance. Does your belief change lives? Does your religion work? Does it help me, whether I'm in your group or not? Or are you just another self-serving group?

"The question of the uniqueness of Christ is not primarily philosophical," he writes. "People are not looking for theological comparisons but for attractiveness, relevance, and usefulness."

In today's culture, there will always be questions and accusations—some fair, others unfair; some informed, others ignorant. As ministers of the gospel, what is our response?

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Hill suggests the best way may also be the simplest. “Be intentional and authentic in your friendship,” he says. “Their response to my overtures can’t determine whether we stay in friendship. If it does, then it’s not a friendship but a manipulative ploy to get them to become a Christian. It’s a difficult paradox to reconcile.”

— BRETT LAWRENCE; excerpted from our sister publication *Leadership* journal, © 2003 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

### Discuss

1. How can we reach beyond the walls of our church to interact with young skeptics?
2. How have you combated the “whatever works for you” mentality, and what was the result?
3. What does it mean to present the “relevance and utility” of Christ to young adults outside the church?

## Getting the Drift

*Young people don't need hip leaders; they want older Christians committed to being present in their lives.*

1 Timothy 4:12

*Josh Riebock speaks to young people at camps, churches, colleges, retreats, seminars, and conferences. He is author of mY Generation: A Real Journey of Change and Hope (Baker, 2009). In this interview, he speaks with Drew Dyck about how churches can impact the lives of young people.*

**Ed Stetzer has described many youth groups as “holding tanks with pizza.” Teenagers generally seem happy with their youth groups, but then most of them end up drifting out of church after graduation. What’s going on?**

Let’s be honest, you can find a lot more fun things to do in college than eat pizza. If there’s not a more compelling reason, why would you waste your time? Growing up I hated youth group. I didn’t see the point. To me, if it doesn’t get beyond the pizza and movie and games, eventually you’re going to drift away.

When I look at my life, and the lives of the people that I know and still know, the people that end up wandering off from church often do so simply because they never understood the need to be in a community. The church that they were a part of before perhaps never presented it that way or told them that existed. It was more like, hey, just one more night of fun! Come get a break from homework. There’s just nothing inspiring about that. It potentially creates a real faith struggle. You wonder, “If I don’t see the point of church and church seems to play such a major role in this whole Jesus thing—what does that tell me about Jesus?” There’s a potential domino effect. I think the church needs to either say that it’s not essential, or it needs to act essential. To say it is and then to not act that way—it creates so many problems.

**In your book you write that Jesus was relevant, but not relevant because he wore the latest tunic and fashion sandals. We’ve all seen the leader who is 40 years old and wears skinny jeans and a faux hawk, but doesn’t get it. How can you be both relevant and authentic?**

Part of relevance is tied to the second word you used: authenticity is crucial. As a soon as that disappears, irrelevance is soon to follow. I don’t believe that someone has to look like me, act like me, and like the same things as me in order to impact me. Most of the time, and when I look back through my life, some of the people that have had the greatest impact on me, and some of the people that I will still go in my life regularly, are more than 20 years older, and are in completely different vocations. They dress like suburban dads.

The reason I go to them is because more than anything, their actions have demonstrated to me over and over that they care about me. I mean, honestly, what is more relevant to someone than that, than knowing someone cares about you? If we invested half as much time thinking of how to care for young people as we did sitting in meetings talking about this new series we’re doing, or how we’re going to amp up a program, things would be much different. None of this is new. But when we insult young people when we think that because a building is cool or the music is good, that all of a sudden they’re going to go, “Oh, now I want to be here!” They just think, how shallow do you think I am? It needs to be about something more. What would it look like as a church to really demonstrate humility to these students, to demonstrate what it looks like to serve and to be involved as opposed to laboring over that other stuff? I think students would get a completely different picture of why the church matters and of who Jesus is.

**The younger generation is so media saturated. They’ve been inundated with advertisements their whole lives. They can really smell when someone is trying to package something and sell them full of goods.**

In my six years of being a youth pastor, I found that the one thing that seemed to break through to students is when someone got involved in their lives. It’s not that being relevant doesn’t help. It does. But those things are not compelling enough to keep someone. It’s not compelling enough to draw them deeply into something. And we know this. Can you tell me what the number one movie in America was a year ago?



**Oh, man, you got me there.**

We don't remember that stuff. It all comes and goes! If you were to try to remember what series your church studied four months ago, that's tough. I barely remember the message I heard three days ago. But I remember the people who were involved in my life. I realize that this is guess basic stuff. But I think if we would invest in students, we'd find that God's wired our souls that way. Unless we speak that language, and unless we invest our hours in people, we're not going to demonstrate to students how essential Jesus is and the essential role the church plays in conveying his message.

**Why do many young people seem to be bailing on the church and even on the Christian faith?**

A big part of it is that we haven't communicated anything compelling about it. The way we demonstrate it is boring. The faith that we live out in front of them isn't the faith that they find if they actually read scripture. It's almost feels like there are two completely different stories being told. If someone is actually investigating their faith and pursuing Jesus, at some point those things are going to collide and it just creates problems. Some choose not to reconcile those two experiences. They choose to ditch it rather than work through it.

Another factor is that we've kept younger people out of most leadership positions. That's a problem. The younger people don't have a voice. I heard about an older church that's wrestling through the idea of how to connect with the younger generation. So they gathered all the leaders and some younger individuals and asked for their input. One of the teens said, "Well, if you really want to demonstrate that you care about us, about the younger generation, you've got to let us make some of the decisions." Someone asked, "Well, what exactly do you mean?" The young person said, "For example, why not let us have a say in the music and the worship?" The elder looked at this young person and said, "That's a great idea, but your generation doesn't fund this church, we do."

When I hear things like that, it's no mystery why young people walk away. Of course not every church is like that, but sometimes there's a sense of entitlement with the older generation because they have the power and money. That can be incredibly discouraging for a young person. They just think, well, I'm 20 years away from having a voice here anyway, so maybe I'll come back then when I actually matter.

It's just exactly the opposite of the message Jesus teaches. He would say that you have power so that you can serve. You have resources so you can give and not ask for anything in return. You've been put in a position of leadership to demonstrate what it looks like to be a servant rather than lording over people. That kind of posture of humility changes everything. Suddenly young people would feel like they're contributing something that matters to them instead of just being asked to join in something that matters to someone else.

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**Discuss**

1. Have you seen churches that entertain but don't connect deeply with young people? What's the right balance between entertainment and discipleship?
2. What is your church's attitude to young people? Are they included in major decisions?
3. How can your church capture the attention of young people in a culture where they are inundated by media?

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### Six Kinds of Leavers

*Use these categories to better understand why young people leave the faith, and how to reach them.*

#### 1 Corinthians 9:19

Not all young people leave the faith for the same reason. Over the past year I've had the opportunity to interview dozens of leavers. No two people I talked to were identical, but upon close observation, some patterns emerged. The following list introduces six different kinds of leavers. I've assigned them names based on the primary factors that led them away from the faith. As you read this list, think of young people you know who have walked away. Do any of these descriptions sound familiar?

**Postmodern Leavers** reject Christianity's exclusive claims and moral absolutes. Personal experience—not objective truth—guides them. They care about the poor and oppressed, but feel that Christian faith is too narrow.

Characteristic language: *"Logic comes from the Western philosophical tradition. I don't think that's the only way to find truth."*

Tips for reaching postmodern leavers:

- Tell your story. In a postmodern world, metanarratives are suspect, but personal perspectives are sacrosanct. You are authorized to tell your story.
- Build trust. Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, two campus evangelists with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, have seen literally thousands of postmoderns come to Christ. The first step they've witnessed on the path to faith for these college students is simple: learning to trust Christians.
- Invite them to serve. Postmoderns prefer to discover truth through experience rather than reason. Most also have strong social consciences and a willingness to serve the poor. Inviting them to serve alongside you actually allows them to participate in God's work in the world and experience life in the community of believers.

**Recoilers** have been hurt by Christians, often ones they regarded as spiritual authorities. These leavers may cite intellectual doubts as the reason for their departure, but deep hurts and psychological scars are what really caused them to abandon the faith.

Characteristic language: *"If God is love, why did someone hurt me in his name?"*

Tips for reaching recoilers:

- Empathy, not arguments. Since emotional pain is what drove them from the faith, identify with their pain rather than trying to refute their arguments.
- Focus on relationship. Since their break with faith came because of relationship, their healing must also take place in the context of relationship. Show them that Christians can be trusted.
- Provide a theological framework for understanding pain. Eventually you'll have to provide satisfying biblical answers for the negative experiences they've had. Help them differentiate between God and those who hurt them in his name.

**Modern Leavers** completely reject supernatural claims. Miracles don't happen. God is a delusion. Heaven is pie in the sky. They have no problem with truth claims and will readily argue their convictions. But any truth beyond the reach of science is dismissed as superstition.

Characteristic language: *"Religion is irrational nonsense. If the Bible is true why are there no miracles today?"*

Tips for reaching modern leavers:

- Don't fight "proxy wars." When faith becomes too contentious, debate often gets channeled to other arenas (such as politics or lifestyle issues) and we end up fighting "proxy wars" of inessentials. Save your most impassioned pleas for the life-giving message of the gospel.
- Engage in courteous but rigorous apologetics. Moderns have no problem with truth claims and reason. Lay out your Christian beliefs with clarity and conviction.
- Don't assume they understand Christianity. Moderns will present a variety of reasons for the decision to walk away, but even among the most argumentative, bizarre misperceptions of the faith abound. Make sure you communicate the gospel clearly and gently correct misunderstandings.

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**Neo-Pagans** trade Christian faith for earth-based spiritualities such as Wicca. Not all actually participate in pagan rituals, but they deny the reality of a transcendent God and see earth as the ultimate source of true spirituality.

Characteristic language: *“Earth is a goddess. I encounter her sacred presence in the water, wind and trees.”*

Tips for reaching neo-pagans:

- Demonstrate care for creation. Since neo-pagans have a deep reverence for the earth, they will reject any spirituality that fails to account for the sacredness they’ve encountered in nature.
- Honor Eve. Most neo-pagans are women and feel that Christianity has done a poor job of valuing women. Point to the compelling example of Jesus, who always related to women in a way that was gentle, yet never demeaning.
- Share your spiritual experiences. For most neo-pagans, Christian faith was a dry and dusty affair. They long for dynamic spiritual connections.

**Rebels** are stubborn and strong-willed. They find it difficult to submit to God’s authority and don’t want anyone telling them what to do. They may even hold basic Christian beliefs, but the temptation to engage in sinful behavior and the desire for autonomy cause them to push God away.

Characteristic language: *“I can’t stand having someone control me. I just want to have a good time.”*

Tips for reaching rebels:

- Don’t focus on their sin. Rebels often lead sinful, destructive lives; this can make it easy to harp on their destructive choices. However, doing this will cause them to tune you out and deprive you of opportunities to speak into their lives.
- Look for moments of “heightened receptivity.” The destructive lifestyle of rebels means they’ll suffer many lows. When they reach those low points, be ready to engage them in spiritual conversations.
- Give them a cause. Underneath a rebel’s propensity for rebellious behavior lies a deep thirst for adventure and purpose. Make sure they understand the radical nature of the gospel, with all its risks and demands.

**Drifters** do not suffer intellectual crises or consciously leave the faith; they simply drift away. Sometimes this process takes years and usually happens after leaving the Christian environment of their youth. Over time God becomes less and less important until one day He’s no longer part of their lives.

Characteristic language: *“I grew up a Christian, but I don’t really practice the faith anymore. God just seems irrelevant to my life now.”*

Tips for reaching drifters:

- Atmosphere, not argument. Drifters are strongly influenced by their environment. The first step in reaching them is to lead them back into the presence of other Christians.
- Raise the bar. Drifters usually leave because they had a shallow faith, one where God was little more than a benevolent force there to make life more pleasant. Show them that church is more than a social club and that following Christ is an all-or-nothing proposition.
- Connect. One of the major reasons young adults leave is lack of connections to older, spiritually mature Christians. Connect drifters with Christians outside their age group to form discipling relationships.

— DREW DYCK; adapted from *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith...and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Press, 2010). Used by permission.

## Discuss

1. When was the last time your church did teaching on Jesus’ largest block of ethical teaching, the Sermon on the Mount?
2. How you would rate yourself when it comes to teaching on who Jesus is—not just what he did?
3. What are some great conversation starters to use with young adults who are into Jesus but turned off by church?

**REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH****Bridging the Generational Gap**

*The fast-changing culture and skepticism of young adults requires a different approach to evangelism.*

Acts 17:16–21

*T.V. Thomas is the Director of the Centre for Evangelism & World Mission. He travels widely speaking to young people at camps, churches, colleges, seminaries, retreats, seminars, and conferences. He spoke with Building Church Leaders about how to evangelize to young leavers.*

**Young people are leaving the church at an alarming rate. Why is this happening?**

Christian leaders have not been prepared to deal with the change in youth culture. In youth culture, a few years are an eternity. In the past few years, the whole sense of community has been redefined. Facebook and other social networking sites are community to young people. Coming to a church event used to be pretty natural, but it now it looks very different from the kind of community they are experiencing.

**So what's the answer? Should we all be texting and Twittering?**

Well, we need to do more of that. We need to be in the spaces in which they are connecting. And since they are more reluctant to come out to events, when we have an event, it needs to impact them and meet actual needs. But we really need to take initiative to get to their turf. The old model was about getting them to come to us. Now rather than come, you go. That isn't always about getting online though. Go sit on the campus, go to the lunch cafeteria, and get out there where young people live their lives.

**How has the postmodern climate changed the way we do apologetics?**

In the past apologetics has basically been us saying, "Listen here, we've got this great defense of the gospel. We have our reasons all stacked up and you're going to listen." That just doesn't work as well anymore. I think if you were to actually win young people over you have to help them discover the gospel in a relational Bible study. So you don't do historical apologetics: the problem of evil, the existence of God, etc. You make them feel comfortable and lead them to discover the truth piece by piece. So rather than persuade solely with logic, you facilitate discovery, where they see for themselves, and then help them to put it all together. It's like a puzzle, and it's pieced together through facilitated discovery.

**What about reaching those who grew up in the church, but have fallen away or even outright denounced the faith?**

Tell them about your story. They might say, "Don't tell me anything about Christianity!" But they don't mind you telling them your story, because it's your story. Just because they walked away from the faith doesn't mean they don't admire it. They just haven't figured out how it fits in to their scheme of things. But when they can see that you feel comfortable and are enjoying your faith, they'll respond. And then, of course, it's important that you bring people who are enjoying their Christian faith into your circle. That's very important, that whole idea of exposure. Don't impose, but expose.

**A lot of people advocate evangelism through acts of service. But what about sharing the gospel verbally? What's the right balance?**

I think the acts of service should be your context, the environment in which you're able to speak into their lives. Young people care about a lot of things, everything from poverty to helping seniors, to caring for the environment, to the problem of AIDS. Participate in acts of service with them and then ask some questions that touch on the underlying principles for service. You might ask them, "Why are we serving?" Well, for one, because of the dignity of humans. That's a value that the Bible spells out clearly. All humans are valuable, but we need to ask them to think, where does that value come? Who gives the value? Instead of starting by talking about sin, we can explore some other approaches.

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**Discuss**

1. Is your church going to the places where young people are? Where is that in your community?
2. Does your church put more of an emphasis on rational arguments or relational study?
3. What areas of service in your church could be good to direct younger people to?

**REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH****Churches that Connect with Millennials**

*These nine traits characterize churches that reach disaffected young adults.*

Colossians 2:19

Let's look at some examples of churches that are actually reaching young adults. We surveyed almost 200 churches to search for trends and found a series of nine common characteristics in these churches that are effectively reaching young adults. Here's what they're doing:

**Creating Deeper Community**

Churches that are effective at attracting and developing young adults place a high value on moving people into a healthy small group system. Young adults are trying to connect and will make a lasting connection wherever they can find belonging.

**Making a Difference through Service**

Churches that are transforming young adults value leading people to serve through volunteerism. More than being pampered, young adults want to be part of something bigger than themselves and are looking to be part of an organization where they can make a difference through acts of service.

**Experiencing Worship**

Churches that are engaging young adults are providing worship environments that reflect their culture while also revering and revealing God. More than looking for a good performance, young adults desire to connect with a vertical experience of worship.

**Leveraging Technology**

Churches that are reaching young adults are willing to communicate in a language of technology familiar to young adults. Young adults sense that these churches are welcoming churches that value and understand them, engaging them where they are.

**Building Cross-Generational Relationships**

Churches that are linking young adults with older, mature adults are challenging young adults to move on to maturity through friendship, wisdom, and support. Young adults are drawn to churches that believe in them enough to challenge them.

**Moving toward Authenticity**

Churches that are engaging young adults are reaching them not only by their excellence but by their honesty. Young adults are looking for and connecting to churches where they see leaders that are authentic, transparent, and on a learning journey.

**Leading by Transparency**

Churches that are influencing young adults highly value an incarnational approach to ministry and leadership. This incarnational approach doesn't require revealing one's personal sin list so much as it does require that those in leadership must be willing to express a personal sense of humanity and vulnerability.

**Leading by Team**

Increasingly churches reaching young adults seem to be taking a team approach to ministry. They see ministry not as a solo venture but as a team sport—and the broader participation it creates increases the impact of ministry.

— ED STETZER; excerpted from *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* (B&H Books, 2008). Used by permission.

**Discuss**

1. What practices from the list above resemble what our church is doing? What things are these churches doing that we are not doing?
2. In what practical ways can we make our congregation more welcoming for young adults?
3. What obstacles do we currently face that prevent us from implementing practices that resonate with young adults?

**REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH****Calling Them Home**

*Seeing prodigals return means participating in what God's already doing in their lives.*

Luke 15: 11-32

Ex-Christians pray some of the most beautiful prayers.

I only realized this fact when I heeded my wife's advice to start asking one simple question in my interviews.

It was an absurd question, really, considering how bitterly most of the people I interviewed had denounced the faith. But I started asking it anyway.

"Do you ever still pray?"

Usually the person's eyes would turn to the ground. If we were talking on the phone, the line would go silent for a few seconds.

"Yes."

"What do those prayers sound like?" I would ask.

That's when they poured out their prayers. They were angry prayers, but beautiful in their honesty and desperation: "God, where are you? Can you hear me? Do you exist? Do you even care about me? I miss you."

If those surprising prayers taught me anything, it's that God is still very much at work in the lives of those who have rejected him. That's heartening. It makes our task of reaching leavers less daunting. Ultimately we don't carry the responsibility to bring them home. That's God's job. Our work involves merely getting behind what he's already doing.

But how can we do that? Let's look at some of the ways we can participate in God's work in their lives.

**Discourse**

Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to do any homework to reach leavers? If we didn't have to worry about studying up on the arguments for God's existence, the resurrection of Jesus, or the reliability of Scripture?

While that would be easier, it's not reality. We need to know why we believe what we believe. It's essential to our faith and our witness. As we've seen in previous chapters, the arguments we present will vary depending on our audience. But we must be prepared to give good answers to hard questions. Fortunately there are great answers for the questions leavers ask. We just have to do our homework and learn what they are.

At the same time, we shouldn't expect too much from arguments. They're valuable, but have clear limits. It's easy to imagine facing off with ex-Christians in a debate-style format. If we only score enough rhetorical points, we think, we can argue them into the kingdom.

Of course, that's rarely how it works. Our exchanges with leavers will likely exert a more subtle influence. The impact can be gradual, almost imperceptible. Yet presenting our reasons for God will make a difference, even if we "lose" some arguments. C.S. Lewis wrote, "The very one who argued you down, will sometimes be found, years later, to have been influenced by what you said." I've found this to be true in my own experience. Even when I strongly disagree with someone on a topic, interactions with them affect me. If they present good ideas with clarity and conviction, they often eventually change my mind. We enter into dialogue with leavers with the long view in mind. We're not trying to win arguments. We merely want to clear some of the obstacles to faith. At the very least, we can give them words that will echo in their minds later in life.

**Relationships**

When I began writing this book, I knew that relationships were important to this issue. However, it wasn't until I talked with dozens of ex-Christians that I realized just how important they really were. Deconversion doesn't happen in a vacuum. A person's decision to abandon the faith is inextricably tied to a host of human connections. The same is true of the decision to come back. In testimony after testimony, we hear of how God uses one or two caring Christians to lead people to himself. All the words in the world won't matter if we don't forge these kinds of loving relationships with the leavers in our lives.

Of course the relationships between Christians and ex-Christians are notoriously difficult. Conflict is inevitable. It's easy to become discouraged, especially when an ex-Christian seems so hostile to the faith. But

## REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH

take heart. The ones seemingly most resistant to God can be the ones most likely to come home. It's often said that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Emotional reactions to God, even negative ones, are signs of life. Often those who are seemingly beyond God's grace are those who are actually closest in coming to him.

### Prayer

In the moment when one leaver finally surrendered to God, he was hit with a distinct impression. He described it like a voice in his head: *Do you realize how many prayers went up to make this possible?*

There were dozens of Christians faithfully petitioning God for his return. When that moment of surrender came, God impressed upon him the crucial role that those prayers played.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of prayer. I'm convinced that we can give our loved ones who have strayed no greater gift than time spent in the presence of God on their behalf. Plead, ramble, cry, rage—but don't stop. We can be confident that when we pray for prodigals, we are praying according to God's will. Our desire to see them return is nothing next to his.

— DREW DYCK adapted from *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith...and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Press, 2010). Used by permission.


### Discuss


1. What questions have you asked leavers in the past, and what were the results?
2. How might God still be working in the life of someone who has wandered from him? How can you get involved?
3. Of the three actions above—discourse, relationship, and prayer—which have you given the most time? The least? What steps can you take to lead young adults back to God?

## REACHING MILLENNIALS WHO LEAVE THE FAITH

### Further Exploration

*Books and other resources to equip your church for evangelism.*

 **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

 **LeadershipJournal.net**: Our sister website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith...and How to Bring Them Back** by *Drew Dyck*. This book provides profiles of young adults who have left the faith and tips for engaging them in meaningful conversations about God, and to ultimately lead them back to the faith. (Moody Press, 2010; 978-0802443557 )

**UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christians ... and Why it Matters** by *David Kinnaman*. This book provides comprehensive research revealing what young people think about today's expressions of Christian faith. (Baker Books, 2007; 978-0801013003)

**Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts** by *Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer III*. This book explores what kinds of churches have proven effective in connecting with young people who have drifted away from the church. (B&H Publishing, 2008; 978-0805443929)

**a.k.a. Lost: Discovering Ways to Connect with the People Jesus Misses Most** by *Jim Henderson*. A handbook on how to make meaningful connections with the "missing": the people formerly known as "lost." (WaterBrook, 2005; ISBN 978-1578569144)

**Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News** by *Rick Richardson*. The national coordinator of evangelism for InterVarsity Fellowship USA offers ways to spread the gospel in a postmodern age. (InterVarsity Press, 2000; ISBN 978-0830822768)

**Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them** by *Ed Stetzer*. Stetzer includes practices from churches that have been particularly effective at attracting young adults. (B&H Publishing, 2009; ISBN 978-0805448788)

**They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations** by *Dan Kimball*. This book describes how young people see the Christian faith. (Zondervan, 2007; ISBN 978-0310245902)

**Share Jesus without Fear** by *William Fay with Linda Evans Shepherd*. This book is an antidote to argumentative and antagonistic approaches to evangelism. The foundation is solidly biblical and the method refreshingly relational, offering clear evidence that one-on-one evangelism is easier than it seems. (Broadman & Holman, 1999; ISBN 978-0805418392)