

Getting the Drift

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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