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Soul Searching the Millennial Generation

Strategies for Youth Workers

L. David Overholt and James Penner

Stoddart

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*We would like to dedicate
this book to our families:
Helen and Karra;
Claire, Elya, and Erick*

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Introduction

Because you have picked this book up, you probably love teenagers. So do we! However, loving teenagers is just the first step for those of us who work with them. We believe youth work requires two further steps.

One is understanding. We hope that as you travel through the pages of this book you will gain a deeper understanding of what forms the inner and outer worlds of the teenagers in your life, to understand their spiritual, social, and personal dispositions in the spirit of St. Francis's prayer: "Lord, help me not so much to be understood, as to understand."

The second step is creative application. We hope to spark in you the beginnings of creative thought about how you can help your teenagers. We don't want to leave you frustrated, asking "So what do I do now?" We hope that our creative applications of theory into actual youth work will help you create your own applications to your own situations.

We are both lifelong seasoned youth workers. Dave is a pastor of a youth-targeted church of many hundreds. He teaches youth ministry courses at a variety of seminaries and speaks extensively to youth and youth workers in Canada and the United States. James is a parachurch youth worker who teaches a sociology of youth course at University of Lethbridge, Alberta, and is a spiritual director and youth culture/ministry consultant in Canada. Dave has a doctorate in Philosophy of Education, with a dissertation on the dynamics of adult-teen mentoring. James has a master's degree in sociology, with a thesis on the relationship (or lack thereof) between teens and organized religion. We both have extensive training at various colleges, seminaries, and retreat centers, and we both were invited by renowned sociologist Reginald W. Bibby to take his recent nation-wide teen survey and apply it to youth work.

We bring different strengths to this venture. Because of his sociological background, James contributed much of the survey analysis, while Dave, because of his more extensive and intensive front-line experience in youth ministry, contributed the bulk (but not all) of the youth ministry stories and insights. The “I” in this book is used interchangeably, but it most often refers to Dave’s experiences. We have analyzed teen culture through different lenses — James through a sociological lens and Dave through a psychological/educational lens. To us, this book is very much “co-authored art,” with all of the advantages, joint commitment, ongoing communication, and tradeoffs that such a venture implies.

Both of us assume that God is still very much alive and lovingly working in individuals and communities. Both of us have joyfully experienced the God who tasted death and lives again: Jesus Christ. We are writing this book with an understanding that there is a partnership with God in youth ministry. You may not share this assumption. We respect that. Still, we invite you, “Please read on!” The Christian community has a very active history in working with teenagers, and we believe that you may gain insight into your group by observing ours. We have tested our findings with a large sampling of Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelicals, and found that our analyses and their implications to ministry can be broadly applied.¹ But they can be applied outside church circles as well, places such as the family, community youth programs, schools, sports settings, and the work arena.

Sources

The sources of our research are threefold.

First, Reginald Bibby’s Project Teen Canada (PTC) 2000, 1992, 1984, survey data. This unparalleled source of comprehensive trend data shines a light on the values, behaviors, expectations, and concerns of young people over the past two decades. In addition, we occasionally used Reg’s Project Canada (PC) 2000 adult survey to compare today’s teens with today’s young adults, parents, and grandparents.

Surveys can be likened to aerial photos, freezing images in time from an airplane at 30,000 feet. No research tool is better for establishing cultural and generational patterns on a macro level and understanding the shifting trends of an entire society. However, surveys are what researchers call “thin” description (as opposed to the “thick” description of face-to-face interaction). The surveys we used for this book do not fully describe our teens. Few people wish to be defined merely as a member of a cohort. Youth and young adults are complex, unique, and

awe-inspiring individuals. The greatest survey data in the world can provide only limited information on specific youth. It cannot begin to match what can be accomplished by sipping a Coke or cappuccino across the table from a youth. But the surveys do give us a great starting point for the job of getting to know teenagers one person at a time.

As we immersed ourselves in the data and reflected on our youth ministry experiences, nine key themes emerged:

- the supremacy of relationships;
- the effectiveness of authority figures;
- a desire to break free from childhood restrictions;
- the omnipresence of popular culture, as defined by music, movies, and television;
- the pressure to consume;
- experience with new technologies;
- teen concerns;
- a romantic notion of risk;
- subtle shifts in values and language.

Each of these topics forms a chapter of the book. The last chapter is a summary of youth ministry principles that worked as background assumptions.

We are extremely pleased to be able to offer Canadian data and ideas to Canadian youth workers. However, we are convinced this resource also speaks to youth workers in the United States. Canada is farther down the multicultural, relativistic road some call postmodernism,² and perhaps has something strategic to share about youth ministry from experience in an increasingly diverse and global context. As an American friend across the border told me, “We in the States are seeing this postmodern wave coming; you in Canada have been living in it.”

Our second source of information is face-to-face interactions with countless young people and youth leaders. We have spent our entire adult lives mentoring and educating youth and young adults in faith communities and professional settings. We have lived the question, “How can adults and youth together experience life that is fully human and joyfully alive?” The practical applications sprinkled through these pages come from years spent pursuing this question, through ministry joys and pains. We have confidence that what we have learned can be applied across the board.

Last, but not least, we have consulted the Bible. As Donald Posterski has said, “The Bible as God’s permanent revelation establishes the agenda for ministry. Faithful people will always aim to implement what it teaches.”³ We have tried to think biblically about each topic addressed. In particular, we studied the New Testament eyewitness accounts of Jesus, and sought out theologians and practitioners who could help us address the question, “Given the trends in youth culture today, how would Jesus encourage his followers to respond to today’s young people?”

Structure

Each chapter of the book begins with a cluster of findings from the PTC survey. We then look at the large-scale pattern that emerges and ask, “Why are teens doing the things they do?” But because we strive to go beyond simply understanding teenagers, the bulk of each chapter suggests creative strategies for adults who work with youth, asking, “How can we propel this generation toward liberating, joy-filled adulthood and spiritual maturity?” At the end of each chapter we include a to-do list that will help you achieve these goals.

Youth Work as Mission Work

Teen culture is different from mainstream culture. It frequently shocks adults. Our first response to teen culture is often that there is something wrong with it, that it needs to be transformed into something that looks more like our adult culture. Yet we would never think of suggesting there is something wrong with Europeans or Asians just because they eat, dress, or speak differently from us. We must remember that, in many respects, youth work is cross-cultural.

The challenge we face as adult youth workers is to honor teen culture as a creative expression of who teens are, while realizing that elements of that culture may be unhealthy. Some who read this book will think we are simply accepting teen culture and allowing it to set the agenda of ministry to teens. To such readers we say, yes, we are — as we would hope to do if we were working in a foreign culture. We would allow that culture to set the language and dress, and select the agenda of the message (which contains a multitude of messages). Other readers will question passages in which we seek to transform and bring a message to teen culture. To these people we say, yes — there are elements of any society that are not healthy, and our message does have a transformative and prophetic role to play. Of course, we won’t always get it right. Still, we focus on making what we think are the most helpful recommendations.

Finally, we want to welcome you to this adventure of soul searching the millennial generation. If you're reading this, chances are you're already a front-line youth worker or a parent of a young person or persons. Bottom line: You care a lot about the younger generation. Many of you care enough to be frantic, exhausted, and poor in order to launch those you love in the millennial fold. We know you are there — hundreds upon hundreds of selfless parents, volunteers, and professionals. We've met you — community and campus youth workers, youth group sponsors, counselors, camp cabin leaders, moms and dads, Sunday school teachers, educators, municipal government leaders, clergy, informal friends of youth, and college students strategically training to be youth pastors and/or youth professionals. All of you are doing your best to create meaningful communities and assist significant faith and life commitments among youth and young adults. As you touch young people one at a time in mentoring relationships and corporately in youth groups, you are steering the course of the twenty-first century in perhaps eternally good ways. Our world will be better ten years from now because of your efforts. *Bravo!* We hope you thoroughly enjoy reading and applying this book.

The Millennials

All across North America, thousands of youth groups will meet tonight. Youth leaders will make frantic last-minute phone calls after learning that the pizza place won't deliver, or that seventeen teens have shown up, when the van they reserved holds only fifteen people. Later on, hundreds of junior and senior high-school students will be talking about their teenage realities over a Coke with adults they trust. Somewhere tonight a youth will decide not to kill him- or herself because of the presence of a caring adult. For still others, new possibilities will take root tonight when a simple word of encouragement fertilizes the seeds of a dream.

Who Are the Millennials?

Today 4.1 million Canadian and 40 million American youth and young adults crave that "I believe in you" message from adults and peers. They are part of what social analysts refer to as the "millennials." Born in the 1980s and 90s, this generation is coming of age as we begin our journey through the third millennium.¹

They are a large cohort — a second baby boom of sorts. Neil Howe and William Strauss comment, "As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse."² Because of the sheer size of this group and the desire of virtually every social institution to pass on its values, attitudes, and products, adults have a deep desire to understand and influence the millennials.

This inspirational generation has much to teach us. These teenagers have high self-esteem and great expectations for their personal future. Some recent commentators go so far as to say that this generation will

alter our social landscape in significantly positive ways. As Howe and Strauss put it, “Over the next decade, the Millennial Generation will entirely recast the image of youth from downbeat and alienated to upbeat and engaged — with potentially seismic consequences for America.”³

While only a third of millennials claim to have experienced God (36%), many more believe that spirituality is important (60%). This belief creates a hunger to experience God. To our great wonder, millennials are open to experiences through religious institutions. When teens who did not attend services at least once a month were given the statement, “I’d be open to more involvement with religious groups if I found it to be worthwhile,” nearly 40% said they would be interested.⁴ What a great open door to find out how we can mutually meet each other’s needs! If corporations were to learn that 40% of consumers were interested in them, they would pour all their resources into reaching that market share. There is a strategic opportunity for youth ministry by faith groups.

Thirteen percent of teens take part in religious youth groups; 87% do not. Of the teens who are in religious youth groups,

- 63% are Protestant
- 20% are Catholic
- 14% belong to other faiths
- 3% claim no religious affiliation, although they participate in the youth group of a particular religion

Teens who participate in religious youth groups are much more likely to enjoy their religion, value religious group involvement, believe in God, believe that God cares about them, experience God’s presence, and display high levels of honesty, politeness, and compassion than either regular church attenders who do not belong to religious youth groups or non-church attenders. These findings suggest that youth groups in which teens and adults experience life and explore faith together go a long way toward enhancing the lives of today’s teens.⁵

Developmental Issues

Some things the PTC survey points to are not so much generational as developmental. In other words, some of the findings are there simply because today’s millennials are teenagers. We will try to distinguish between those issues that are simply part of being a teenager and those that have been produced by a special cultural condition.

According to psycho-social theorist Erik Erikson, the teen years are when people deal with identity issues, when they figure out who they believe they are. Once teens have begun to resolve identity, intimacy issues become paramount during the young adult years. They determine who their real friends are and who is committed to staying connected with them through thick and thin. Ideally, youth have the opportunity at this time to discover a caring lifelong community. This affiliation not only affords them the opportunity to establish a nurturing relationship with God, but also teaches them that walking through life with like-minded sojourners can add meaning and purpose to existence.

An adolescent is in the throes of physical, psychological and sociological change. As Rolf E. Muuss, Eli Velder, and Harriet Porton have written,

Sociologically, adolescence is the transition period from dependent childhood to self-sufficient adulthood. Psychologically, it is a “marginal situation” in which new adjustments have to be made, namely those that distinguish child behavior from adult behavior in a given society. Chronologically, it is the time span from approximately twelve or thirteen to the early twenties, with wide individual and cultural variation.⁶

It bears repeating: The years of adolescence are transition years. By the end of them, a youth has made the monumental move from the security (or insecurity!) of the home to full-fledged maturity, when resourcefulness and responsibility kick in. At the same time, the youth has moved from having the body and mind of a child to having those of an adult. This transition is a daunting one!

Because adolescence is also a sociological creation, its boundaries change. The PTC survey focused on youths between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Many people, however, believe that adolescence of a sort extends past high school, especially when a teen goes directly to college or university. They don't consider the cultural transition from childhood to adulthood complete until the youth has some kind of job, is married and/or living on his or her own, and is contributing to the wider society. Students in colleges and universities are frequently seen, even by themselves, as in some way putting off entering “real life.” They are in an extended adolescence — what James Côté and Anton Allahar call a generation on hold.⁷

The Stress of Transition

“Next year I want to be thir-‘kid,’ not thir-‘teen,’” said one twelve-year-old.

Have you ever taken a stress test, where you assign yourself x number of points of stress if you have moved, had a death in the family, or changed jobs? In these tests, stress is linked to significant life changes. In adolescence, we inevitably experience significant changes, sometimes on a daily basis. Teen bodies are perceptibly changing. Breasts start growing (and showing). Pubic hair can’t be hidden in locker rooms. Periods and wet dreams confuse. Girls start to experience the gaze of grown men. Magazines and corporations start to market to this age group with a vengeance, using exaggerated notions of “femininity” and “masculinity” right when youth are most vulnerable. Teens are changing in the ways they think, focusing on the ideal possibilities of life. Because of hormonal changes, teens start to see each other as sexual beings. First loves, first jobs all happen during this time. Teens have aspirations they have never had before. School turns up the pressure to perform several notches. Team sports, drama ensembles, musical groups, and friendship groups all add pressure along with their promises of successful, happy futures. If you gave each change a stress number, many teens would be off the chart. In fact, stress levels related to “so many things changing” is higher for youth than any generation of adults today.

TABLE 1.1 **Personal Concern Across Generations**

(% indicating bothered “A Great Deal” or “Quite a Bit” about so many things changing)

Teens	38	Parents	24
Young adults	19	Grandparents	25

Bibby, PTC 2000, PC 2000 data sets

We adults often repress our memories of the lack of confidence, the constant comparing, the teasing, the bullying of our high-school years. Take a minute now to remember your own adolescence. You will probably recall the inner confusion in that personal struggle to attain a worthwhile and sturdy identity you could proudly call your own.

I have just finished marking a whole stack of papers from a class of adults who were asked to remember their adolescence. Every one of them wrote that they’d in some way struggled with periods of low self-esteem and self-doubt. One wrote that high school changed her life forever, as she “linked her dreams to her inability.” Each student believed he or she

alone had experienced the waters of self-doubt and was astounded to learn that every other person in the class had shared this experience.

A speech from the award-winning Lethbridge Collegiate Institute drama *Kids Will Be Kids* says,

School sometimes makes you feel like a statistic. We travel in mass hysteria, hoping that nothing outside the usual rigor will occur. Being harassed about a fashion flop, an embarrassing occurrence . . . or perhaps . . . a random act of violence provoked by nothing. Insults are thrown, the threat intended for egos to be built or to be bruised. Stars are born by a glorified name gained from an exaggerated rumor. To be allowed into a clique, one must prove worthiness by the set standard. If you're not one or the other what are you? Non-existent. An unknown face invisible to the people around you. From my recollection of junior high the part that sticks in my mind is the constant immaturity. By high school some people just get taller.⁸

Youth, by definition, is the transition from dependent childhood to responsible adulthood. In this strategic time, where ambiguity is a given and stress levels are high, responsible adults have a pivotal, life-expanding role to play.

The Importance of Youth Ministry

I lead wilderness orienteering. For those who are uninitiated, orienteering involves arriving at a certain point in the forest (a food drop-off zone) by following the heading of a compass. If you are off by one degree when you start your journey, you could be thousands of feet off after walking five miles. Similarly, changes that at first seem small can in fact point a teen's whole life in a different direction. That "simple" change in direction can affect hundreds of people he or she comes into contact with over the course of a lifetime. My friend and co-worker Steve Brown says that when he is at a campfire with teens he squints, and sees through the smoke that each student is a representative of hundreds of people that stand behind him or her, waiting to be influenced. This is the art, and the wonder, of youth ministry.

Try this little experiment. Think about someone who influenced you toward your job, your hobbies. Chances are that influence stretches back into your teen years. For example, I recently enjoyed speaking at a

camp in Albany, New York. I had the opportunity to speak there because of a friendship I made during my first job in western New York State. I had that job because of the college I attended. I attended that college because a friend at camp told me about it. I went to that camp because of a split-second decision my dad asked me to make when I was sixteen.

What happened in your teen years? What marble did you step on that swung you around and changed everything? Youth workers, along with their students, are creating turning points that change lives and change nations.

Last fall I had lunch with Rev. Dale Lang, who has been propelled to national prominence in Canada since his son was tragically gunned down in a high school in 1999. Dale has traveled across Canada and has addressed more than 100,000 students with a message of hope and forgiveness. Dale shared with me his vision of a coming “nameless” revival of ordinary people, each catching the importance of putting other people ahead of things and issues. “Everything positive happens one heart at a time,” Dale stated simply. “No ministry we do is less significant than any other!”

Can you imagine the slow, exponential building of a tidal wave of compassion, as people start to be faithfully available to the young (and older!) people in their orbit. By touching one heart at a time, you and I can become just such nameless heroes.

All youth work is really mission work. In my church, which serves many other churches, we lose a quarter of our attenders every year. Many of the teenagers head off to college. Our university students head back home, or to different cities to find work. The teens in your church right now will not likely be the volunteer deacons and elders in that church years from now. However, they *will* be the volunteer deacons and elders in somebody’s church. We have to stop seeing teen work as ownership, and start seeing the reality: that teen work is mission work for a nation.

When that great young couple comes into your church, or the highly trained single person sits in a pew for the first time, how many of you ask, “What made them the way they are?” The answer is that some youth group somewhere did its job. Perhaps falling attendance figures in churches are the result of many years where youth ministry was not taken seriously.

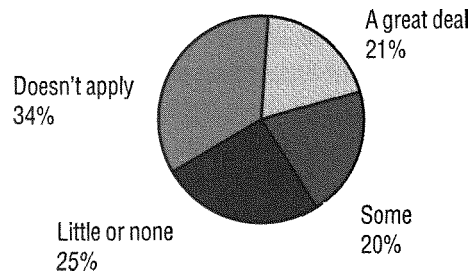
If you work with youth in a faith community, you are uniquely situated to be a meaningful and transformational presence in the life of someone young. And you are making a difference! Many youth we’ve

encountered in our travels across North America are profoundly joyful that you are. I especially remember two youth groups I visited one spring. Joy and healthy relationships permeated these communities. They were “colonies, islands of one culture in the middle of another,”⁹ outposts of an arena where freedom and compassion reigned. Youth in these communities stated over and over that their group was a safe and fun place where they could make and bring friends, be themselves, explore God, and make a difference in their world. Each group had strategic, sacrificial, and caring adults present. I hope many more such intergenerational communities will be created as time goes on.

Sobering Realities for Churches

Youth work is a God-sized challenge. The national survey data suggest that only about 20% of teens feel joyful when they think of faith communities.

Teen Enjoyment from Religious Groups



The national picture suggests that approximately one-third of the teen population has no connection to a religious group, and another quarter is unimpressed with the impact religion is having on their lives.

This sobering reality was driven home for me in an unchurched teen focus group I conducted. One teen stated, “Tell church leaders to leave us alone. If they pester us too much, we’ll tell them to ‘F off.’ If we have questions, we’ll come to you.” But when I asked that same group the question, “What comes to your mind when you think of religious leaders, ministers, priests, and pastors?” the room went quiet for a few seconds. They were thinking hard. Then I got three responses: “The Pope, that’s the only one I can think of!”, “The guy on TV who bumps you on the forehead and you fall over — we don’t need that kind of religion!”, and “The ones who come to your doors in twos. They’re pushy.”

At that moment I realized something very significant: Many teens have absolutely no clue what happens within those religious groups where teens do report contentment.

With God helping us, we must do a way better job of uncovering what happens in joy-producing religious youth groups, spread the news around, and find ways to make these places more available to all types of youth. At the same time, some things that have been done supposedly “in the name of Jesus” have to stop.

At one church focus group, I mentioned the “leave us alone” comment. An articulate young woman reinforced for me how pestering some religious youth groups really are. In the group she previously attended, “If you didn’t believe the same things they believed, they stated that you were going to hell. I will never go back to a group like that.” Another bright, God-seeking youth who we consulted for this book said a youth worker at his previous church had judged him a “bad kid.” He then drifted to another group, but didn’t click with the youth worker who, he sensed, felt hurt when he left. He now attends another church with his parents, but finds little or no value in his present experience because “the youth group was cliquey.” He then added, “Two coffees with you have done more for me than three years of youth groups.”

I wish I could say that all the teens who have contacted me over the years were this affirming. I’ve learned the hard way what does and does not work with youth. Taking the time for informal relationships is key. Long-term, non-judgmental relationships of unshockable friendship with youth are a *must*.

There’s a big job ahead of us — a challenge that needs us all — and the picture will change only slowly, one positive contact at a time. So strap on your seat belts as we attempt to describe this generation of teenagers and its needs and possibilities in more depth.

Endnotes

Introduction

- 1 Discussions with Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical leaders, Vancouver, British Columbia, November 3–4, 2001, conducted by Reginald Bibby.
- 2 See, for example, Michael Adams, *Better Happy Than Rich? Canadians, Money and the Meaning of Life* (Toronto: Penguin Books of Canada, 2000), 24–28. Adams highlights Canada's postmodern shift relative to the U.S. with the following statistic: In 1996 a comparative survey found that more than twice as many Americans (44%) as Canadians (20%) agreed with the statement: "Father must be master in his own home." (In 1983, when this variable was first measured, 42% of Canadians agreed!)
- 3 Donald C. Posterski, *Friendship: A Window on Ministry to Youth* (Scarborough, ON: Project Teen Canada, 1985), xiii.

Chapter One The Millennials

- 1 Generational divisions are an inaccurate science. Some people place the brackets around the millennials a couple of years on either side of the eighties.
- 2 Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 4.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 If the Quebec data are excluded from the total, the figure jumps closer to 50%.
- 5 One cautionary note: The correlation between religious youth group attendance and positive faith doesn't necessarily demonstrate that youth group attendance *causes* this growth; some groups may simply be screening out irreligious teens in order to look more spiritual. We advocate that religious youth groups be open for *all youth* to explore at their own level.
- 6 Rolf Eduard Helmut Muuss, Eli Velder, and Harriet Porton, *Theories of Adolescence* (New York: Random House, 1975), 4.

- 7 James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994).
- 8 Lethbridge Collegiate Institution, *Kids Will Be Kids*. Used with permission.
- 9 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 12.