

College Students: Utilizing Christian Individual and  
Community Development to Keep Them in the Kingdom

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## Who is Reaching the College Student?

### *Youth Ministry in the Nineties*

Youth ministry exploded in the nineteen-nineties. The decade produced the most feared generation in youth ministry history, "Generation X." The characteristics of Generation X were broadcast from every pulpit and public podium. This new breed of teens were "post-modern" (post-Atari home video games, post-backward masking heavy metal, post-nuclear threats, post-blended families, post-latchkey generation, post-just say no, and post-condom distribution in schools). They had seen it all, or done it all. Nothing could impress them or keep their attention.

This country's largest churches and denominations sank their money, time, and their best men into youth ministry development. Youth ministry became an excellent weapon of evangelism. As a result, youth groups all over began to grow into the hundreds. Youth ministries captured Generation X's attention with big lights, amazing worship bands, and worldwide missions trips. Youth ministry became a professional, organized arm of the Church.

One of the reasons for success is that the youth minister became the developmental expert of current teen culture. God taught the Church to zero in on the developmental needs of teens. In effect, youth ministers began to ask the same question that developmental psychologists ask. What are they going through in this stage of life? That question paved the way for the Church to meet Generation X at their need. The Church took care of them, provided a social network for them, mentored them, entertained them, and then sent them off to college.

### *Youth Ministry in the New Millennium*

Generation X is now in college and most of them are almost done. Who takes care of them, provides a social network for them, mentors them, and entertains them now? In a table

comparing the characteristics of "churched" and "unchurched" adults, the Barna Research Group (1999) reported that only twenty-two percent of college graduates are in church at all (Survey methodology, para. 4). Obviously, something other than the Church is meeting the needs of the college student. The nineties are gone, and so are the young people who filled our youth rooms.

Youth ministries now focus on Generation X's younger brothers and sisters, but no longer on Generation X. They have walked out of the youth room and onto the campus, not into the adult sanctuary. Perhaps the Church's ideas of college ministries have been limited. College Christians are often thought of as youth sponsors. The problem is that youth groups have catered to their every need since junior high. Upon high school graduation, they are either expected to baby-sit the new group of teens or take a pew in the traditional worship service. They don't have much of a choice. Is it possible that wild youth ministries may be better preparation for the party atmosphere at college, than for the community atmosphere at Church?

The modern American Church, which has invested so much into youth ministry, has nothing to show for it if college students are not actively involved in the Church. To put it into perspective, one may ask, "since there are so many nationally known youth ministries, where are the nationally known college ministries?" The counselor may ask a similar question: "why are there so many studies conducted on college campuses, but so few articles are written about the college student?" Ironically, research psychologists often draw from college samples to make generalizations about society at large, not about college life in particular.

#### Where is the College Student at Developmentally?

##### *Developmental Psychology is Necessary*

College students spend just as many years in college as they do in high school. They develop new needs. They are making new choices: educational, vocational, and relational. Who

is there when they are actually making the decisions? Their counsel is probably not being received from Godly sources. A study conducted by Barna Research (1998) found that among those in their twenties, "only 23% had read from the Bible in the past week" (para. 12). As Christian leaders and counselors, it helps to look at collegians developmentally. Before asking, "how we keep them in the Kingdom," we could ask, "where are they at in this stage of life?"

#### *Understanding the College Student Developmentally*

"Among those attributes are their eclectic lifestyle, their non-linear thinking style, the fluidity of their personal relationships, their cut-and-paste values profile, and the hybrid spiritual perspective most of them have developed" (Barna, 2001, Why they're called "Mosaics," para. 1). George Barna partially attributes this diversity to emerging technologies. College freshmen, in 2001, have spent the entirety of their teenage life with the Internet at their fingertips. It has given them a unique way of thinking, opening the door to a literal world of possibilities, and perspectives. In spite of all of the shifting sand in our culture, Barna (2001) predicts that today's youth are, "likely to be known for their character" (Why they're called "Mosaics," para. 1). Perhaps they will grow weary of virtual selfhood and become real people.

#### *Personality Development*

There is a natural development of the personality that is easy to understand. In adolescence, personality is stretched. Peers become more important. Personal values begin to develop. A unique style of relating, self-esteem, and a sense of meaning are the developmental tasks that must be completed for their future. What sets college students apart from teens developmentally, is that their task is to fine-tune their personality. Fowler (2000) writes,

Perspectives on adult development alert us to the fact that, with these seasonal movements, we will be testing, shaping, and reforming the ways we relate to others and the world, as well as revising the ways in which we imagine ourselves (p. 116).

### *Pagan Development*

American culture has set the stage for a generation to rise up that does not know God at all. George Barna comments,

It is amazing that we live in a period during which people are more interested in spirituality than at any time in the past half century, yet they are seeking the answers to their spiritual questions and needs from sources other than Christian churches (Barna Research Group, 1999, *A Perspective on the Unchurched*, Para 1).

Public education, in one generation, has completely removed traditional Christian values from the halls of schools, and the effects are showing.

Although the Christian home and youth group can counteract the secular indoctrination of the high schools, they have little influence in the colleges. For example, the student who is taught evolution in class does not spend the evening with a Christian family or youth group, but in a dorm or a fraternity house. College students live in a completely secular community, at a stage in life when they make the biggest decisions. "A society which once hinged around the church is no more and more pivoting around the university, and the church is marginal to that university" (Bass, 1990, p. 210).

Goodwin (1988) realizes that "Another source of student conflict and frustration is differences in interest, outlook, or philosophy with many others in the school" (p. 196-197). Philosophy, without God, becomes humanistic. Paul warns that, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8:1, New King James Version). An amazing knowledge of God, became

pride, and the downfall of Lucifer (Isaiah 14:13-15). Since secular education teaches philosophy without God, the end is agnosticism or paganism. Sheer knowledge exalts itself against God.

Cultural norms used to be influenced by the Church, as the center of society. Bass (1990) observes, "the ever-increasing dominance and confidence of the cultural forces represented by the multiversity seemed further to weaken religion's claim to be a center of value" (p. 212). Modern society no longer recognizes the Church's authority. On top of that, college students are finding answers in the religions of their multicultural peers.

### What is College-age Christian Development?

#### *College Christian Character*

In spite of societal trends, the Christian leader or counselor has no choice but to develop mature Christians. The development of Christian virtue takes place in two common contexts: discipleship and communion.

Discipleship is the forte of the Church. "Teach your children to choose the right path, and when they are older, they will remain upon it" (Proverbs 22:6, New Living Translation). Discipleship provides Christians relationships with nurturing people. The key to the college group is finding the right fit. A Christian counselor has a unique edge on discipleship in the Church. He can easily apply the principles of group counseling to the college group. The factors of group counseling develop strong, meaningful relationships. College students are craving that. The Christian counselor who uses group counseling on the secular campus may experience some of the dynamics of discipleship as well. It is possible to lead a mixed group of Christian and unbelieving students. Would the Christians naturally draw the others in, and even disciple them?

Communion is the core function of a fully developed relationship with a nurturing God. The Church teaches the practices of communion from an early age, as evidenced in an old junior

church song, "Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow." The pitfall of devotions is that it easily becomes a ritual instead of a way of relating to God. Nouwen (1990) discusses the dangers of becoming too familiar with God, particularly in the Christian College. "Theological students who explore with their minds the mysteries of God's presence among God's people without letting that Word mold their own hearts will eventually find themselves bored and dispirited" (p. 93). The depths of communion must be kept alive and fresh for the college student. Through prayer, the stresses of college life may be brought into the Throne Room, laid down, and exchanged for God's rest, Matthew 11:28-29.

### *Relevant College Ministry*

Historically, there have been two pervading modes of campus ministry. The first one is cultural relevance: revamping ministries to reflect the unique cultural customs and expectations of the new breed of young people. This is a great idea, but should not be the main priority of community. The danger has already been seen among campus ministers.

The more cosmopolitan (that is, the less religious) their university, the more innovative their style became; and the more innovative their style became, the less acknowledgment they were likely to receive from the church . . . Yet the troubling likelihood exists that the ties were stretched so far that many campus ministers lost touch with the distinctive word that they might have spoken in a realm hungry from meaning (Bass, 1990, p. 214).

The relevance mode of ministry eventually compromises. The article reflects on a national dilemma in the nineteen-sixties. Campus ministries were gaining momentum, but the Church withdrew support because the Gospel was being compromised. Because of this problem, non-denominational organizations formed to reach the campus. Now, these parachurches are not sending students back into the Church because of the breach that occurred in the sixties. What

would campus ministry have been like if the Church had resolved it's issues with its campus ministers and supported them all of these years? Being relevant is not enough.

*College Community for Christians*

Fowler (1990) uses the Latin word "paideia" to describe a Christian community on the college campus. He develops the concept drawing on ancient culture.

In the Greek city-state where the term had its origins, *paideia* was informed by a reasonably coherent worldview and shared consensus about the virtues and passions needed for citizenship. This consensus was shaped by the language, the myths, and the heroic stories of the polis. Each city-state had its heroic figures by whose actions the city was founded, given its distinctive character, or saved from internal or external danger at crucial points. Through schooling, through athletic competition and military training, through attendance at public enactments of drama, music, and ritual, and through the crucial theater of the political process itself, the young, at least those destined for citizenship, were formed in the *paideia* necessary for adulthood and full citizens' participation (p. 64).

The development of *paideia* was the priority of the early Church as well. In fact, the early Church was more of a community than a traditional church (Acts 2:42-47). Consequently, the idea is found in every sermon in Acts. The same three points about community are preached: history is really "His-story," Jesus is the fulfillment of history, and through Him alone do we have a place in history. These points are in Peter's message to the foreign Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40) and Stephen's proclamation to the Jewish leaders (Acts 7:2-53). The three points are found in Paul's address to the educated Greeks on Mars Hill, a sermon that could be preached almost word for word on the college campuses today (Acts 17:16-32). The

application is simple. College students need to belong, why not belong to a community of peers that belongs to the greatest community of all time?

*Developing College Community for Christians*

Fowler (1990) examines faith, hope, and love, focusing on their development in a young adult fellowship. He says that faith is fully expressed in a, "trust in and loyalty to that covenant community" (p. 89). This shared faith can be built as College students are taught the historical stories that, "conserve and convey the sacred history and meanings of our communities" (Fowler, 1990, p. 83). Campus clubs capitalize on the desire of students to be a part of something bigger. What does the club have that the Church does not? The Church wrote the book on community. But James Wilder (1999) wrote the book on the Christian developmental stages of a man's life. In it, he talks about developing a community of men that make adults out of adolescents. He proposes something very similar to Fowler's idea, "The objective is to prepare the self-centered boy for the day he will serve a lord and a purpose greater than himself" (Wilder, 1999, p. 58).

Fowler (1990) defines community hope as, "the responsiveness and fidelity of other, hope for a future in which to be virtuous and committed to the common good" (p. 89). Hope for the self is not big enough. Young adults want to place their hope in a team.

He ties all of Christian development for the young adult together with love. "Without love, commitment to the other virtues tends to deteriorate and fall too much into the self-regarding use of virtues to establish one's own worth" (Fowler, 1990, p. 88-89). Fowler is calling the establishment of self-worth, worthless without a commitment to community. Is not this what Jesus said when He commanded, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). To love our neighbor, the focus must eventually be changed from self-esteem development to group esteem. Wilder (1999) proposes that, "The young man becomes part of a

group of young men with whom he can develop a life-giving group identity" (p. 59). Social psychologists have made it clear that a group identification develops self-esteem. That is why the Christian community is completed by love.

The fulfilling motive of community love is that, through it, young adults may have the opportunity for the first time, to make an eternal impact on their friends' lives. What is the use of just sharing the classroom when students can share eternity? Nouwen (1990) states that, "Many students experience a great tension between what happens in their classes and their own spiritual needs. Their studies themselves seldom lead them to prayer, create community, and call forth a fearless proclamation of God's mysterious ways of salvation" (p. 101).

Christians at the college level are ready to commit. They are ready to do the work of the Kingdom. As singles, they have the free time that it takes. There are a number of other advantages that they have as well. They usually have their own rides to and from Church. They do not need permission slips for group outings. But most importantly, they are looking for someone to mentor them, Christian or not. If College students are given every opportunity to fully develop Christian virtues and Christian communities; then the Kingdom would be turned upside down. Fired up college students would become an example to the Church of the militancy that catches the eye of Christ. "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12).

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