

Gen Z Evangelist Brian Barcelona—How the COVID shutdown led to a digital missions movement

On Friday, March 13, 2020, Brian Barcelona was watching the news when he heard the life-altering report that the entire Los Angeles Unified District was shutting down due to COVID-19. Immediately.

“There was almost an end-of-the-world feeling about it,” he says. “Everything I had built for a decade was shut down in one day.”

Barcelona and his One Voice Student Missions team had boldly been proclaiming the gospel in public high schools throughout Los Angeles. They met with students weekly at noon for Jesus Club Bible studies. Over the years, their campus missions movement had blossomed. Some students were exploring the gospel or coming for free pizza; others were making decisions for Christ and being set free.

Barcelona and his wife, Marcela, had just purchased a house in Los Angeles; they moved in the same week that everything shut down. “It was really difficult to wrap my mind around what was happening,” he says. As hard as it was to accept, he had a hunch that God was opening a new door.

Brian, now 31 and the father of three children (with another on the way), knows as much about Generation Z as anyone. He defines this group as individuals born between 1997 and 2015. Many of them have grown up in a largely post-Christian culture and are biblically illiterate.

“There is more of a fight for the identity of this generation

than we've ever seen," he says. "We are living in the generation that might overturn *Roe v. Wade*. It's the generation of pandemics and a possible world war."

Once in lockdown, Brian began doing Instagram Lives. He used every major speaker he could think of to capture students' attention—but it didn't seem as though they were winning souls for Christ.

Digital Breakthrough

But on June 17, 2020, a breakthrough happened. One of his team members livestreamed a special prayer event called Gen Z for Jesus and drew 25,000 young people. "That's when I knew something was going on," Brian says.

Eager to tweak his method, he asked a couple of teens to show him how to do successful videos on TikTok, a social media app that has experienced more growth among Gen Zers than any other platform. (In 2021, there were approximately 37.3 million Gen Z TikTok users in the U.S. compared to 33.3 million Gen Z Instagram users.)

One of those teens was Gabe Poirot, now 21, who had spent a lot of time studying social media algorithms. "I used to think social media was a waste of time until I knew God was leading me to get involved," he says. Poirot's first TikTok video to go viral landed 1.6 million views.

Some of his pointers:

- The attention span on TikTok is around 20 to 30 seconds, and the first four seconds are the most important.
- Speak to the camera, and know something about the topic you plan to discuss.
- Be authentic. "My generation doesn't like fake," he says. "It's important to fully be ourselves and not be afraid of what people think of us."

Armed with new information, Brian and his team launched The Jesus Clubs page on TikTok and Instagram in July 2020. Unlike his in-person campus ministry, which was built heavily on his personal leadership, he created the digital ministry to be decentralized. He knew that if his page were canceled, there were many others preaching on their Jesus Clubs pages. “If I died tomorrow, I wanted something that would far outlive me,” he says.

And Gen Zers aren’t interested in following celebrity Christian pastors, Brian says. “Millennials grew up in it—and we are seeing it crumble now. Gen Z highly values connection, and when there is a culture of celebrity Christianity, it is disconnected from its people. The currency with Gen Z isn’t how cool the pastor is or what kind of shoes he is wearing. The currency is relationship, authenticity, being genuine in the love you have for someone.”

Dallas Calling

Not long after they were settled into their LA home and making some headway with digital missions, Brian’s wife came to him with a challenge. “The Lord asked me a question,” she began. “Would I obey Him if He told us to move?”

“Yes, we *have* moved,” Brian responded. “We obeyed Him.”

“I feel like He is asking if we would obey Him if He asked us to move again,” Marcela persisted.

Brian had moved to Los Angeles reluctantly at age 20 after living in Sacramento for five years. He encountered Christ in Sacramento at age 16 and launched his high school campus ministry with success.

Moving south, however, brought huge blessings. He gained a spiritual father, Lou Engle, during his five years serving at the U.S. Center for World Missions. And in LA, he met Marcela, a pro-life voice for Engle’s organization.

After the two married, Brian began taking the gospel into a number of hard-to-reach high schools, including Theodore Roosevelt High School, one of the few U.S. high schools with a Planned Parenthood on campus. At Roosevelt, his Jesus Club program grew from five students to 450 in three weeks.

With all of this history in LA, the thought of moving seemed like a giant leap of faith, but Brian didn't dismiss it. Seeking God's perfect plan, he put a couple of "impossible" fleeces before the Lord—and they happened. God was calling them to Texas.

In July 2020, the Barcelonas made a trip to Dallas and met with Michael Miller, pastor of UPPERRROOM, and Nick Vujicic, founder of Life Without Limbs.

Vujicic, who had moved from California to the Dallas Metroplex with his family, asked the Barcelonas when their move might happen. "I said, 'Probably another year,'" Brian recalls. "My wife said, 'No, we'll be out here in a month.'"

Brian told her there was no way they could sell their home in California, buy a new house in Dallas and move in such a short time.

Marcela's words were spot-on. Three weeks later, they moved to a suburb north of Dallas, along with approximately 30 other One Voice team members, all of whom raise their own financial support.

Explosive Growth

A short time after focusing on digital missions, Brian quickly saw its potential. "It took me 10 years to get into 100 schools," he explains. "With digital, we had made a huge impact in two or three months."

Timothy Bruce, a One Voice missionary who now has close to 1 million followers on his Jesus Clubs TikTok page, describes

TikTok as a “net that reaches.”

“Not every one of those million kids who sees a video I post is going to follow me, watch my ‘lives’ and get on Zoom for further discipleship, but there are some who will follow through all the way,” he says. “We get to see a solid transformation in their lives.”

Bruce’s personal transformation took place on Sept. 21, 2014, at a youth gathering Brian organized in Southern California. A pastor’s kid, he had struggled with depression and anxiety. After Christ set him free, he was so impacted that he decided to join One Voice.

As he went into LA high schools to preach, he saw God move in many ways. “Teachers would come to me and tell me how the kids were talking about Jesus Club and how it was changing their life,” he says. “A lot of kids told me if it hadn’t been for Jesus Club, they would have committed suicide.”

After the LA schools shut down, Bruce’s message stayed the same, but the method changed. “Initially, I didn’t like social media at all, but I felt the Lord tell me He was going to do something through it,” he says.

Beginning in August 2020, Bruce posted nine videos a day for a week. A week later, he was at 10,000 followers. He sensed God telling him to do it again for another week. The last night, he was tired and had two more videos to do. “I squeezed out two more videos and heard the Lord say, ‘John 2:13,’” he says. “I look it up, and it was about Jesus flipping tables. I did a video about that, and it blew up—800,000 or 900,000 views on my page. It made my account get traction.”

“God wanted me to see He would do something through social media if I just did what He said and was consistent in preaching the gospel,” Bruce says.

Kala Boss, another One Voice missionary, has amassed 600,000

TikTok followers. She attributes the growth to a hunger for Jesus. "This generation is hungry for truth and Jesus and the real thing. When you give that to them, they're so quick to receive it," she says. "Jesus is moving and touching people through videos and livestreams, and I believe the growth is due to Him."

Christian TikTok veteran David Latting began posting videos shortly after the lockdown happened. "People were struggling, and I was, too," he says. "The videos I posted were super relatable, and my page blew up overnight. I had a million followers in a couple of months."

An influencer among 15- to 24-year-olds, Latting has been banned several times for statements such as "Jesus is the only way to heaven." Being canceled simply motivates him to start new pages, including "Not David Latting."

Last year, he attended the Gen Z for Jesus Rally in the Atlanta area and was led to become part of the One Voice team. "I like the One Voice community and the discipleship best—and I've never seen anything like it," he says. "It's like a giant family."

Latting's videos on his Jesus Club's page have gained him a following of more than 1.1 million followers. "TikTok is a wave God is using right now, but it won't last forever," he says.

Marcela has also joined the digital movement. She learned how to do TikToks and started a page called "The Well" that digitally unites thousands of moms and women in prayer. She has a significant TikTok following of Gen Zers as well.

One Voice team members have trained pastors and older generations who are eager to share the gospel digitally. Some are 70 years old with 40,000 followers and preach on social media every day.

Over the past couple of years, Brian has learned the importance of creating consistency and teaching people the right language. “If you were going to eat with my mother-in-law and father-in-law, I would teach you a few Spanish words so you could communicate,” he says. “That’s what we do with social media. We teach people to communicate their wisdom in the language of a generation.”

Today, 38 One Voice influencers post about 4,500 Bible-based videos a month to a total of 10.7 million followers on their Jesus Clubs pages. Gen Zers who are moved to respond to the gospel can text “SAVED,” and thus far, more than 2,200 young men and women have made decisions for Christ. One Voice missionaries disciple students through Zoom gatherings, and they have even led Zoom baptisms.

“We are in an interesting time,” Brian says. “I think the pandemic really shed light on things we need to change in this generation. Some people say, ‘I’m not going to get into social media because it’s dark.’ It’s dark because you’re not on it.”

The story of Jesus using dirt to heal the blind man in John 9 resonates with Barcelona. “Jesus put His DNA in something that was worthless [dirt] and created a huge miracle,” he says. “If you had known me before I came to Christ—I was broken, with nothing to bring. All of a sudden, Jesus met me, and now my life is being used to open blind eyes.”

Expanded Platform

In 2021, One Voice took the next step and launched the Jesus Clubs app that has led to in-person high school clubs. Brian says about 45 students pack into a classroom each week for an in-person Jesus Club.

To date, One Voice team members have trained students in 30 states and multiple countries. “Social media never replaced what we did in person,” Bruce says. “God gave us this platform to expand it.”

An app feature directs Gen Zers to churches in their area. "One thing you can't replace is the structure that a church has," Brian says. "An online service just isn't the same as in-person."

At the same time, he believes the church must embrace the digital realm or it will not reach the next generation. "Kids have their phone with them most of the time," he explains. "There are parents who don't disciple their kids. They want the pastor to change them in 45 minutes a week—and that can't compare to what they carry in their pocket every day."

A major Gen Z for Jesus stadium event is in the works for Sept. 3, 2022, at Riders Field in the greater Dallas area. Brian says One Voice received almost 5,000 preregistrations in two months after pushing it heavily on social media. The focus is prayer, fasting and evangelism. So people will come for the right reasons, no speaker names have been announced.

As for future endeavors, he believes virtual reality could become big and hopes to launch on this platform next year.

"The Jesus Clubs digital movement is one like we've never seen," Lou Engle says. "It's not built around famous people but faithful people; it's built around people who understand that Jesus is worthy to have the heart of every young person. It's a movement of preachers, evangelists and prayer warriors whose pulpits are their phones. Brian Barcelona has caught the mantle to believe that it truly is possible for God to turn his generation back to God."

*A former Charisma editor, **Carol Chapman Stertz** is a Gen Z mom with old-school technology. She and her family live in the Dallas area.*