

Why I'm Not Giving Up on My Generation

Numbers tell a story. The numerical decline of Christianity in the Western world is no secret. Pandemic statistics are even more alarming. The numbers are disheartening. They make us feel like Elijah: "and I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:14b). Numbers tell a story, but they only tell part of the story. A remnant lives.

We have watched educational, governmental, recreational and familial masses walk away from the faith. But God has revealed, just as he did to Elijah, thousands "whose knees have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18b). A despondent Elijah was infused with faith as the generality of thousands became specific in Elisha, a young man willing to sacrifice everything to pursue God (1 Kings 19:19-21).

As the piercing eyes of Jesus lock with younger generations, He asks, "do you also want to go away?" (John 6:67). Time and again, I have watched as younger generations boldly respond, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). This younger generation is willing to go anywhere and do anything so that Jesus may receive the reward of His suffering (Rev. 5).

Over the last two decades, four specific paradigm shifts have given me great hope that prodigals in younger generations will return home.

Presence Over Production

At the turn of the 21st century, churches were infatuated with novel technology, innovative service openers and attractional elements to reach lost people. The intended positive effort quickly became a vicious cycle. Many church leaders focused on service openers more than opening heaven (Isa. 64:1). The

genuine attempt to reach outsiders led to a neglect of God's mandate to be a "house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56:7c). Instead, some churches became "a den of robbers" (Jer. 7:11b). They were not moneychangers because they merchandised the faith experience; Jesus' rebuke was not primarily to moneychangers. It was to religious leaders who robbed God's people of a genuine experience of His presence. These churches unintentionally robbed younger generations of an authentic encounter with God, leading to their prodigalization rather than their proselytization.

One of my mentors once said, "What you catch people with, you must keep them with." The desperate approach at sensationalism led to pastoral burnout and cynicism. Church leaders were unable to generate enough "wow factor" each week. Younger generations saw through the gimmicks. They longed for God's presence but received a production.

Younger generations are craving the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. A spike in spiritism and other cultic religious groups is an indictment against the church. People are leaving church to discover a spiritual experience. What a tragedy! I can only imagine what the apostle Paul would say: "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal 3:3).

There is good news, though—churches are rising! Churches no longer satisfied with ankle-deep spiritual waters. Churches that long for the deluge (Hag. 2:9). Churches that long for the river to flow (Ezek. 47). Churches that will not quench the Spirit's fire (1 Thess. 5:19). Churches that will not grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). Churches that minister to the Lord (Isa. 56:6).

The presence of God yields unimaginable outcomes. A quick look at the Gospels demonstrates an intrinsic connection between God's presence and the expulsion of demonic activity (Mark 1:39). Recently, our church saw a demonized individual freed,

saved and changed. As the news spread, a family came to our church to witness this authoritative gospel power (Mark 1:27), and their teenage son radically encountered Jesus. When he experienced God's presence, he was gloriously saved, baptized in water and in the Holy Spirit's fire. Marketing, lights and production did not lead this young man to salvation. The organic spread of God's presence and power did.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not against service planning, leadership development or digital production. I love excellence. I love aesthetics. I love leadership development. I am getting a degree in it! But we must not exchange God's presence for human production. Younger generations appreciate the bells and whistles but want the real thing. May we never rob them of their spiritual birthright. Their return home depends on God's presence, not production.

Shepherding Over Spectating

Younger generations crave connection. They will do nearly anything to get it. Technology has promised to satisfy the craving, but it has only manufactured a mirage—the promise of connection without its fulfillment.

Disconnectedness is not a new issue. The church in Corinth experienced something similar. The people had numerous teachers with flashy presentations, but they lacked real connection (1 Cor. 4:15). The Corinthians did not realize they needed shepherding, but Paul did. Young leaders worldwide seek the eschatological fulfillment of the prophet Malachi by restoring the connection their generation needs (Mal. 4:6).

I will never forget the pain I saw in one young man's eyes. He never heard the affirmation of his parents. He only heard criticism. We prayed and sought the heavenly Father for healing. As we prayed, the Holy Spirit led me to embrace this young man with a hug. When I did, the tears flowed. The deep emotional pain was released as God's gracious love was

received. That young man's tears still whisper in my ear, reminding me of younger generations' longing for love and connection. They desire shepherding above the church show.

I mentor several young men. Some come from great family backgrounds. Others come from brokenness. Both backgrounds long for someone who cares. They want to share their successes. They want to share their struggles. They want to voice their dreams. They have incredible spiritual insight. They have zeal. They have anointing. They just need shepherding. They need someone in their corner cheering for them. They need someone fanning the gift of God into flame (2 Tim. 1:6). They need someone saying, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor 11:1).

One young man I mentor, Robert, is so hungry for God. When we first started meeting, he shared several wounds from his childhood, but he did not let his past overtake his present calling. The love of a church family and the safety of spiritual shepherding enabled him to flourish. I am so proud of him. As he pursues his ministry degree, he is training with Christ for all Nations for outreach and crusade ministry. He is seeing signs, wonders and salvations in his ministry. He is 21. This is only the beginning!

Another young man I mentor, Judah, came from an incredible home. He is a natural connector. As Judah and I have journeyed through discerning his ministry calling, he has explored numerous ministry opportunities within our church. He makes our church so much better. He is growing and maturing in God every single day. His giftings and anointings are increasing. He is going to change the world!

As a 28-year-old pastor, I know the difference shepherding makes. My parents encouraged and supported my calling. They love me, pray for me and invest in the church I pastor. Many of my mentors have invested time and money toward my ministerial formation. One mentor gifted me with Logos Bible

software. That is a \$2,000 investment! Younger generations do not need green-room celebrities. They need selfless shepherds who will lay down their lives on account of them. Shepherding is the birthing place of Holy Spirit outpouring. If you do not believe me, ask Jesus. He shepherded 12 individuals as He guided them to the place of Holy Spirit outpouring. Younger leaders are following the example of Jesus as they shepherd those God has entrusted to them.

Missional Over Missions

Younger generations are no longer satisfied with a two-week mission trip they hashtag. They are fulfilling Jesus' desire to preach the gospel to all people (Matt. 28:18-20). Gone are the days when mission trips are the end of spiritual intensity. Younger generations desire a life of mission—day-in and day-out listening to the Holy Spirit. For some, that means leaving everything behind to go overseas. Over the last few months, three young ladies from our church have gone to other countries as they obey the Holy Spirit's leading. They are leaving everything behind for the sake of the harvest. Others are staying in their geographic location but leaving behind the stagnancy of religious rituals. They are finding ways to transform their cities through radical obedience to the Holy Spirit. They understand that missional living does not require a plane ticket.

Many in my generation also understand that missional living can occur from our homes. We are not content with old nets. We want to innovate to invite others to Jesus. New nets do not denigrate old methods. Jesus made this abundantly clear—"Neither do men put new wine into old wineskins. Or else the wineskins burst, the wine runs out, and the wineskins perish. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matt. 9:17, author's emphasis). Podcasts, Netflix, social media and other multimedia approaches do not replace in-person gospel proclamation; they supplement it. Younger generations understand that digital media is not the solution.

It is, however, a new net to cast so that all may know the beauty of Jesus.

The desire to reach out has caused us to reach up. Sending is preceded by knowing the sent one. That is why Jesus asked His disciples to be with Him before He sent them out to preach and cast out demons (Mark 3:13-15). Missional living is rooted in intimate relational connection with Jesus forged in Scripture, prayer and community. Missions was never about altruism or virtue signaling. Ananias did not go to Saul out of altruism but out of obedience crafted in the place of prayer (Acts 9:10-19).

We are grasping a significant reality—prayer is not transactional. It is navigational. Younger generations are learning to hear the voice of God as young Samuel did (1 Sam 3:3-21). We are trusting the Holy Spirit's leading for every step. One of my dearest friends begins his mornings by asking God what His desires are for the day. Another friend starts his day by praying fervently in the Spirit. These are just a couple of ways younger generations are pursuing a missional, Spirit-led life.

Ministering Over Ministry

I have watched numerous Christian leaders and influencers build massive ministry platforms. The attraction of numerical success cannot be denied. But my heart breaks as I watch these same pastors and leaders fall. Along with many others in my generation, I am tired of the name of Christ being disgraced. Younger ministers seek to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors. Younger generations are moving away from ministry as a career to ministry as a calling. The adage sounds worn, but let me share a nuanced difference. The ministry I speak of is not to people but to God.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw a people who would “bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him” (Isa. 56:6b, NIV, author's

emphasis). Ezekiel foresaw the restoration of a priesthood that would “come near to [the Lord] to minister to Me” (Ezek. 44:15, MEV, author’s emphasis). The Old Testament prophets foresaw a ministry that would flow from ministering to the Lord. This is precisely what the early church modeled. In Antioch, the church leaders ministered to the Lord before they sent the apostles off for ministry: “While they were ministering to the Lord ... they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3, NASB 1995).

The younger generations are making this vital connection. They are choosing to become New Testament Levites, consecrating their lives for the sake of ministering to the Lord. This generation is accepting its spiritual inheritance as a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). I am part of the generation willing to neglect the delicacies of earth to receive the delights of heaven. We are eager to consecrate ourselves and contend for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We will not offer something that costs us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24). We will not cart the presence of God with spiritual lethargy; we will carry the ark of God’s presence on our shoulders just as the Levitical priests carried the ark of God (1 Chron. 15:15). We do not want ministry platforms. We want to offer fragrant, pleasing ministry to the Lord!

From the outside, it may look as though younger generations are difficult to understand. We really are not. We just want something genuine. We want holy worship. We want houses of prayer. We want Holy Spirit gifts active in our lives and our churches. We want to see an outpouring of the Spirit like never before. We will not stop. We will not quit. We will minister to the Lord. We will function in our rightful priesthood. As our exaltation ascends to heaven, we believe a divine exchange will occur. God will respond with His weighty glory. This weighty glory will crush addiction, shatter sickness, eradicate spiritual apathy and restore relational brokenness.

I am not giving up on my generation. I hope you don't either.

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