

They Want More

Younger people are leaving the church for a profound reason: They want God to use them.

It's no surprise that college-age believers are leaving the church. Lifeway Research, an arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, has come out with new numbers () that confirm what most of us who work with this age group already knew—that the younger generation is not impressed with church.

In light of this news I fear that some leaders will continue to pursue what I call the “groom-if-ication” of ministry. They believe that the way to keep 20-somethings is to change the “cool” factor of your ministry. By dressing up the Dockers-loving pastor in an übercool Abercrombie & Fitch shirt with a matching American Eagle belt buckle, they hope to stem the tide.

Please believe me when I say that young people are not leaving because the leaders are not hip. Sometimes, in fact, our efforts to be trendy drive them away.

I understand the temptation to relate to the style of the age. We want to show young adults we care about their culture.

But we all know that true commitment has never been about how we decorate our services or ourselves. When 18-year-olds hit the career and college chaos of post high school, they are not going to stay committed just because our coffee is dark and we have a huge video screen.

They leave for a profound reason. They leave because they have never been “the chubby kid.”

What do I mean? Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that when Jesus fed the multitudes, His disciples wanted to send the people away to get food. Jesus realized it was a perfect opportunity to teach an important truth—that the Father wants to use everyone who follows His Son. So He said, “You give them something to eat.”

At this point John adds an important detail to the story: The only person who has food is a chubby little boy. How do I know he’s chubby? He’s the only one out of 5,000-plus people who remembered to bring an extra lunch! This kid clearly cares about not getting hungry.

In spite of his love for grub he hands over the bread and fish. A child—the least likely person to be the source of a miracle—puts his lunch into the hands of God.

What happened next? How did it impact the boy when Jesus broke the bread and it miraculously multiplied? Anyone who has ever been truly used by God can tell you the answer. He was transformed.

Too many young adults go into adulthood without ever experiencing God in this way. Yes, they have felt the chill of His nearness during a great worship set, and incredible communicators have inspired them to faith, but they have never seen the loaves and fishes of their small lives partner with God to feed the hunger of another. This divine activism is what we need.

Do not mistake their love of iPods and Xboxes as a sign of apathy. They want to be used. Within minutes of receiving the news about the Indonesian tsunami, 20-somethings’ blogs lit up with red-hot plans for giving and going.

Literally hundreds of thousands of them flocked to (and are still flocking to) Louisiana after Katrina. While church attendance among this group shrinks, mission agencies report dramatic growth.

The good news is that we do not have to wear hip shirts to reach them or have the sound system cranked up to rock-concert pitch. They want more from us. They want us to help them give away their lunches. They want to be the chubby kid.

Why? Because it is in the moment of giving away their lunches that the knowledge of the Lord becomes transformational to them.

So how do we help them? Instead of inviting the youth to listen to a great band at church, we need to kneel beside them and help them listen to the great calling of the Holy Spirit in their own hearts. We must help them expend their lives in a miracle partnership with Jesus.

If we don't, they will continue to find dynamic opportunities to collaborate outside the church, and we will be left alone—with only cool-looking belt buckles to show for our trouble.

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