

How the Assemblies of God Is Tackling the Millennial Challenge

As the world continues to vie for the attention of the younger generation, the Assemblies of God is one of the few U.S. denominations where young people are flocking. Statistics indicate approximately 40 percent of the Fellowship's more than 3 million adherents are 25 and younger.

"The Assemblies of God has historically done a good job of keeping the focus on the next generation," says Scott Berkey, children's pastor at Victory Worship Center (AG) in Tucson, Ariz., and former national director of the Children's Ministries Agency. "When that comes from the top, it trickles down in different ways and in different capacities all the way to the local church level."

Now more than ever, Berkey says parents are doing their homework before they walk into a church with their families and choosing ones that place special emphasis on children. If the church is doing its job by helping children feel connected, then it's the children who will bring their parents back to the church, says Berkey.

"Today's parents predominantly go where their kids want them to go," Berkey says. "The buying power kids have today is unlike any generation before them, and the same holds true as to where they go to church."

Mark Entzminger, senior director for the AG's children's ministries, says this need for connection is of vital importance to children.

"Kids today want to belong and have a place where they fit in and are welcomed, loved and accepted for who they are,"

Entzminger says.

In addition to a nurturing environment, Entzminger says the AG is reaching a hands-on generation and that teaching methods should reflect this whenever possible.

One of the Fellowship's most successful evangelistic outreaches for children, MEGA Sports Camp, gives evidence of this trend. MEGA Sports Camp allows the worlds of sports and faith to collide with positive results. Entzminger says this Vacation Bible School-style outreach typically attracts children who aren't Christians or who come from an unchurched background. The result is often a number of families getting plugged into a local congregation.

When reaching those outside the church, Berkey says it's important to be strategic and create an environment where people want to come and experience why a church is different from other community children's events.

"What separates us from those events is the love of Jesus Christ," Berkey says. "The people in our churches are interacting and sharing the love of Christ with children."

After establishing a foundation built on the love of Christ, children then graduate into local youth ministries. Heath Adamson, national director for AG Youth Ministries, says the Spirit-empowered gospel is what speaks to their hearts.

"We're firm believers that the most relevant thing today truly is the presence and the drawing of the Holy Spirit," Adamson says. "He always communicates in a language everybody understands, and it is His presence that becomes the impetus that crosses those invisible borders that separate generations."

Adamson says this movement of the Spirit was never intended to remain within the four walls of the church. Through the campus ministry of Youth Alive, students are intentionally being

equipped to be salt and light in their schools and to identify key moments where they can live out their faith, whether it's in science class or walking down the hall at school.

The goal, Adamson says, is for Youth Alive campus missionaries to not necessarily tell everybody about what they believe but to have the courage to listen to somebody's story and, through the interaction of the Holy Spirit, allow God to open a door for them to share God's story.

The hope of the ministry is that the participating students will make an impact on the lives of those around them regardless of where their paths take them. Students not only make a difference; they become the difference.

Jay Mooney, executive director of COMPACT Family Services in Hot Springs, Ark., knows all too well the importance of being the difference in the lives of children and youth, particularly those in crisis.

Mooney says a child or youth who comes through the door of COMPACT immediately is shown the love of Christ. Mentors model consistent discipline and love.

Love was what greeted a 19-year-old woman from South Carolina who described herself as a scared, broken child when she stood on the doorstep of COMPACT's Highlands Maternity Home.

Molested as a young girl, she suffered from a sexual addiction that left her unmarried and pregnant; however, she says it was the love of God that changed her life.

From day one, Mooney says, caregivers work with troubled children and youth from every angle to influence their lives and heal their wounds by ministering to their whole person—body, soul and spirit.

Such was the case with this young woman, who has ultimately come to experience God's grace and forgiveness.

"It's crazy how God ordered my steps," she says. "Highlands is where God began to turn my life around, and now God is walking me down the road so I can be who He's called me to be."

She is currently enrolled in school and has plans to pursue her credentials to become an AG missionary.

"It was just amazing the love that they had for me," she says. "They loved me past my attitude, and they loved me past my sin. They showed me how Christ sees me."

With this simple yet timeless message, AG children's and youth ministries are successfully reaching out to and impacting a generation marked by constant change and advancement.

"At the end of the day, love works," Adamson says. "Walking with Christ works."

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