

The Most Vital Key to Reaching the Next Generation

In case you haven't noticed, sweeping cultural changes are happening in the midst of this global pandemic. Recent polls have shown that teenagers and young adults are abandoning faith.

One recent poll showed that about three-quarters of teens in the United States reject the Christian faith they were raised with after they graduate from high school. The same poll found that about half of this group returned to church in their late 20s or early 30s. The Pew Research Center found that only 1 in 4 Millennials are affiliated with any religion, far more than older adults when they were young.

There are many reasons for this spiritual crisis, and older Christians are eager to blame the media, atheist university professors, secularism in politics or lukewarm churches. But I agree with Dr. Alex McFarland, national talk show host and author of the book *Abandoned Faith: Why Millennials Are Walking Away and How You Can Lead Them Home*. He believes one of the reasons youths are leaving church is because they have no relational connection.

McFarland writes: "Many youth have no—or very limited—exposure to adult role models who know what they believe, why they believe it, and are committed to consistently living it out." In other words, we can't blame the liberal boogieman. The blame really lies with us. We forgot how to mentor.

This week I'm releasing my seventh book, *Follow Me: Make Disciples Like Jesus Did*. It may not be my most popular book, and that's understandable because the topic of discipleship has always had a tendency to drive people away instead of attracting big audiences (see John 6:65-66). I started

investing my life in young adults 25 years ago, and relational discipleship has become my life message. I believe the only way we will reclaim this young generation will be by making seismic shifts in the way we do ministry.

In *Follow Me*, I'm challenging church leaders to recognize four shifts the Holy Spirit is leading us to make:

1. We are shifting from quantity to quality. In the days before COVID, we assumed we were successful if we had big crowds in our nice buildings. But just because a sanctuary is full of people doesn't mean we are making strong followers of Jesus. We must never evaluate our success by worldly standards. God is not impressed with crowds; He wants strong, faithful followers who can then influence others.

2. We are shifting from spectators to disciples. Churches that already had strong small group ministry before the pandemic stayed strong during the crisis and rebounded afterwards. But churches that put all their resources into big congregational events were shut down or lost huge percentages of their membership.

Jesus didn't call us to make churchgoers. He never intended His followers to just sit in rows of chairs year after year, listening to sermons and being entertained. He told them, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19a, NASB 1995). He certainly didn't want His followers to remain spiritual infants; He invites us all to grow up and do the works that He did.

3. We are shifting from big events to small groups. There's nothing wrong with big gatherings. I love to worship with a crowd. But when we made the church about the crowd, we created a Frankenstein's monster that doesn't even resemble the original church in the book of Acts. People don't effectively grow if their only input comes from a weekly or monthly 30-minute sermon. They need solid discipleship training in a

close-knit environment with supportive relationships, warm hugs and eye contact.

We live in a world full of fear, loneliness and abuse. And that's a big reason many people would never set foot in a big church full of strangers. Their social anxiety prevents them from walking into a concert-style arena to hear a sermon in a dark room. But they would consider visiting a home for a meal or a small-group study. Why are we making it so hard for people to connect?

4. We are shifting from unapproachable celebrities to accessible servants. We have lived through the era of the rock-star preacher, and this fad is fading fast. It is no coincidence that during the pandemic, several high-profile ministers with massive followings disappeared because of tragic moral failures. I didn't rejoice when I heard the news about these leaders—because I know we are all capable of making horrible mistakes. But the collapse of these giant ministries underscored the fact that God is calling us away from Hollywood-style glamour and back to New Testament humility.

Ministers who lead like Jesus aren't afraid to empower others, and they aren't afraid of their followers being more successful than they are. In fact, they want their disciples to surpass them. The faster we shift away from the outdated celebrity model, the sooner we will reach the world with Christ's love. {eoa}

Lee Grady's new book, Follow Me: Make Disciples Like Jesus Did, is available now from most online book distributors. You  can also order it from Charisma House at my.

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