

UNDERSTANDING
COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND YOUNG
TWENTYSOMETHINGS

Reaching the Net Generation

By Dave Arnold



I needed an escape from the office, so I headed to Barnes & Noble, a gold mine for someone who loves books and coffee. That's where I met Jimmy, a college student majoring in Computer Science.

I sensed God leading me to talk with him, so I walked over to where he sat looking through the pages of the latest issue of *Wired*. "Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"No, I don't mind," he replied. He was cordial enough and invited me to sit down. I fired off my question, "What do you think spirituality is?"

He sat back in his chair, rubbing his chin in deep thought. "Well... I'm a rationalist. I only believe in what can be explained."

"So you're saying you don't believe in spirituality?" I inquired. More chin rubbing.

"Well, I don't really think about it. I guess it's a way of explaining things that people don't understand, something that doesn't have a rational explanation."

As the conversation continued, I quickly realized I was talking with a well-read person and a deep thinker. He went on to say he'd read the Bible (many times, he claimed), the Koran, the Talmud and some Hindu writings.

"I believe Jesus existed historically—that He was a good guy who told people to be nice."

But Jimmy said he didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God or that He rose from the dead. "These are only theories—they're not concrete."

An unreached population

Jimmy is one of millions of college students and early twentysomethings in North America who are lost and searching for something solid to grasp, but coming up short in their quests.

Author Leonard Sweet talks about our postmodern culture as EPIC (Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven and Connected). College and early twentysomethings are very “EPIC” in how they think and live. Many churches aren’t quite sure where to place them or how to address their unique needs and questions.

Gary Jennings, Collegiate Evangelism manager, North American Mission Board, describes students as a searching, experiential population segment. “Most college and twentysomethings haven’t been reached with the gospel, but they’re very open to talking about spiritual things. They’re in an exploration time in their lives and will try just about anything to fill that void.”

As a pastor myself to that age group, I’ve found that they’re very spiritual in how they deal with life. For many, college becomes a smorgasbord of spiritual paths to choose from, while discernment is in short supply, as demonstrated by my brief friendship with Jimmy: he had *read about religion* but not *formed a relationship* with the Savior.

“College is a time when you’re confronted with who you are and what you believe to be true—so, by definition, the college experience is a spiritual journey,” says Gary. “This generation is hungry for truth.”

That journey can be a foundation for understanding the gospel for students who are open to hearing it. But to share Christ effectively, we must understand this generation. How do we begin?

Stats and trends

- Many college students and early twentysomethings create their own understanding of religious truth. One college student told me: “I believe in a higher power, but I don’t refer to it as a ‘he’ or ‘she.’ I just call it ‘it.’ And I don’t believe you need to go to church, because you can find your own religion.” Another person I met said he believes in Jesus and what He claimed, but he also believes in re-incarnation, a viewpoint I often hear from non-Christians in this age range.

- In “Twenty-somethings Struggle to Find their Place in Christian Churches,” researcher George Barna wrote that Americans in college or in their twenties are “significantly less likely than any other group to attend church..., to be absolutely committed to Christianity, or to read the Bible.”

- Adds Barna: “The most striking reality of twenty-somethings’ faith is their relative absence from Christian churches. Only three out of 10 twentysomethings (31%) attend church in a typical week, compared to more than four out of 10 of those in their thirties (42%) and nearly half of all adults ages 40 and older (49%).”

- Barna also noted that from “high school graduation to age 25 there is a 42% drop in weekly church attendance and [an overall] 58% decline from ages 18 to 29. That represents eight million twentysomethings alive today who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will no longer be active in a church by their 30th birthday.”

- “The low level of twentysomething church attendance is not just due to the ‘college years,’ when many young adults may not have easy access to a church,” adds Barna. “The research shows that church attendance bottoms out during the late twenties when the vast majority of students have transitioned from education to the workforce. Just 22% of those ages 25 to 29 attended church in the last week.”

- According to Dr. Michael Lindsay, a consultant for religion and cul-



ture with the Gallup Institute, only 52 percent of freshmen upon entering college frequently attended religious services. By the time of their junior year, only 29 percent frequently attended a religious service.

- Many college and twentysomethings feel “overlooked as potential leaders.” Only 4% of those in their twenties are currently serving in a local church—the lowest of any age group.

- According to “Crisis on the Campus” (*Psychology Today*, May 2002), college students are extremely prone to serious depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal tendencies and hospitalization due to crises or emotional disorders. There are now more counseling centers established on college campuses than ever before.

How should the church respond?

AWARENESS

The first step of reaching this next generation is to be aware of them. Churches are usually good at reaching children and teens in effective ways: hiring staff, doing various outreach programs, ministering in relevant ways. But something happens when a person turns 18. They graduate from the youth group, and the church rarely has a specific ministry for them.

The church can’t expect that when students graduate from high school they’re automatically going to plug into the church because they’re “adults” now. Rather, those who are between 18 and 25 face some of the toughest and most life-altering decisions they’ll ever make—decisions like finding purpose, finding a vocation, finding the right spouse, etc. The church needs to provide a place for them and offer guidance during this formative time.

The 18- to 25-year-old group is indeed a specific “population segment.” As a group they have specific needs, speak a certain language, have similar interests and many times a certain outlook on life.

ACTION

Not only must the church be aware, but it must take action, communicating to this population in relevant ways to reach them with the gospel.

This means creating an environment for college and early twentysomethings. The ministry I lead in Michigan is called NextGen Ministries. We meet weekly—once a month on Saturday nights (for Vintage) and the other three weeks on Sunday nights (for The Gathering). Vintage feels like a café and features a live talk show where college students and twentysomethings can watch as their peers are interviewed. The Gathering is a time of worship, relevant teaching, drama, video and other creative elements. Both Vintage and The Gathering exist to provide an environment where this age group can connect with God and connect to others.

For more information on reaching this generation visit:

- www.studentz.com/college
- www.isionline.org
- www.lifeway.com

A crucial harvest

Pray that this generation will find the truth in Christ in a world that pushes tolerance and relativism. Pray that God will raise up Christian leaders from this age group. The church can be effective in reaching them. I think the key is to provide an atmosphere of relevance and authenticity, a forum for exploring ideas and life’s choices—without ridicule and judgment for those who show up with thinking that varies from Christian beliefs. People in this generation need to find Christ for themselves, and the church can provide the place. @



Dave Arnold is currently planting a church in Chicago, Illinois.