

LETTER TO SENIOR PASTOR

Dear Pastor,

I've asked your youthworker to forward this letter on to you. It's about the kids in your congregation and the powerful role that you play as their pastor in their spiritual nurture.

I know that you've got teenagers sitting in your congregation every week. From your vantage point up front, you may spot them doodling, daydreaming, napping, zoning out, or even text-messaging. At times, it becomes painfully obvious that their eyes are lying. Even though those eyes may be focused on you, the young person behind the eyes is somewhere else. All this is evidence of a growing reality we face in our churches today: Many teenagers feel disconnected from the person in the pulpit – and as a result, the message as well. This troubling fact points to the need for pastors to intentionally listen to, understand, and reach out to students in a way that facilitates students' connection and engagement with you, the messenger, and the life-changing message you've been called to preach.

What can you do to foster deep and significant connections with the emerging generations that extend from the pulpit to the pew, in order to point young people to the cross and new life in the Kingdom? Our pastoral lives must be marked by several core characteristics that are part of who we are and how we minister in our students' postmodern world. We should prayerfully and intentionally develop these characteristics as part of our ministry strategy. They each reflect the earthly ministry of Jesus and effective missionary efforts throughout the history of the church.

Approach teenagers as a cross-cultural mission field

To effectively engage the emerging generations you must remember that there is a cultural gap that you are responsible to span. Their world is not your world. Consequently, you are a cross-cultural missionary who must employ the incarnational approach God used when he sent his Son into the world. God came to us as one of us. He entered into human culture, living and using human language and customs. Knowing their language, culture, and lifestyles helps us contextualize the unchanging message in forms that are familiar to youth.

Be in but not of the world

We must avoid the extreme of pulling ourselves out of the culture, and the opposite extreme of becoming so closely aligned to the world that we uncritically assume values and behaviors that are contrary to God's will. The church has been guilty of both for far too long. We must learn to walk the tightrope of living for God in the context of the postmodern culture. By maintaining the proper balance, we are maintaining a transforming and redemptive presence in their culture and modeling true, biblical discipleship for all those young people who come to faith.

Always evaluate – and where necessary, abandon – your ministry methods

While the content of the Word always remains unchanged, the way we do ministry should be constantly evaluated. There is no room for sacred cows. If the message isn't getting through because of dated methods, new ones should be prayerfully sought and adopted in order to effectively communicate the Good News. However, we must adopt only those methods that are faithful to the unchanging Word. And we must never assume that methodologies can do what only relationships can.

Answer all the groans

All creation groans with longing for ultimate redemption. (Rom. 8:22) Jesus tells his disciples to "preach the Good News to all creation." (Mark 16:15) Creation includes not only fallen humanity, but institutions and systems. Our ministries should address and speak God's Word to the social systems that shape a teenager's life, including families, schools, media, peers, vocations, relationships, etc. A biblically balanced ministry that goes beyond getting people "saved" will command the attention of the young, showing them the relevancy of the Gospel to all individuals and to all of life.

Use popular culture as a communication tool

Survey your students to see what they listen to, read, and watch. Then read, watch, and listen for yourself. Popular culture is the life-shaping soup that they marinate in all day every day. That soup is filled with stories, video clips, books, films, magazines, lyrics, and so forth that can help us communicate the unchanging message in a relevant manner (see www.cpyu.org for updates on today's youth culture). Jesus consistently used word pictures, analogies, and illustrations from his culture as tools for communicating unchanging truth. The Apostle Paul opened his mouth only after looking and listening carefully, using Athenian idol inscriptions and poetry to build a case for the Gospel (Acts 17). By using something familiar from the pulpit and in our face-to-face conversations, we can get them to perk up and listen, allowing us to lead them into an understanding of something new.

Understand your own cultural biases

When our adult world collides with the reality of their emerging youth culture, it can get messy. Because what we encounter is different and may make us uncomfortable, our tendency is to spend a good amount of our “ministry time” convincing students that we are right and they are wrong. In other words, we must understand our own cultural biases and our inclination to see these biases as matters of right and wrong that we force on others as non-negotiables. The reality is that our way of doing things isn’t always the only way of doing things.

Be intent on building relationships

The postmodern generation longs not only for a connection with their Creator but also with their fellow humans. What sets them apart from prior generations is the deep level of brokenness they’ve experienced in their most basic relationship – the family. This leaves them intensely hungry for and open to relationships with others. Are you taking the time to get to know the students in your congregation? Relationships open the ears, eyes, and hearts of young people to the truths of God’s Word. Relationships are more often than not the doorway through which the emerging generations come to faith and learn what it means to live out a faith that’s integrated into every nook and cranny of life.

Love without condition or limits

One of the great cries in today’s youth culture is the need to be and feel loved. It is crucial that our contact with young people is filled with love. Yet they may be hesitant to return our embrace because we are from another generation and culture, or because of their trail of deep relational brokenness and fear of being hurt again. To help them overcome that fear, our love must be sincere and without condition or limit. Like Christ, we must simply love, and do so by serving them.

Be willing to suffer “with”

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, was called to minister to the poor after praying a very dangerous prayer: “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” It’s dangerous because its answer can shake up our comfortable and self-centered priorities. When God answered Pierce’s prayer, he felt a deep compassion for the hungry and poor that changed the course of his life and the world. In order to effectively connect with the emerging generations, we must pray that same prayer. When God answers this prayer, we will fully realize the significance of incarnational ministry to the young, and, like Jesus, our hearts will be broken by the depth of their spiritual and emotional pain. We will be driven to immerse ourselves in their world, their history and their humanity. In effect, we will have an infectious “heart of God” for them that will sweep through our congregations.

Provide a place and community

Today’s emerging generations long for a place to belong and call home. Their yearning is amplified by the fact that broken family situations and the lack of healthy peer relationships have left them with a huge relational void. They want connections, relationships, and community. Our churches should seriously consider stopping the destructive pattern of always separating the Body of Christ along generational lines. Teens should be included when the church assembles for worship, fellowship, mission, service, and discipleship. They need access to and relationships with those who are older, wiser, spiritually mature, and more life-experienced.

Be a learning listener

The emerging generations have a two-fold complaint about those of us who are older: We don’t listen, and we don’t understand. Understanding comes only through listening. By listening, we begin to learn about those we’ve been called to reach. When we listen, they feel understood and are more willing to listen to us when we speak to them. Our full attention and energy must be focused in on hearing and understanding what teenagers have to say.

Be a storyteller

The avenue to the heart of a young person is story. This is good news as our pastoral calling is to telling the story of the great biblical drama of creation, fall, & redemption. We must not only tell them God’s story, but also help them realize that God’s still redemptively active in the affairs of humankind by becoming vulnerable & telling them our stories – both the good and bad – about how God has changed us.

We are called to be signposts, pointing to Jesus Christ and the redemption, new life, and purpose that are found in him. As signposts we will “stick out” by entering into the postmodern world of young people while wearing these important characteristics. Doing anything less jeopardizes our ability to effectively cross cultures into their lives, and will only serve to foster a bigger and bigger disconnect between the person in the pulpit and the kids in the pews.

Be encouraged! You play a more powerful role than you can imagine in the lives of your congregation’s students. And if there’s anything I can do to serve you as you serve your students, please let me know.

Blessings to you,

Walt Mueller
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SendTheFire is here for you too!

Call us with questions, bounce ideas off us or let us know how we can partner with you and/or serve you as you pour yourselves out for our younger generation!

