

“Don’t be fooled by the size of this volume. Dynamite comes in a small package. The author wastes no words as he places years of research and frontline ministry experience onto the written page. Lowery is a trusted ministry partner whose works should be read, meditated upon, prayed over, and carefully implemented! Failure to do so could result in a generation lost for Christ.”

Jerry Ross

Minister of Education, Quail Springs Baptist Church,
Oklahoma City, OK

“Thanks for letting me read and comment. I really think it will be a great resource. Since I’ve started at FBC Chickasha, I’ve tried to focus on building the young adult age range, and I believe Unlabeled 2 is something those in leadership can use to be even more effective.”

Doug Matlock

Education and Outreach Pastor, Chickasha, OK

“As a young Southern Baptist pastor, I am confident that the future of our denomination is tied directly to the challenges of reaching the new generation of young adults. This powerful volume speaks boldly about the transformation of methodology and mindset within the local church that must take place for reaching these young adults. By reading this volume, I have been called to accountability in my church leadership role for the spiritual guidance of these people. May we be found faithful to do all that is required of us to reach them with the gospel of Jesus Christ!”

Rusty McMullen

Pastor • Trinity Baptist Church, Maud, OK

UNLABELED 2 • KEYS TO EFFECTIVE YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL & SMALL GROUP INTERACTION • CRIS LOWERY

UNLABELED 2

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
& SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

Leaders
as Mentors



Quick
Glimpse of
Young Adult
Culture

Preparing
to Lead



Mission
Connections

CRIS LOWERY

Foreword

There is a great challenge facing the established church of the twenty-first century. It revolves around reaching young adults in the eighteen to thirty-four year-old age group. While this group is becoming active in many parts of our society, it is apparent that many of them are withdrawing from our Southern Baptist congregations. This is evidenced over a fourteen-year period by a steady decline in the enrollment of eighteen to thirty-four year olds in Oklahoma Southern Baptist churches.

From 1997 to 2010, the number of young adults enrolled in Sunday school has declined by 22,015 people, a decline of roughly 32 percent. A significant portion of these have migrated to churches outside our denominational influence. The question we must ask ourselves is will we accept this trend as inevitable, or do we want to do what it will take to reverse it? This book is designed for those who want to reverse the trend.

UNLABELED 2

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
& SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

This publication is made possible by your gifts through the Cooperative Program.

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Thanks to those who helped by proofing, adding comments, editing, and basically finding mistakes I made before it went to print! Some of these people are Dr. Randall Adams, Chris Baker, Rick Brown, Matt Danner, Dr. Alton Fannin, Mark Gaines, Dr. Tim Gentry, Robert and Raleah Harper, Kristin Harris, Jennifer Hill, Rick Longcrier, Doug Matlock, Rusty McMullen, Rob Miller, Rance Peters, Kacie Potts, Brent Prentice, Shane Prichard, Katie Puckett, Linda Rickey, Jerry Ross, Terry Sanders, Joel Soto, Karen Soto, Rudy Vargas, Alisha Wadsworth, Clint Walkingstick and Tiffany Zylstra.

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Introduction

For many churches, reaching young adults can be a challenging and somewhat daunting task. There are so many questions and yet a limited number of resources that give practical insights as well as steps to take in impacting the eighteen to thirty-four year-old age group. This small book is designed to give you important cultural information about this group to help you better understand their worldview. It lists practical suggestions on how to structure an effective Sunday school or small group experience that will connect them to the truth of scripture, to you as a mentor, to your church family, and ultimately to a relationship with Christ.

It's possible for every church to reach young adults if they are willing to invest time and energy into building relationships and open to young adults who may challenge traditional beliefs about what church should look like. Those churches

who see young adults as people uniquely created by God and worthy of their time and effort will find themselves being attractive to this segment of our population. It will also require an intentional effort to engage this group outside the four walls of our buildings.

Beginning a relationship is the first step and can happen in any area of your life where at least one young adult is present. From these relationships, ministry begins to happen. We simply need to look around in the world where God has placed us and begin to look for those young adults He has already placed in our circle of influence and begin building the kind of relationship that will make a difference for eternity.

References to young adults are intended to be generalizations of some trends that have become evident in this age group. Not every young adult resembles all of the trends or characterizations mentioned. This is a conscious effort, however, to represent

this group's cultural trends rather than each person's individual journey.

One of the things you'll notice as you read along are comments made by young adults. These comments allow us a glimpse into the hearts and minds of those we are seeking to understand. Some of the comments are affirming, some challenging, and some unsettling, but they are all specifically directed at the material contained in this book. My thanks go out to those who took the time to read through it and give honest feedback. The material is better because they did. It will be beneficial to take time to evaluate their comments in order to understand the thought patterns and convictions behind them.

My hope is that the enclosed information is brief enough to be read in a single sitting and in depth enough to be a valuable resource in your efforts to reach the young adults in your community. For

more information about reaching young adults, check out our online webinars at **www.bgco.org/emerginggenerations**. May God bless you in your efforts as you reach out to build relationships with this unique and interesting generation.

“

If a young adult is the teacher of a young adult class, it is difficult for that teacher to not fall into the ‘I’m amazing’ mindset, as mentioned characteristically before, and compete with those in the class. And if they do, it is easily recognized in the group and difficult to recover from in a learning environment.

”

Kacie ²⁵

Leaders as Mentors

An interesting characteristic of young adult culture is their acceptance of and desire for mentoring relationships. While they are outspoken and often fairly sure of themselves, they seem to be very receptive to learning from those who have gone before them, especially if it is based on a relationship. In our survey, as well as in conversations with young adults, they desire to walk alongside someone who can be a listening ear, provide support

emotionally, and give advice when asked for. This dismisses the idea that young adult classes need to be led by other young adults. Older adults who are willing to build relationships with young adults can have a significant impact. It doesn't mean young adults won't be good leaders of a Sunday school class or small group, it just means there should be a conscious effort to include older adults either as an active part of the class leadership or possibly an informal connection between a younger and older class or group.

“

This is so true. We are craving this. As much as we may appear to ‘know it all,’ we respond when someone invests in our lives. We see investing in the lives of others as valuable. So if you come to us, wanting to walk alongside us, that speaks volumes. I think we’ve overcomplicated what it means to be a mentor to someone. ‘Mentorship’ may sometimes be intimidating to adults, but I think it can be as simple as having coffee every so often, checking in to see how someone’s week is going, asking how you can pray, or meeting to pray with someone. It doesn’t have to be a two-to-three hour a week commitment. It is doing life together.

”

Kristin ²⁷

With this in mind, here are a few important aspects of mentoring through relationships.

Be a listener. Young adults respond well to people who listen intently to them and then ask questions from the information they received. While this sounds simple enough, there are some things to avoid that will keep it from happening. Here are a few of the pitfalls to effective listening.

- Offering advice too soon. There can be an inclination to help someone fix their problem as part of our listening process. Unfortunately, this can easily become a barrier to communication, especially when someone just wanted to be heard. A good rule of thumb is to listen intently. Then offer suggestions if they are appropriate. Often, if someone wants advice, they will ask for it. They might say something like, “What would you do?” or, “Has anything like that ever happened to you?” When this happens, you’ve

entered a teachable moment. Try not to unload all your wisdom in one sitting. By mixing your knowledge with more questions about them and their situation, you will make the most of this opportunity.

- Turning the attention back on you. Using stories about your life and experiences are beneficial but don't need to be long and drawn out. When you begin telling a story about your life, even though it is meant to make a point, it turns the focus of the conversation to you rather than the young adult you're talking to. This isn't to say you should never go into detail about your life stories. The more young adults know about your history, the deeper the relationship can become. It's just wise to be careful not to turn teachable moments into history lessons about where you've been and what you've done. Save these for those purely social moments where the conversation is less pointed.

“

**Learning from others' experiences is one of the
absolute most effective ways for me to learn or
understand things.**

”

Katie ²³

- Try to avoid unproductive clichés. When someone comes to you with an issue they consider to be serious, it can be counterproductive to toss out phrases like, “Welcome to the real world,” or, “Let me tell you what a real problem looks like.” Other types of phrases that can easily shut down the lines of communication are, “I told you so,” “Didn’t I tell you that would happen?” and, “You think you’ve got problems?” If our goal is to hear as much of a young adult’s story as they will tell us, using these kinds of phrases will create more barriers to that type of communication than they could ever hope to open up. A smile, a nod of the head, and a well-planned question from information you just heard them say will be a much more positive and rewarding approach.

“I think this is true for everyone, no matter how young or old you are. When someone really listens to you, it makes you feel like you can ask for advice with the things you’ve shared.”

Kristin²⁷

“In some churches they look at the young adults as trouble makers instead of taking their time to connect with them and see what the problem is, so they could become the solution. We are not here to criticize, but we are here to help them get out of the hole.”

Rudy²³

Good Listening Skills to Develop as a Leader

Good listening skills are one of the most important things you can develop when working with young adults. Because of their cultural background, they are generally willing to share their story to someone with a listening ear. Much has been written about listening skills, and it is a fascinating area of study. By developing a few good habits, you will be able to carry on great conversations with young adults as you hear about their life journey. Here are some basic skills you can develop that will pay big dividends.

- 1 Be the one who starts the conversation. You can start a conversation with a young adult simply by showing interest in them. Making a positive comment about a logo or advertisement on a hat or

t-shirt, hair style, fingernails, tattoos, shoes, or anything else that is personal to them is an easy way to begin a conversation. From that one statement or question, you can gain enough information to ask your next question. This will only happen if you listen intently to their response. Our minds have a tendency to wander even when we are actively involved in conversations. This is something we can overcome with practice, however. One key is to focus your attention to what is being said, looking for the very piece of information you will use to frame your next question.

Not long ago I was in a restaurant eating lunch with some friends. We had a great conversation going with the waitress as she checked in on our table. Toward the end of our lunch, another girl came by to gather up the baskets our burgers came in. She had several tattoos that seemed to tell her life story. One that was especially interesting was a name that had been

tattooed on the inside of her left wrist. I asked her if she had designed some of her tattoos, and she smiled and said she had. That was enough information to ask the second question which was, “Did you design the one on your wrist?” Her answer was yes. By using listening skills, I now knew that her tattoos were personal, so I asked what the one on her wrist was. She explained she had wanted to do something to remind her of her mother and how much she meant to her. She was going to have her mother’s name put there but that didn’t seem personal enough. So she took a letter her mother had written her to the artist, and he copied her mother’s signature onto her wrist. Every time she looks at it, she not only remembers the things her mother did for her, she remembers the words of encouragement that were in the letter. We got to hear her story because we initiated the conversation then asked questions from information she gave to us in her response.

“

**We are waiting for you to approach us. We are
flattered when you do. We appreciate that you care.
We realize that you see us.**

”

Kristin ²⁷

- 2 Avoid telling your story. The goal of listening is to hear as much of a person's story as they are willing to tell. In an effort to do this, we will sometimes tell a story that is somehow related to the story we just heard. Instead of creating a bond or empathy, most often we shift the focus of the story off of the person we are listening to and back onto ourselves. Once that's been done, it's very difficult to get the focus back onto the person you're listening to, especially with the same intensity. The best approach is to avoid telling your counter story, and instead, ask another question from the information you just received while listening. If a counter story has to be told, it should be short, to the point, and then the focus should be directed back to the individual with another question or short statement.

“There’s a reason the author uses about thirty variations of ‘listen’ throughout this book. It’s that important! Everyone has a story to tell, and young adults are no different. Some of the most meaningful lessons in my life have come from experiences shared with peers.”

Karen ²⁷

“This is a difficult skill to master, but once accomplished it opens up a whole new world of intimacy in conversation with the person. By doing this you essentially are saying to that person, ‘Your story is so important to me that I am willing to lay aside my own need to be heard just to better know you.’”

Rusty ³¹

- 3** Use Bible stories to make a point. Young adults live in such an interactive world that stories work well in making points or giving needed advice. There are times when you are listening to a young adult that the Holy Spirit will whisper in your ear the story that person needs to hear. This is different than your own brain telling you what to say, because it will come up with story after story that might work in this situation. Listen for the Spirit's urging before you launch into a Bible story. Once you know that you are supposed to tell a specific story, the following steps might be helpful to remember.
- Ask if they have ever heard that story and if not, would they mind if you told it. An example statement might be, "That reminds me of a story I read in the Bible. Have you ever heard the story of David and Goliath? Can I tell you that story?"

- Give any important information before the story begins. This doesn't need to be a long history lesson, but if there is information that helps the story come alive, tell it before the story begins. In the case of David and Goliath, it would be good to know that Goliath was a professional soldier and that he was a giant! It's also good to know that he fought for a group of people who hated the God of the Bible. David, on the other hand, was just a kid. His brothers were soldiers, but he was too young to serve in the military and was just there bringing them some supplies. He was part of a group that worshipped the God mentioned in the Bible.
- Stay true to the story. There's no need to try and modernize the story. Trust in the fact that the word of God is living and active and that the Holy Spirit will use it to make the impact He desires to make. Arming Goliath with an AK-47 might make the story more modern day, but it doesn't help it make a greater impact.

- Try not to add things that weren't in the original story or leave out major components. This doesn't mean the story should be memorized. Just do your best to stay as true to the story as you can.
- You might end your story with a statement like, "Does any part of that story remind you of what's going on in your situation?" Listen for a response. Then use your listening skills to ask a question from the response that was given. If you were prompted to tell an evangelistic story, you may also have an opportunity to present the steps it takes for someone to follow Jesus.

Another effective encounter you can have with young adults is to experience life skills together. From woodworking and gardening to candle making and mechanics, interaction with real-life projects will allow natural and impactful encounters to happen. You can invite some of them to help with a project or offer to help with something they are currently working on. Letting them know



you are a resource for them when they need help is a great way to be invited into their world. The conversations that happen during these times are often much deeper than what will happen in a church setting or where time is limited. Don't be afraid to initiate these opportunities. If the interest isn't there, don't force it. As you continue to build relationships, the day will come when these opportunities will arise.

“Give us opportunities to learn, walk alongside us. Then give us opportunities to lead. If you call us alongside you, don’t make us stand in the wings. We want to serve with you. Give us responsibility. Many churches are full of people who have had the same responsibilities for so many years. Step aside on a few things and invite us be a part of your ministry. Let us take ownership with you. Our approaches and passions may be different, but we serve the same Lord. We will respect where you’ve been if you show us. Don’t make us wait until you are ready to let go of a role. Help us learn what true leadership means by allowing us to lead and serve with you.”

Kristin ²⁷

“This is great and so true. We are adventurous and always looking for something new, a challenge to tackle, and it is unexpected from what people think we will want to do, so that causes intrigue.”

Kacie ²⁵

Quick Glimpse of Young Adult Culture

Just like any people group, understanding young adult culture is an important part of the process when planning strategies and programs that will be effective. While there are many influences that have impacted this group during their years of development, we will look at two that impact greatly the way they accept information and their decision-making process. We'll call the first one the "hyper-inflated ego" and the second, "the world

at their fingertips.” Both are unique to this generation and greatly impact the way they interact in learning situations.

Dr. Kevin Leman wrote a book entitled *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. In it he described some of the common characteristics of first-born individuals as opposed to those born in the middle and finally youngest in the family. One of the characteristics of those born last was called “the golden child syndrome.” The youngest child in a family often has things done for them because they are the baby of the family. And no matter how old they get, they are often still seen as the baby of the family. Because of this, Mom, Dad, brothers, and sisters will come to their rescue, listen to almost anything they say, and generally give them a sense of being special, just because they are the youngest.

The challenge for these “last borns” comes when they enter the workforce or other places where their special privileges because of being youngest aren’t

recognized. In many ways, this is what happened to the current generation of young adults as they were growing up, regardless of their order of birth. Sometime in the late eighties and early nineties there was a shift in the way society approached a child's self esteem. It was determined that a child's self esteem was so important that it should be protected at all costs. People quit keeping score at children's competitive events so that every child could be a winner no matter what the final score was. (To be completely accurate, scores were no longer officially kept, but every parent knew what the score was at the end of the event!) Parents, coaches, teachers and most other authority figures were encouraged to tell children they were unique and very special and that nothing could stand in the way of them accomplishing whatever they wanted because they were so special. The end result of being told you are so special is that eventually you not only believe you are special, but you begin to believe you are more significant than those around you. This "hyper-inflated ego" causes a variety of behaviors that are prevalent in today's young adult culture.

“This is so true, I’ve heard our generation described as having “helicopter parents” that have their fingers in everything we do, cheering us on, making sure our world is perfect and wonderful.”

Kristin ²⁷

Some of the most prevalent impacts of this overemphasis on ego have been that this group expects people to listen when they speak as well as put their ideas into action. They aren't generally patient when it comes to waiting their turn for leadership positions or places of recognition. They want what they want and they want it now. The struggles come when they enter the workforce and other places that don't automatically recognize their "golden child" status. As a discussion group leader, it's important to understand this dynamic. Helping lead young adults in a discovery process is much more effective than simply telling them what they should think. Good listening skills also become an important tool for the small group leader.

“Generally people who talk the most in a conversation or discussion feel the best about how it went. I totally agree that ‘good listening skills also become an important tool for the small group leader.’ Those in this generation are so focused on relationship and the ‘golden child’ status that they want to feel like what they say is heard and respected.”

Doug ²⁹



One of the backlashes of this hyper-inflated ego has been the enormous pressure young adults are under to succeed. Many are going through what is being called a quarter-life crisis in their twenties. This is a time when they really need a listening ear and someone with experience to walk alongside them. Understanding this and building relationships during this time will help you become a valuable asset to the young adults in your world.

“My generation definitely needs to learn some humility. I feel like we put such a high value on our thoughts and getting a response to feel affirmed. We post it on facebook, we blog about it, and we wait- wait for another affirmation, another comment that we are indeed what we thought we were - wonderful.”

Kristin ²⁷

“There are also some benefits to this mindset. Such as, we believe we have what it takes to lead and are able to lead at younger ages. The older generational mindset is often incredibly frustrating: you have to wait until your old enough to have some authority or responsibility. Well, not necessarily. It's not age that automatically makes a great leader. Biding your time does not guarantee results. Sure, you shouldn't be ushered to the top, but neither should your age prevent you. I feel as if this is often the case.”

Alisha ²⁶

“

I really think this information can help change the thinking of not just an older generation as they relate to the younger generation but also young adults as we read how impatient we are with most things and how we can relate on some level with the ‘golden child’ idea.

”

Shane ²⁶

A second dynamic unique to this generation from the ones before them is that due to the Internet, the world has always been at their fingertips. This means the manner and speed in which this group has gained information is drastically different from when their parents were growing up. They are able to access information on any topic in a matter of seconds. Their world is a combination of speed and information overload. A couple of things have happened because of this. The first is that they no longer automatically believe a designated speaker is an expert or the final authority on any subject. Because of their instant access to information, before they are finished listening to a speaker, they can find multiple other “experts” online with the same degrees and experience as the person they are listening to who will contradict what that person is saying. One university student put it this way: “It is imperative that someone studying this generation realize that we have the world at our fingertips and the world has been at our fingertips for our entire lives. I think this

access to information seriously undermines this generation's view of authority, especially traditional scholastic authority."

Generations prior to this one depended on a teacher or speaker to stand as the authority figure on a particular topic and tell the students what they needed to know. This shift in information availability has impacted the way young adults receive information as well as question the authority of anyone who deems themselves as an "expert." It's easy to see why there can be so much confusion in this generation when it comes to saying something is always right or always wrong. Understanding this dynamic is important when we come to planning for interacting with young adults in a Sunday school or a small group setting. It helps us understand the need for leaders who can present Bible truths and lead good discussions rather than those who are good at information download and pre-determined life applications.

“We’re not confused, we’re distrusting due to a lack of authentic relationship with the ‘expert’... A lot of us feel as if we don’t fit in anywhere. Our constant feeling of disconnect is something that ultimately brings us together. It’s your ability to call out your own weirdness that makes us able to hear you and connect with what you’re telling us. If you believe you have it all together, we won’t believe the things you say.”

Clint³²

“Discussions are a big way to get our attention and a great opportunity to convince us of the authority on a subject, while also allowing us to speak, which gives us the feeling of being a key player to the end result ‘golden child.’”

Kacie²⁵

Another important dynamic of young adult culture is a great openness to diversity that may not be found in all age groups. Before we go on, let me make this statement. Whether we like this part of their culture is not as important as that we understand it. Some may want to stop reading after the following few paragraphs and just chalk this group up as an immature group with no moral compass. I'd encourage you to continue reading. Remember, understanding a people group is not the same as agreeing with them or condoning their thought patterns. If we have any hope of capturing the hearts and minds of this generation for the cause of Christ, we need to adequately understand who they are and why they think the way they do. So take a deep breath, let it out slowly...and read on.

“

**For many, truth is relative to relationships.
Without a genuine relationship, attacking issues
is seen as attacking people.**

”

Doug²⁹

Alcohol: While this is seen by some generations as a hill to die on, it's not seen that way by many young adults. Whether they drink alcohol or not, many Christian young adults don't see this as an issue to focus on.

Tattoos: While I'm uncertain as to when the tattoo craze became prevalent in young adult culture, I'm very certain it's a popular trend and one with important social significance. Tattoos for this generation almost always have a story behind them. They tend to represent an event, person, or ideology. Understanding why a young adult chose a specific tattoo gives you a quick glimpse into part of their life story.

“Tattoos are also more nonchalant and used as a new type of fashion statement. People get fake mustaches tattooed on their index finger just for laughs or get song lyrics on their feet simply for fashion and to stand out and make a statement. Not your typical cross, barbed wire fence, or lover’s name.”

Kacie ²⁵

“I had a roommate who had a tattoo of an Adidas symbol along his ribs on the left. I thought this was ridiculous until I found out the story. He had a close friend who was really into soccer, and she was typically clad head to toe in Adidas apparel because of it. She committed suicide, and it affected my roommate greatly, so he got a symbol he associated with her tattooed close to his heart. I will not quickly judge a tattoo again.”

Rance ²⁸

Homosexuality: This generation is generally more inclined to know people who are homosexual than previous generations. They don't necessarily agree with it as an acceptable lifestyle, but they are generally unwilling to challenge that person's belief system in a confrontational manner. In part, this may come from their general lack of desire to push their belief and value system on other people or have others push their beliefs on them. Understanding this is not the same as condoning it, but it helps us avoid making comments in ways that diminish our ability to build relationships. And if we hope to speak truth into the lives of this generation, it will happen through relationships.

“You should also realize that homosexuality is more open and common now, and for Christian young adults, as their peers, to evangelize them we must socialize to a point. So sometimes it is difficult for people my age to know where this line should be drawn.”

Kacie²⁵

“I would greatly agree that tattoos, alcohol, and homosexuality are turn-off issues across generations. It appears to me that older generations tend to be black and white, but younger generations do not accept this. It's harder to think through issues with that type of black-and-white mentality when you know and love people who practice homosexuality. And when someone preaches on homosexuality and has never had a friend who is homosexual, they're blind to that. Relationships are most definitely the key, in so many respects.”

Alisha²⁶

“

The biggest disparity I've seen between Baptist churches and other denominations is openness to different subcultures... I know some people were uncomfortable when I would invite them to church, because if it had Baptist in the name, they felt they would get judged by appearance or lifestyle...

”

Shane ²⁶

“

I don't have many homosexual friends, but I would never shun or judge someone because their lifestyle does not line up with my own. With that being said, it does not mean that I would hide my beliefs from them in any way, but I would still love them because I am called to.

”

Katie ²³

While these are only a few of the issues where young adults may differ from previous generations, they help us see the importance of word choice in our communication process. These will also be things to consider as we plan for the teaching/interaction time in our Sunday school or small group experience.

Preparing to Lead

For many, the classic style of teaching was for students to enter a room and be seated while a teacher or instructor downloaded information, generally in a lecture format. While this has always had some built-in challenges as far as retention and behavioral change, it's even more of a challenge with young adults because of their cultural background. In general, this is a group who would rather be part of the discovery process than be told what to think. They would rather interact



through legitimate discussion than be led along with a series of questions designed for a pre-determined conclusion. They expect to be heard, and for their opinion to matter. This means a skilled facilitator will be more effective in small group settings than someone skilled in lecture. There are indications that facilitating has more going for it than just cultural preference. It may be a trend due to physiological changes in the brains of young adults.

“

I hate having a ‘second sermon’ on Sunday mornings. I cannot stand going to a Sunday school class and sitting there while the leader makes a point and the ‘discussion’ is little more than backing up the points they just made. I have already listened to the pastor’s sermon, I don’t need another one. I need a place where I can connect with other believers.

”

Rance ²⁸

“

Young adults appreciate and gravitate toward those who demonstrate a genuine interest in us and what we have to say. Fostering a Sunday school culture that encourages this is definitely more appealing than lecturing. Leaders with ‘tunnel-vision’ or, as the author puts it, ‘questions with a pre-determined conclusion,’ will likely risk losing credibility among the young adults and build what may seem like insurmountable barriers.

”

Joel ²⁸

For years learning has been thought of as either right brained or left brained. Roger W. Sperry, who earned the Nobel Prize in Science for his work on Brain research, describes the differing functions of the brain as follows: “the left hemisphere (left brain) reasons sequentially, excels at analysis and handles words, the right hemisphere (right brain) reasons holistically, recognizes patterns, interprets emotions and nonverbal expressions.” In reference to learning styles, the left brain is more analytical, and the right brain is more creative.

For a generation that has grown up in front of one type of screen or another, a higher percentage than ever before are indicating right brained learning tendencies. Many are hands-on learners, enjoy interactive environments, and relate well to information presented in story form. This makes the interactive environment an important part of the learning process for young adults. This interactive environment

includes guiding learners in the discovery process and leading them toward personal application. Both of which can be accomplished through engaging them in Biblical stories then following up with well-designed questions. While this method is not necessarily difficult to master, it is a challenge, because it's not the default method of teaching for many.

“ I have personally experienced a professional career teacher who has led his Sunday school class using a lecture format for over twenty years, convert his teaching style to an interactive environment, and the testimonies coming from this class were all about the significant change of openness and camaraderie among the class leading to greater spiritual growth. ”

Rusty ₃₁

One of the upsides, though, is that once this teaching method is mastered, it can be used with any Bible story and most pre-written curriculum. Here are some of the simple steps you can use in preparing for and leading an actual young adult Sunday school class or small group experience.

Several years ago, the International Mission Board developed a method of teaching or creating an engaging learning environment called “storying.” It was developed in response to people groups who were oral learners. Interestingly, though, the same dynamics that make it work well in non-literate environments also seem to be effective in young adult culture. It follows a basic pattern that includes explaining the culture of the times,

telling the story, having learners re-tell the story, then asking well-designed questions. A closer look at these steps will help you be prepared to lead young adults in the discovery process as well as their personal application.

Preparation is always the key to a successful learning environment, and this method of teaching is no different. The way you organize the information you discover may vary from what you have done in the past, and how you present it will be vastly different from a lecture scenario. We'll use the story of the woman at the well from John 4 to illustrate each step of the planning and implementing process.

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Like you mentioned earlier about us not believing that a person is the final authority on something, the same thing applies to a teacher being prepared. If they do not at least have the appearance of being prepared with research or advanced study on the subject, then we will automatically discredit much of what they say. We need proof and sources, and in order to keep our attention, they must appear to be up to our level and ready for discussion, or the ‘I’m amazing and more significant than you’ syndrome will kick in on our part. What they put in is what we will put in. Preparation is a sign that they are committed and that they care about us. If you want our attention, come into the room knowing what you’re talking about.

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Kacie ²⁵

The first step in preparation is to research the cultural dynamics that were in place at the time the story happened. These can be found in most commentaries as well as topical Bibles and Bible dictionaries. Finding authors who understand Hebrew history will help a great deal in the preparation stage. For instance, knowing which laws were written laws and which were oral or traditional makes a big difference in understanding many of the customs of the time. Setting the stage for the story helps it come alive as you tell it later.

In the case of the woman at the well, you might say, “Here are three things we need to understand about the culture of the day before we look at today’s story. The first one is that Jewish men didn’t speak to women in public at the time this story happened. Depending on which commentator you go with, they either didn’t speak to any women in public, or they didn’t speak to non-family member females in public. The second thing we need to understand is that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, a teacher of the Jewish

law. He would have been well versed in the 613 written laws and the thousands of applications that would have applied to these laws. Not speaking to women in public would have been an example of a man-made or oral law. A final thing that makes this story come alive was the bitter hatred between the Samaritans and Jews. Jews considered Samaritans to be half breeds with no rights or claims to their religious heritage. Samaritans hated Jews and had even gone so far as to build their own tabernacle as their place of worship. This racial hatred had been going on for over four hundred years and was deeply engrained in both cultures.”

The next step would be to tell the story. We are a people who respond well to hearing stories. Capitalizing on that fact is one of the strengths of this process. In order to do

that, you will need to become very familiar with the story. Read it as many times as you need in order to be able to tell it from memory. Telling a story is different than memorizing it word for word. You may want to read it in smaller sections until you have mastered the entire story. Practice saying it out loud by yourself or find people in the course of your day who will listen as you tell the story. Let them know you're practicing on a story you're going to teach later this week or next and ask if you can practice on them. Be expressive as you tell the story. Let the excitement, disappointment, anger, and other emotions be heard in your voice. After you have told the story to your group, ask them to re-tell the story, with each person telling a small portion of the story rather than one or two people telling the bulk of it.

“Storying is perhaps the best way to learn about Scripture. The inclusion of the cultural context of the day and time in which the story is written is paramount for understanding the lessons in Scripture and how they are applicable today.”

Clint₃₂

Re-telling the story serves a number of purposes. The first is to reinforce the details of what happened in the story. This is done by having as many people as possible take part in the retelling of the story. Including a variety of people also accomplishes the second purpose, to get people involved and talking. One of the great strengths of this process is involvement in the discussion. By including as many people as possible in the re-telling of the story, this process begins with a non-threatening activity where a number of people are actively listening and giving input. This can be accomplished by observing a few simple guidelines.

- 1 Let one person start and tell a portion of the story.
- 2 Have someone else pick up where the first person left off and continue the story.
- 3 Try not to go in order around the room or to let any one person tell the entire story.

Reinforcing the basic facts of the story as well as setting the tone for the follow-up

discussion begins with asking two simple questions. The first question is, “Did we leave anything out when we were re-telling the story?” To make this as non-threatening as possible, allow people to open their Bibles and read along after the story has been retold. The second question to ask is, “Did we add anything to the story that wasn’t in the biblical version?” In my experience this is usually a fun question to ask. By now, everyone knows what parts were added that weren’t in the original story and who added them. It’s usually fun to watch people react as they laugh about the things that were added. It’s also interesting to see what assumptions were included that were never mentioned in the biblical version.

Staying true to the biblical version is an important part of the story-telling process. Avoid trying to modernize the story by placing it in a current-day setting. It is much more effective to explain the original cultural climate and stay true to the story. Once the story has been set up, told and re-told adequately, you’re ready for the next step which is discussion and discovery.

The discussion and discovery processes work best when the leader uses facilitative skills rather than lecture. This involves asking good questions and helping to guide the discussion by listening to answers and asking questions from the information received. Here are examples of open-ended questions that could be used in this phase:

- What do we learn about (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the main character) from this story?
- What main truth do you see revealed in this story?
- With what we learned about their culture, why do you think the people mentioned acted or reacted the way they did?
- Was there anything in this story that was unsettling to you?
- Was there anything in this story that challenged or inspired you?
- What do you personally need to do as a result of this story?

As people respond to the different questions, listen carefully to what they say. Much can be learned about a person and/or their situation by the response they give. Because many of us were raised in lecture-format learning environments, it's easy for us to slip back into this mentality at this stage of the process. It will be important to think of yourself as someone who guides the discussion, giving input where needed, to avoid wrong interpretations from being accepted as fact.

An example from the woman at the well story might be helpful. Let's say one of the responses to the question, "What did you learn about Jesus from this story?" was, "Jesus doesn't care about people's sin. He just loves the person." In a lecture format, we might immediately correct this statement. This tends to hamper open discussion, because few people appreciate being told they are wrong, so in order to not repeat the incident, they will just avoid participating in the discussion.

Another option would be to say something like, “I think that’s an interesting observation. Let’s look at some other stories in the Bible to see if that thought is found other places as well,” or “Can you think of other places in Scripture where that same idea is revealed?” It wouldn’t take very long to find the story of the cross where we see that sin is a big deal to Jesus, and yet His love for the sinner is even greater. By guiding discussion, it allows the discovery process to happen within the group. It can be a challenge, however, as people begin to express ideas and thoughts that may run against the norm. A couple of thoughts may be helpful here:

- 1 Not every issue has to be settled by the end of class. Sometimes it’s okay to let an issue be unresolved for a few weeks while people wrestle with and research what the Bible says about it.
- 2 Where cultural issues are concerned, we may need to agree to disagree. There are a number of issues covered in Scripture that are clear. Lying, cheating,

murder, hatred, bitterness, and so many other issues are clearly defined as wrong for the Christ follower. Other issues like which shows to watch, what movies are okay, types of music, etc., are more cultural than Scriptural. Some may argue fiercely that Scripture defends watching only G-rated movies. Some will say it justifies PG, PG-13, or R depending on the subject matter. Others will say you should never go to the theater! Topics like this can consume weeks of discussion time and may or may not ever be resolved. Spirited discussion can be a good thing, but when it begins to split the community over issues that will never be completely resolved, it becomes a hindrance. It's up to you as the facilitator to know when to rein in the discussion and remind the group of those things that are most important.

“With our generation growing up believing we are right about everything, I have seen many discussions derail over minute details such as what the definition of worship is.”

Rance²⁸

“As a facilitator you will inevitably bring up hot-button issues, making the air in the room feel strange. Be the person who leads the elephant out of the room by verbally recognizing when you’ve reached an awkward moment in the dialogue. Doing so clears the air and lets us know that you’re tuned in to what’s being discussed in a real and human way. Being open about your own discomfort about a topic makes it okay for us to own what we’re feeling as well.”

Clint³²

Storying and facilitating can be used with virtually any passage of Scripture in the Bible and works well with a variety of curriculum options. Just like any teaching style, though, if you use the same approach week after week, it will have a tendency to become too familiar. Some simple options can help you avoid this in your Sunday school or small group experience. Here are some options you might try in your group to add variety.

- 1 Have one or more students prepare the background materials for the passage you're going to study. You will still need to understand the cultural implications before you get to class, but having someone else do the study and present the cultural considerations adds a different feel to the experience. An added benefit is the buy-in from those who prepared the material. The same can be done with telling the story. Have someone come prepared to tell the story for the day. This may work better after you've modeled what story telling looks like for several weeks.

- 2 Break your group into smaller discussion groups for the retelling of the story and/or for the discussion time. This allows those who might not contribute in a larger group to express their opinion in a more comfortable environment.
- 3 Ask one of the members to find a video that compliments the passage you will be looking at the next week. Use the video to spark discussion, challenge peoples thought patterns, or support the truth for the day.
- 4 Touch as many of the five senses as you can during the experience. Using the arts is a great way to spark discussion.
 - a The words to a song, a poem, or a piece of artwork can all be used to create discussion.
 - b Using a piece of art and asking which part of the picture reminds you of what we saw in the passage today can result in great discussions. You might ask, if the artist were thinking about God while painting this, what do you

feel like he or she would be trying to say? Another question might be, if the artist understood the love of God and experienced it for themselves, what do you think might change in this picture?

- c Smells are powerful, as well. Burning myrrh when it's mentioned in a passage brings the words to life. It also helps to evoke powerful memories in the individual the next time that passage is encountered. Cooking unleavened bread while telling the exodus story or the Passover story is another example of using the senses to commit a passage of Scripture to memory.
- d Hands-on activities are also a powerful learning tool. Showing people how to make a tzitzit, which is the tassel that hung at the corners of a priest's robe,

while telling the story of the woman healed from the issue of blood helps bring the story alive. It's believed that this is what she was reaching for believing that healing would come in the wings of the Messiah. Wings were another term for corners of the robe.

In general, it's good to remember that this is not a sit-and-listen generation. Active participation helps to keep them engaged, sparks open discussion, and helps them internalize the truths of the day. Because the dynamics of every group are different, one idea may work well with a particular group but not with another. Don't give up if you try one or more approaches and you don't get the desired outcome. Keep trying until you find the combination that works best for your group.

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We are also trying to re-learn how to approach the Bible and God's way for our lives, because at this age we are facing tons of new life stages. With allowing the open discussions it allows us to compare and contrast other's ideas of life in relation to the Bible with our own, therefore recreating our viewpoint and founding our constantly challenged personal beliefs for our specific but new time of life and making it our own. Even if someone doesn't speak at all, they are doing this during discussion.

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Kacie ²⁵

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Many times just broad questions are what I get the most out of. These are the kind of questions that do not have one answer. In our small group we do run-over questions that are provided by the church, but we also ask the general question of 'What did you get out of Sunday's sermon?' and it amazes me how differently God can speak to each person from the same message. Even if only a few people share what they learned, it is always enlightening and uplifting. It is great to get different point of views as well.

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Katie ²³

Mission Connections

Young adults, in general, have a desire to be part of something bigger than themselves and look positively on those people and organizations that are making the world a better place for people to live in. In a 2009 survey of young adults in Oklahoma, there were a few commonalities that were equally important to the churched, previously churched, and un-churched group. One of these was their desire to help people and make a positive



impact on the world. This makes missions experiences a vital part of the young adult small group experience. Some great benefits of connecting your Sunday school class or small group to one or more mission experiences include creating a feeling of community within your group, living out Scripture as opposed to absorbing information, and providing opportunities for un-churched young adults to be engaged with your group of believers.

“Totally agree on missions connections. The churches that I see growing today are those that are active missionally in their communities.”

Doug²⁹

“After growing up in church, I was worn out and burnt out from doing church activities. There were so many prayer meetings, planning meetings, groups, and service meetings that filled every free moment I had, and I didn't actually feel like I was doing anything or making a difference in anyone's life. I became more religious and less of a Jesus follower. Religion was pushing me away from Jesus.”

Anonymous²³

There is something unifying about working together for a common purpose, especially if that purpose is significant in the lives of individuals or a community. Your small group of believers spending three hours doing a front-yard makeover for a widowed lady in the community will foster greater bonds than can be forged by sitting in a classroom. When people experience life together, they create memories, build bonds, and break down barriers. They also experience a bit of what Jesus did as He sacrificed for us. There are a variety of mission experiences young adults will respond well to and some things to consider as you begin planning them. These include planning, time, and overall impact.

As you begin to think about what mission experiences your group might be involved in, it's important to make sure they are part of the process from start to finish.

**“If you help us be a part of the planning, we will
take ownership.”**

Kristin ²⁷

Some of them may already know of ministries or needs in your community, and they can gather information about what is needed or how your group could help. It's good to bring a few options to the group so they can make a choice about which to be involved with. Variety serves other purposes as well, including making your group aware of the needs of your community and introducing them to some of the people who feel called to meet those needs.

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This generation is not sold on bigger buildings and greater crowds but on resources being used to create hope and to display love. They want to know that they have impacted someone's life by giving their time, money, or energy. For them it's about being a change agent and having a feeling that they made a difference. There is no project they won't pursue for the betterment of this world, so dream big about the missional vision for the class.

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Rusty₃₁

Once your group has decided which need to meet first, you can begin the planning process. Taking some of your Sunday school or small group time to plan or keep others informed of the project's progress allows everyone to be involved from start to finish. This also keeps missions experiences as part of the DNA of your group and increases participation on the day of the event.

Pre-planning is crucial to the success of the experience. Making sure everyone has a significant role once they arrive is also crucial. There should be task lists that

can be assigned to a person or group of people with clear objectives along with the tools needed to accomplish it. These can be assigned before the experience so people will know what to expect and what tools or materials to bring, or they can be assigned that day if the items are going to be supplied or are already onsite. Mission experiences will be a detriment to your young adult efforts if they are poorly planned and there is not enough work for everyone to be involved. On the other hand, well-planned experiences will be something your group will talk positively about for a long time.

“One thing to keep in mind is how busy my generation is. The planning and organization is important, but you also don’t have to do something every single month. Also, we want to have a missional perspective, but taking care of needs of those within the group (making meals, mowing yards when a husband or member is sick) also helps with bonding within the group.”

Kristin ²⁷

When to have the experience is another important consideration. In our culture, people seem to do their best to fill as much of their time as possible. Because of this, whenever you schedule things outside of the time people are already setting aside for church-related activities, your participation may drop. Allowing your group to set the day and time will help this some.

Another option is to try to do as many of your activities as possible in the time they are already setting aside. This can include your mission experiences. Using a few of your meeting times each year to participate in a mission experience can be a great benefit to your group. It's very likely that more people will participate during the regularly scheduled time than if you ask them to change their schedule during the rest of the week.

We played with this in a small group I was a part of. Our group ran fourteen to sixteen at that time and wanted to make a difference in our community. After settling

on a mission experience that fit our skill set, we began talking about the best time to do it. Our group met Sunday mornings, and the majority agreed that if we did our experience during that time, they would be able to attend. With the church leadership informed and supportive, we took two Sunday mornings to work on the project we had chosen. We had over 100 percent attendance each week and built memories that we talk about years later. Not every mission experience can be done during the time your small group meets, but it's a good idea to keep this option open.

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I agree with this method. As a young adult, you are most likely trying to juggle the schedules of work, school, relationships, and school social groups. It is hard to keep up with all those extra activities. Therefore, if you plan your community outreach during your normal group time, there is no reason you would not be able to attend. It also feels like less pressure if it occurs during your normal meeting time. Being a part of so many groups and trying to put full effort into each group can tend to make you feel stretched thin if you are always planning some ‘big event’ with each group. The result of this is most likely dropping one of your groups.

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Katie ²³

There's another reason to consider this. As previously mentioned, changing the world for the better seems to be a common characteristic in young adult culture. Because of this, it's an easy thing for a church young adult to invite a previously or un-churched young adult to an event like this and the likelihood that they will attend is strong. This can be a front door for many into your young adult community. The important thing is to find the time that works best for your group to include the largest number of people participating.

Closing Comments

What an exciting time to be involved in reaching young adults for the cause of Christ. While it may take longer to see them make salvation decisions, once made, they seem to be well thought-out decisions to become as much like Jesus as they can. Your part in helping them along this spiritual path will be greatly rewarding as you live out the Great Commission. May God richly bless you in your efforts to expand His kingdom in the lives of those He dearly loves.

“In conclusion: listen to young adults, apply the lessons learned from this book, and make a concerted effort to grow with us not apart from us!”

Karen₂₇

For more resources and information about reaching young adults, contact Cris Lowery, clowery@bgco.org or 405-942-3800. Also check out the young adult webinars previously recorded at www.bgco.org/emerging