

Youth Evangelism Study Group Report Cincinnati Area Baptist Association

This report gets at evangelization within the context of a concerned church.

We know that children may ask questions. We meet them at their point of need and interest. We must lead them to understand the purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Asking open-ended questions allows you to hear their progress.

Young people may be in church simply seeking friends—or dates. Sometimes we say to church teens, “You’re a Christian, right?” We can miss their greatest spiritual need! Instead, it may be best to say, “Tell me about your baptism.” Or ask, “What does it mean to you to follow Jesus every day?”

*As the Holy Spirit prompts us, we must respond with Bible-based truths and even our own testimonies of salvation. This report will further equip your church, your youth leaders, and those who would engage the youngest in our communities with the Good News of Jesus!
--Mark Snowden, Director of Missional Leadership, Cincinnati Area Baptist Association*

At the SBC annual meeting in Nashville the messengers adopted vision 2025 as the strategic focus looking forward over the next couple years. Mark Snowden asked a group of pastors to specifically look at Strategic Action 4 which states: “Turn around the ongoing decline in the SBC in reaching, baptizing, and discipling those under the age of 18.” The study group has learned that the majority of children leave the church in the sixth grade, so this change at the SBC level was readily accepted.

For the last five months, this team has prayerfully been meeting in order to bring some clarity and recommendations to the Cincinnati Area Baptist Association. It is our prayer that this report helps you see the problem that we each are facing, as well as some tangible actions that each one of our churches can take in order to reach this next generation for Christ. For the remainder of the report the term young people will be used to refer to all children under the age of 18.

The Problem

As the SBC faces a steady 20-year decline in baptisms, it is clear that something is going on. As a society at large, the personal connection with a religious belief has also waned. The generation that came out of WWII was found in nationwide surveys as 73% being connected with a religious belief system. Whereas this current generation of young people, according to similar nationwide surveys, is revealing less than 12% are connected with a religious belief system. So, the problem is pervasive throughout our society and the signs show that we are living in a post-Christian culture. (Isaiah 5:20) What is the body of Christ to do? How can we effectively reach young people with the gospel of Christ and see life transformation in our churches? (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Our prayer is that the culmination of our discussion and study will help point each of our churches in a healthy direction with practical wisdom for reaching young people and discipling them for the challenges that they will face.

The Obstacles

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| 1. Worldliness | 2. Mental Health | 3. Education |
| 4. Busyness | 5. Parents | 6. Discipleship |

1. Worldliness. A brief description is necessary to understand the context of how these words are being used in context as obstacles. Young people are being encouraged and challenged

more than ever to conform to the standards of this world. (Romans 12:2) It would seem that all avenues of influence are perpetually on a negative downward spiral that has increased in godlessness in the last couple decades. Popular movies openly mock God and believers for their faith. Popular musicians openly attack Christian beliefs and have begun to promote the occult and deviant behaviors. (2 Peter 3:3) It is not new that these things are happening but rather the acceptance and mainstreaming of these ideas. Not only are these things being mainstreamed but the target audience is increasingly younger. The content and intent of many cartoons aimed at those under age six is concerning as even the targeting of such a young audience is now acceptable. (Mathew 18:6-7)

2. Mental health has become a buzz word in our society, with more people than ever taking prescription anxiety medications. (1 Peter 5:7) Just in the last year and half, through COVID, we've seen an uptick in mental strain specifically on children and teenagers. Mental health experts are now warning that at least 50% of young people (specifically teenagers) are facing clinical depression from the confusion, fear, and isolation that our society has gone through. And sadly, the same research revealed that 1 out of 3 young people (specifically teenagers) have contemplated suicide in the last 30 days. Mental health experts have also said that the mental strain on elementary school-aged kids through COVID could take as much as five years to correct. (Matthew 6:34)

3. Education. It is important to realize that education doesn't happen in a worldview vacuum. Whoever is in charge of the curriculum that is being taught is essentially responsible for shaping the worldview of those they teach. (2 Timothy 4:3-4) Assuming that education is neutral in matters of faith and worldview has led many to be unprepared for the attack on the Biblical worldview. Young people are very impressionable and when they spend a minimum of 30 hours a week under instruction, one must understand the worldview being imparted. A worldview without God, without faith, and without a moral foothold. Increasing in our society is the desire to remove various parental rights, as society at large is threatened by those who would impart a Biblical worldview to their children.

4. Busyness: The day and age of schools not playing games or having practices on Sunday is long gone. From school districts to sports clubs to extra-curricular activities, there is no shortage of things making a demand on young peoples' time. And while these things are not evil, in and of themselves, they have created an idol that has replaced the church and the fellowship of believers. (Matthew 6:33) Young people are told that they will not get college scholarships unless they join these various organizations even from elementary school. Young people are being told that you have no chance in life unless this thing you're passionate about becomes your god and you give it all your time. Above these types of time-monopolizing activities, many families have become accustomed to taking the weekends off for "family time." (Luke 12:34) Some even take most the summer off church so they can be together. And while being together as a family is of utmost importance, it too can become an idol when it is placed above God.

5. Parents. By God's design parents are to be the most influential people in their children's lives. (Proverbs 22:6) Yet so many feel inadequately prepared to handle the spiritual questions that their children ask. Society by and large has seemingly changed the job description of parents as evidenced by young people who seem to be more in control than their parents. Discipline has become taboo and giving kids everything they didn't have has become the norm. (Proverbs 13:24) As we stray from God's design for parenting, it becomes more evident that the result of such a shift is actually more stress. Families seem to be under more stress and pressure than ever before, evidenced by the increase of children living in broken homes of divorced parents. In January 2021, new studies revealed that at minimum one out of every two kids is from a broken home. (Mark 10:9)

6. Discipleship is last on the list for a few reasons, primarily because so many of the other obstacles could all rest on it. The American church went through a phase where we simply did large attractional events to draw young people into the church. And while we saw great numbers

in attendance and even amongst those professing to make a decision, the long-term effects on the body of Christ were anything but that. Church became an event and sadly for many, that is all that it was. Many made decisions to follow Christ and even were baptized, but follow-up for new believers was generic and an increasing number of young people simply left our churches. (Dip them and drop them.) While many churches faithfully are teaching the Bible, the question becomes, are we making disciples? And can our children and youth lead others to Christ and disciple them? (2 Timothy 2:2) Simply showing up and listening to a teacher doesn't make our youth a disciple, but sadly attendance has been the focus for many.

The Solution

When discussing and researching these obstacles in regards to the SBC Vision 2025, it became abundantly clear that for the most part the solution deals with various aspects of discipleship. Also clear was that mental health was in a category all by itself. So first, we will deal with some solutions in regards to mental health before diving into the majority of which center on various aspects of discipleship. And while mental health is a difficult thing to address because of the uniqueness of each person and their individual circumstance these are some overarching guides to be a blessing to young people and their families.

Personal Issues:

1. Build relationships with students and families. It is hard to help someone during a time of mental health crisis if you do not have a relationship with them and trust has not been built. (Galatians 6:2)
2. Actively look for those who are struggling with mental duress and seek to engage them with a message of hope. (Romans 15:13)
3. Train staff and volunteers to be proactive when they see a potential issue. Not that they have to deal with or address it themselves, but rather bring it to the pastor's attention. (Mathew 11:28)
4. Work with the families of young people who are struggling, remaining visible as a reminder that they are not alone. (Romans 12:15)
5. Familiarize yourself with the Biblical counseling resources in your area as well as mental health professionals. (Proverbs 24:6)

In regards to Biblical counseling resources and mental health professionals, our group thought that it would be beneficial for CABA to keep a list of such resources so that when someone is in need, they have a reference place of where to start. (Colossians 2:8) This responsibility however should not fall on CABA staff to look up and track down resources across our region, rather there should be an avenue where local pastors are able to contribute information to a growing list of resources that are available. By working together and sharing the resources we are each aware of, we would have quite the list for someone to go over when they were facing a mental health or family crisis. As mentioned previously, with the rise of young people coming from divorced homes, these young people are experiencing greater emotional strain, stress, and anxiety.

Disciple-making

Jesus commands His followers in Matthew 28:19 that as we go, we are to make disciples. It is our job description to lead people to follow Jesus a little more each and every day. Disciple-making really is the key that needs to be a primary focus as we seek to engage more young people with the gospel message and ensure transformed lives.

We must understand that biblically, parents hold the responsibility to train up their children in the ways of the Lord. Parents must help their children grasp the need for repentance and forgiveness. As the body of Christ, it should be our desire to come alongside parents and encourage them in whatever practical ways we can. (Titus 2:1-8) Realize that there are young people whose parents do not care or are not believers. As the body of Christ, we need to find practical ways to encourage parents to take up spiritual conversations with their kids, not leaving that simply to the church. Ideally, Christian parents will be role models for their kids.

Consider two practical examples for teenagers. (1) Most of youth do not drive and so it becomes critical for us to engage the parents in order for churches to see any sort of consistency in attendance on the part of the young people. (2) It is also the parents who prioritize their family's too-busy schedule, which at times keeps them from regularly attending church. From these practical examples, we can see the critical role that parents play in disciple-making. For church leaders, it becomes imperative for us to reach and minister to parents if we want to see conversions, baptisms, spiritual growth, living a missionary lifestyle and a Bible-centric influence among their kids as well as other young people.

Parents:

1. Churches must find opportunities to love on parents and be their biggest cheerleaders.
2. Provide resources for those looking at evangelizing their children, which often starts with consistent family devotions. Even quality weekly times together discussing Scripture and praying together can have a powerful influence. For some, this can be a scary step as most have a false sense of what that even looks like, never having witnessed it themselves. Help take the fear away by incorporating that into adult discipleship, answering questions, and being a resource.
3. Integrate parent testimonies into your church's worship service. Young people are looking for authentic faith and testimonies provide a connection.
4. Parenting small groups can facilitate good discussion and support for those in similar situations. It also provides an opportunity for teaching on priority and the necessity of connecting in the body of Christ.
5. Help raise awareness of the worldview that the public education system is founded on, by giving parents resources so they might have conversations with their kids. The world is not shy about having these conversations and so we must be proactive in our approach

Students are seeking genuine truths as they are being told many lies and deceptive worldly truths. These challenge the very core of what it means to be a Jesus-follower. In order for baptism numbers to increase, we need to recognize, but stop blaming mental health, the world, busyness, inattentive parents, etc., and we need to set the challenge. We need to set the mark high and attainable.

We need to talk about David's sling and also the reality of the failures of man, we need to talk about Jonah's great fish and also the realities of denying God, and we need to talk of Jesus' birth and also how through the Magi, God was at work in advance. We need to give students the real Biblical truths for which we as adults and ministers so dearly stand.

We need to evangelize in a way that shows students and their families that we are willing to work despite the obstacles put before us. We need to show them that Jesus is not stopped by leprosy or Covid. We need to let them see the unfailing, never-ending love of God. We need to present the Gospel to them without fear and in doing so we will see students come to know the Lord at an exponential rate, because I believe in the power of God.

--Danny Calves

to helping parents. If they never hear you talking about it, then the assumption is that you are unaware.

6. Communicate with parents about what their children are learning in the various programs offered by the church with resources for them to be able to continue the conversation at home.
7. Create opportunities for parents to take their children to missions events, such as a mission fair or appointment service, and take them on mission trips. When a child or teen sees parents on mission, it encourages them to make decisions that could impact their life calling as they listen to God and join in His mission.

Somewhere along the way, far too many churches delegated out children's and youth ministry to specific volunteers and took a more hands-off approach. If we want to see a turn-around in lives transformed by the gospel, living out their faith, then we must see that this is the responsibility on the entire church and not simply a selected group of volunteers. As a church, if we are wanting to reach young people in this process of evangelism, discipleship, and missions, we must realize that children and teens do not live in a vacuum. It takes community and fellowship in your church. As churches have become more demographically-separated, we must find ways to encourage church members to think differently.

Churches:

1. Feeder programs are essential. (Proverbs 22:6) If you want to have a strong children's program, it begins with the preschool program. Connecting parents at that stage sets up families to continue into children's programs as their kids develop spiritually. The same is true with youth ministry. A strong youth program begins with the children's program. Connections are important and doing things with excellence cannot be understated. The deterioration of one ministry focused on preschoolers, children, and youth will affect the other ministries focused on all young people; they are intricately connected.
2. Adopt a grandparent program which would partner young people with a senior adult that they could routinely catch up with at church. Emphasis would be on the young person taking the lead but the senior adults would see it as a time of spiritual investment. (2 Timothy 1:5)
3. Adopt a family program which would partner families with young people with empty nest / senior adult couples that they would routinely catch up with at church. Emphasis would be on coming alongside the next generation of parents and encouraging them in this very important task. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

Understanding the culture that we're in and the struggle that we face, our desire is simply to be faithful with the task that the Lord has put in front of us. Our prayer is that this report would be a blessing and a reference point as we each seek to make disciples. Realizing that the only way to see a spiritual increase amongst young people is to come alongside parents and encourage them in this task of discipleship. Strengthening families strengthens the church and therefore increases evangelism as we make disciples. (Deuteronomy 6:5-7)

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