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PHOENIX, AZ YOUTH INITIATIVE

The title alone of Josh McDowell's book "The Last Christian Generation" poses a significant question. What will our country look like in 15 years when this generation steps into society? Today the research indicates that we are having a harder time reaching youth with the Gospel and an even harder time keeping students who grew up in the church. A national study conducted in August of 2007 shows that 70% of teens raised in the church walk away from their faith for a minimum of a year and less than 50% return by age 30. This equates to 840,000 youth walking away from the church annually between their junior year of high school and their freshmen year of college. Today many youth groups look healthy in terms of activity and numbers, yet a closer look shows a significant drop off in the attendance of juniors and a greater drop off in the attendance of seniors and when they leave home. Some discount this because they believe they will come back later in life like many of us did. Yet today, the factors working against coming back are very different with a post-modern thought process taking over in the minds of our young people. To count on their return would be to disavow what happened in Europe when post modernism took hold there some 60 years ago.

Why are the years after high school graduation so important? During these years our youth make critical life decisions including: career, lifestyle and often their spouse. Those that do return bring with them those decisions and habits having built the foundation of their lives upon shifting sand instead of Christ. Their latent return contributes to many of the issues we see in the Body of Christ today, including the divorce rate as they return to the church with a spouse they met and married apart from the Lord.

The Phoenix Youth Initiative is a community based outreach to bring leaders together to look at the research and conduct additional research into the issues impacting the hearts of youth, seeking to challenge the status quo and create real room for change among the audiences that have direct bearing on the issue: Pastors, Leaders, Parents and the Teens themselves. This will be accomplished through a small group of community leaders that together will host senior pastor symposiums and youth pastor symposiums. These will lead to Sunday school hour sessions for parents in churches across the community and a parent and teen weekend where teens and their parents will build the basis for a sound relationship, processing the issues, their faith, their family and a plan addressing the challenges teens face as they grow into adults.

Phoenix Youth Initiative

Summary

Research shows that, nationally, 70% of teens walk away from their faith. YTN over the past five years has spent time with 1,500 teens working to understand the factors that are distancing their hearts from the church and our Lord. The Phoenix Youth Initiative seeks to come alongside churches, Christian schools and parents with research and resources that significantly impact the hearts of teens .



Key Issues

There has been a great deal of research into the religious lives of teens including Christian Smith's National Survey on Youth and Religion, George Barna's Twenty Somethings, and Fuller Youth Institute's transition study. A number of key issues have been identified: a significant drop off in the belief in the Bible as truth, a drop in the attendance of teens and early twenties in the church, and a decline in biblical literacy. YTN's work with teens supports all of these findings and raises additional questions that have not been covered in research to-date including:

1. Why has biblical literacy declined (because we are teaching less)?
2. Why are the teens deciding to leave the church and their youth group?
3. What factors discourage teens in their pursuit of the Lord?
4. How are teens feeling about their faith?
5. What issues in the transition to life on their own snare our students?

In this discovery process we interacted with 1500 teens in small groups and through individual interviews, which painted a far different picture than what we thought we would find. Initially we interpreted their responses as excuses or even as lack of faith. Yet the consistency of their responses left us with a nagging sense that God wanted us to listen and dig deeper. We were gripped by both the clarity and also the complexity of addressing what the teens indicated was at the root of the issue. As a result, we began wrestling deeply in scripture and formulated test content that targeted their issues. As we took the content to youth groups and youth conferences the response was beyond our wildest expectations, both hitting

teens directly where they found themselves and challenging their youth leaders to think differently. It became clear that the youth leader alone could not address the issues at hand. Upon seeing significant progress in the lives of their students, youth leaders often returned home with a new direction in mind only to meet stiff resistance to the change they needed to make from parents and thus the senior pastors. As a result, additional material was assembled and tested for these audiences, which ultimately pointed us towards a “community based” approach that would address all the people who have significant influence upon the lives of our teens.

As we embark upon the community outreach in Phoenix we will cover the body of research that exists to date, along with the factors we have found in our qualitative research. Some of the more important factors we uncovered are summarized in the key issues area including: “Culture Clash”, Are They believers?, My Community is Killing Me, Expectations, Please my Parents, and Reason for Hope. In the pastor symposiums these and other factors will be presented and ample time will be given for discussion related to the issues and the possible solutions.

This is a systemic issue.

The problem of reaching and keeping our youth is not isolated to a given church, denomination or geographic area . It is system-wide. Churches that are not experiencing these conditions are the rare exception. Failure to turn and face the issue because we do not want to admit failure or because we do not know what to do is unacceptable, given the growing pervasiveness of the loss of youth. In fact, this may be the most important issue facing the church in our country given its long-term ramifications concerning the growth and health of the Body of Christ in America.

The Culture Clash: its impact should not be minimized

For the first time in over 100 years a base shift in generational thought process (Modern versus post Modern)has created a cultural divide between “our church leadership and parents” and the teens we are trying to reach. Through our interaction with 1,500 teens we have come to understand just how significant the impact of this is in our battle for the hearts of the next generation. Having a modern mindset myself it took hundreds of hours of interaction with teens to begin to understand how deeply my predispositions affected my view of teens and my approach to them. One’s predisposition tends to make one look for specific issues and to approach those issues in a manner consistent with one’s mindset.

One finding that surprised us in the quest to understand our teens was that a majority of the reasons given for leaving the church had little to do with their individual faith, but rather stemmed from a number of community based issues that were pervasive within their youth group. As we analyzed the way we approach students we found that the predominant focus was on “ones individual faith” an approach influenced greatly by our modern mindset and we also found that rarely were vital community factors addressed.

Are They Believers: they never gave their lives to Christ

Today we often hear that a key factor behind the loss of youth is that many of the students in our youth groups are not genuine believers. Clearly unbelievers exist in our groups, but this conclusion alters our view of the problem and thus our solutions. In our research with 1,500 teens we have been surprised by the percentages that were feeling guilty and unsuccessful in their faith. As we dug into these students' stories some consistent themes emerged. More important, as I looked into their eyes I often saw frustration and disillusionment. I also frequently saw the Lord behind those disillusioned eyes. Jesus commanded us to have a "child-like faith" and many of these students professed faith as children. Should we question those decisions or seek out the reasons that their hearts have grown distant from the Lord while under our care. As a result, we began to look at the situation differently, seeking to take these preteens and teens who made professions of faith at a young age, many several times, and revitalize their hearts while approaching them as valued believers instead of as potential unbelievers.

My Community is Killing Me: my youth ministry drags me down

As we interacted with teens related to the reasons they would leave the church we were unnerved at their response to hypocrisy. As it turned out when they brought up hypocrisy, they were not talking about hypocrisy within the church or among adults nearly as much as they were troubled by the hypocrisy among the students in their youth group. As we worked with them to define what was going on it became clear that this was not an excuse but rather a significant problem. Working with teens we defined the hypocrisy occurring within the youth group as "leading an intentionally deceptive dual life", meaning knowing what to say to keep peace at home and how to act in church but leading a very different life when away from these audiences. Further, we found that in many youth groups the students were working together to get around the "rules" and to cover up their sin. As we talked about this with groups around the country we have asked what percentage of the students in their youth group were leading this dual life. The response we received from students was typically that between 50% and 85% of the teens in their youth group were leading a deceptive dual life. In fact, we have students on camera sharing the reason they left the church being that every time they returned to the youth group they got sucked back into that subculture and into activities that made them feel guilty. Asking freshmen to stand up to older students who are beating the rules is a tall order for the more community minded student of today.

Expectations: we need to increase what we expect of our youth

Today many are saying that we need to raise the bar of expectation and that our youth will rise to meet it. Before embarking on this journey I too believed that if we increased our expectations our youth would rise to meet them and that the unbelievers would be identified. A number of years ago we began working with teens in a church based college ministry after being on staff with Campus Crusade. We were struck by the indifference we met. This led us on a quest to understand what we were seeing. Having seen students rise to my expectations while on staff with Crusade I re-contacted a number of my disciples to see if they were carrying

forward what they had begun to do on campus. Their answer was emphatically no. While I was with them, they met my expectations, but once I was gone, so too were the faith activities I expected of them. As we have interacted with teens over the past few years I revisited the expectation question and discovered that most of our teens are buried under a pile of expectations emanating from all corners of their lives that few if any church leaders could live up to. This has led many to have a sense of hopelessness because they believe there is no possible way to meet the expectations they perceive. As a result, they grow numb to the truth and often clash with the key people in their lives, parents and youth leaders. Their desire to escape from this shortfall increases to the point where they either adopt a dual life or leave the group and/or church altogether.

Please My Parents: yeah right!

One of the simpler and more surprising findings from our interviews with teens who made the transition well was that many still had the desire intact to please their parents. As we have pondered this we have also examined research from the National Survey on Youth and Religion that found that 69% of teens wanted more involvement in their lives from their parents. This combined with our research calls into the question our cultural conclusion both inside and outside of the church that parents cannot have positive relationships with their pre-teens and teens. As we talked with teens we found that they are seeking a different type of involvement/relationship with their parents.

In addition, through our work with teens we found that those that did best in the transition of leaving home, were those who still had the desire to please their parents intact. As we have reflected upon the research, we sought to understand why the desire to please parents was so important. We believe that this is critical because our students have not yet transitioned their, “desire to please” to God. We found that shift is most likely to happen once they leave our homes; placing a priority on the relationship we have with teens.

God appointed us as the shepherds of our children, until they transfer that desire to please to God, we need to work to have the type of relationship with our teens that leads to them to desire to please; a relationship similar to the relationship that led the disciples to desire to follow and please Jesus.

YTN has been testing content with parents and teens for two years that covers both the research and a shepherding model that is founded in Jesus’ relationship with the disciples. Parents who participated wrestled deeply with the research and worked diligently to alter their approach to their pre-teens and teens. These parents have testified to positive results in both their relationship with their pre-teens and teens and in to he positive outcomes in the lives of their teens upon leaving home.

Hope

We have found hope in the midst of all we have uncovered. The next generation of teens, if we approach them in manner that connects with their mindset, will, I believe, be far better at reaching America than our generation has been. This belief is based upon the priority they place upon community and experience. We as modern mindset thinkers become concerned at any emphasis on experience, as it is not consistent with our inherent understanding of what matters.

As I look at Acts and the first century church, where it talks about their numbers being added to daily, it was because they were “devoted to the apostles teaching” as well as a long list of community based factors that provided an amazing experience for the (pre-modern thinkers) of the day. We as moderns tend to minimize and or become fearful of experience, because we place the priority on truth alone and for some because our experience in the body has been difficult. The next generation will not overlook the value of community and the impact a great experience can have in the reaching of others.

We have tested content based upon these issues and sought to address the culture of youth groups. We have approached them as valued believers and helped them process why they are sensing that the “Yoke is heavy and the Burden is unmanageable,” instead of the “Yoke being easy and the Burden being light.” As a result, we have seen teens’ hearts reignite for the Lord in a surprisingly short period of time.

If we as pastors, parents and leaders take the time to rethink our approach to our teens and take seriously providing our youth with ministries that have healthy vibrant communities not besieged by the hidden dual lives of a majority of their peers. Then I believe we will find that our students will quickly become far more devoted to “the apostles teaching” as opposed to being distant and withdrawn as we teach them things that have come to mean so much to us. In so doing we will raise up the next generation of leaders.... leading a church with a more vibrant community that will result in throngs of new believers being added to our numbers daily because it will be devoted to “the apostles teaching” and provide an experience that is more consistent with what it teaches.

It only takes one generation to turn the world upside down. God can do amazing things and often he chooses to do it through youth. Remember Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the apostle John. If we, God’s people, will humble ourselves and pray and seek His face and turn from our ways, He will forgive us and heal our land... and our children in the process or even better our children may well be the process.

Our Goals

- Reduce attrition rates post high school
- Expose church leadership to the research and issues
- Expose parents to the research and issues of their pre-teens and teens
- Challenge parents to shepherd their teens
- Confirm the research findings in Phoenix
- Develop additional transferable resources based upon research and community need
- Seed a mindset of setting students up to succeed beyond graduation
- Promote measurement of youth ministry effectiveness
 - Tracking of graduates
 - Assessments of dual life percentages for individual youth groups
 - Develop assessment tools for youth ministries to determine whether or not they are making progress
 - Develop a long-term mindset related to outcomes
- Change the culture of our youth groups

The Plan

Local

The initiative is focused on impacting the youth in Phoenix, AZ. ***It is intended to serve local churches, ministries, parents and ministry leaders helping to assess the reality of where we are and begin to rethink what is needed to alter the loss of youth in our community.***

Many of the issues that face youth ministries in Phoenix are not unique to Phoenix. While our initial focus is on Phoenix, what we learn and experience here can be leveraged to other communities through the Youth Transition Network. This is the tension that exists within the initiative; while our focus is local our vision and its application is universal.

The local component involves addressing the key leaders and influencers in the community along with the audiences that have direct bearing in the lives of teens. It is not our desire or intent to prescribe an equation, as each body and segment of our community has different environmental factors. It is our desire to help everyone understand this audience, its uniqueness and needs. In the process we hope that we will come to understand how to extend to this generation the grace rooted in a life long sanctification process and the belief in the Holy Spirit's ability to guide, convict and change the hearts of young men and women.

We would like to begin work in the community with a series of gatherings where the research can be presented and discussed. Extending to those participating the opportunity to participate in a research project around these issues in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

YTN along with local partners would:

- Host a senior pastors' symposium on the loss of youth
- Host a youth pastors' symposium on the loss of youth
- Conduct a statically valid research study into the issues with interested churches and Christian Schools
- Conduct a series of one hour Sunday school sessions for interested churches
- Hold A Shepherding for the Future weekend combined with Reboot weekend for teens bringing parents and teens together around important issues
- Provide self-evaluation tools churches can use based upon the quantitative research conducted in the city.

A best practice is a technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result. A commitment to using the best practices in any field is a commitment to using all the knowledge and technology at one's disposal to ensure success.

It is our objective to provide assistance and services to the body of Christ to tackle this pervasive issue that impacts everyone.

Research

We recognize that our research to date has been qualitative in nature. However, the size and geographic dispersion of our research, along with the response to the materials developed indicate that we are close to if not on top of the center mass of the issues that are dampening our students' hearts' response to the truth.

By executing a statistically valid study in Phoenix while undertaking the outlined steps above we will be able to make needed adjustments based upon the research while simultaneously beginning work in the lives of our teens.

Local Partnership including Testing and Refining

As churches work to adjust their approaches to youth based upon the research, we will track responses to both the YTN delivered content and that of the changes made in churches that desire to participate. Learning from one another will be facilitated and serve as a proving ground as we work together to address the issues at hand.

Tools

Identifying problems leads only to frustration unless there are solutions. While YTN has initially tested resources for parents and teens these are the beginning point. Following through beyond this stepping off point is vital if we want the fruit to be long lasting. We expect the research to facilitate the development of additional tools and solutions to address the other issues that



we discover. These tools may be developed in-house or by third parties as the research is made available to others.

Organization

The initiative, as presently envisioned, has several organizational components. YTN will work with Phoenix Seminary and Southwestern College as we seek to bring a group of ministry and community leaders together to discuss the research and initiative. As partners in the initiative Phoenix Seminary and Southwestern College will participate strategically but the YTN Phoenix Youth Initiative itself will require funding from the community.

Phoenix Youth Initiative (PYI)

(PYI) is an outreach of YTN a 501c3 organization. YTN encourages those organizations who become involved to take the basis of the research and concepts developed by YTN and adapt them to their specific segment of the community. YTN will develop additional materials as requested and come alongside churches and schools that seek additional insights within their specific organization and structure.

Affiliated Entities

PYI is a work in progress and we are soliciting input and counsel from a wide variety of sources and individuals. As this develops in the Phoenix area we will add organizations and individuals who seek to become strategically and practically involved in the effort.

Organizations

Phoenix Seminary

Is devoted to developing leaders for the body of Christ that posses both scholarship and shepherds' hearts. Their participation in the initiative will translate to the many pastors and youth pastors they serve on a daily basis as they seek to build the next generation of leadership for the Body of Christ

Youth Transition Network (YTN)

Youth Transition Network (<http://www.youthtransitionnetwork.org/>) is a non-profit devoted to addressing the loss of youth from the Body of Christ. It began its crusade by assembling a group of our nations' largest denominations and para-church youth ministries to assemble a transition portal that today has 4,700 ministries on 3,000 campuses waiting to connect with high school seniors before they arrive on campus. In the process of developing the portal, YTN interacted with 1,500 teens seeking to understand the forces that kept their faith from impacting their lives deeply.

Individuals

Darryl Delhousaye

Darryl is President of Phoenix Seminary, a long-term friend and servant of the kingdom in Arizona. His experience as a mega-church pastor and connection to churches across Arizona make him a valuable advisor and strategic partner in the effort to address the loss of youth in the community.

Paul Hendricks

Serves as the VP of Development for Southwestern College and is a long-term proponent of Christian education. His years of experience in the business community and ability to get it done brings valuable energy to the initiative

Brian Raison

Serves as a Director of Community Development for Ohio State University and has served as a Board member for the Youth Transition Network. He has conducted several studies for Ohio State into the transitional students of youth and authored both Christian and secular resources based upon this research. Brian serves YTN as a volunteer helping to quantify the research conducted over the past several years.

Research Addendum

Research Methodology

A great deal of research has already been done related to our youth. YTN has endeavored not to rehash, but rather leverage the research done by George Barna, Christian Smith and Fuller Youth Institute.

One of the overriding factors seen in research to date is that biblical knowledge has decreased. The response to this has been significant with talk of the need to bring worldview training and doctrinal training back into youth ministry along with apologetics. We support these efforts and have included training in them in our national preparation event for youth.

As YTN conducted the qualitative research we discovered a compelling set of factors that may point to the reasons why biblical knowledge has decreased in this generation. These factors do not point to the fact that we are teaching less, but stem from other factors that when combined with a post-modern mindset result in less internalization of the truth we are teaching and thus less retention.

These factors will be covered more deliberately in the pastors' symposiums. They have also refocused our research leading to a very different qualitative and thus different quantitative study we seek to undertake though the initiative in Phoenix.

Areas of specific interest have been identified in YTN's qualitative research.

What is the culture of our youth program

- What are the reason teens give for wanting to leave the church?
- Do our students feel successful in their faith?
- What level of expectation are our students carrying?
- What percentage of students are leading an intentionally deceptive dual life?
- How is the youth program viewed by our students?
- Do the students perceive the same mission and purpose of the group as the leadership?
- How do we measure the health of the community among the students?
- How do our students currently handle failure in their walk with God?
- From their perspective, have the youth committed their lives to the Lord at some point and at what age range?
- How do teens view their faith and the decision they made as children today?

How do the parents and church leadership impact the equation

- Do our students perceive that they are believed in and trusted by the youth leaders, church and church leadership?
- How are the relationships between our students and parents perceived?
- Do youth feel valued by the church?

- If our students are carrying an unreasonable load of expectations are these expectations a result of the youth program, church, parents or a combination?
- How do these figures vary based upon the factors below?

Over riding factors for the qualitative to be measured around these issues?

Overriding factors for the Qualitative research to be done in Phoenix.

- Age (Is there a noticeable difference in younger teens vs older)
- Gender
- Ethnic background
- Size of church
- Size of youth group
- Style of youth group
- Denomination
- Geographic Region
- Family status (natural family vs blended/single parent, etc)
- Youth group leadership
 - Paid staff vs intern vs volunteer, etc
 - Length of time in youth ministry
- Length of time teen is in the ministry

Other

- How do youth ministers evaluate their group?
- What metrics do their “Supervisors” use?
 - Senior Pastors
 - Elders/Deacons/etc
 - Parents
- What are great points of tension in the role of youth pastors

Research Plan

YTN plans to execute a nationwide study into the loss of youth. Phoenix will serve as the starting point allowing us to confirm the qualitative research executed to date and to make adjustments before expanding it to other communities.

The Plan

The plan involves doing a study in the Phoenix Area bringing statistical validity to the qualitative research locally. We would like to combine this with a national study covering the same instrument.

The study will be conducted during a youth group’s weekly meeting without warning so as to get a valid cross section of students including those who are motivated believers and those who are forced to come.

The process will involve an introduction video with students and leaders talking about the study’s importance and the need for transparency.

Youth leaders will be excused from the room and the study administered by a trusted student leader. That student will collect the results, place them in the provided envelop and take them that evening to a mailbox so that they will be scanned by Scantron.

The instrument will be designed by Brian Raison and Jeff Schadt and be reviewed by faculty at both Southwestern College and Phoenix Seminary.

An alternate version of the instrument will be developed for Christian junior high and high schools should interest develop from this segment of the community.