

Evangelism Is Not Just for Adults

By Michael G. Geiger

Many times when the term "evangelism" is mentioned, the image that comes to mind is the organized group in the congregation that is made up of outgoing people, who, once or twice a month, go out and visit the prospects to the church. Or the term may bring to mind the general command the Lord gave to all Christians in Mark 16, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." No matter what images come to mind, the term and concept of evangelism, and especially organized evangelism, is often thought of in the context of an adult type ministry. Unfortunately, in that way of thinking, a vast resource of "evangelists," namely teenagers, is left out of the picture. Evangelism is not for adults only.

Many teens, probably more than we realize, have a deep love for their Savior, know what he has done, and have a desire, maybe great, maybe small, to share that message with others. These are teens who realize that they are included in "the world" which was saved by God's "one and only Son" (John 3:16). These are teens who realize that Jesus really is "the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6). These are teens who realize that there is "no other name given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). These are teens who understand that this promise is for "you and your children" (Acts 2:39). These are teens who know the only way someone else will have the opportunity to know Jesus as their Savior is if they tell them. They know that "faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). These are teens who, just as well as adults, can "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Why? Because we all, teens and adults, are Christ's ambassadors (II Corinthians 5:20), made competent by him (II Corinthians 3:5), and are working together as a united body (I Peter 2:5) to bring the message of reconciliation to the world (II Corinthians 5:19), children, teens, and adults.

We do not have much problem bringing the "message of reconciliation" to children and adults, but sometimes the teenage group falls through the cracks. Why? Simply because we as adults do not have as much contact with teens as we do with fellow adults or younger children. The detachment may lead us to forget that teens living today are faced with many and varied challenges. Some of these challenges have been around for years and are faced by everyone who passes through the teenage years. Every teen must ask and find an answer to some difficult questions in life. Who am I? Where do I belong? What am I going to do in life? Who are my friends? Does any one love or care about me?

As if finding answers to these challenging questions was not enough, many are faced every day with unique challenges to the late 20th century, which will certainly not go away in the 21st. The breakdown of the American family has had a huge impact on the development of children, including teens. For years the home with mom and dad provided the safety, love, acceptance, and guidance that a teen needed to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, all too often the ideal home-life is nowhere to be found. Homes are often not a place of safety and love, but of violence and hatred. Love and direction are often replaced by hatred and neglect. Spiritual upbringing and guidance are replaced by religious apathy. Teens are looking for answers. They are looking for love. They are looking for acceptance. It's no wonder that many turn to sources other than God or home to fill these voids. The words of a song used by Josh McDowell in his youth outreach program, "See You at the Party," summarize the empty feeling many teenagers have: "Lookin' to find my place in this world./ Lookin' for a reason roamin' through the night./ Lookin' to find my place in this world."

Teens certainly are searching, but what answers are they finding? Some find love, unity, and respect in the midst of gangs. They find their solution for problems and direction in life in alcohol and drugs. They seek love and acceptance in the bed of an uninterested partner. Or they may just give up looking for any answers and take the easy way out, suicide. Others, while not as extreme, struggle nonetheless. They search for religious

values in themselves and their friends. They experiment to discover what is best for them. They hurt and have no one to whom to turn. They have an emptiness with nothing and no one to fill it.

These kids want to be loved and accepted. They need to know that God has made their bodies just the way he wanted them as he knit them together in their mother's womb. They need to know that their failures have been covered by the perfection of Jesus' life and death. They need to know that they are accepted through Christ into God's family. They need to know that the voids of this life will be replaced by the happiness of heaven. But, who will tell them?

Certainly the Lord has entrusted adults, as parents, teachers, pastors, or friends, with this message to take to teenagers. However, knowing that adults do not have nearly as much contact with teens as other teens and knowing that a teen will often seek out and respect the advice and words of a peer before taking to heart the words of an adult, why not train and use teens to reach out, to evangelize, their peers?

Youth are searching and struggling with many questions in life—not the least of which is their relationship with God. There is nothing that turns off a young person quicker than an adult who has all the answers and is willing to tell everyone exactly what to believe and when to believe it (Clement & Salsgiver, 3).

Evangelism is not only for adults, but adults must play an intricate role in making evangelism a part of a teen's life. As Dr. Barbara Varenhorst, a Christian psychologist and author of the Peer Ministry training curriculum, noted after interviewing a number of Junior and Senior High students,

Repeatedly [the students] told me that they went to their friends for help with their personal problems, and occasionally I also heard, "But I don't know how to help my friends when they come to me for help." Finally I got the message and the idea. Adolescents represent a vast human resource not being used. Adolescents have the desire and the credibility for providing help to peers, but most lack the skills of how to go about it. So why not teach them? (Varenhorst, 7).

Training certainly is an intricate part in making evangelism a reality for teens, but before an adult jumps into a full-fledged training effort, s/he must realize that the lack of training is not the only barrier which must be removed to make youth feel comfortable talking about their Savior. Before talking about their faith, teens must deal with and overcome some very real fears and insecurities. Jackie Bauer, a guidance counselor at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, WI points out that "teens are in a time of their lives when they are trying to find out who they are. Part of this identity is found in their faith, but realize this faith is growing and developing just like their body and emotions. Many are struggling even as their level of sanctification is growing." If they sense that sharing their faith is not "cool" or the "in!" thing to do, they may not do it to avoid being ridiculed by their friends and peers. They may fear being labeled by their friends as a "goodie two-shoes," a "religious freak," or just "weird." They may fear that they will not have answers to every question people may raise. Some may be carrying guilt from a past sin and fear that they will be found out and labeled as a hypocrite by the person to whom they are witnessing. These fears and insecurities are not absent from adults, but recognize that during the teen years they are more acute and debilitating.

Realizing that teens have these fears and apprehensions in sharing their faith, adults can do various things to help alleviate their fears and make evangelism more comfortable and natural for teens. First of all adults can serve as an example in life and in witnessing. Many teens have not had good role models in the area of "faith-talk" which makes them hesitant to do it themselves. Pastor John Ibisch from Wisconsin Lutheran High School feels that, second, we can make evangelism more natural and easier for teens if we would start talking about and doing evangelism with them in the earliest grades of elementary school. "When kids get

comfortable sharing their faith at a younger age, it may be easier to share their faith when communication is tougher in the teenage years." Third, we as adults must be more forward in setting the pace. "If adults are doing it, kids will catch it' (Turriff). "People love to talk about their faith when they realize that it's the thing to do" (Bauer). Both Pastor Ibisch and Jackie Bauer encourage us as adults to do more "faith-talk" and to talk about "What Jesus means to me' around teens. "Adults who work with youth must show by example that it is possible to share faith with friends and to talk about spiritual things in a natural way" (Clement & SaIs giver, 40).

Training by example is a great place to start in getting teens involved in evangelism. However this certainly can be expanded in many and varied ways. One simple way Pastor Ibisch has used at Wisconsin Lutheran High School to get teens comfortable using "God-talk is to teach them "One-liners' which can be used to respond to different life circumstances that arise. For example, instead of saying, "Gesundheit" when someone sneezes, learn to say, "God bless you." He has the kids develop and use these one-liners especially during times of stress in a person's life such as a marriage, an unwed pregnant mother, time of divorce, or an untimely death in an auto accident.

Another training method can be to just simply teach the basics of Christianity in a timely and relevant way to a teen's life. When a teen comes to learn and appreciate how the message of the cross applies and strengthens his/her life in many and varied ways, s/he will be more apt to share this same comfort and encouragement with a friend who is hurting and searching in the same way. Pastor Turriff reminds teens that they already have all the training they need if they know and understand the message of John 3:16.

Even though a structured evangelism method may not be used often or at all by an individual teen, it is beneficial to teach teens a more organized witness method. This may help to eliminate the fear of not knowing what to say or how to say it. "Some training is good to alleviate the fear to speak of one's faith" (Bauer). Some of these more formal training methods may include, but are definitely not limited to, the outline of God's Great Exchange and Talk About the Savior. In addendum to a basic witness outline, teaching the following may also be of benefit: 1) How to answer common objections, 2) How to use apologetics to respond to peers who challenge their faith and belief system (Kastens), and 3) The basic teachings of the major denominations (i.e., Catholics, Baptist, etc.). This will help a teen speak knowledgeably with a peer of these denominations (Ibisch).

To some teens, however, God may have given a stronger desire and gift to share their faith. To this select group of teens a more intensified and structured method of evangelism can be taught. One method, although not written for the sole purpose of evangelism, is the Peer Ministry program written by Dr. Varenhorst. (This program has been implemented in area Lutheran high schools such as Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, WI and St. Croix Lutheran High School in St. Paul, MN). The Peer Ministry program is used to give teens the people skills of how to interact with diverse people of all ages; strategies of how to help with differing problems; attitudes of acceptance and respect; commitments that involve risk and sacrifice; and the practice of applying these things to actions day after day until the ministry becomes part of the fabric of our lives (Varenhorst, 7). One of the great benefits of the program is that it teaches teens basic skills that help to overcome some of the fears that were mentioned earlier. The participant is taught 1) how to initiate a social relationship through basic communication skills, 2) to care about the individual and their hurts and troubles, 3) to use good conversational skills such as the use of closed, open, informational, and personal questions, 4) to listen to both spoken and non-verbal communication, 5) to welcome a stranger to a group, 6) to communicate with authority figures, 7) to stand up to and overcome peer pressure, 8) to help others make decisions, in addition to others.

While most of the material is not a specific law/gospel presentation, the skills that are taught and learned are invaluable to help teens overcome their fear of people and remove surface issues. Once past these issues, a

teen may have a comfortable opportunity to share his/her faith with a peer who is hurting inside. The training program does end with a session on sharing one's faith. Practical suggestions are given to use the learned skills to make a teen more at ease while sharing his faith. Some of them include 1) having teens get comfortable talking about their faith by first daring it with their close friends, 2) having them identify their "world" into which they might take the gospel¹ and 3) make evangelism and faith-talk a part of the mission of your youth group.

A specific witnessing outline can easily be added to this training. An outline is beneficial to have in mind when talking about the way of salvation to eliminate the fear of not knowing what to say, to keep the discussion on track and to present clearly the message of salvation. Pastor John Ibisch uses the "Talk About the Savior (TAS)" outline with his high school senior evangelism class. This outline has three basic parts: 1) There is no everlasting life by works, 2) God provides everlasting life in Christ, and 3) Through faith we receive everlasting life. Pastor Michael Turriff and others have taught their youth the outline of "God's Great Exchange." This method is based on a four part outline, 1) What God demands, 2) What God sees, 3) Man-made remedies, and 4) God's remedy. Other outlines certainly can be used. Other suggestions include using a portion of Scripture such as Ephesians 2, "The Wordless Book" which connects a color to a part of the story of salvation (Hochmuth, 2-66), and other teaching and training outlines provided in the *Evangelism Handbook for Schools*.

The training methods are many and varied, formal and informal, but none of them will do any good if teens do not have a chance to put them into practice. At times we are hesitant to involve teens in our evangelism programs at the congregational level because it takes time and energy, and they, from time to time, come across as uninterested in sharing their faith. Many teens will give, as Mike Pfeifer, Youth and Family Minister from St. Mark's in Green Bay says, "Moses-isms." "Oh, but I can't do that ... I don't know what to do ... I don't know what to say..." Training will most likely take away the last two excuses, but to take away the first, "we need to create opportunities for kids to talk about Jesus in a safe environment" (Ibisch). This is where pastors, teachers, youth leaders, adults must use their creativity. Many youth are sincerely looking for ways they can become involved in the overall mission outreach of their congregations.

Pastor Ibisch gives his teens witnessing opportunities first by inviting adults into the classroom to play the role of the unbeliever as the student uses the TAS outline to share his/her faith. Another opportunity he provides for students of his class is to visit the patients of Froedtert Hospital in Milwaukee, WI. The hospital uses the students initially to take a patient survey but also allows them to carry on a conversation with the patient. This often gives the kids an opportunity to offer comfort and to share their faith in a non-threatening atmosphere. This arrangement provides two benefits for the kids. First it puts them in a situation to share their faith, and second it, more often than not, provides a positive experience to spur on the next witness opportunity. The positive feedback the patients give the students does wonders for their confidence and their desire to continue sharing their faith.

The congregational setting provides a vast array of opportunities to involve teens in evangelism. All pastors have to do is use them. ". . . there's nothing wrong with inviting or asking our high school youth to roll up their sleeves and take part in these areas of outreach/mission/evangelism that we've typically targeted for only adults to serve in" (Pfeifer). Pastor Turriff is in the process of implementing a "Teen Elder" program.

¹ This method is based on Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The teen's "Jerusalem would be people I am comfortable with," "Judea" would be "people who may be more a challenge, but still comfortable with." "Samaria" would be "people I generally don't like and would be outside my comfort level." "Ends of the earth" would be "people I know nothing about and who are beyond my present comfort level." (Varenhorst, 170-171)

Through this program, Turriff plans on using a select group of teenagers to talk to delinquent teens of the congregation to try to regain for the Lord some of the confirmation class losses. He has also taken some of his Youth group along on evangelism calls that he has made. The benefit he sees as twofold: 1) it instills confidence in them and their ability to do evangelism, and 2) sometimes the adults respect the words and witness of the teen more than the pastor himself.

Other congregations have involved their teens by taking their youth group to a distant home mission congregation to aid them in their outreach efforts. When Mike Pfeifer was in Bloomington, MN he took a group of his teens to Colorado to help Pastor Ross Stelljas with outreach in Denver, CO and also to help in Montrose, CO with the outreach to the Cora Indians. Holy Word Lutheran Church in Austin, TX is planning a trip to the Apache reservation to involve their youth in outreach efforts there. The regional youth rally in Watertown, WI in the summer of 1996 involved the youth in canvass work in the Madison, WI area. After some training time in Watertown, the youth were taken to congregations in Madison to conduct a simple survey of various neighborhoods. Pastors Mickey Turriff and John Parlow reported that many kids had very positive feedback and left the rally with a new or renewed interest in evangelism work.

Some youth still may be intimidated by the one to one personal contact. However, there are opportunities for these youth as well. Teens can be used to hang door hangers to invite the neighborhood to special events such as VBS, Easter Sunrise Service, Friendship Sundays, etc. Contact can be made with new-move-in's in the community by taking an evening with teens to address welcome letters to these people. Follow-up notes to visitors can also be written and sent by teens. Some other suggestions to get youth involved in the overall mission work of the church can be found in Appendix A.

The youth of our congregations certainly are a great resource to tap in the overall mission work of the church. However, as we strive to make some of these ideas a reality, there are a few things that we, as pastors and youth leaders, must keep in mind. First of all, before any of the above can happen, we must help our teens grow in an appreciation of and a love for Christ and his work for them. We do this by asking ourselves, "Where are the youth hurting? What are the issues that confront them? What are the places of tension for them?" (Clement & Salsgiver, 45) and then apply God and his law and his love to those hurts, issues, and tensions. Only with the love of Christ in their hearts will any teen be motivated to share this joy with others. Second, as with any other area of ministry, youth work in general and in the area of evangelism takes time and money (Pfeifer). Some of the foregoing ideas may not be possible without the aid of solid youth leaders and financial support from the congregation. Third, we must be willing to help youth find their spiritual gifts and give them opportunities to use them (Ibisch). Be willing to give them a spiritual gifts test and then find ways to use those gifts. Fourth, as we are working with and training youth for evangelism work they need to know that they are emotionally and physically safe (Varenhorst, 22). They need to know that in the setting of the group they will not be ridiculed, rejected, or made fun of because of something they shared. Fifth, they need to know that their presence and participation is important and recognized. "Kids want to hear they're appreciated and treated as communicant members of the congregation." (Turriff). Sixth, and probably most importantly, love teens as Christ loved you. Show them they are important. "Be their friend, mentor and positive role model" (Turriff). Build them up. Encourage them. Care for them. Just love them with the love of Christ. "Have a heart for kids. You don't have to be the most dynamic leader, just care about them. Care about them as the church of today, not as the church of tomorrow" (Turriff).

The Lord Jesus "went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom. and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send

out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:35-38). Could teens be part of the answer to the Lord's prayer? By all means! Evangelism, work in God's harvest field, is not just for adults!

Appendix A

Uses for teens in the overall evangelism effort of a congregation:

- As greeters on Sunday mornings
- As visitors to shut-ins Oust to visit them or to bring them a sermon tape)
- As visitors to patients in a hospital or nursing home
- As a mentor to a new member of the youth group*
- As teachers or teacher's aids to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School classes
- To reach out to peers in the church or community who are identified as lonely, rejected, or isolated*
- As tutors to children*
- As Camp or Retreat Counselors or leaders*
- As assistants to the youth leader*
- Allow them to participate in a youth service (develop the service, design the bulletin cover, read the readings, offer the prayers, be the ushers, play the music, sing in a choir, etc.)
- As a regular participant in the congregational evangelism program
- Use your imagination! The possibilities are endless!

(*These ideas come from the Peer Ministry Training Handbook by Dr. Varenhorst)

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