

REACHING OUT TO TWENTY-SOMETHINGS

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A White Paper
Board for Parish Services
September 15, 2003

Introduction

When a professor of evangelism is asked to present a paper on “reaching out,” he thinks of, well, outreach. Planning an intentional strategy of evangelizing a generation of Americans unfamiliar with Bible stories or truths is a fascinating subject! But when members of the Board for Parish Services asked me to present on reaching out to twenty-somethings, I sensed there was more on their minds than reaching out. There was reaching in. What do we do as a church to keep connecting a certain age group of our members with the gospel? What is the answer to consistent losses in membership in this same age group the past several years? How do we intentionalize our touching them with the good news? This paper will attempt to address strategies both for outreach and inreach where young adults are concerned. Evangelism and nurture are twin offspring of the gospel Jesus proclaimed and gave to his church.

Our Challenge

Perhaps you are familiar with the cult-like following *The Matrix* movies enjoy among young adults in our country. The movies tell the story of a twenty-something office worker and computer hacker who discovers the world is not as it seems. Everyday life is really an illusion created by something called the Matrix. The routine of this everyday life is mind-numbing. People wake up, go to work, come home—but through it all, every day, they exhibit no individualism or personal choice. They are being controlled by the Matrix, and because they can’t think for themselves, they are ignorant of what is happening to them. Their lives are not their own. The hero of the story is that young man who discovers the truth and commits himself to setting the rest of his generation free from the Matrix’s control.

It has been said that the plot line of these movies is a metaphor for the American twenty-something mission in life. They watched their parents go to work every day and spend their weekends running errands. They gained the impression that the older generation was put on this earth to work. To young adults, that’s the Matrix—a joyless, uninspiring *illusion* of life. But it’s not what life really is. And the last thing they want is to be stuck living the life of a previous generation, a life that’s illusionary at best and fake at worst.

The task of an authentic, confessional church is to prove over and over again that life with Christ as your Savior and Leader is the real life. Young adults are fed up with being disillusioned by what others have called the fulfilling life—climbing the corporate ladder, free sex, chasing after material possessions. They saw it didn’t leave their parents satisfied and they’re not about to believe the secular world’s hype today. Now is the time for Christ’s church to speak up boldly. Now is the time for the WELS to go on the offensive with the real, fulfilling life of living under Jesus. Now is the time to challenge young adults the way Paul challenged the Athenians: “Baby busters, I see that in every way you are searching for something real,

something that won't let you down, something that will fill your emptiness. The satisfaction you claim is unknown I am going to proclaim to you. Let me tell you the story of Jesus Christ" (adaptation of Acts 17:22-23).

Our Strengths

Keeping twenty-somethings in church or attracting them to church, then, begins and ends with the greatest story ever told, the gospel. As a church body we believe that the Holy Spirit works on young adult hearts by the power of the gospel. We may have our disagreements over what styles of gospel ministry to employ. But not one of us is willing to leave the gospel behind. I believe we are unified in our belief that our only hope for power (cf. Ro 1:16) in claiming twenty-somethings is the gospel. This is a great strength.

It is our heritage to maintain the clarity of the gospel. From our teachers we have learned to distinguish between the two great doctrines of the Bible. From experience we have learned the mess we make of church when we turn the gospel into a law or when we use rules and regulations to motivate. We have, I believe, endeavored to present justification in its awesome simplicity and sanctification in its exciting possibilities. This is a great strength and it should serve us well when reaching out to young people who thirst for simple truth in the context of their lives.

WELS pastors and teachers are not trained to see the gospel as a subject, but rather as a living force to be preached and taught. I suppose there are sermons, devotions, classroom lessons, Sunday school classes, and Bible class sessions utterly devoid of the gospel, but I doubt there are many like that in our circles. When young adults come into contact with these ministerial acts they will also come into contact with the gospel. This is a great strength—one that no WELS Christian who has the privilege of preaching or teaching should take for granted.

Yes, we know the gospel. We believe God works through the gospel. We strive to lay the gospel on people's hearts whenever we minister to them. Our trust that the gospel will work has led us to study it, and our study of the gospel has led us to trust it will work. WELS spiritual leaders think of the good news of Jesus as their weapon (cf Eph 6:17; He 4:12) against the devil. It occurs to me that our knowledge of the gospel approaches that of a well-trained Marine who has learned his M-16 so masterfully that he can, with his eyes closed, take it apart and put it together again in less than a minute. God has given us a weapon to capture hearts and we know that weapon.

Areas For Improvement

Over the centuries of the New Testament church the weapon has not changed. The greatest story ever told has not evolved into something different. The Word has not lost its power nor the sacraments their promises. Our church body cannot improve the gospel to win and keep more young adult hearts. The gospel cannot be improved. Yet, we can and should be improving our knowledge of those to whom we bring the gospel as well as the way we bring it. The Marine knows his M-16 like the back of his hand. But he also studies the target and works on techniques for firing his weapon in a way that corresponds to his surroundings.

The four inspired evangelists have been instructive to me in this regard. Writing the earliest and to a predominantly Jewish audience, Matthew tells the story of Jesus with many Old Testament allusions and references so that the reader cannot escape the conclusion that Jesus of

Nazareth is the God-promised Messiah. Mark wrote from Rome at a time when Christians in Rome were considered weak superstition-mongers who were harmful to the state. So Mark was inspired to tell the story of the powerful Jesus whose life was filled with mighty deeds, even though he gave up that life freely. And Mark wrote in a rambling, breathless style of Greek that the common Roman could understand and get excited about. Doctor Luke had witnessed how the gospel prevailed even in the darkest corners of the Gentile world. So he told the story of a Jesus who came not just for the Jew and not just for prominent members of society. Finally, John, writing at the end of the first century for people who may have been two or three generations removed from Jesus' life on earth, told the story of Christ in words whose simplicity is only surpassed by their depth. Four inspired men told the same story of the same Savior. But each time the story-telling took on the unique characteristics of time, place, and audience.

We notice the same phenomenon when we listen to Paul preach sermons in Acts. When in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41), he started with the history of Israel and proceeded to present Jesus as the One God was preparing the world for when he treated Israel in such a special way. When his audience was a crowd of frenzied natives in Lystra (14:15-17), Paul used the wonders of nature as his point of contact to introduce the God of their salvation. When addressing the cultured cognoscenti of the Areopagus (17:22-31), he quoted their poets and appealed to their study of philosophy before he preached the resurrection of Jesus. Paul did not set out to change the gospel when he preached it in different settings to different people. He did set out to change the way he preached it.

We are not the only church body who has room for improvement in this area. But it would be good, in fact it is essential, to recognize our need for improvement. Reaching twenty-somethings consistently with the gospel means studying the target and considering how the weapon should be used. I consider the BPS a great blessing in this regard. You are in position to serve as leaders in helping WELS Christians understand that we often must take a different approach in keeping young adults in touch with the means of grace. You also are in a position to lead in teaching us those new approaches. The rest of this paper will seek to describe common qualities of this age group, and then we'll consider some specific suggestions for your leadership in reaching this age group with the gospel.

Knowing The Target

The first common characteristic of twenty-somethings in America today is that they bristle at the notion of having common characteristics. They refuse to be labeled. It is important that we understand this not as immaturity or arrogance, but as a leaning toward individuality and a cry for diversity. "Come get to know me for who I am," the young adult is saying. They're not looking to "rock the church's world" and change things dramatically in the way we serve the Lord as a church. But they do expect that we be open to new ideas. They do expect to be heard. And they don't just accept diversity. They expect it. Churches that want to keep them in the gospel must be willing to ask for their help and listen to their ideas. We are to love them enough to take them seriously and to ask them to work beside us. When they do work beside us in the church (and they will work!), let's be ready to recognize that their ways of engaging other twenty-somethings are probably better than our ways.

It seems volunteerism has replaced politics for today's young adult. They still want to make a difference like every generation before them. But they don't believe politics or bureaucracy can do it. "Just Do It" is more than a Nike slogan for twenty-somethings. It's a

personal philosophy. Rather than align themselves with a political party to make salutary changes in society, young adults tend to see themselves as political independents. So how do they make a difference? By volunteering. Whether they go to church or not, a higher than average percentage of young adults may be found tutoring young children and bringing meals to the homeless. They are looking for the church to facilitate this service. Congregations that actively explore how they may share the gospel socially (not the same as social gospel!) will be a special place for young adults to be fed by the gospel.

A recent University of Michigan study concluded that 25 to 34 year-olds were trying to start businesses at three times the rate of 35 to 55 year-olds. The entrepreneurial spirit in young adults may be due to what they've witnessed in the corporate America of their parents. The thought of working in an office cubicle while waiting for an opportunity that never comes certainly is not appealing. Nor is the idea of being chained to a schedule that discourages personal or family time. These are the hard lessons of the baby boomers that have led twenty-somethings away from serving a boss and toward being their own boss. A church that knows its target will understand the opportunity. As young adults build their own businesses that cater to more young adults, spheres of influence for evangelism grow and missionfields present themselves. Why not encourage the young entrepreneur to include the Suffering Servant in their customer service?

I think it's pretty neat that every eight minutes I can get a complete forecast from the Weather Channel. My sixteen-year-old daughter can't believe anyone would ever wait that long for information. Young adults have grown up in the information age and they're cruising on the information highway like BMW's on the Autobahn. Perhaps it's an overstatement to say this age group does everything on the Internet, but it's pretty close. Fascination with the Internet has spawned electronic multi-tasking. That is to say, a surfer rarely does just one thing while online. There's research, news, banking, shopping, stock trading, and relationship building—all at the same time! The Internet is not going away. Nor is the young adult's desire to use it. It stands to reason that they would look to the Internet as one of their primary sources for fulfilling their spiritual needs. The church must be on the Web and in e-mail inboxes, preaching the gospel and helping people to grow in the Word. It is not a stretch to say that in the near future any church without a home page might as well have an unlisted phone number. Church leaders who don't know how to do that have a good source of experience in their midst. Just reach for the nearest twenty-something; they'll know what to do.

Our nation's divorce epidemic has come home to roost in the twenty-somethings. Perhaps WELS statistics skew more favorably, but chances are better than even that the typical American young adult grew up in a single parent home. At the time their parents were getting divorced psychologists were saying divorce would have no lasting impact on the children. It hasn't been until recently that those opinions have been turned on their head by mental health experts. Twenty-somethings have felt the pain of marriages gone awry. Thus they are much more cautious. They're waiting longer to get married. They're jaded. Young adults don't enter marriage thinking they'll live happily ever after, they just hope it lasts. Churches that advertise marriage seminars (both pre- and post-marriage) for the community will be offering something young adults want. Because they are taking marriage more seriously than the previous generation, twenty-somethings will see this kind of counseling not as a chore, but as a great service provided by the church. What an excellent time to reach them with the gospel.

If you are in your mid- to late-twenties, you were born at a time when children were being widely perceived as a burden. Such a perception was unprecedented in American culture.

While children of the baby boom were welcomed as a precious commodity, the baby busters were born into a country worried about overpopulation and the cost of raising children. Childless-by-choice couples became fashionable, and apartment complexes catered to them. Adults who had children were told the best way to raise their children was to make sure the parents were happy, whatever the cost (i.e., divorce, career). Good parenting was focusing on the parent rather than the child. We should not expect the age group to have learned much about what good parenting really is. Young parent groups and seminars in the church will hit home with young adults. They are not averse to sacrificing for the sake of their children, but they want wholesome modeling. What's more, they want to network with other young parents who have the same questions. A church that reaches out to them with parenting forums and mentoring relationships will touch this age group.

Because the twenty-somethings may have a poor example of marriage and parenting in their past, they thirst for family. They want to know what it's like to have elders to look up to and contemporaries to respect. The peer groups they formed as children tended to be pseudo-families. This is why the concept of relationship is key to a twenty-something. When they're not hanging out with friends (in person or on-line), they're watching TV shows and movies about friends hanging out together. This extended buddy system is not the last vestiges of college life. It's a search for family. If a Christian congregation is not a family, I don't know what is. God ordained marriage to produce families, but he also speaks of Christians as brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers in his Word. When a congregation tells a twenty-something we are a family of believers, that's a promise. It's a promise that we will love you unconditionally while expecting you to pull your weight. Young adults will respond. Mature Christian adults should not try to "be hip" in order to attract and retain twenty-somethings at their church. The attraction and retention happens when the gospel is shared by Christians who are looking out for one another and are genuinely interested in one another's lives. Like a family.

No, you can't fake it with young adults. Madison Avenue and the media have over-hyped them their whole lives, and they're tired of it. In a church, I don't think they're looking for a show. That doesn't mean multi-media and different music in worship don't have their place. But let us beware of giving the impression that we're trying to sell the young adult something. They're interested in the authentic. They want the truth. What more could a WELS church ask for? We have the gospel, the true story of a man who lived, died, and rose again. We trust the Holy Spirit touches our hearts with that gospel and leads us to act it out more and more in our lives. There you have reaching out and reaching in to twenty-somethings in a nutshell. Let them see the truth of Jesus at work in your life and invite them to feel that truth at work in the family we call the church. The more our congregations foster worship and fellowship experiences where young adults can connect with the gospel in action, the more this age group will accept the church as family.

Hitting The Target Through Worship

Corporate worship is the family meal. We come together from our different walks of life to feed on Word and Sacrament and to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" and "encourage one another" (He 10:24-25). We are not the same ages when we come together for worship, nor do we pretend to have the same interests outside of worship, but we benefit from coming together all the same. It would be silly for a mother to work so hard to get the family together and provide a delicious meal only to seat each member in a different room. Just because

we are aware that each generation has its own unique characteristics doesn't mean that we should have one worship service for busters, one for boomers, and another for builders. But it does mean that we take special care in allowing each worship service to be a fresh vehicle for the power each generation needs and craves, the gospel. More than ever, every WELS worship experience must be a clear expression of Christ's gospel if we are to reach out to twenty-somethings.

During my vicar year I learned that teenagers yearn for a solid consistency in worship. This surprised me. I thought the teens would want worship to be new and innovative because that's the kind of people I thought they were. Teenagers are innovative. They flock to and fall for the latest fad. But they don't want that in worship. The couple hours on Sunday are an oasis from all that is changing in their lives and in them. They expect corporate worship to be bedrock, not shifting sand.

Young adults are not teens, but they were not too long ago. If the ups and downs of adolescence may be compared to whitewater rafting, being a twenty-something is like your first few breaths after the rapids in the calmer water below. There still is a desire for something solid in the midst of all the craziness. Young adults comprise the first generation brought up with the notion that everything's up for grabs as far as the truth is concerned. They were taught that truth does not exist outside the subjectiveness of personal experience or the whims of the powerful. Perhaps we've been led to believe that they will refuse to accept the concept of objective truth. Actually, they want the truth. They expect people to be blunt with them. In worship they want and expect something that is real—real about their brokenness and pain, real about God's forgiveness and strength. If a twenty-something goes to church, it's not for entertainment. Fact is, most entertainment for this age group is "reality-based" anyway. No, they want the real meat and potatoes of Jesus' family meal. Worship for twenty-somethings, then, is a time for God to tell them the truth about their lives and for them to thank him for it. This emphasis on truth comes through as the worship service accentuates God's presence, his Word, and his call to action. Let's examine these three areas.

Why does St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle get about a thousand young adults together for worship at the strange time of 9:30 p.m. on a Sunday? Because they've got the best grunge band doing Christian contemporary or the best multimedia presentation? No, they have neither. But what they do have is a way of impressing God's presence upon these young adults. They lower the lights, light the candles, burn the incense, and have a men's choir chant the ancient Compline service from the Book of Common Prayer. Darkened sanctuaries and burning incense are not means of grace. But in this case they support the means of grace. They help to create a worship atmosphere of transcendence. They silently proclaim that worship is a time in the presence of God. Young adults want this. I'm convinced they want their worship time to be a *different* sensation from the sensations they have the rest of the week. Trying to recast our worship to be more like the pop culture twenty-somethings are trying to escape for a time is not, in my opinion, serving them well. Christians may respectfully disagree on what works best to express the transcendence of divine worship without offending the sensibilities or binding the consciences of the worshipers. But respecting and rejoicing in God's presence during worship is something that will resonate with every age group.

"I want the truth! You can't handle the truth!" This courtroom exchange from the movie *A Few Good Men* reminds me of what happens when preachers pussyfoot around law and gospel. The twenty-something in the pew is crying out (in their minds) "I want the truth!" A preacher who is unclear with law and gospel is basically responding to this cry with "You can't handle the

truth!” The law is the truth of our sin and failure and what it deserves. The gospel is the truth of forgiveness and life in Christ. Many young adults are struggling right now with the ambiguities of a postmodern world. What’s wrong? What’s right? Who is God? How does he feel about me? Church leadership has the solemn privilege of speaking not just about God, but for him as we proclaim his Word. Now is not the time to throw into our sermons a few sentences with the word “sin” and call it law, and a few sentences with the word “grace” and call it gospel. It’s quite possible that today’s young adult, even the one with a church background, will have no real understanding of these words. Let’s be blunt about sin. Call a spade a spade. Let’s be excitedly expressive about grace. Deliberately celebrate the rescue story that is the gospel with every proclamation of God’s Word.

When Jesus spoke directly to Saul to convert him, Saul’s first post-conversion act was to ask “What shall I do, Lord” (Acts 22:10)? I have tried to impress this fact on beginner homileticians. God’s people want to know what they can do for the Lord who saved them. After they are terrified by law and comforted by gospel, they would like specific suggestions as to what the gospel will look like in their lives. This is especially true for the “Just Do It” generation. Worship that includes the preaching of many practical examples of Christian service will connect with twenty-somethings. For them it’s taking the gospel out of the abstract and making it concrete. Now is the time for every WELS preacher to consider a simpler, more narrative style for his preaching. Try proclaiming Christ through the story of the text rather than the ideas you formulated from the text. Then connect the listener’s life—their struggles, troubles, dreams, activities—to Jesus’ story. And as we do we are blunt with law, amazed with gospel, and empowered for service. That’s the truth.

Hitting The Target Through Evangelism

Were you as stunned as I was when former pro wrestler Jesse Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota in 1998? How in the world could something like that happen? Political analysts pointed to Ventura’s popularity among twenty-somethings. What great message did he have for young adults who had never voted before? Ventura was never ashamed to say, “I don’t know. I don’t have all the answers.” Personally, I think the governor should have the answers, or at least a plan. But the generation that came after mine doesn’t really expect all the answers to life’s problems. This has ramifications for reaching out to unchurched twenty-somethings. Evangelists who desire to penetrate this culture must focus less on “I have the message” and more on “I am the message.” Please understand this correctly. What I’m trying to say is that young adults tend to respond more to someone who models the message rather than simply proclaims the message. This is in keeping with their emphasis on relationships. Think of what this might look like in the way we evangelize today.

Too many pastors and laypeople think they must take on a different personality in order to evangelize. Fact is, if we are clear and honest about who we are in relationship to God and the unchurched, we have what it takes to evangelize. Be clear with the twenty-something that you are a sinner. Come clean about how much you need God’s grace. The Robert Schullers of the world used to have would-be evangelists avoid any talk of sin for fear that the unchurched might become depressed. That was a boomer fallacy. The next generation tends to be relieved that there is actually a place where the pain of sin and guilt are openly acknowledged in an atmosphere of trust and compassion. This place is the church.

Be clear with the twenty-something that you are a saint. More than ever the evangelist must testify to the transformative power of forgiveness in their life. Young adults, having been brought up on voyeuristic talk shows that show every kind of poor behavior, may wonder if anyone can really change. The evangelist is living proof that lives do change when Jesus brings us into a right relationship with God. The testimonial has its place, as long as it focuses the unchurched twenty-something on God's gracious power in bringing us through the trials and hardships of the past.

Be clear with the twenty-something that you are a friend. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the truth of the gospel is to be a true friend. Young adults are used to having differences with others; they expect individuality and diversity. But they also believe friendship transcends all those differences. One way this generation defines friendship is by saying what it is not. Friendship is not abandonment. It is not bailing out. When we prove to the unchurched twenty-something that our congregation will walk through their pain with them, it's then that we can share the news that pain will not have the final word because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This is authentic friendship. Can we, as a church, find new ways to connect Christians with young unchurched folks who are looking for friendship and help as they deal with life's problems? Why not intentionalize our friendly help in times of need like: job hunting, financial struggle, marriage, parenting, addiction or substance abuse, relocation, etc.? It will take some work, but congregation's that mobilize their members to make this kind of friendly help available will be authentic examples of the gospel for the unchurched young adult.

Be clear with the twenty-something that you are a servant. My former parish was on the northern edge of the Bible Belt. Judging from the numbers of beautiful church buildings in our small river town, you would have guessed that there was no "niche" for the WELS church. In talking to other pastors and by reading their materials, however, I discovered that our WELS mission really did fill a niche. We were the church of *free* grace. Sure, the other Christian churches talked about God's grace and Jesus' salvation, but you couldn't help getting the impression that there were strings attached. It seems that the biblical concept of a God who would offer grace and forgiveness for nothing is foreign to American society and many American churches. Telling the twenty-something about this free grace is one thing. Showing them free grace in your attitudes and actions toward them is another. Perhaps our church could build up more servant ministries in order to reach out to the young adult. Simple servant acts like helping with a community building project, providing neighborhood meals, or passing out sodas and lemonade on a hot day are good ways to make contact with unchurched people. We can refuse payment for our service and only when asked why we're doing it reply: "because of what God has done for me."

Being clear with the young adult about your sinner/saint/friend/servant status will open many doors for telling the Good News. Then we must step through the door and actually verbalize sin and grace. In the past we have trained in a systematic theology approach to law/gospel presentation. We relate (some might say "prove") in a logical way that we are deserving of eternal death, cannot earn our salvation, and are recipients of God's forgiving grace in Christ. Considering that recent polls conclude that most Americans still believe they will face God upon their deaths, I believe this kind of systematic approach that places us before God to defend our reason for being in heaven is still a good one. But perhaps we should take a cue from the twenty-somethings affinity for narrative stories. Let's develop more law/gospel presentations that deliberately follow a Bible story from beginning through the middle to the end. Let's also develop more of a biblical theology approach to verbalizing law and gospel with the unchurched.

We do that by telling the story of people and God from the beginning (creation) through the middle (the fall and its consequences) to the end (Jesus death and resurrection). The Bible's story, then, becomes the prospect's story. They see themselves in the narrative of salvation.

Concluding Remarks

In terms of the challenge for the Christian church, is there anything closer to the first century A.D. than the twenty-first century? The generation of young adults ready to make their mark on the world does not know the Christian story. What's more, they are skeptical and maybe hostile toward the idea that Christianity has the answer. Their background leads them to distrust institutions, and they have a hard time believing the church can make a difference in their lives.

The WELS must be ready to say: "The church can't. But Jesus can. And the church is all about Jesus making a difference for us." Our church will reach out to and retain twenty-somethings when we confront them, immerse them, overwhelm them, and demonstrate to them the gospel in a way that corresponds to their life experiences. To that end, the BPS may take the lead in helping congregations use the gospel weapon among twenty-somethings by promoting ministries that

- promote a team style of leadership in the congregation with the pastor as coach and all age groups as valuable members;
- return to the concept of lay leadership rather than multiplication of paid professional staff;
- recognize a craving for fellowship in Bible studies and group activities;
- provide many opportunities for service not only in the church but also in the community;
- encourage a more narrative style of preaching that is high in examples of Christian service;
- teach worship settings that emphasize God's presence, God's Word, and God's call to action;
- develop an outreach paradigm that is lifestyle-oriented in pre-evangelism and narrative-oriented in evangelism; and
- provide congregations with workshops and seminars they may conduct to touch young adults where they need help (relationships, marriage, parenting, etc.)

We are powerless to penetrate this generation without the gospel. But with our heritage of knowing the weapon, and a new passion for studying the target and appropriately using the weapon, we shall reach more and more twenty-somethings both inside and outside the church.