

# Reaching the Next Generation with Your Ministry Message

How to Communicate Effectively With Young Adult Evangelical Christians

A PUBLICATION OF



# THE PROBLEM

Your ministry organization has a long history of successful service, with a loyal and supportive donor base, a dedicated staff, and thousands of stories of changed lives.

But unless you make some changes now, your ministry's future may be in jeopardy.

Many legacy ministry organizations find resistance as they reach out to today's young adult evangelical Christians.

There is a disconnect with the next generation.

In 2011 and 2012 perhaps no other topic has been as ubiquitous in Christian writing, research, conference speaking, and ministry discussions as the idea of an "exodus" of young people - especially young adults - from church and from their commitment to their Christian faith.

While there is some disagreement about the statistics and specifics, most American evangelicals agree that their faith is not being passed seamlessly and effectively to the next generation. Many leaders are very concerned that the current trend, if unchecked, will lead to a post-Christian America in which the influence of the faith is diminished significantly.

More specifically, leaders of ministries and pastors of churches are concerned that their numbers are dwindling, especially among younger adults.

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

**(Jeremiah 6:16, NIV)**

# What You Need to Know if You Want to Reach Young Adult Evangelicals With Your Message

- + Be ready to start with the basics - Christian young adults are less biblically literate and less committed to the Bible's accuracy and authority than their predecessors.**

Christian young adults are all over the place on their beliefs about the authority and accuracy of the Bible. As a whole, they tend to be less biblically literate than the generations before them. They are less likely to depend on the Bible to help them with daily life decisions and choices. They tend to be uncomfortable choosing absolute biblical standards of truth and right and wrong, especially when they perceive that these standards pass judgment on others' beliefs and life choices. By contrast, those who have developed a deeper commitment to the Bible are more likely to be impacted by spiritual influences like Bible reading/study and spiritual leaders like their pastor.

*If your organization wants to impact this generation you cannot assume young Christians have a traditional evangelical Christian commitment to the Bible as the inspired word of God and the “only basis for faith and practice.” It may be necessary to start with a “why you can trust the Bible message” basing other messaging and appeals on it.*

**+ Do everything you can to build relationships with the young adults you want to reach; where possible, one-on-one interaction is the most effective way to really impact them.**

Nothing is more important in the process of reaching out to young adults than a sense of relationship. Young adults want to be engaged in a connection that involves more than an exchange of information. Without this context, they are unlikely to seriously accept teaching and advice. One-on-one relationships have the most impact.

*If you want to influence young adults to make life changing decisions, you must be adept at developing relationships with them and sharing in this context. This is obviously a challenge when the “relationship” is with a large group, but there must be an effort to deliver messaging in a “relational” way.*

**+ To build rapport with young adults, you must be yourself.**

Trying to be like a young adult rather than being yourself is a communication disaster. This not only involves your style of communicating, but also your transparency. Honesty about yourself, your flaws, even your differences is much more likely to make you effective with this audience.

*Reaching young adults with your message will require that you break down some walls of skepticism. Being humble and genuine and not trying too hard to be like the audience is the best way to get a “fair hearing.”*

*“I believe the Bible is the word of God, but that some parts have been changed and some of the truths in the Bible have been lost or tainted.”*

**+ Communicate with young adults in the context of life and make sure you understand the value of “story.”**

In relationship with young adults, leaders who want to see them conform their lives to Scripture must make the message personal. This often begins with sharing your personal story and how the message of the Bible or the specific truth you are conveying has made a difference for you. Young adults have been conditioned to be the ultimate consumers who see everything in a very personal (if not self-serving) way.

*To reach young adults with your message, you must help them see their place in it. Preparation should not just include subject matter expertise, but context expertise - understand their world and put your message into their story as best you can.*

**+ Realize that reaching across generations to engage young adults is much like cross-cultural communication.**

Older Christians who want to influence young adults must recognize there is a deep cultural difference between generations. In order to effectively communicate with young adults so as to influence their life decisions, it might seem like the influencer is engaging in cross-cultural ministry.

*In the same way missionaries learn another language and culture, if you want to impact these young adults, be prepared to be flexible and willing to meet them on their terms. The good news is that many of these young adults respond well to anyone who really cares about them and wants to take the time to understand.*

“Many (if not most) Christian younger adults are basically ignorant of the Bible and what it actually teaches. So, it’s kind of irrelevant to their daily decision making. ... Lots of them seem to value the Bible, but actually know very little about it.”

**(qualitative phase comment – Christian website content/user experience manager; female)**

**+ Preaching is an enigma for young adults — they reject more traditional styles — but if you learn to preach and teach authentically, you can get a fair hearing for your message.**

Young adults do not want to be told what to believe or what to do. They reject preaching that is demanding and negative and prefer more interactive, relational communications. However, when the presenter is genuine and the message is delivered humbly, often in the context of “story,” young adults are inclined to give it a fair hearing. Where previous generations tended to respond to expertise and authority, this generation appreciates other virtues more, such as humility and authenticity.

*To reach young adults with a message, learn to preach and teach in a way their sensibilities will accept. Communicators who present with humility and genuineness will have an opportunity to influence young adults. In fact, they will be given the right to share with passion and even authority.*

**+ Media is essential and excellence is expected as you deliver your message to this generation of young adults in a way that will reach them.**

There has never been a more media-savvy generation than current young adults. As digital natives, many of them have developed instincts for consuming your messaging through media. They are the ultimate consumers, and they have limited attention for your message. You must become adept in media development and message delivery using young adult sensibilities.

*If you want to reach young adults, you must use media. If you want them to engage it, you probably need young people helping you develop it based on what they value. Unless it is excellent in the way they perceive excellence, it is likely to be quickly dismissed.*

# SHARE YOUR HEART

Effective Communication with Current Evangelical Young Adults

## I. Background: The Problem Many Legacy Organizations are Facing

### We Need Help

"We have maybe 10 more years to survive," the distinguished, gray-haired leader of a prominent international ministry said to The A Group leadership. "We need your help!"

The concern of this highly-educated and successful man was not driven by what you might expect. It was not a lack of funds, nor a shortage of enthusiastic ministry supporters. On the contrary, this ministry has had more than a half-century of success and boasts a faithful and supportive following of thousands. They have an impressive staff of professionals who know their business and who have proven it with their amazing record of changed lives. They have facilities that would be the envy of most Christian organizations. They have produced high-quality and beautifully designed

"If I want to engage a person to really share truth with him/her, I start with 'where did you grow up?' They have to know you care about them; you have to invest in them. Then you can begin to impact their lives."

**(qualitative phase comment –  
singles pastor 18-35 year-olds  
mega multi-staff church)**

materials and products that have been well received. And, perhaps most importantly, their CRM database is full of constituents and donors who love their ministry.

In spite of all these advantages and all their success, this ministry is moving toward irrelevance and eventual extinction. They have a big, big problem.

### **We Can't Reach Young Adults**

Like many other Christian ministries, once thriving churches, and perhaps especially denominations, this leader understood the problem and its potential for destroying everything he and his team have built. *"We are not having any success reaching this next generation,"* he admitted. *"We cannot seem to get through to and communicate our message effectively to young people and young adults."* He is not alone in this concern.

Like the gentleman who asked for our help, there is a desperation — to find a relevant approach, to speak to the heart, to see real change among young adults.

**"Stories are the language of the heart."**

— John Eldrige

## **II. To Reach a Solution: Primary Research to Investigate the Problem**

### **The A Group Approach — Primary Research to Understand Young Adults**

In crafting marketing, technology, and branding strategies, The A Group team begins with its years of experience and developed expertise. The next step is to scour the available research and ideas related to the problems and issues to be addressed. Often The A Group conducts primary research to

ensure that strategies are based on valid data. To address the question of ministry effectiveness among young adults (those who are by all accounts leaving their faith in large numbers), The A Group conducted a two phase research project.

### ***Primary Purpose of the Study***

The A Group conducted the project to better understand how evangelical young adults (18-35) are impacted by those who want to communicate with and influence them. This includes assessment of communication styles and contexts to understand their impact both positively and negatively. Further, the study examines the likelihood that different communications approaches will produce acceptance of the ideas communicated and if this acceptance may engender actual life change in the young adult.

### ***Secondary Purpose of the Study***

The study was also conducted to help ministries, especially legacy organizations, which have a rich history of effectiveness among evangelicals, understand how their methods of communication and influence are likely to impact young adults. Findings should provide guidance to these organizations helping them adjust their methods, communication styles, and strategies so they may continue their effectiveness to the current generation of young adults.

### ***Two Phase Study Methodology***

The qualitative phase of the research consisted of 17 in-depth interviews with influencers who regularly interact with younger adults. The targets of this phase were Evangelical (Bible-believing) church leaders, college and university instructors/influencers, and other ministry leaders.

*"I was young not too long ago, and I know the last thing you want is someone preaching to you."*

— America Ferrera

The second phase of the project was quantitative, consisting of 529 online surveys with a valid sample of Christian younger adults. The research was unsponsored and conducted using a highly-regarded online sample provider.

### ***Young Adult Evangelicals Defined***

To qualify for participation in the quantitative research, a respondent had to be in the age category (18-35) and then affirm he/she considered him/herself to be a “Christian.” Then the prospect had to respond affirmatively to the question:

*“Does the following statement describe your faith experience:  
‘I have made a decision to follow Jesus Christ and believe I will  
go to heaven because I have confessed my sins and accepted  
Him as my Savior.’?”*

All respondents who did not answer “yes” to this question were screened out of the questionnaire and disqualified for the research.

## **III. Research Findings: What Ministry Organizations Need to Know to Impact Young Adults**

Findings are taken from both phases of the research. The directional (qualitative) results were, in many cases, validated (quantified) in a national survey of young adults.

### **A. Begin with an understanding of what young adults are like generally**

These general observations, derived from the research, are characteristic of many evangelical young adults and provide a background for understanding and interpreting other research findings in this report.

**They are self-focused:** More than ever, with the moment-by-moment use of technology and the increase in choice and personalization, young adults have become very self-centered. Every aspect of life is viewed through the grid of “what’s in it for me?”

*“They are interested in the now and the moment. They are not as focused on the past. They are not interested in spending a lot of time talking about it or studying it. They are more concerned about their life, school, job, etc.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Professor and Counselor Ph.D. Non-Denominational Large Christian University)

*“This generation is all about “what do I get out of it?”*” (Qualitative Phase Comment – Singles Pastor’s Wife, Large Denominational Church)

*“They very rarely engage what is not directly related to them. If they’re not interested – they just do not engage.”*  
(Qualitative Phase Comment – Science Professor Ph.D. Non-denominational Christian college)

**They desire to be in community with others:** Young adults want to live their lives in the context of relationships in a community of people with whom they share affinity. This sense of community may be very different than the ideas of their parents. The affinity might be much different than those similarities that brought people together in previous generations.

*“Processing their faith is most often a personal experience. Personal is singular, but affected by the community around them. They make important spiritual decisions based on what their*

We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.

**(Psalm 78:4, NIV)**

*friends are doing, more than just how it impacts them personally."*

(Qualitative Phase Comment – Spiritual Formation Leader  
Non-Denominational Christian College)

**They don't like absolutes and non-negotiables:** The importance of accepting others and an unwillingness to judge others' lives, beliefs, or choices makes Christian young adults less likely to accept something as objectively true. Young adults are less willing to pass judgment on others and to place principle over individuals. It is a challenge for them to accept absolutes, even those long-held by American evangelicals.

*"Starting conversations (even "debates") helps create understanding of theirs' and others' perspectives. All of this is in the context of understanding this generation does not want to judge anyone, and they don't tend to see things in black and white."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Science Professor Ph.D.  
Non-denominational Christian college)

*"Those who stand up for their faith often believe people reject the Bible because they don't understand it. When my generation says I believe in something, it means I don't tolerate something else. They don't like this."* (Qualitative Phase Comment –  
Spiritual Formation Leader Non-Denominational Christian  
College)

*"They are not as comfortable dividing over ideas as their predecessors. They don't like dividing into 'camps' of ideas and excluding others. They especially do not like what they see as 'throwing stones' at those who disagree with you. There is a delicate balance in presenting truth to them."* (Qualitative Phase  
Comment – Christian publisher of trade books and media for  
young adults)

### They place a high value on social impact and doing good:

Young adults tend to value doing good for others, such as those with physical needs, and pursuing social justice as a way to demonstrate or even validate ones faith. This is in contrast with some older adults' expressions of their faith in more spiritual terms or more in the context of the life of the church. Young adults tend to believe that a faith that is not demonstrated by doing good deeds is not a valid faith.

*"They want to be active in their faith. They are focused so much on involvement that this new "breed" of Christian may have replaced the ideas and theology of the previous generation with experience and involvement. What faith now looks like is battling homelessness, helping battered women, fighting sex trafficking, etc."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Campus Pastor Mega Church 2,000+ mostly under 35)

*"Young adults today want a tangible faith, one that is real and lived out. They want to know that their faith (and yours) makes a real difference. See what young adults protest against or rally for and you will understand a lot about them. They hate social injustice, sex trade, poverty. See what moves them to better understand how they see and apply faith."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Missions Agency Director)

*"The worldview of young adults is very different than older Christians. Their spirituality is informed significantly by their interest in (passion for) social action. The way their spirituality "plays out" in real life is very important to many of them."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Christian publisher of trade books and media for young adults)

**"If you really live out your faith, they are willing to listen to your ideas. Being real will at least get you a hearing."**

**(qualitative phase comment – science professor Ph.D. non-denominational Christian college)**

### They tend to have complex and even inconsistent worldviews:

Young adults can be very complex and their approach to life can be very confusing for those who are trying to reach them. Many do not seem to have a consistent worldview. Some young adults who identify themselves as Christians (even “born again”) have views of the Bible and life that seem to come into conflict with this claim.

*“Young adults in church have no consistent worldview. They are so inundated from every angle, by corporate donations to humanitarian causes. They think we’re “helping,” but those companies do not put the money in a place consistent with our world view. Worldviews are merging like religions. They don’t really live it or think about it.”* (Qualitative phase comment – Young Adult Ministry Pastor, Mega Church – Speaks in YA service weekly)

*“I don’t think most of them know what it looks like to have a consistent Christian worldview. Many who call themselves Christians are realists (in their minds) but practically, they are relativists. For example, they would say “stealing is not OK,” but they order water at McDonalds and fill the water cup up with soda. They don’t live what they say they believe.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Professor and Counselor Ph.D. Non-Denominational Large Christian University)

**“They are not as comfortable dividing over ideas as their predecessors. They don’t like dividing into ‘camps’ of ideas and excluding others. There is a delicate balance in presenting truth to them.”**

**(qualitative phase comment – Christian publisher of trade books and media for young adults)**

**Their lives are media and techno-centric:** With much of their lives lived online, young adults receive more and more of their information and develop and maintain more and more of their relationships through the means of media and technology. Their technologies are ever changing and their standards and expectations are ever elevating.

*"Media is a great way to get people engaged. Say we have a sermon on serving; we have a website that allows them to respond immediately. We connect people to the opportunity to serve though Twitter and Facebook. They can see their friends getting involved and they join in. This generation is very into what their friends and involvement with others. Through social media they interact, and there is a powerful synergy created. It is all connected and you can see it all developing through the network.* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Campus Pastor Mega Church 2,000+ mostly under 35)

*"Create a way for them to stay connected after you talk with them. In this time, when people get engaged in something, they can step into it full on. When they walk away they should be able to go to a website, like it on Face Book, strong social media with videos, excellent information – ready to go before you step on stage to present your ideas."* (Qualitative phase comment – Spiritual Formation Leader Non-Denominational Christian College)

## B. Foundational Ideas and Influences - The Bible and Young Adult Evangelicals

**They are all over the place on their views about the Bible:** Even though the young adult respondents all identify themselves as having a “salvation experience” with Jesus Christ, they do not necessarily have a conservative/traditional evangelical Christian view of the Bible and its accuracy or authority.

- Just over one-half (53.5%) say they believe the Bible is inspired and fully trustworthy.

Table 1 – What young adults believe about the Bible Which of the following best describes your belief about the Bible?				
	Total*	8 - 24	Age Category 25-29	30-35
The Bible is inspired by God and is fully accurate and trustworthy on all subjects it addresses	529	289	186	186
	283	152	104	27
	53.50%	52.60%	55.90%	50.00%
The Bible is inspired by God, but not all of it should necessarily be taken literally	215	117	75	23
	40.60%	40.50%	40.30%	42.60%
The Bible is a book of ancient fables, legends, and history as recorded by man	31	20	7	4
	5.90%	6.90%	3.80%	7.40%

- Four in 10 (40.6%) young adults believe the Bible is inspired, but question whether all of it should be taken “literally.” The following are some verbatim statements from the quantitative survey when they were asked to clarify their opinions:

*“Like many of the books ever written there are exaggerations, euphemisms, and metaphors for what has happened. Plus it’s always more fun when telling a story to constructively recreate events.”*

*“I question as to whether the Old Testament was actually inspired by God, or rather just books of ancient Jewish laws and history. The New Testament, however, is something I strongly embrace.”*

*“I believe the Bible is the word of God, but that some parts have been changed and some of the truths in the Bible have been lost or tainted.”*

- A small percentage (5.9%) believe the Bible is not inspired at all.

#### **They struggle with living out biblical teachings in their daily lives:**

Those who have not developed a deep trust for the Bible as the ultimate authority for life are less likely to derive their beliefs and life choices from it. By contrast, those who have a high regard for biblical accuracy and authority are much more likely to be guided by its truths and instructions. Many of the general observations about young adults are tempered by their confidence in the Bible.

- As an example of this point, of those young adults who believe the Bible is fully trustworthy, three-fourths (76%) say that Bible reading and study is somewhat/very influential (4+5 on a 5-point scale) in shaping their beliefs and life choices. By contrast only one-half (52.60%) of those who believe in an inspired, but not literal approach to the Bible; and three in 10 (29.10%) express a strong reliance on the Bible in daily life. (Table 2)

**Table 2 – Influence of personal Bible reading and study in shaping young adult beliefs and life choices**

Thinking about your life right now, how influential is each of the following in shaping what you believe about God, the Bible, and truth and how you make life choices? Please answer using a 5 point scale where 1 is “not very influential” and 5 is “very influential.”

	<b>Belief about the Bible</b>			
	Total*	Fully accurate and trustworthy	Inspired not all taken literally	Fables, legends, & history
	529	283	215	31
<b>1</b>	24	9	10	5
<b>Not Very Influential</b>	4.50%	3.20%	4.70%	16.10%
<b>2</b>	31	8	21	2
	5.90%	2.80%	9.80%	6.50%
<b>3</b>	96	39	46	11
	18.10%	13.80%	21.40%	35.50%
<b>4</b>	117	65	49	3
	22.10%	23.00%	22.80%	9.70%
<b>5</b>	220	150	64	6
<b>Very Influential</b>	41.60%	53.00%	29.80%	19.40%
<b>N/A</b>	41	12	25	4
	7.80%	4.20%	11.60%	12.90%
<b>Net Influential (4+5)</b>		215	113	9
		76.00%	52.60%	29.10%

- This principle holds true for the influence of their senior pastor as well; 64.3% of those who believe the Bible to be fully trustworthy report that in their lives, the senior pastor is somewhat/very influential; by contrast only 39.6% of those who believe the Bible is not fully trustworthy and 25.9% of those who see it as a man-made book are influenced by this spiritual leader. (Table 2)
- Parents and family are major influences on young adult beliefs and life choices no matter their view of the Bible. Self-reliance and influence of friends are greater for those who see the Bible as less reliable. (Table 3 outlines responses that have been coded into categories from open-ended comments to the question *"Please name any specific influences or influencers who have had a major impact on what you believe and how you make life decisions!"*)

**Table 3 – Influences and influencers having a major impact on young adults beliefs and decisions**

Please name any specific influences or influencers who have had a major impact on what you believe and how you make life decisions. (Coded responses from verbatim comments – ranked by total sample)

View of the Bible	Fully accurate and trustworthy	Inspired not all taken literally	Fables, legends, & history	All Views/ Total Sample
Parents	39%	32%	25%	35%
Family (esp grandparents)	16%	25%	0%	19%
Pastor/Minister	21%	8%	8%	15%
Famous leader/Speaker	7%	7%	17%	8%
Friends	4%	8%	17%	7%
God	8%	3%	0%	5%
Devotions/Personal Study	5%	7%	0%	5%
Leaders/Teacher/Professor	5%	5%	0%	5%
Self/Life Experience	0%	7%	33%	5%
Bible	5%	3%	0%	4%
Other	7%	11%	0%	8%
Sample Sizes	95	75	12*	182

\* Caution, sample sizes are too small for valid quantitative analysis

## C. Making Connections: Communication Styles that Have a Positive Impact on Young Adults

**They are most influenced through relationship, especially one-on-one:** Over and over in the qualitative phase of the research, influencers said that Christian young adults value relationship. In some cases, they warn that no significant life change can be influenced without building trust over a period of time in the context of a relationship. The value of relationships is validated in the quantitative phase as well — young adults rate one-on-one interaction as the most effective of several approaches (see Table 4).

*"If I want to engage a person to really share truth with him/her, I start with 'where did you grow up?' They have to know you care about them, you have to invest in them. Then you can begin to impact their lives."* (Qualitative phase comment – Singles Pastor 18-35 year-olds Mega Multi-Staff Church)

*"I would have done me no good to walk in and say 'x' if I didn't know them. I spent my first year at this church building trust and building relationships. I always take them to the Scriptures, but I know I have to start with a relationship."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Singles Pastor Mega Multi-Staff Church)

*"Relationship is most critical. I have the greatest impact in the coffee shop or in my office. Even in class I try to connect with them. No matter your age, if they sense that you really care about them, they will listen to you and let you into their lives."* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Professor and Counselor Ph.D. Non-Denominational Large Christian University)

- One-on-one relationships are the most effective way to influence young adults to change what they believe or to make life commitments. This is confirmed when rating a list of choices (Table 4) and when asked to respond top-of-mind (Table 5).

**Table 4 – How young adults are influenced to make life commitments and changes**

Thinking about how you are influenced by others to make a commitment to change what you believe or how you live, how effective is each of the following for you personally? Please answer using a 5 point scale where 1 is “not very effective” and 5 is “very effective.” (Ranked by mean scores)

	Not Very Effective	1	2	3	4	5	Not Very Effective	Mean	Confidence Interval
	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	95%		
One-on-one conversation	24	36	157	170	142	<b>3.70</b>	[3.61 - 3.79]		
	5%	7%	30%	32%	27%				
Someone’s story/testimony	21	48	172	160	128	<b>3.62</b>	[3.53 - 3.71]		
	4%	9%	33%	30%	24%				
Sermons/preaching	30	58	167	147	127	<b>3.53</b>	[3.44 - 3.63]		
	6%	11%	32%	28%	24%				
Individual study of writings/materials/online resources	35	55	184	139	116	<b>3.47</b>	[3.37 - 3.56]		
	7%	10%	35%	26%	22%				
Lecture/teaching	32	56	193	153	95	<b>3.42</b>	[3.33 - 3.51]		
	6%	11%	36%	29%	18%				
Group discussion/interaction	42	55	188	144	100	<b>3.39</b>	[3.29 - 3.48]		
	8%	10%	36%	27%	19%				

**Table 5 – Communication styles and methods that impact young adults most**

What communication styles or methods do you think have the most impact on younger adults like you in impacting their beliefs and the way they live their lives and why do you believe this? (Coded responses from verbatim comments)		
	Total Response	Total Answer*
One-on-one/Relationship/Friendship	27%	34%
Social Media/Internet/Technology	11%	13%
Personal Story/testimony	10%	13%
Group/Small Group Discussion	9%	11%
Pastor/Sermons/Teaching	5%	6%
Mentor/Consistent Role Model	3%	4%
Bible Study/Reading	3%	4%
Church/Community	3%	3%
Music/Worship	3%	3%
Youth Group/Youth Pastor	2%	3%
Personal Experience/Real Life	2%	3%
Parents/Family	2%	2%
Prayer	2%	2%
Application/Relevant/Interesting	2%	2%
TV/Media	2%	2%
Activities/Involvement	1%	2%
Teaching/Lecture	1%	1%
Other	9%	11%
Don't Know	16%	20%
Nothing/None	3%	4%
Sample Size	497	401

\* Excludes “Don’t Know” and “Nothing/None” – recalculated based only on those who had an answer/opinion

“Nothing is more important in the process of reaching out to young adults than a sense of relationship.”

**They value “conversation,” and are impacted by “story:”** In the communities young adults share, there is typically an ongoing “conversation” about life and the issues that matter to them. This conversation is in the context of relationships and is shared through the “story” they are living out together. The idea of story is that the message fits into the life of the messenger in a significant way and has shaped the story of her life. This approach gives the message a validity that appeals to the young adult.

*“My generation is extremely story-oriented. They look for it as reality and truth. Thinking of it as a story makes it more real. The last thing we want to hear is that the deepest roots of our faith are in a book of rules to follow. When they see it as a story of love, they are much less ashamed. It gives them courage.”*

(Qualitative phase comment – Spiritual Formation Leader Non-Denominational Christian College)

*“Go back to story always to change the heart and mind of a young person.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Campus pastor mega church 2,000+ mostly under 35)

*“They process better through narrative than proposition. The story of my life and theirs is most important. ‘How does faith look in tennis shoes?’ In real life, not in theory.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Professor and Counselor Ph.D. Non-Denominational Large Christian University)

**They respond to genuineness and humility; they want to know your story:** Young adults quickly assess those who want to influence them and determine whether or not they are genuine. Genuineness and humility appeal to the young adult more than knowledge, authority, or forcefulness. Preaching (seen as a

negative style when it is forceful or demanding) can be very impactful with young adults if it is delivered with genuineness and humility. Young adults want to see the values lived out in the life of the presenter before they are ready to listen. They are asking of those teaching them “Does it work for you?” (“Show me your life;” “Tell me your story”)

*“You have to be yourself. The senior pastor spoke to my group recently. None of them wear ties. He wore his tie, but he spoke from his heart and they listened to what he had to say. Don’t try to be them, just be yourself.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Mega Church Young Adult Minister; speaks weekly to young adults)

*“When you get up to talk to them, one of their first questions is ‘How does it play out in real life?’ They want to know it is tangible and can play out in a real life scenario. Realize they are assessing you so quickly to see if what you’re saying is legit. They want to know if it’s real to you – if you’re real.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Missions Agency Director)

*“This is not a PowerPoint generation anymore. The most effective way to speak to young adults is to speak from your heart. You must present the issue openly and share passionately with them.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Singles Pastor Mega Multi-Staff Church)

**Asking questions and discussing alternatives is an effective ways to engage them in group/teaching environments:** Using the Socratic approach of asking questions and listening to the young adult creates conversation and builds relationship. This is an effective way to draw people in and to create a context in which information can be shared with impact. Presentation

of alternatives — rather than telling young adults which option out of many is the “right” or even the “biblical” one — and allowing for conversation and input builds the relationship and creates a context for impactful sharing.

*“They are very open to new ideas and they will constantly ask why they should believe what you say. The presenter cannot be insecure. You must be willing to let them question your ideas. Be willing to let an idea percolate along with them. They are going to continue to push and ask, ‘Where are the boundaries?’”*  
(Qualitative Phase Comment – Missions Agency Director)

*“I definitely prefer the Socratic Method. I find this is the most effective way to engage them and to get them to think through. I pose questions and start conversations – including postulating scenarios. This seems so much more effective than lecturing them.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Science Professor Ph.D. Non-denominational Christian college)

*“It is really helpful to give young adults opposing views. Reasoning helps a lot. We want to ‘walk around’ the issue, chew on it. We want to form our own opinion and not have it shoved down our throat. Then, you just hope and pray the Holy Spirit uses it to change them.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – 20-Something Ministry Blogger)

## D. Communication Styles that Have a Negative Impact

Hypocrisy is the ultimate communication-killer for them. Unless they believe you are real and genuine, you are unlikely to really influence them: If young adults perceive even a hint

of disingenuousness, they are likely to see every proposition presented as the empty words of a person whose life is not consistent with his message. This rejection of hypocrisy extends to pretense and trying too hard to be like the young adult. If the person is not being “himself” or does not live out the message he is presenting, he will not be heard.

*“What not to do – don’t try to be them (work out a lot, wear their clothes, talk like them. This is a no-no because it says I am desperate. They assess you very quickly. Tell your story. Be yourself.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Spiritual Formation Leader Non-Denominational Christian College)

*“This generation is good at seeing hypocrites. If you really live out your faith, they are willing to listen to your ideas. Being real will at least get you a hearing.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Science Professor Ph.D. Non-denominational Christian college)

*“Lots of times I will take people’s defenses down from the start. I talk about my own struggles and make it clear that I know I don’t have all the answers. Sometime I’ll even apologize for the way Christians have dealt with some ideas and subjects in the past.”* (Qualitative Phase Comment – Campus pastor mega church 2,000+ mostly under 35)

**They do not respond well to lecturing, forceful preaching, or to being told what they must believe:** More than any other communication style or method, young adults say they are least impacted by those styles that involve a one-sided, forceful approach. The idea of being told what to believe or do, even from those who are well educated or in authority is seen as not very impactful (Table 6)

**Table 6 - Communication styles and methods that impact young adults least**

**What communication styles or methods do you think have the least impact on younger adults like you in impacting their beliefs and the way they live their lives and why do you believe this? (Coded responses from verbatim comments)**

	Total Response	Total Answer*
Preaching/Sermons (esp. Yelling/Old Style)	17%	24%
Lectures/Talking	17%	24%
Forcing/Telling What to Believe/Think/Do	8%	11%
Individual Study and Reading	6%	9%
Non-Interactive/Non-Social/Non-personal	5%	7%
Online/Blogs	4%	5%
Not Applied/Irrelevant to Hearer	2%	3%
Christian TV/TV Preachers/Personalities	2%	3%
Parents	2%	2%
Not Genuine/Not Lived Out	1%	2%
Other	16%	23%
Don't Know	24%	35%
Nothing/None	6%	8%
Sample Size	498	347

\* Excludes “Don’t Know” and “Nothing/None” – recalculated based only on those who had an answer/opinion

**Forceful, sometimes negative, demanding preaching — perhaps successful with past generations — is not very effective with them:** Preaching generally is an enigma in the research because it is seen as having a significant influence on the belief-shaping of many young adults (Tables 4 and 5). However, it is cited as a strongly negative communication style (Table 6). Looking further it becomes clear the issue is the type of preaching. Negative, forceful, demanding preaching is a very off-putting and less impactful style with current young adults. However, as explained in other study findings, genuine and humble preaching can be effective.

*"Always approach them in humility, not in a 'this is the way it is' mentality. This is a big difference between this generation and previous, they wanted Charles Stanley to say 'this is what the Bible says, now do it!'" (Qualitative Phase Comment – Campus pastor mega church 2,000+ mostly under 35)*

**Overbearing instruction, no matter how it is delivered — whether through parenting, preaching, teaching, or friendship — is an overwhelmingly negative communication approach them:** Young adults are put off by an authoritative, non-interactive style that does not engage them in a more relational and (what they perceive as) caring way. (Table 6)

*"Don't try to win the argument and be dogmatic. You may win the argument, but not the person. Caring about them is much more critical than winning the argument." (Qualitative Phase Comment – Professor and Counselor Ph.D. Non-Denominational Large Christian University)*

## **E. Defined and Perceived Inter-Generational Challenges**

**They do not share an appreciation for the authority-based communication styles so appreciated by Builders and**

**Boomers:** Much of the current communication aimed at inducing life change in young adults, in personal interaction (mentoring, discipleship, etc.), the classroom, and from the pulpit is ineffective. Young adults are not responding as their parents did to the teaching and preaching that is still common. "Knowing your stuff," being well educated, or having a position of authority is not enough with this generation of young adults.

**Older Christians (parents, leaders, pastors) tend to express their faith differently than current young adults:**

Older Christians can tend to focus on a more “spiritual” approach to faith expression that includes church attendance/involvement, Bible study, and other practices. Young adults can see these as rituals. Young adults often focus their faith on more outward, practical demonstrations such as meeting human needs and working for social justice. These differences have created negative assumptions (on the part of both groups) about each others’ genuineness and spirituality.

#### **IV. Applying Research Findings: Becoming Effective With Young Adult Evangelicals**

The A Group’s approach extends well beyond the kind of investigation presented in this report. For more than a decade, we have worked with our clients to turn intelligence like this into strategic solutions.

# ACTION STEPS

What you can do today to improve the way you communicate with the next generation.

## 1. Start with the basics.

When [Trevecca Nazarene University](#), an unapologetically Christian college in Nashville, Tenn., engaged the The A Group as a partner for an aggressive admissions campaign, the team started with the basics: in-depth research, surveying perceptions of the university among the public, current students and potential students. Around that research, The A Group and Trevecca teams worked together to develop the **We Teach That** campaign, focusing not just on the university's academic offerings, but on the long-term impact a quality Christian education had on students' lives. Using messages such as "You are part of a bigger story.", "You can make a difference." and "Make the most of every opportunity," Trevecca's admissions campaign reached prospective students with big picture ideas about their futures, purposes and places in the world before talking to students about Trevecca's specific offerings. These messages were distributed using traditional advertising as well as on social media-focused sites that The A Group created, reaching students in the communities where they live, learn and interact.

"If we really want to help someone grow, we will have to help them in a way that fits their wiring. Our great model for this is God himself, for he always knows just what each person needs."

— John Ortberg  
(as quoted in *You Lost Me*)

"If you want happiness for a lifetime, help the next generation."

— Chinese Proverb

## 2. Do everything you can to build relationships with the young adults you want to reach.

Building relationships with one child at a time is how [Metro World Child](#) grew from a neighborhood Sunday School program in Brooklyn, New York to an international organization reaching more than 100,000 children around the world each week. Founded more than three decades ago, though, Metro's brand did not reflect the way the ministry was growing. And while Metro was living an incredible story in the heart of some of the world's most dangerous places, this story was not being told in a way that reached new audiences and in turn new supporters.

In conjunction with the Metro team, The A Group recommended a rebrand of the organization, changing both the name and the look to position Metro as a leading global inner-city children's ministry. After selecting the name Metro World Child, the team began a nine-month process of brand development, creating a new web presence, writing and designing new collateral and developing a communications strategy to first announce and explain the name change to Metro's loyal supporter base and then help the ministry reach new audiences and grow its donor base, both today and in the future.

## 3. Be yourself. Be humble. Be authentic. Be transparent.

An unwavering focus on building genuine connections with young adults is just how [Student Leadership University](#) encourages the next generation of Christ-centered leaders. SLU engages youth through both weekend conferences and week-long, destination-based, cumulative youth training programs. SLU engaged The A Group as its strategic marketing

partner to build awareness and attendance for both Leadership Rocks weekend events and SLU events during the summer. In conjunction with the SLU team, The A Group developed a messaging and engagement strategy to both simplify and streamline communications about the SLU offering as well as raise awareness among new audiences and move existing audiences from awareness to participation by registering for an event.

#### **4. Meet them where they are—in the digital world.**

David Platt and the rest of the leadership team at [The Church at Brook Hills](#) understand that before people come through their doors, they gather information from the web and social media conversations. David's vision for discipleship is a global vision, and together with The A Group, a website was developed that includes more than 400 pages of information yet is organized in a way that does not overwhelm. The site design reflects the mission and message of Brook Hills, and an expansive media section aggregates teaching series, including small group studies, downloads and a branded and a shareable media player. Becoming a flagship website, many other churches reference The Church at Brook Hills website when seeking inspiration for their own site designs.

#### **5. Get outside perspective**

TWR is a worldwide ministry, reaching millions of people in more than 160 countries and 200 languages and dialects for Jesus Christ. With a global presence and content that is distributed in multiple languages, TWR needed cutting-edge technology to effectively accomplish its mission and reach people around the world.

Though TWR is a large organization with an internal IT team, it recognized it needed an outside perspective to stay on top of technology trends and create custom and unique solutions for the constantly growing ministry. TWR engaged The A Group as its long-term technology partner, together creating multi-lingual platforms, media databases and content-driven websites. Because of The A Group's focus and expertise in both the technology and ministry space, the partnership has given TWR access to the most current ministry software built specifically for their technology needs.

TWR's initial desire for an outside perspective is a great example of the way in which The A Group often develops long term collaborations to help ministries more effectively carry out their missions.

# ABOUT THE A GROUP

The A Group is a full-service marketing and technology firm focused on helping ministries, churches, nonprofits, and Christian resource organizations tell their stories and build their influence.

We are a strategic solutions company. Our vision is to offer our clients creative and effective solutions to their branding, technology and communications needs. We work hard to understand their challenges and opportunities and navigate the marketplace, which has been radically transformed by new technologies.

# SERVICES

## Marketing

- Strategic planning & brand development
- Market research
- Full-service marketing campaigns
- Graphic design
- Social media management
- Video production

## Technology

- Custom web solutions
- Easy-to-use content management system
- Multi-lingual platform
- Mobile app development
- Secure enterprise cloud hosting

# OUR MISSION

We are here:

- To provide strategic and effective solutions for our clients.
- To serve them in the areas of implementation through innovative tools and technology.
- To partner with clients through the entire process, ensuring that all elements line up with the strategy and desired results.

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## FOLLOW US:



# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The degree to which young adults are “leaving Christianity” is debated; however, there are many sources documenting this trend. Cited here are only a few:

- You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith (2011, Baker Books, Grand Rapids), David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins. The authors of this book cite extensive research findings that document the reasons young adults discontinue their church attendance and participation.
- The report, A Generation in Transition: Values and Politics Among College Age Millennials, based on a 2012 study conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University. A key finding is that “Younger Millennials report significant levels of movement from the religious affiliation of their childhood, mostly toward identifying as religiously unaffiliated.”
- The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church (2009, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco). Author Reggie McNeal finds that 90% of youth active in high school church programs drop out of church by the time they are sophomores in college.
- Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults are Leaving the Faith...And How to Bring Them Back (2010, Moody Publishers, Chicago). Author Drew Dyck analyzes the reasons adults leave by describing categories such as “Postmodern Leavers,” “Modern Leavers,” “Neo-Pagans,” “Rebels,” and others.

### ***Study Methodology***

The qualitative phase of the research consisted of 17 in-depth interviews with evangelical (Bible-believing) church leaders, college and university instructors/influencers, and other ministry leaders who regularly interact with younger adults.

The second phase of the project was quantitative, consisting of 529 online surveys with a valid sample of Christian younger adults. The research was unsponsored and conducted using a highly-regarded online sample provider.

To qualify for participation in the quantitative research, a respondent had to be in the age category (18-35) and then to affirm he/she considered himself/herself to be a “Christian.” Then the prospect had to respond affirmatively to the question:

*“Does the following statement describe your faith experience: ‘I have made a decision to follow Jesus Christ and believe I will go to heaven because I have confessed my sins and accepted Him as my Savior.’?”*

All respondents who did not answer “yes” to this question were screened out of the questionnaire and disqualified for the research.