

Will you love me?



Building relationships has always been the core of any successful ministry. In the Old Testament, God spoke 'in partial and varied ways through the prophets.'¹ But in the New Testament, the Word became flesh and said to His apostles, 'I have called you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.'² The Apostles were not just slaves or servants to Jesus, but friends. It is through friendship that Jesus passed the faith to His followers.

And it is through friendship that the faith is passed on today. I decided to look up 'friend' in Webster's dictionary and I found two interesting definitions:

1. One attached to another by affection or esteem.
2. One that is of the same nation, party or group.

I propose that the friendships we build with teenagers today be more about the first definition than the second.

Do the teens in our churches and youth groups feel that our affection for them is based on who they are or do they think it is predicated on their acceptance of our beliefs? Though in theory we might say the former, many of our practices suggest the latter.

Avoiding manipulation

Young people today, who have grown up as major targets of advertisement and marketing campaigns, are hypersensitive to relational manipulation. And surveys tell us that due to the breakdown of the family and the fracturing of youth culture, teenagers have an even more heightened need for *belonging* than previous generations did. Frank Mercandante, in his excellent book, *Engaging a New Generation*, commented on this generational shift:

'For years, relational youth ministry was built on the mantra "earn the right to be heard." Once we demonstrated interest in young peoples' lives by being relationally present, and built a sense of trust, they would become open to the gospel message. This approach worked with Boomer and Gen X teens, as they inquired, "Will you accept me for who I am?" However, a nuance in Millennial Generation teens' query is a complete game-changer. They ask, "Will you accept me for who I am not?" In other words, does the relationship stand on its own or does it exist for a hidden motive? Today's teens are suspicious and put off by relationships with an agenda. They hunger for relationships for relationship sake.'

Later on in the book, he comments that today's teenagers, 'are not looking for something to believe in as much as a community in which to belong.'³

Belonging

Last November, during the 're:Build Online Catholic Youth Ministry Conference,' Mark Oestreicher, former president of Youth Specialties, spoke of the importance of *belonging* for today's young people:

*'There is a super-heightened need for belonging within teenagers today... How can we as youth workers create ministries that offer unconditional belonging whether or not those teenagers ever choose to agree with our beliefs? This is a challenge. We've always said, "Believe like us and then behave like us and then you can have belonging." And these days our youth ministries need to invert that and we need to say, "We want to offer you real, genuine, authentic belonging. And we know that in the midst of that you might be willing to try on our behaviors... and in the context of that you might choose to believe.'"*⁴

When St. John Bosco famously said, 'Love, and they will follow you anywhere,' he wasn't talking about relational manipulation. He was speaking the truth. Teenagers, then and now, desire true friendships and respond to real love.

The challenge we have to wrestle with is how to let a young person know that they are loved even if they reject what we teach. How do we respond to a teen in our midst who doesn't believe that God exists or engages in behaviors that are contrary to Church teaching? Do they still feel welcome?

How do we strike the balance of loving them where they are, but loving them too much to let them stay there?

One thing is sure: postmodern teenagers *feel* more than they *think*. The previous generation of youth could accept a rational explanation of the Gospel message as the entry point into the community of faith. Today's youth seem to need to first feel that they belong before they will be willing to open their minds to the truth. 📖

Notes

1. Heb 1:1.
2. Jn 15:15.
3. Frank Mercandante, *Engaging a New Generation*, Our Sunday Visitor Press. Quotes were taken from an advance copy of the book.
4. His talk is available online at <http://www.rebuildmychurch.org/?p=88>.

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