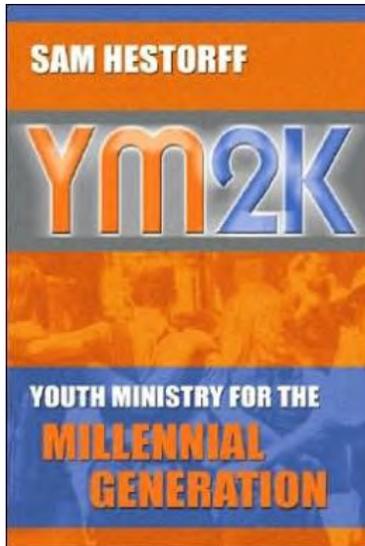


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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YM2K: Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation

INTRODUCTION

The Millennial Generation refers to those born roughly between 1982 and 2000. The media portrays them as a lost generation; religious speakers often refer to them as the source of the next revival. In spite of these differences in opinion, some common trends are emerging from this subculture. Often, modern church programs and postmodern needs have collided. Youth are often left alone in their culture to search for their identity. The task of millennial youth ministry is to enter their world. The goal of this book will be to identify some of these generational trends and explain how they affect youth ministry. The intent is not to label a generation, but to help youth leaders understand the culture in which they live and minister.

CHAPTER 1: ALL ALONE

Of all the issues that teens face, loneliness tops the list. Many youth feel increasingly alone and alienated, as if they are left to negotiate the journey through adolescence on their own. Yet, our students have more and are busier than any time in history. Our culture equates being busy with being happy. They have lots to do, but still often feel that no one is there for them. Today's youth spend more time on their own than any other generation. A sense of alienation and abandonment is a persistent struggle. Two sources of this abandonment can be identified: parental and institutional.

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Warning Before You Read On

The following sections are not meant to offend, but to educate. Teens describe their experience as lonely. Perhaps we can lower our defenses and realize that we have, at times, contributed to this loneliness.

Parental Abandonment

Many teens simply want to know, “Will you be there for me?” Many parents simply have not been. The emergence of after-school programming has resulted in surrogate parenting for many. As parents have become busier, children are often left at home with nothing to do. Students who grow up alone are left without the security, protection, limits, and values of earlier generations. Attendance at our kids’ events or driving teens to their various activities does not replace the nurturing and boundaries that adolescents need.

The family is meant to be a place of support and guidance where teens can discover their identity on their way to becoming adults. In times past preference was given to the well-being of children while parents made sacrifices. In postmodern society, preference is often given to the well-being of adults, while the young are expected to sacrifice. Parental agenda has taken predominance over youthful needs.

Youth ministry has contributed to the sense of parental abandonment. We’ve allowed parents to simply drop their youth off at youth group with the assurance that we will make them spiritually mature. Parents must relearn the art of setting boundaries for their children, which might require setting boundaries for themselves by clearing their schedules. Families must learn to be together rather than filling time with structured activities.

Institutional Abandonment

High schools were originally intended to help teens transition into adulthood by imparting the necessary academic and social skills. Teachers served as mentors. With the onset of “standardized testing,” everything that is done is aimed at getting students to pass a test. Busy and overburdened teachers can rarely serve as mentors. Students have simply become the way a school gets funding to continue a system that has subtly abandoned them. Organizations that once served the developmental needs of youth are now more concerned with perpetuating themselves. Institutions that were designed to ease the transition into adulthood now often contribute to the sense of alienation and abandonment.

Youth Ministry Abandonment

The youth ministry profession has been just as guilty for abandoning students. When attendance numbers are the mark of a successful ministry, and when programs take precedence over relationships, we communicate “you’re only valuable when you attend our events.” In addition, the short tenure of the average youth pastor ensures that teens will see two, if not three ministers during their school career. The goal of making sure every student is known, loved, and cared for is greater than any large event we could ever pull off. Until we give students this individual attention, they will continue to feel abandoned.

CHAPTER 2: TOO BUSY

Because of the abundance of opportunities, and the pressure to “be involved,” today’s youth are busier than ever. Parents shuttle their kids to practices, to rehearsals, to games, to church, and then back to school. Often, the belief is the more involved a young person is, the more successful they will be in a competitive world. In an effort to “keep up with the Jones,” parents are exhausting themselves and their kids with activities. Also, the media suggests that it’s the students who have nothing to do that are causing all the problems. This has communicated to millennials that it’s not who you are that matters, but rather what you do.

Extracurricular activities used to be for fun. Now they are a means to get ahead. Rest, “down time”, and creativity have been sacrificed to help children “succeed.” A study by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan found that between 1981 and 1987:

- Students had lost 12 hours of free time per week.
- There was a marked decrease in family and religious participation.
- Family conversations decreased by 100%.
- Family meal time had decreased by 33%.
- Weekly religious participation by students decreased 24%.
- Time devoted each week to structured sports had doubled.
- Time devoted to studying had increased 50%.

Teens spend an average of twelve hours a day at school and after-school activities. Those with jobs add another 10-20 hours a week. Homework can add another two to three hours in the evening. Students are often on the move from 6:00am until well after midnight. There is simply too much to do, especially for developing adolescents whose bodies are in need of rest. To survive their over-scheduling, teens have had to learn how to multitask. It’s not unusual for a young person to watch TV, while listening to music and playing a video game, all while texting a friend and trying to do homework. Multitasking has not only become necessary for survival, it’s accepted as normal. In the face of this phenomenon, youth leaders often say, “Turn off your cell phones and stop the side conversations so you can pay attention to the message.” Is it possible that young people have lost the ability to focus on a single thing?

Youth Ministry in a Busy World

If we’re honest with ourselves, most youth ministries are contributing to this busy-ness. Students are often asked to commit another 10 hours a week for church activities. Most of us have experienced the wild ups and downs in weekly attendance as we compete with other activities in students’ lives. In order to “keep up” we create bigger and better programs in hopes it will attract more kids, or at least keep the ones we have. But the fact remains—when a student misses a practice, they may not play in the game; if they don’t do their homework, they may not pass. There’s rarely a consequence for missing a youth group activity, so we find ourselves on the bottom of many student’s list of priorities.

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Youth Ministry Response

We can't compete with the world, nor should that be our goal. Rather, we should seek to engage the world and transform it from the inside. Begin by asking:

- How many hours are we expecting from our over-busy students?
- Are we concerned with numbers or changing lives?
- How can we best use the limited time we have with students?
- Does ministry only happen through our programs and in the church building?

The primary principle for ministry to postmoderns is “intentionality.” Be intentional with the limited time you have with students. Less may be more. Strive for quality over quantity. Create authentic community in a safe environment that lets students know that the ministry related demand on their time will be unique and worth it.

CHAPTER 3: DISCONNECTED AND STRESSED OUT

The lives of postmodern teens are often splintered from hectic schedules and lack of adult support. They put forth separate identities—one for school, one for family, one for their friends, and one for church. A Christian teen may lead a Bible study on morality on Wednesday, and then sleep with her boyfriend on Thursday, without seeing any contradiction at all. Without adult guidance to help integrate the various aspects of identity, teens become confused and stressed. For the first time in history, young people are dealing with stress-related illnesses. Adolescent depression is commonplace. It's all too easy to prescribe medicine to deal with these conditions rather than deal with the sources of stress.

Sources of Stress

Some stresses come from within the adolescent; other sources are external. Stress in itself is not inherently bad. It's only negative in excessive amounts, or when we are not equipped to respond to it healthily. With youthful over-scheduling, teens often do not have time to process stress properly. In addition, they often lack healthy adult models of responding to stress. Teens are overstressed and unable to handle it.

Biological Stress

Adolescent bodies are undergoing rapid changes. This leads to an unprecedented self-awareness that has them comparing themselves to others as well as the unrealistic images in magazines and on TV. Realizing that they do not measure up results in a pressure to be perfect and often overwhelming stress. In response to the body's physical changes, one of a teen's greatest needs is sleep. But increased school demands, after-school activities, and hectic schedules result in a state of sleep deprivation for far too many.

Family Stress

Over half of all teens report their relationship with their parents as their biggest stressor. Family

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fighting and ongoing conflict produce fear and anxiety in many youth. Rarely will teens share what is bothering them in this realm. Often they feel that they are the cause of the family problems. Identity formation occurs in the family context. Without the necessary support and guidance, confusion and stress are the results.

School Stress

Youth feel the pressure to excel in school. Everyone is vying for a place in college and the competition can be intense. In addition, young people are expected to pass high-stakes standardized tests in order to advance and ultimately graduate. Homework amounts have increased dramatically over the last decade. Combined, these factors have done little but add additional stress to adolescent lives.

Peer Stress

Peer relationships are a major source of stress for modern students. The pressure to fit in, to find social acceptance can be overwhelming. Failure to do so can result in isolation, low self-esteem, and unmanageable stress. This emotional distress of adolescence often leads to an emotionally disturbed adulthood.

Societal Stress

The media depicts a world full of war, poverty, global warming, and a struggling economy. Youth realize that this is the world that they will inherit. They can get genuinely upset over the inequality, injustice, and cruelty that TV confronts them with. In addition, young people often feel that society expects them to be perfect. Whether it's in the classroom or on an athletic field, teens are left with a perpetual sense of "never being good enough." This expectation to perform, even while the world is falling apart, leaves youth with an inordinate amount of stress.

How Students Handle Stress

According to a national poll:

- 52% do something active
- 44% listen to music
- 42% watch TV or play a video game
- 30% talk to a friend
- 26% eat something
- 23% lose their temper
- 22% talk to a parent
- 11% cry

An additional 25% claim that when they are stressed, they take it out on themselves. Destructive behaviors such as drug use, sexual expression, or "cutting" have become common means of dealing with stress. Teenage depression is seeing a meteoric rise. Feelings of hopelessness, worry, and worthlessness abound. These feelings regularly build up until they explode in suicide attempts. Our culture needs to find ways of creatively removing stressors from young lives while also equipping them with healthy coping skills.

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Youth Ministry Response

Be Alert and Be Present

Many youth have learned to conceal their true feelings, thinking that no one cares for them. Realize this and be alert to students' feelings. When a young person seems upset, express concern and ask sensitive questions that help them give words to their feelings.

Model Healthy Coping Skills

How do you handle your own stress? Most young people have not seen healthy models of responding to stress. One of the most helpful things we can do is provide a calm, healthy example of responding to stressful situations in our own lives.

Let Them Play and Be Creative

Because so much of their lives involve structured, stressful activities, young people have lost time for play and creativity. Many activities that were once "playful" have become competitive. Provide unstructured time for your youth to relax and be creative. A pile of Lego's or some Play Doh might be just the thing they need to unwind before a meeting.

Let Them Sleep

Whoever said that teens have to be up at 7:00am while at the youth retreat? That just makes for a tired and cranky weekend experience. Their tired and stressed bodies probably require sleep more than anything else. Let them have it.

Educate Parents

Parents are equally responsible for allowing their kids to over schedule their lives. Help them set boundaries for their young people. Teach them to say "no." Have parent trainings that help them develop their own coping skills that they can model for their kids.

Final Thought

Students don't need more activities to add to their stressful lives. They simply need adults to be present. Focus on developing authentic relationships with youth, mentoring them as they journey toward adulthood.

CHAPTER 4: CLUSTERS

In generations past, the main goal of high school was "fitting in," and the main rule to accomplish this was conformity. Students sought to comply with a certain way of dressing and talking to find acceptance among their peers. Cliques formed around common interests. In such a setting, the goal of successful youth ministry was simply to attract the most popular kids; the others would naturally follow. However, to millennial students, this social dynamic no longer applies. They aren't interested in fitting in or conforming to a standardized look. They aren't attracted by getting the "popular" kids involved. Today, they are simply interested in finding a safe place to belong. This security is found in a small group of peers called a "cluster."

Why Clusters?

In a society where both adults and institutions have gradually pushed them away, teens have had little choice but to seek intimacy among their peers. These peer groups take on the characteristics of surrogate families, even providing rules and values for its members. At one time high schools were simply comprised of the “in crowd” and everyone else. Now, the youth subculture has splintered into a diverse array of clusters, each providing acceptance, companionship, and protection.

Characteristics

Clusters typically range between five and eight students, and tend to be gender specific. However, a cluster will often align itself with an opposite-sex cluster and spend a great deal of time together. This has led to the phenomenon of “group dating.” Loyalty to the group is the highest value, and such rules and values guide every decision made by individuals within the cluster group. The emergence of online communities has allowed youth to continue these relationships past high school, often delaying the progression out of mid-adolescence.

How They Form

Peer clustering begins as teens seek friends who are similar to themselves, not similarity of interests as in times past, but similar self-concept—a defined sense of who he or she is. Because of this dynamic, labels such as jocks, nerds, band geeks, goths, or cheerleaders, often no longer apply, as any cluster can contain any or all of these members. Remember, cluster groups form around self-identity, not common interests.

Identifying Cluster Groups

Theorists suggest three types of family groupings based on emotional closeness:

1. *Enmeshed*: members lack a sense of separate identity; dependent on group for identity.
2. *Disengaged*: low level of closeness; members don't contribute healthily to each other.
3. *Differentiated*: appropriate closeness. Members share involvement that is supportive.

Students will generally choose cluster groups based on the desired or perceived degree of emotional closeness. On a sliding scale of 1-10, they will rarely choose to associate with a group that is more than one level away from their own perceived attachment level.

How Clusters Affect Youth Ministry

First and foremost, clusters affect attendance. Students who list members of the youth group as their closest friends are much more likely to be committed, active members of the group. Conversely, students who don't quickly fit in are more apt to describe the group as “cliqueish” and either stop attending or go elsewhere. Secondly, since youth tend to adopt the beliefs and values of their cluster, it can make passing on biblical truth a challenge. They tend to pick and choose what they believe, dependent on what their group believes. They generally are only able to process theology in the context of their cluster because their desire for God is rarely distinguished from their desire for one another.

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Youth Ministry Response to Clusters

Listen

We must see ourselves as missionaries, go to where millennial students are at, and listen. We must learn what their lives are like and what matters to them. We can discover which cluster they belong to and what the values and rules of their group are. Then we will be more equipped to bring the gospel into their world.

Build Trust

Millennials are looking for authenticity. Authenticity leads to trust. This means being honest about our struggles and showing how we can turn to God in the midst of sin.

Engage with Small Groups

No one can build trust and authentically engage with more than a handful of students at a time. We must therefore invest in building up a team of adult leaders who in turn invest their lives in the lives of young people. This may be threatening at first as we empower others and no longer know every student personally, but the needs of this generation demand it.

What Do Small Groups Look Like?

Traditionally, small groups are formed based on set standards: common interests, age, topic, gender. “Forced community” such as this will not work with the millennial generation. Small groups must be built upon their existing cluster groups to be successful. Simple questions like, “Who sits at your lunch table?” are simple ways of discovering these groups. When small groups are formed around clusters, students are much more likely to invite friends. Each group will undoubtedly have a different look, feel, and direction, based on the needs of the group. One group may meet at a coffee house to talk; another may want to dive deeply into Scripture.

CHAPTER 5: WHEN DOES IT END?

“Becoming an adult” has become a very ambiguous process. Adolescence both starts earlier and lasts longer than in previous generations. There are no longer clear-cut rites of passage that mark the onset of adulthood. Millennials are suspended in adolescence for an undetermined amount of time, waiting for culture to recognize them as adults. But many postmoderns are in no hurry to become adults. Why would they want to become what they perceive as the source of their pain, to inherit a world they see as falling apart?

It’s been said that adolescence “begins in biology and ends in culture.” Puberty has been the most widely accepted onset of adolescence. Over the past 200 years the age of puberty has decreased from roughly 14 to around 12. Society used to call one an adult when they married and/or went to work, around the age of 16/18. Now, none of the usual markers (college, religious confirmation, work, or even marriage) signal a definite end to adolescence. Entrance to adulthood has been delayed by society until the mid to late 20’s. Adolescence has gone from a two-year, clearly marked event to a fifteen year, nebulous process.

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Youth Ministry Response

If students graduate from our youth ministries without a safe place to continue their spiritual journey, they're likely to drop out of church altogether. We can't just dump them in an adult Sunday school class. We must help them find their place in the body of Christ, and help the church to embrace them. This can be accomplished in part by understanding the three stages of adolescence.

Early Adolescence: Ages 10-14

They are going through puberty. The many changes often result in confusion, awkwardness, a need to fit in, and a need for security. They're still open to getting that security from parents. They think concretely rather than abstractly. Introduce this age group to the idea of the body of Christ and give them opportunities to serve.

Middle Adolescence: Ages 14-17

This is a time of increasing independence, where friends play a far more significant role. They should also be given opportunities to serve, but alongside their peers.

Late Adolescence: Age 17 to Twenty-something

Because of educational goals or societal factors, their entrance into adulthood has been delayed. They need adult mentoring and careful theological reflection. Expect full responsibility for how they respond to God and serve in the body of Christ.

Warning

If adolescence now extends into the mid to late 20's, many entering youth ministry may still be adolescents. It is crucial that young ministers act like adults, rather than attempting to relive their teen years through youth ministry.

CHAPTER 6: YOUR TRUTH MAY NOT BE MY TRUTH

Young people no longer believe simply because you said so. The Gospel is seen as *a truth* among many truths. Truth is seen as relative and generally decided upon by the group in which they live. This has resulted in more than just a tolerance for other viewpoints; said diversity is affirmed and celebrated. It's not that young people aren't asking spiritual questions. They are. But they're also rejecting organized religion and institutional church in favor of nontraditional paths of finding spiritual meaning. The internet and media have allowed them to encounter many belief systems at the touch of a button. Millennials are picking and choosing their beliefs from a variety of options and putting them together in a way that makes them feel good. This has resulted in a predominant belief system that researcher Christian Smith calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism":

- A God exists who created the world and watches over people.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair.
- The goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- God is not really involved in life until you need him to solve a problem.

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- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Youth Ministry Response

Three changes must occur if we are to reach postmoderns effectively:

Parents must be equipped

Parents are still the most influential force (whether good or bad) in the faith development of their children. Youth ministry must include a process of encouraging and empowering parents. Create a support group for parents. Offer training seminars. Set up a library of resources. Write a parents' newsletter.

Youth Leaders must be grounded in theology

In order to present a holistic picture of the Gospel, youth workers must have a firm grasp of both testaments and how they relate. Read widely and deeply. Invest in Bible study tools. Study the Scriptures with other leaders.

Get Out!

Real ministry doesn't just happen within the four walls of the church. Set time aside each week to go where postmodern students are. To reach them effectively, we must take the time to get to know them on their "turf."

CHAPTER 7: ENTERING THE WORLD BENEATH

The emergence of youth ministry as a profession has resulted in an unintended consequence—the creation of a “church world” increasingly separate from the world around it. As we have withdrawn from the world, the non-Christian community has become increasingly secularized. Many who are entering youth ministry as a calling are expected to simply perpetuate an institution that was designed for the needs of previous generations. As a result, the impact of youth ministry has been limited to those inside the church. If we are going to influence the postmodern generation, a few things have to happen.

No Cookie-Cutter Youth Ministry.

We must resist the urge to simply copy the latest trend or the successful youth program across town or across the country. Resources are just that—resources to stimulate our own thinking, not an excuse to be lazy. Seek God prayerfully and reflectively concerning the needs of your unique situation.

Have a Vision

Related to the above, you must have a God-given direction, informed by Scripture and theology, to lead your congregation in its ministry to youth.

Be the Body

It takes the varied gifts of an entire body to reach youth, for no one person can know and love so many and unique young people in this generation. As you put together your team, they must:

- Love God. You can't lead a young person to a relationship that you don't have
- Love each other. Our care and concern for each other is the best example of Christian

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community to young people.

- Love themselves. Youth ministry is not the place for adults to “find themselves.”

Engaging Millennial Students

It's not about programs, but authentic relationships. To make Christ real to postmoderns, consider the following.

- Jesus comes to students where they are. We must be willing to enter their world.
- Jesus accepts them for who they are. His love is unconditional.
- Jesus offers them life-changing grace, but his grace demands a response.

Today's young people are going to worship something. Because they feel abandoned, they are not likely to worship the God of adults and their institutions. Let us reach out to them with the love of Christ and mentor them into healthy disciples.

CROZ'S CORNER

Several youth ministry authors have recently been pointing out the specific needs of the postmodern generation. Hestorff's work stands out for its succinctness. It's a brief, introductory look at millennials and how to reach them. It's a great place to start if you haven't given much thought to how young people have changed over the last twenty years, or to how our methods need to change if we are to effectively reach them. But be prepared—Hestorff doesn't pull any punches when addressing ineffective schools, parents, churches, and youth ministries. You will be enlightened and challenged by diving into this book.