



Welcoming the Future Church

HOW TO REACH, TEACH, AND
ENGAGE YOUNG ADULTS

Jonathan “JP” Pokluda
with Luke Friesen



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2020 by Jonathan Pokluda

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pokluda, Jonathan, 1980– author.

Title: Welcoming the future church : how to reach, teach, and engage young adults / Jonathan Pokluda, with Luke Friesen.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019028427 | ISBN 9780801078118 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with young adults.

Classification: LCC BV4446 .P65 2020 | DDC 259/.25—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019028427>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



To Todd Wagner:

thank you for your incredible investment in me.

To The Porch Team:

*we have been in the trenches together,
watching God change lives and partnering with him.*

Contents

Introduction: The World's Most
Influential Generation 9

SECTION ONE: TEACH

1. Be Real 17
2. Teach the Whole Truth 27
3. Get Good Feedback 47

SECTION TWO: ENGAGE

4. Hold Traditions Loosely 61
5. Under-Promise and Over-Deliver 77
6. Define a Path Forward 89

SECTION THREE: DEPLOY

7. Find Leaders 107
8. Call Them to Greatness 123

Contents

9. Give the Ministry Away	133
10. Create Unique Shared Experiences	145
11. Remember the Vision	161
Conclusion: Starting a Revolution	175
Acknowledgments	178
Notes	180
About the Authors	188

Introduction

The World's Most Influential Generation

More than seventy million people watched a three-minute music video we made about Millennials. I wouldn't be surprised if you're one of them, but just in case you haven't seen it yet, search "Millennials by Micah Tyler" on YouTube.¹ Go ahead—watch it! I'll be right here.

I asked my friend Micah, who is a Millennial, to make that video to open a talk I gave at the Church Leaders Conference in 2016 about the importance of reaching young adults.² It's a catchy tune that parodies all kinds of Millennial stereotypes, from still living with their parents to essential oils to participation trophies and man buns. Um, ouch? Or at least some people felt that way. Reaction to the video was immediate, immense, and mixed. On Watermark Community Church's Facebook page alone, where the video was originally posted, it got more than nine million views, one hundred and fifty thousand shares, fifty thousand reactions, and nearly five thousand comments. Other

sites and stations then picked it up, and it went completely viral, getting more than thirty million total views in the first week.

One of the lines in the song is, “Criticism isn’t easy for their ears,” and it wasn’t. Some people said the video was unkind, un-Christian, and überjudgmental. Some people called it hate speech. Others called it ageism. I’d say the reaction to the video exactly proved the point it was making. Of course, the video wasn’t actually sincere criticism. We were just making fun of ourselves—before getting down to the serious business of talking about how the church can teach, engage, and deploy young adults.

But really, why did so many people watch this video, share it with their friends, and weigh in with their opinion about it? Because it resonated so deeply with them. It tapped into some chords of truth about this incredibly gifted generation that also feels incredibly misunderstood.

I believe some people in the church have contributed significantly to that misunderstanding. You know Millennials and the generations following them are literally the future—that truth is undeniable—but you aren’t sure how to reach them. And if you’re not reaching them, there is no future for your church. I’m not trying to be harsh here; it’s really just a math problem. If young adults aren’t joining and leading in your church, eventually your church will die. Or at the very least, it will miss out on an opportunity to impact and unleash the most influential generation the world has ever seen. I want to help make sure your church doesn’t miss out on Millennials and the next generation of leaders.

I’m a Millennial myself, and I’ve spent the last ten-plus years of my life trying to figure out how to reach and unleash this seemingly elusive group. Some call them Generation Y, some

call them Millennials, others just call them young adults or the “next generation.” I will use all those terms interchangeably to address those ages nineteen to thirty-five. I had the humbling privilege of teaching and leading tens of thousands of them through a ministry called The Porch (www.theporch.live), and I saw that ministry grow from a weekly gathering of 150 people to one with more than forty thousand people hearing teaching every week laden with the gospel and Scripture.

Besides my own experiences as a young adult, including my own mistakes and failures to learn from, throughout my time in ministry I have also walked alongside and counseled literally thousands of other people in their twenties or early thirties. I’ve learned so much about what some do to succeed at this crossroads and how some fail. I’ve seen what works and what doesn’t work, what brings happiness and what brings pain. I’ve had the opportunity to study the Scriptures and to be mentored by Bible experts older and wiser than I am, and I have seen how following (or ignoring) God’s wisdom leads to very different outcomes in life.

In studying this generation, I’m studying myself. So much of what I read about Millennials resonates with me personally. I want to do everything in my power to help you reach them. These are the leaders of tomorrow (and today), and you must invest in them. If God has given me grace in learning anything along the way, I want to entrust it to you (2 Tim. 2:2).

There are two main reasons I’m so passionate about reaching this demographic.

1. Because it’s me. When I was twenty-one, I stumbled into a church and sat in the back row, hung over and smelling like

smoke. I began to wrestle with the reality of “Who is Jesus?” He saved me, came into my life, and changed everything. He gave me a greater obsession and passion than any of the addictions I had, which were numerous. He began to replace them by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he gave me a new reason for living. I want to help rescue others who are caught up in the same cycle of sin and hopelessness I was, changing both their “now” and their “forever.”

2. Because it’s strategic. If you want to change the world for the cause of Christ, you are going to need to reach this generation. Why? Because they are the most influential generation the world has ever seen. Here are a few statistics about Millennials:

- A full one-third of the world’s population is Generation Y, making it the biggest generation in history.
- 96 percent believe they will do something great in their lives.
- 87 percent think the environment is their responsibility—they are “green.”
- 81 percent have volunteered in the past year.
- 79 percent said they want to work for a company that cares about how it affects or contributes to society.
- 77 percent said “helping others” was among their chief motivations in life.
- 61 percent feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world.
- 60 percent voted in the 2012 US presidential election. This was the highest young voter turnout ever, and the 2016 election was similar.³

All is not well with this generation, though. Here are a few other, much more sobering, statistics:

- Their number one goal (81 percent) is to get rich; their number two goal (51 percent) is to get famous.
- 75 percent claim that they are “spiritual but not religious,” meaning that they have no ties to anything other than “spirituality.”
- 68 percent say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religion.
- 64 percent believe that sex outside of marriage is morally acceptable.
- 59 percent of Millennial Christians disconnect from church after age fifteen, either permanently or for an extended period of time.
- 50 percent believe that all people are eventually saved no matter what they do.
- 44 percent say they feel or have felt depressed.
- 10 percent have considered committing suicide.⁴

Young adults are influencers, and they want to make a difference. Many of them are misguided, but if they can be shown how to use their gifts to make a difference bigger than themselves, they will be the most powerful force you have ever seen unleashed in your church. I believe that to my core. But it will take time, patience, knowledge, and strategy on your part. They will come into your church thinking, *Look at me*, and you will have to direct them to use their influence to say, “No, look at Jesus.” How can you do that? Let’s dig in together.



SECTION ONE

Teach

CHAPTER 1

Be Real

I was a porn addict for more than a decade before I became a Christian. It completely owned me. It was a struggle every day. But honestly, it wasn't really a struggle—I just binged on it repetitively. When I became a Christian and understood grace, I got on a path to recovery. The Holy Spirit began to do an amazing work in my life, changing my obsessions and freeing me from my addictions. Today I walk in an incredible (and frankly, miraculous) amount of freedom from lust and pornography. But that doesn't mean I'm immune to it. In fact, not too long ago, after years of freedom, I gave in to temptation and looked at nudity online. A few days later I was scheduled to preach a message about living by the Spirit instead of the flesh. Let me tell you—things got real in a hurry.

Being real is about being you—being who you really are. And being honest about your imperfections. Millennials hate inauthenticity, and they can smell it from a mile away. I believe inauthenticity is the number one reason young adults are leaving the

church—or never show up in the first place. They think church is a place where people put only their best foot forward, hide their issues and problems, talk about surface-level things, and pretend to have it all together for an hour or two before going back to their normal, uninspired, no-different-from-anyone-else lives.

I wouldn't want to be a part of that either! I believe “being real” needs to affect at least two main areas of our lives: living out who we really are (not trying to be like someone else) and dealing with our sin transparently. This is so important. We must let this hit our heart. This needs to change how we do what we do.

I can remember when I realized the most strategic thing I could do with my life was to influence young adults to know Jesus. I did what so many of you have probably done. I started to audit who I thought was best reaching them, and I started listening to those people. I tried to preach like them. I caught myself saying things I had heard them say, even if it wasn't relevant to me. At the time, The Village Church was a young church, reaching young adults, and Watermark was a church born out of a young adult ministry.

One day I was driving down the road with a pastor-friend and reflecting on what I wanted to do with my life. I asked him, “What do you think I need to do to be the next Todd Wagner or Matt Chandler?” (the pastors of those two churches). He responded, “Let's start with, why do you want to be those guys? I think that would be a huge mistake.” His point was clear. God made them who they are, and he made me who I am. I needed to be faithful with the story, gifts, and ministry God had entrusted to me and not try to be someone else.

Know Who You Are, Be Who You Are, Like Who You Are

Young adults don't want to follow a replica of your favorite celebrity pastor. If that's what you're trying to be, they won't follow you or even listen to what you're saying. They want to follow someone who is earnestly and sincerely following Christ. And you need to follow Christ by knowing who you are, being who you are, and liking who you are. This is real and attractive to young adults. They resonate with this kind of authentic living.

Know Who You Are

You are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14)! God didn't make a mistake when he put you together and gave you the personality, strengths, weaknesses, and experiences that make you who you are. Do you know what part of the body of Christ you are (1 Cor. 12:12–27)? There's a big difference between a foot, an ear, and a mouth. Can you articulate your strengths and spiritual gifts? Capitalize on those. Do you have a death grip on your weaknesses and a sober-minded knowledge of where Satan would first try to take you out? Focus on defending those areas. If *you* don't know who you really are, you won't be able to lead young adults into discovering who *they* really are and who they were meant to be. If you're not sure about your answers to those questions, ask those folks around you who know you well. Beg them for a no-holds-barred, biblically based assessment of your character, strengths, and weaknesses. You might not like everything they tell you, but you'll grow from it. (We'll talk more about feedback in a later chapter.)

Be Who You Are

You don't have to be hip and cool, wear skinny jeans, be tatted up, have a trendy hairstyle, or garner a million Instagram followers for young adults to listen to you. You just need to be you, toiling with them for the sake of the gospel and teaching them the Scriptures, and they will listen. Don't believe me? Just look at John Piper. I know many young adults have been impacted by his ministry. Is that guy hip? More like hip replacement. But the brother knows the Word, and it *bleeds* out of him. If you're cut, you should bleed Bible too. Being rooted in God's Word and in your identity in Christ will give you the confidence to live out the unique identity and personality he's given you. Young adults don't need you to be like them, but they need you to authentically be who God made you to be. You are God's man or woman, sovereignly placed exactly where he wants you (Acts 17:26) to be his ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20). He doesn't want or need you to be a clone of one of his other creations. We'll talk later about what it means to hold certain traditions loosely—since you probably could tweak some things about yourself or your strategy to reach young adults more effectively—but not at the expense of authenticity. Be yourself. That may not earn you a Piper-esque following, but it will ensure anyone following you is getting the real deal.

Like Who You Are

You need to enjoy who God made you to be! This might be the hardest one of them all. Do you like yourself, or do you wish you were more like somebody else? Do you embrace your part in the body of Christ, or are you a foot desperately trying to

be a hand, or maybe a hand desperately trying to be a mouth? It's often dissatisfaction with ourselves that turns us into chameleons who want to be like others. This doesn't mean you shouldn't work on your weaknesses, or try to learn new things, or maybe even try to make your teaching more engaging. But it does mean you need to do business with the pride and envy that might be lurking in your heart and festering into a dislike of yourself. Comparing yourself with others will steal your joy. Desperately wanting to be liked, especially without truly liking yourself, will come across as a neediness that actually repulses young adults. But Christ-centered confidence is attractive!

Does this all sound like a tall order? Good. It is! Thankfully, you're not alone in this. "[God's] grace is sufficient for you, for [his] power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). To remind myself of this, I reflect on this thought nearly every day: *If dependence is the goal, then weakness is the advantage.* If dependence on God is the goal for me, then my many weaknesses are to my advantage. If I believe at my core I can't do anything without him, then these weaknesses push me into a deeper relationship with God. If you rely on the Lord to help you live authentically, knowing you are powerless to do so apart from his power working in you (John 15:5), that's exactly where you need to be.

Your Mess Becomes Your Message

Remember the porn addiction and recent slipup I mentioned? Here's what happened. Not too long ago, I was reading a friend's post on social media and clicked on a hashtag. It was an

innocent hashtag, but it took me to another hashtag. That one wasn't so innocent. I clicked on it anyway. I knew I shouldn't have, but my flesh kicked in and I kept going. I chose to do it, and I was exposed to nudity—pornography. It was only for a few moments, and thankfully that's where it stopped, but still I had returned to my sin like a dog to its vomit (Prov. 26:11). *What? No!* How could I have done that after years of freedom? I wanted to beat myself up. I felt like a fraud; I felt defeated. I knew Christ had died for this sin, and God forgave me, but I felt like a hypocrite. I know many of you are all too familiar with this cycle, whether in that particular sin struggle or another.

To make things worse, a few days later I was slated to preach a message in front of a few thousand young adults on Romans 8:5–13, about choosing to let God instead of our flesh be in the driver's seat of our lives. How could I teach and preach God's Word and tell them to remove their flesh from the driver's seat when my own flesh so recently had its foot mashed on the gas pedal? I knew I had a choice—to stay silent about my sin or to expose it. To live out either Psalm 32:3 or Proverbs 28:13. So I got behind the pulpit, and I . . .

What would you do, if you were in that moment? Be honest. What's your first reaction? These are questions and decisions you must deal with.

I began the message and made most of my points, but then I paused.¹ I walked the audience through the specifics of what I just told you, laying out exactly how it started, what I did, and how it ended. I told them I wanted them to know I struggle and sin too, and I wasn't onstage hypocritically calling them to deal

with their flesh in a way I myself was unwilling to. I confessed my sin to them and asked for their forgiveness.

What do you think happened? Do you think they bolted for the exits, eager to get as far away as they could from yet another pastor with a moral failure?

After every message I gave at The Porch, I would stay down by the stage to talk and pray with anyone who wanted to. There was also a whole team of volunteers who did the same thing as pastors to their peers. After this message, I had the longest line I've ever had of people waiting to talk with me. There was a clear pattern. One after another, they told me, "I've never heard a pastor say that." "I've never had a pastor say anything like that." Then they poured out their struggles, told me where they were and how they were doing, and asked me how to find freedom from their sin. In that moment, it felt like the purest form of ministry that anyone could experience. God took my mess and used it as a message to point people back to freedom and forgiveness in Christ.

How Transparent Is Your Church?

Wherever I serve and lead in ministry, our team is committed to being transparent. Being "authentic in our walk" is one of The Porch's stated core values.² It wasn't just stated, though—it was (and is) lived. We don't just admit to being sinners; we also confess our specific sins and talked about our struggles with whoever needed to know them. The level of transparency I described above may be shocking to you, but its purpose isn't shock value. It's about refusing to let anyone put us on a

pedestal as we pursue Christ together. It's about being sober-minded in our judgment of ourselves, not thinking of ourselves "more highly than [we] ought" (Rom. 12:3). We are just like those who hear our messages—sinners saved by grace who are continually in desperate need for the freeing truth of the gospel. This is part of the culture and DNA of Watermark, from those who teach from the stage to those who lead the janitorial team.

Is the leadership in your church vulnerable, authentic, and transparent? Are you? If not, that's a major reason why you won't be able to reach young adults.

Think about it. If a pastor or church staffer just admits to being a sinner in general, what kinds of sins do you automatically think they're referring to? Probably the kinds of sins people might feel comfortable admitting to in church, like not reading the Bible enough, not giving enough money, or possibly not sharing the gospel as often as they should. Or, God forbid, maybe they got just slightly frustrated when that person cut them off in traffic and thought a bad word but didn't say it out loud. How relatable is that, when young adults are struggling with much deeper and darker issues and sins like crippling anxiety, addictions of all kinds, abortions, and highly promiscuous relationships? Not very. If those "churchy" sins are true, then they need to be confessed. But what's also probably true is those church leaders need to confess their lustful thoughts about another person's spouse, the conflict they had with their own spouse, and the covetous materialism they're fighting when they look at the kinds of cars their church members drive but they can't afford to. Now we're talking. Now we're connecting and engaging.

Young adults know their leaders aren't perfect. They know they sin in way more areas than just not reading their Bibles enough. They know you're not perfect. But if you never talk about your own sins, or if all you admit to are those "churchy" sins or to just being a sinner like it's an abstract concept you deal with on your own, your lack of authenticity will drive them away because it doesn't show them how to address the sins they're really struggling with.

How Transparent Is Your Future Church?

I say this so passionately because shortly after I made that confession from the stage at The Porch, I was speaking at a seminary about the topic of reaching young adults. I told the exact same story to them. After I spoke, the students filled out feedback forms about the session. As I read through the feedback, I was heartbroken at how many future pastors and teachers said things like, "You just can't talk like that in a mixed-gender audience." "You can't say those words in front of people." "That's offensive." "You need to have the appearance of holiness as you preach to people." "You don't need to let them into your personal sins." "You can confess those in private."

This made me really sad. If you agree with their feedback, I'd discourage you from ministering to young adults (or anyone, really) until you can see authenticity is actually an advantage in ministry. The world does not need any more inauthentic pastors. If you want young adults to think you are the expert and you have it all together, you are unqualified for the job. If, however, you are willing to let them know how you struggle, when

you struggle, and that you are quite literally a mess—that's the first step. Jesus takes your mess and makes it a message, or even a ministry. If you are unwilling to do that—and I say this as humbly and respectfully as I possibly can—you will not reach young adults. You just won't. You will take your mentality to the grave, looking back at a demographic you missed because you were not willing to be honest, real, transparent, and authentic.