

5 Surprising Characteristics of Churches That Are Actually Reaching the Next Generation

By Carey Nieuwhof



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I've visited a few churches this year that are doing a fantastic job at reaching 18-30 year olds—a vastly under-represented demographic in most churches.

I took notes at all the churches. They all shared surprising characteristics, even though they are incredibly diverse.

The surprise (at least for me)?

It wasn't their model that made them effective. The churches I studied have different models.

It wasn't their denomination. One was Roman Catholic and attracting tons of young families. Others were cutting edge conservative evangelical church plants.

It wasn't their facility. Some were portable. Some were permanent. In many ways, these churches are bending the rule book established by the megachurches of the '90s and 2000s.

Here are five things I've seen in churches that are killing it with people in their 20s and 30s:

1. Passion over Polish

If you attend enough conferences, you can think that you need polish to pull off effective ministry. Another \$50,000 in lights or sound and you'll be good.

The effective churches I've visited and seen recently by no means had the best lights, stage or production. Some had almost no stage and no lights, while others had a pretty decent package, but not nearly the level you see at some churches.

What did they all have in common? Passion.

When it comes to reaching the next generation, passion beats polish.

It's not that polish is bad, but I think it's increasingly trumped by a raw authenticity that exudes from leaders who will do whatever it takes to reach people with the Gospel.

Smaller facilities and stage sets were more than compensated for by preachers, worship leaders and team members who exuded passion for the mission.

2. Jesus over God

This may seem either self-evident or trivial, but I believe it's neither; the churches that were packed with young adults talk about Jesus more than they talk about God. Of course, Jesus is God and God is Jesus.

But God can mean many things in our post-Christian culture. Jesus is far more specific. I've noticed that churches that talk about Jesus and the Holy Spirit are having a greater impact on young adults than churches who talk about God.

3. Progress over Facilities

Several of the churches I've visited this year are multisite. And they don't have massive facilities from which to launch new locations.

Next Level Church in New Hampshire is reaching almost 3,000 people over six locations. Their largest facility is a 14,000-square-foot campus that's a converted auto repair shop. They've done a fantastic job remodelling it, but they've done it on a dime and it only seats 400 people. They're reaching almost 3,000 people out of that space across six locations.

It's not the 10 million-dollar facility you'd think you need to have to reach 3,000 people, but that's not what Joshua Gagnon, their lead pastor, is focused on. (By the way, I was recently a guest on Josh's leadership podcast. Perhaps my favourite interview I've given. Raw and so real.)

Josh's passionate, can-do, no-excuses attitude is in part what's led them to become one of the 10 fastest growing churches in America.

Ditto for National Community Church in D.C. They're doing a superb job reaching young adults with very small permanent facilities. And they're adding an eighth location without first building out the space they already have.

Impressive.

4. Risk over Certainty

All of the churches I know that are doing a great job with young adults take risks. Big risks.

They're either at odds with their denomination (I've seen a few of these) or are launching locations where no one else would dare plant a church.

They're figuring out how to accommodate parking and even children's ministry after they've made the decision to open or move. They just want to see the kingdom advance. And the young adults they're reaching seem fine with the uncertainty. They just want more space and more locations to invite their friends to.

Lesson? If you've got growth and momentum but you're waiting for certainty before you determine what's next, you might be waiting too long. Just act.

5. Mission over Money

The question for many churches is this: Does mission follow money, or does money follow mission?

Great question.

The churches I know that are doing a great job with young adults would say 'money follows mission.' Do the mission well, and money shows up.

In fact, if you lead with the mission first, everything else shows up: people, money and the resources you need.

Too many churches wait for the day when they have the money to realize their mission. Realize your mission, and you'll have the money you need.

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