

# FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

Our Vision for 2008

By Wayne Christensen

*The New York Times* ran an article on October 6, 2006 by Laurie Goodstein entitled, *Evangelicals Fear the Loss of Their Teenagers*. The article should grab the attention of all Christians who are concerned about the next generation.

Despite their packed megachurches, their political clout and their increasing visibility on the national stage, evangelical Christian leaders are warning one another that their teenagers are abandoning the faith in droves.

At an unusual series of leadership meetings in 44 cities this fall, more than 6,000 pastors are hearing dire forecasts from some of the biggest names in the conservative evangelical movement.

Their alarm has been stoked by a highly suspect claim that if current trends continue, only 4 percent of teenagers will be “Bible-believing Christians” as adults. That would be a sharp decline compared with 35 percent of the current generation of baby boomers, and before that, 65 percent of the World War II generation.

While some critics say the statistics are greatly exaggerated (one evangelical magazine for youth ministers dubbed it “the 4 percent panic attack”), there is widespread consensus among evangelical leaders that they risk losing their teenagers.

“I’m looking at the data,” said Ron Luce, who organized the meetings and founded Teen Mania, a 20-year-old youth ministry, “and we’ve become post-Christian America, like post-Christian Europe. We’ve been working as hard as we know how to work—everyone in youth ministry is working hard—but we’re losing.”

...Genuine alarm can be heard from Christian teenagers and youth pastors, who say they cannot compete against a pervasive culture of cynicism about religion, and the casual “hooking up” approach to sex so pervasive on MTV, on Web sites for teenagers and hip-hop, rap and rock music. Divorced parents and dysfunctional families also lead some teenagers to avoid church entirely or to drift away.

Over and over in interviews, evangelical teenagers said they felt like a tiny, beleaguered minority in their schools and neighborhoods. They said they often felt alone in their struggles to live by their “Biblical values” by avoiding casual sex, risqué music and videos, Internet pornography, alcohol and drugs.

When Eric Soto, 18, transferred from a small charter school to a large public high school in Chicago, he said he was disappointed to find that an extracurricular Bible study attracted only five to eight students. “When we brought food, we thought we could get a better turnout,” he said. They got 12.

Chelsea Dunford, a 17-year old from Canton, Conn., said, “At school I don’t have a lot of friends who are Christians...”

“A lot of my friends are self-proclaimed agnostics or atheists,” said Ms. Dunford, who wears a bracelet with a heart-shaped charm engraved with “tlw,” for “true love waits,” to remind herself of

her pledge not to have premarital sex.

She said her friends were more prone to use profanity and party than she was, and added: "It's scary sometimes. You get made fun of."

To break the isolation and bolster the teenagers' commitment to a conservative lifestyle, Mr. Luce has been organizing these stadium extravaganzas for 15 years. The event in Amherst was the first of 40 that Teen Mania is putting on between now and May, on the breakneck schedule that resembles a road trip for a major touring band. The "roadies" are 700 teenagers who have interned for a year at Teen Mania's "Honor Academy" in Garden Valley, Tex.

More than two million teenagers have attended in the last 15 years, said Mr. Luce, a 45-year-old, mop-headed father of three...and the star power of an aging rock guitarist.

"That's more than Paul McCartney has pulled in," Mr. Luce asserted, before bounding onstage for the opening pyrotechnics and a prayer.

For the next two days, the teenagers in the arena pogoed to Christian bands, pledged to lead their friends to Christ and sang an anthem with the chorus, "We won't be silent." Hundreds streamed down the aisles for the altar call and knelt in front of the stage, some weeping openly as they prayed to give their lives to God...

Outside the arena in Amherst, the teenagers at Mr. Luce's Acquire the Fire extravaganza mobbed the tables hawking T-shirts and CD's stamped: "Branded by God." Mr. Luce's strategy is to replace MTV's wares with those of an alternative Christian culture, so teenagers will link their identity to Christ and not to the latest flesh-baring pop star.

Apparently, the strategy can show results. In Chicago, Eric Soto said he returned from a stadium event in Detroit in the spring to find that other teenagers in the hallways were also wearing "Acquire the Fire" T-shirts.

"You were there? You're a Christian?" he said the young people would say to one another. "The fire doesn't die once you leave the stadium. But it's a challenge to keep it burning."

This *New York Times* article should serve as a wake up call for the broader evangelical community. Statistically, we are failing miserably to disciple the next generation. Of course we should all be cautious of statistics, since they are easily skewed and often misleading. Nevertheless, there are times when they can be instructive, and this is one of those occasions. Other studies reveal that we are losing anywhere from 70-88% of *our* children. In T.C. Pinkney's, *Report to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee*, Nashville, Tennessee, September 18, 2001, he "reported that 70 percent of teenagers involved in church youth groups stop attending church within two years of their high school graduation. See also the 2002 *Report of the Southern Baptist Council on Family Life*, which reported that 88 percent of the children in evangelical homes leave church at the age of eighteen" (Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Family Driven Faith*, p. 215). Even if we take into account the more optimistic numbers we are still failing.

Imagine that you're a college student, and your whole grade for the semester is based solely upon the grade you receive for your final exam. You show up on the last day of class, take the test, and get anywhere from 12- 30% *right*. The professor gives you an F, and then asks, "Where have you have been all semester?" He confronts you further, "Did you really think that you could skip class all semester, and then show up on the last day, take the exam, and receive anything close to a passing grade?" Wouldn't you feel utterly humiliated? This is how the evangelical church should feel. The reality that we have to

reckon with is that we are losing the next generation. Put bluntly—just in case this hasn't been blunt enough—our kids, church kids, are going to hell in large numbers.

The answer to this crisis or epidemic by many evangelical leaders and churches—though certainly not all—has been fun. More fun via flashy pyrotechnics, louder, hipper music, and Christian T-shirts has been the strategy. We've wrongly assumed that MTV is one of our competitors. MTV is, to be sure, an obstacle to living the Christian life, but is our goal to compete with MTV?

Recently, a member left our church. This member wrote, "For a long time now, my son (he is nine years old) has been reluctant to attend church. The only way I could get him to attend was on Sundays when Children's Church was available. I felt like I was pushing him further away from God by forcing him to attend church where all he would do is complain throughout the service." This parent also said that the child has "opted not to do AWANA this year." Then the solution is stated, "Because I feel like I'm losing him, I need to bring him to a church that has a thriving Children's Ministry so that he is excited about God, worship and Christian education."

Putting aside the obvious lack of discipline of this child, I have to consider if we as a church have added to this parent's difficulty by making church fun. When church ceases to be fun, the child quickly becomes disinterested. Even AWANA isn't exciting and stimulating enough any more. So I have to wonder, given the presupposition that fun is the answer (even though I think it is faulty), just how "thriving" the children's ministry has to be so that our children will be excited about God, worship and Christian education?

At our last elders' retreat, I said to the elders, "You, like me, grew up in church, and you didn't go to children's church half-way through the service. You sat through the whole service. Furthermore, I'll bet that your parents, like mine, never asked if you "had fun in church." That was never the goal. So when did Disney Land begin to influence the ministries of the church?

Perhaps it would help to look at the "fun factor" from the perspective of a Chinese Christian who is part of the underground church. If the government discovers that they are meeting without their official sanction they will pay a severe price. Do you really think that Christians in this type of hostile environment are saying, "We need to show our kids how much fun Christianity is"? You know that such a thought wouldn't even enter their minds. Fun is hardly the right description of the Christian life when your life is on the line. Yes, the joy of the Spirit is there, but this is not the same as fun. Therefore, I assure you that passing on the baton of faith to the next generation in China involves something other than fun.

I would like to make one more observation about *The New York Times* article, by asking this question, which I'll return to later, "What in that article was conspicuous by its absence?" In other words, "What wasn't even considered in the solution to reaching the next generation for Christ?"

For some time now I've been praying about the vision for 2008. In some ways I don't like the term vision, since it has been so distorted by many churches. At the same time, it's good to evaluate how we're doing every year, and to consider what changes should be made to be more Biblical and God-glorifying. During this process of prayer, I believe God brought a few things together. One evening I was talking with an elder of a mega-church (I will not tell you which church, but you would all be familiar with it), and he asked if I heard about Bill Hybels' apology. I hadn't. He said that Hybels publicly admitted that the manner in which Willow Creek had been going about discipleship for thirty years now hasn't been working. Then in a moment of honesty which surprised me, this elder said, "Due to my position, I have an opportunity to interact with a lot of Christians from many different churches, including my own, and it's sad how many don't know who Joseph is, or who Job is, or what justification

and sovereignty are all about. I'm afraid that because we have so many people coming to our church, we are not discipling them like we should." If I heard him correctly, he was saying, "The fact of the matter is, we're right behind Willow Creek. I fear that we're not doing much better."

If you would like to hear Bill Hybels' admission for yourself (it wasn't really an apology *per se*, even though some are calling it that), and hear about the survey that led to it, go online to [www.revealnow.org](http://www.revealnow.org). Hybels addressed the issue at one of Willow Creek's leadership conferences. We watched most of the message at our annual meeting.

I mention Hybels' admission, because it shows from yet another angle that we aren't doing a good job at discipling in the church. But I commend Hybels for being honest enough to publicly admit that Willow Creek has been failing. This is causing other churches to be equally as honest, and of course we want to be included in their number.

Hybels said that the survey revealed that mature Christians are not being fed. He said Willow Creek should have been encouraging people to read their Bibles between services, and to more aggressively do the spiritual practices. Let that sink in. Willow Creek hasn't been encouraging its people to read their Bibles during the week.

Due to the results of the first survey, Willow Creek is doing another one, along with other churches, and they are asking people what they want in order to grow as a Christian. If Christians haven't been reading their Bibles over the years, are they in a position to know what they need in order to grow? I don't think so. I would love to see Hybels gather together the world's greatest theologians and ask them, "Biblically, where do you think we are going wrong?"

To accurately evaluate how a church is doing, I would suggest surveying the children who have grown up in the church. Are they married to a Christian? Are their children walking with the Lord? How is the third generation of Christians in the church doing? Success is seen when our children and grandchildren are zealously following Jesus Christ.

At our annual meeting we also watched a clip from a message by Voddie Baucham called *The Centrality of the Home in Evangelism and Discipleship* (we have this message on DVD at the church if you would like to view it in its entirety). Baucham drew our attention to two studies that showed we are losing anywhere between 70 to 88% of our children by the end of their freshman year of college. He also made the observation that over the last thirty years a tremendous rise has taken place with degrees being given in youth ministry, and a steady, but persistent decline in our children remaining in the faith. How are these two connected? Baucham says, "For years now the church has been saying, 'We're professionals; don't try this at home.'" Therefore, parents haven't. The result has been a wholesale abdication by parents to disciple their kids. Instead they drop them off at the church and expect the youth pastor and the other leaders to do their job for them.

Earlier I asked in reference to the *New York Times* article, "What is conspicuous by its absence?" What wasn't even considered as a solution to reaching the next generation for Christ was *parents*. We're so program-oriented in our thinking that discipling our kids doesn't show up on the radar. One time I was talking with a professor at a well known Bible college, who was formerly a pastor as well. At the time he was looking for a new church, and said that he was looking for a church with good children's ministries to disciple his kids. I should have asked, after I got past my shock, "As a former pastor, and a professor at a Bible college, aren't you capable of discipling your own kids?" It's one thing to have ministers and teachers reinforce what you are doing at home; it's another thing altogether to turn your responsibility over to them. God couldn't be any clearer, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). My question for parents is simple: What

are *you* doing day in and day out to disciple your children, so that they will not become a sad statistic?

George Barna noted, “Parents are not so much unwilling to provide more substantive training to their children as they are ill equipped to do such work. According to the research, parents typically have no plan for the spiritual development of their children, do not consider it a priority, have little or no training in how to nurture a child’s faith, have no related standards or goals that they are seeking to satisfy, and experience no accountability for their efforts” (Ibid., 206). To practically work toward family discipleship, we are suggesting that families do three things every week (of course they can do more if they like). Then, in order to reinforce this, and provide encouragement (you can also call it accountability, if you like) we will do two out of the three every week together as a body at church.

First, we suggest that families read about a chapter of the Bible together every day. In the Bible program that will be supplied for you each week in the bulletin, that will take you through the entire Bible in three years. To read a chapter a day will take about 5 minutes. And then time can be spent asking and answering questions, followed by prayer. What the apostle Paul said to Timothy’s about his upbringing, you want to be able to say to your children: “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Second, we will come together every week and recite our memory verse. The memory verse will be in the bulletin every week as well, and we will say our verse together as a corporate body at some point in the service. So on the first Sunday in January we will all recite Psalm 1:1. The following Sunday we will recite Psalm 1:1-2. We will finish Psalm One in six weeks, and then we will start over with a new section. Admittedly, this will require a little effort on your part. But let me ask, “If I paid you a hundred dollars a week to memorize your verse could you do it?” What’s really being tested here is our conviction about the importance of meditation on the Word, which is to take place day and night (Ps. 1:2). How will we ever grow as Christians if God’s mind and will is not a regular part of our thinking? Recently, I was witnessing to a man, and in the course of our conversation he said, “Well, I think reincarnation...” I stopped him and said, “Who cares what you think.” I followed that up by saying, “And who cares what I think. We want to know what God thinks. Only God can instruct us concerning eternal matters.”

Dallas Willard writes in *Spirit of the Disciplines*, “As a pastor, teacher, and counselor I have repeatedly seen the transformation on inner and outer life that comes simply from memorization and meditation upon Scripture. Personally, I would never undertake to pastor a church or guide a program of Christian education that did not involve a continuous program of memorization of the choicest passages of Scripture for people of all ages.”

Third, we will work our way through the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which should take a year. The value of the WSC is seen in this story: Dwight L. Moody, the famous nineteenth-century evangelist, was preaching once to a crowded meeting of children in Edinburgh, Scotland. To get their attention he posed a question: “What is prayer?”—expecting to answer the question himself. But to his amazement scores of little hands went up all over the hall. So Moody asked one young fellow to give his answer. The boy spoke out with clear and confident tones, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.” Moody’s amazed response was, “Thank God, my boy, that you were born in Scotland!” (John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 203). This boy had memorized the answer to question number 98 in the WSC. We will not memorize these questions and answers, although you may, but we will make them available each week to study as a family, and then we will say them together on Sunday morning during the service.

Unless parents step up and take responsibility for the discipleship of their children we are not likely to

witness any significant reformation in the church. Some 400 years ago, the Puritan Richard Baxter exhorted pastors, “Neglect not, I beseech you, this important part of your work. Get masters of families to do their duty, and they will not only spare you a great deal of labour, but will much further the success of your labours. If a captain can get the officers under him to do their duty, he may rule the soldiers with much less trouble, than if all lay upon his own shoulders. You are not likely to see any general reformation, till you procure family reformation. Some little religion there may be, here and there; but while it is confined to single persons, and is not promoted in families, it will not prosper, nor promise much future increase” (Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 101-102).

If parents, and fathers especially, will disciple their children, the legacy could continue till the return of Christ. Several years ago *Christian Life and Faith* magazine presented some interesting results as they contrasted the generations coming from two different families. The Jukes family began in 1677 when an immoral man married a very licentious woman. Nineteen hundred descendants came from that union. Of these, 771 were criminals, 250 were arrested for various offenses, 60 were thieves, and 39 were convicted for murder. Forty of the women were known to have a venereal disease. These people spent a combined total of 1300 years behind bars and cost the State of New York nearly 3 million dollars.

The other family was the Edwards family. The third generation included Jonathan Edwards who was the great New England pastor and theologian. Of the 1,344 descendants, many were college presidents and professors. One hundred eight-six became ministers of the gospel, and many others were active in their churches. Eighty-six were state senators, three were Congressmen, 30 judges, and one became Vice President of the United States. No reference was made of anyone spending time in jail.

“But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments” (Ps. 103:17-18). Repeatedly, we are reminded that how we live today is having an impact on generations yet unborn. By the grace of God, if we will love God, walk in obedience and faithfully discharge our parental duties, a thousand generations we reap what we have sown (Deut. 7:9).