Called to Pass the Torch

by Tom Couser

I am a child of the fifties and sixties. I grew up in Detroit, Michigan. The Motor City of those days was vastly different from today’s decaying urban wasteland. The auto industry was at its peak. The economy was booming and Motown was a bustling metropolis. The whole city was my playground. During summers I could ride my bike to the Detroit River to go fishing or ride the bus to Tiger Stadium to watch a ballgame. Downtown was a safe place to hang out, and it included the largest department store in the world, J. L. Hudsons.

I grew up in a family environment. Grandparents, aunts and uncles all lived in the same neighborhood. The church was part of our lives. We attended St. James Lutheran Church. George Kurz was the pastor and Carl Munzel was the organist and choir director, but they were not the only ones who mentored me. I had confirmation sponsors, Sunday school teachers, and there was a volunteer who coached our church basketball team. As I reflect back, I had quite a support system. That did not keep me from wandering off path for a time. I made some poor choices and had my time in the wilderness, but every time I found myself back home I had a team of people who reminded me of my spiritual roots. I wasn’t beaten over the head with the Law. Rather, I was surrounded by people who lived the Gospel. In the midst of change and uncertainty, they remained people of hope.

I recently thought of my upbringing as I read the book, Sticky Faith, by Kara Powell and Chap Clark. They wrote about the web or relationship required to mentor a young person in the faith. In the process they introduced the concept of 5:1. Many ministries strive to have 1:5 ratios in youth and children’s ministry, namely one adult for every five children involved. What Powell and Clark proposed is that every young Christian needs five significant adults other than their parents involved in their spiritual development. When I wrote my book, Parenting with Guilt: Avoiding the Seven Things Parents do to Screw-up Their Kids, I dedicated one whole chapter to the importance of providing a support system for our kids. While parents certainly shoulder the primary responsibility when it comes to nurturing children in the faith, it is a function we share with them as a church community.

At no time has it been more vital than at the present. We are losing our teens and young adults. We have always expected some of that. Students graduate from high school and head off to college. In the process we see less and less of them. Many graduate from college, start careers and get married. In the process they seem to have little interest or time for organized religion. Look around. If your church is typical, young adults probably make up the smallest percentage of membership. Recent research tells us that now many teens are mentally adding the church to the list of things that are irrelevant to their lives.

In his book, Eutychus Youth, John Oberdeck, a professor at Concordia University-Wisconsin, draws parallels between Eutychus, the young man who Paul raised from the dead in Acts 20, and the youth of today. Eutychus falls asleep during one of Paul’s sermons and tumbles from the window ledge where he was sitting. John Oberdeck sees today’s youth as having these things in common with Eutychus:

- He is young.
- He is bored.

Every young Christian needs five significant adults other than their parents involved in their spiritual development.
He is at risk.

Dr. Oberdeck points out another unfortunate fact about the Eutychus story: Nobody noticed.

I believe the church today has taken notice. Teens and young adults are filing out the back door of the church and we’re concerned. We worry about the future of the church, but more than that we are concerned about the future of their souls. Before we try to come up with a response, we need to seek to understand. Even young people who have grown up in the church might have a different concept of faith than we do.

The "Do Good and Be Happy" Age

My generation was labeled the “Baby Boomers.” Sociologists have attached the term “Millenials” to those born between 1984 and 2002. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, has ascribed the name “Mosaics” to this group. It is a reference to the patchwork faith that many teens and young adults subscribe to. Some of this is born out of a desire to be tolerant of other religious views, but a portion is also the result of being turned off by the traditional church. Many of these young folks still consider themselves to be Christians, but their brand of faith is a shadow of what God intended for His people. In his book, You Lost Me, Kinnaman refers to the Mosaic faith as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Let’s break that down:

Moralistic: Morals are a good thing. They provide us with guiding principles. To be moralistic opens the door to more extreme, self-righteous conduct. I must admit some guilt because I might have contributed to this. During my youth ministry years I took teens on short-term mission trips, but I didn’t always provide the follow-up when we returned home. Instead we often talked about all the good we accomplished or all the lives that we impacted.

Therapeutic: Once again the intent is good. There are some therapeutic activities that are part of my daily routine. I have been a borderline Type II Diabetic for years. Diet and exercise have become my mantra. That therapeutic behavior has kept my blood sugar under control. While therapeutic behavior works for health purposes, it does not work on a spiritual level. The focus needs to be on what God has done for us, and our reaction to it. For many Mosaics it is all about feeling good. Even when they do attend worship, the focus tends to be on them and having their needs met.

Deism: According to the World Union of Deist website, “God gave us reason, not religion.” From this comment alone we can begin to understand how Deism fits the mindset of so many young people. The statement, “God gave us reason,” puts the emphasis on the individual. It begins with what God has given me, instead of what God has done for me. A person can begin to reason that, “God exists but I really don’t need Him.” To Mosaics, Christianity is no different from other world religions in that God just wants people to do good and be happy.

Making Disciples

While the current trends are disconcerting, all is not lost. History is on our side. Our God is still the same. He still calls us to action. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) still applies. Remember, it was spoken to individuals and not an institution. God’s desire is that each of us be in the ministry of making disciples.

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It begins with relationships. It is easy to stand around the coffee pot during the Fellowship Hour on Sunday mornings and talk about the lack of young adults in worship. I would really encourage you to seek to have a quality relationship with someone under the age of 30. Put aside your bias when it comes to their lifestyle. Listen to them. Try to understand them and their struggles. Before you can share your faith with them, you need to have a relationship.

Create an environment where questions can be asked. One complaint that Mosaics have is that the church is not the place where you can ask difficult questions. We are all broken people. Broken people
struggle with sin, and they struggle with worldly issues. The church needs to be a community where those issues can be discussed, without judging those that are asking them.

**Be a person of hope:** In retirement I work part-time as a hospital chaplain. One of the first observations that I made is that Christians respond to crisis differently. When I walk into a room, I can tell that Jesus is present without a word being spoken. People of faith grieve differently. It’s more than just a positive attitude and a smile. It is the quiet confidence that comes from knowing our God has conquered sin, death, and the devil.

The torch of faith must be passed. We have no choice but to be people of faith. Earlier I referred to the concept of 5:1. What are you doing to become one of the five? Who are the youth and young adults in your world who you could impact? Don’t expect them to come running to you. Seek them out. Get involved in teaching a middle school or high school Bible class. Volunteer to go on a mission trip. Seek out any young adults who might be in your community and listen to them. There is a lost world out there. Don’t just sit around…. Do something now.

*Tom Couser is a retired Director of Christian Education (DCE) and served churches in Missouri, Illinois and Texas. He spent the last eleven years of his ministry as school counselor at Lutheran High School of Dallas. These days he stays busy as a hospital chaplain and freelance writer. His new book, Passing the Torch: Sharing Faith and Values with the Millennial Generation, will be released in spring 2013. Tom blogs at tomcouser.blogspot.com and you can follow him on Facebook and Twitter. Tom and his wife, Barbara, live in Dallas, Texas, and have three married children and three grandsons.*

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Who are the youth and young adults in your world who you could impact?

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