



Postmodern Children's Ministry
Copyright © 2004 by Ivy Beckwith

Youth Specialties Books, 300 South Pierce Street, El Cajon, CA 92020, are published
by Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Avenue SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beckwith, Ivy, 1954-
Postmodern children's ministry : ministry to children in the 21st
century / by Ivy Beckwith.
p. cm.
ISBN-10: 0-310-25754-9 (softcover)
ISBN-13: 978-0-310-25754-7 (softcover)
1. Church work with children. I. Title.
BV639.C4B38 2004
259'.22--dc22

2004008752

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible:
New International Version (North American Edition). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984
by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with
the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real
situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

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—electronic, mechan-
ical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed
reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please
contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that
are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

Editing by Carla Barnhill
Proofreading by Laura Gross and Kristi Robison
Cover design by Burnkit
Interior design by Sarah Jongsma
Printed in the United States of America

05 06 07 08 09 • 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Contents

	Introduction	9
one—	The Millennial Child and Beyond	15
two—	The Beginning of Faith	41
three—	Bringing Faith to Life	55
four—	The Role of Community	71
five—	Children in Community	79
six—	The Family Factor	101
seven—	The Bible Is for Children, Too	123
eight—	Children in Worship	141
nine—	Postmodern Faith Formation	163



The Millennial Child and Beyond

One morning several years ago I had a short but memorable conversation with the Missions pastor of the church where I was employed as the Director of Children's Ministries. We were discussing how people understand the concept of truth. My friend made the point that the purpose of evangelism is to convince people that the Good News of Jesus is true. But, he said, the time would come when the response to our attempts to convince will be, "Okay, it's true. So what?"

I was intrigued by his words, and in the intervening years they have come back to me over and over again. I believe that Western culture and those that the North American church hopes to speak to are in this "so what?" era. With this change comes a host of new challenges to the church's mission of evangelism and discipleship, such as battling relativism, searching for new paradigms of

gospel proclamation, and rethinking our understanding of the Bible.

Those of us who've made careers out of children's and family ministry have had a lot of success and recognition over the last 25 years. We've become professionals. We have academic degrees in Christian Education or Spiritual Formation. We have heightened awareness of the importance of specializing in ministries to children and their families. We've helped proliferate a multimillion-dollar curriculum-and-resource-publishing industry. And we've helped seminaries and Christian colleges grudgingly admit that what we do is a legitimate educational discipline, that it involves more than providing cut-and-paste activities for children in the church basement while the adults get on with God's real business. Web sites and nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping us do our jobs better are growing and providing more and more resources. Children's ministry has its own national conferences, and we have our own celebrities. Megachurches hold large events to pass on the secrets of their success in children's ministry. And I'm sure somewhere in all this we've seen God work among the children and families we've been privileged to know. Children's ministry has come a long way since Henrietta Mears, the founder of Gospel Light Publications, mimeographed Sunday-school curriculum in her garage. We've moved out of the shadows and into the limelight of church ministry.

Yet continuing on this track will not meet the needs of the current generation and the generation to come. If we hope to have any effect on the spiritual formation of the children and families that come to our churches in the next 50 years, children's ministry cannot continue as we know it. We need to be thinking about new paradigms, new ways of doing what we're doing, and we need to be thinking about it right now. If we don't, we'll soon find that we've become irrelevant to the families who live in the changing

culture. We'll be scrambling to figure out what happened to everything that looked so shiny and unstoppable at the end of the 20th century.

I began to see this need for a revisioning of children's ministry as I grew to understand the formidable cultural change swirling around us. I heard a speech by a New Testament professor from a prominent midwestern seminary who was speaking to educational ministry professors and teachers. He addressed the subject of postmodernism and the church's response to it. I remember two things from what he said that day. First, he said that those holding a postmodern worldview do not believe in the existence of absolute truth. This statement reminded me immediately of the conversation I'd had years before with that Missions Pastor: I realized that the belief in absolute truth was foundational to so much of Christianity that the postmodern resistance to the idea of absolute truth could be a rather significant problem for the church—we would need to figure out how to answer the “so what” question.

Second, he described a weekly Bible study for business executives that he led in downtown Chicago. He explained that he never went into these sessions armed with formulas and arguments to convince the people of the truth. Instead he simply shared stories of God with them and guided their discussion of these stories. He introduced God to the people and let them decide for themselves. I couldn't help but believe he was on to something. He was proposing a way of bringing people to faith that didn't have anything to do with cut-and-dried teaching methodology. The idea struck a chord in me that day and sent me on the path to where I am today.

The Modern Era

For the last several years, the term *postmodern* has floated around academic and theological circles. (The term is also used in many other disciplines—art, literature, architecture—but it means different things in each context.) Now it is part of the popular vernacular, and yet most of us don't really understand what it means. I'm no philosopher and don't have a philosopher's understanding of the abstract thinking behind the term, but I can tell you how I've come to understand it as a layperson.

In order to understand how something can be postmodern, first we need to understand how something can be modern. Think back to the European history and philosophy classes you had in college or graduate school. Most likely you studied something called the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason that came around 1700 A.D. This era is commonly thought to be the beginning of the modern era. (In light of the church's resistance to postmodernism, it strikes me as quite ironic that my Christian college had no qualms about requiring a course on the Enlightenment.) Your professors may have talked about how philosophies of modernity came about as a reaction to the more superstitious, mystical, and religious thought of the Middle Ages.

During the Enlightenment, men and women (though mostly men) began to discover they could exert some kind of control over their world and conquer parts of it. Life, it was discovered, was not just a serendipitous journey where everyone was at the mercy of circumstances outside of personal control. Machines were invented that could do some tasks better than human beings. And people were discovering that the human ability to reason and solve problems was a useful tool for taming and mastering the external world. Perhaps, the philosophers mused, humans could be the masters of their own destinies. The only things human

beings needed to make the world better was men and women who learned how to think and use their innate talents and skills more effectively. If humans could uncover the mysteries of the world, then perhaps it was no longer necessary to believe in that all-knowing, all-seeing God of the Middle Ages.

Philosophers believed human beings could discover the absolute truth about reality within themselves and that if they thought long enough and hard enough about it, they could solve any problem the world had to offer, eventually perfecting the world and themselves. Many of the thinkers of the Age of Reason had little use for the God of the Bible.

Moderns believe in absolute truth and that all truth is objective. They believe that the final word on all things, the understanding of objective reality, is out there somewhere and humans can find it through our capacity for reason. This objective, absolute truth is not subject to the whims or perceptions of kings, rulers, priests, or cultures. An assertion is true if it accurately and objectively represents the independent, external world. All this knowledge is accessible for all humans; there is nothing we human beings can't know if we just put our minds to it and analyze the problem or the situation. There is nothing humans can't do or understand eventually. Modern thinking holds absolute faith in the rational capabilities of the human mind.

Modernity is scientific. The sciences with their hypotheses, theories, seeming objectivity, and ability to experiment and test for truth are held up as one of the best pathways to absolute knowledge and truth. Modernity prizes analysis. If we can just look at a problem from all sides and use all of our brainpower to figure out the causes and effects, we'll eventually be able to find a solution. The best way to think, then, is logically, linearly, analytically, and unemotionally. Because the world is making progress

in a straight line toward something better, moderns are extremely positive and optimistic about the future.

In addition, modern thinking emphasizes the work and well-being of the individual over and against group and community life. Men and women are on their own in what they accomplish. Each individual is responsible for herself and has the right to make her own decisions and mistakes. Pulling ourselves up or making something of ourselves is more important than the needs or abilities of the greater community. So modernity has great faith in the individuals to grasp and understand the absolute truth about the way things are. Once that truth is applied to individual lives and societal problems in a logical and analytical way, the world will be on its way to perfection. We can think our way to a better life and a better world.

Over the last 300 years, this modern way of thinking has infiltrated our culture—Western culture in particular—so completely that few people have ever considered that it is not necessarily the only way of understanding the world. As the minds of each generation have been formed by this modern way of thinking, so too were the institutions of those generations, including the church. The modern church, therefore, holds to some of these same ideas: the belief that we must defend our faith with solid arguments and spiritual truths, the insistence on personal acts of faith, the idea that the only secure faith is one built on a foundation of absolute, unshakable truth.

The Postmodern Era

Postmodern literally means “after modern.” So when we say we’ve moved into an age of postmodernity, we’re saying that the modern age has passed and we’ve moved into a new paradigm, a new overall worldview.

But these kinds of cultural shifts are never easy—or quick. When the world was moving from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason, not everyone got there at the same time. People didn't wake up on January 1, 1700, look at their calendars, and say, "Goodness! Look at that! We've moved into the Age of Modernity." These cultural changes, while tumultuous and significant, are gradual.

And that's where we are now. We find ourselves in a world slowly leaning toward postmodern but still populated by a lot of people who hold a modern worldview. This leads to conflict and to at least one popular misconception about postmodernism. Lots of speakers and writers like to use the word *postmodern* and generational monikers like *Generation X* or *millennial* interchangeably. They treat the postmodern worldview as a life stage that one will likely outgrow as maturity settles in.

While it's true that many people under 30 tend to think in postmodern ways, viewing the world through postmodern glasses cannot be chalked up exclusively to life stage analysis. Research shows that about 30 percent of Baby Boomers, 50 percent of Baby Busters (or Xers), and 60 percent of millennials have postmodern sensibilities. And although I am squarely part of the Baby Boom generation, I have carried around postmodern sensibilities my entire life. I just didn't know what to call them. I've never felt like I fit in with most Baby Boomers. I've thought and felt differently from most of my peers all my life—and now I know why.

But let's go back to those percentages for a minute. While I strongly believe this is not primarily a generational issue, it's worth noting that those with the strongest tendency toward a postmodern worldview are those currently labeled the Millennial Generation or Generation Y. These are the children we see currently in our churches. The

Millennial Generation has been described as those children born between 1980 or 1982 (social science makes no claims to being an exact science) and 2001. Some generational specialists believe the Millennial Generation ended on September 11, 2001.

So, sitting in your preschool classrooms every Sunday morning are a bunch of cute, curly headed postmoderns! Whether you agree with the postmodern way of thinking or not, ministering to these children demands that you understand their worldview.

Our world's new cultural and intellectual paradigm is truly a shift in the way human beings process information and in the way we view the external world. We're seeing a world where all the old certainties are dissolving. It's no wonder moderns are scared. Everything they've always hung onto as absolute truth, from our safety as a country to the way life is created, is being challenged and questioned. But it's happening. It's here. The church must understand it. And the church must deal with it.

Just as moderns believe there is discernable and knowable absolute truth and objective reality, postmoderns believe there is no overarching truth or ultimate ideal that explains and undergirds all of human existence. Postmoderns believe that reality or truth is always subjective. One's reality or truth grows out of one's perspective and life experiences. It is not imposed from the outside. Therefore, the modern idea of a metanarrative or a grand story that explains everything about the world is greeted with incredulity. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, authors of the book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, explain it this way:

But if metanarratives are social construction, then like abstract ethical systems, they are simply particular moral visions dressed up in the guise of universality. And in falsely claiming universality

while being blind to their own constructed character, metanarratives inevitably privilege unity, homogeneity, and closure over differences, heterogeneity, otherness, and openness. The result is that all kinds of events and people end up being excluded from the way in which the story gets told. No metanarrative, it appears, is large enough and open enough genuinely to include the experiences and realities of all peoples.¹

Okay, that's a mouthful. Let's talk about it some. Big stories whose intent is to explain truth or the meaning of life all had to come from somewhere. That "somewhere" is other human beings. All humans live in some sort of place, country, community, or tribe. All humans live in a subjective context. No one can stand outside of her own reality. Therefore, no big story can ever claim to be objective because it cannot help but be colored by the prejudices, beliefs, customs, and stories of the context from whence it came. (Interestingly, missionaries have understood this for years.) So postmoderns instead acknowledge that one's beliefs and stories are local. They proclaim what is true for that particular community or tribe. What is true for one community is not necessarily true for another. Some postmoderns acknowledge that these big stories can be helpful as explanations of personal reality while others condemn them because the stories are seen as exclusive and closed systems. But they can never be seen as objectively true.

This rejection of the universal truth of the metanarrative poses a problem for Christians because Christians believe they have in their possession the only true metanarrative, the Bible. The story of God's plan for creation is thought to explain all of life, reality, and truth. But it does no good to browbeat people who don't believe in absolute truth with the absolute truth they don't believe in.

Therefore we need to find new ways of looking at the Bible, new ways of talking about the Bible, and new ways of teaching what's in the Bible. And, frankly, this is really what this book is about. We'll deal with this issue more specifically in a later chapter, but for now let me quote a friend of mine on the subject of the Bible as metanarrative: "I like to think of it as the best metanarrative."

This lack of belief in a system of absolute truth translates into the postmodern idea that there is no common standard by which to measure, judge, or value ideas or opinions. What I believe is good, beautiful, moral, or normal is shaped by my environment, context, and culture. Other environments may have other standards as equally valid as the ones I hold. Let me give you two examples that illustrate the pervasiveness of this view in our culture.

A few years back the VH1 cable network aired a show called *The List*. The show revolved around a celebrity host and four celebrity guests. The premise was that the guests would determine the top songs or musical groups in a particular category such as "Best Love Song of All Time" or "Best Girl Group of the 1970s." Each guest listed three songs or groups fitting the category. After all the choices were revealed, each guest removed one of the picks from the list. Then the studio audience voted for their top three picks from the list, thereby determining the best of the category.

Now compiling "best of" or "top 10" lists is nothing new, but in the past, measurable criteria such as the number of records sold, amount of airplay, awards won, or concert grosses would have been used to determine what was best. But in the VH-1 world of *The List*, the only criteria used were the personal feelings, tastes, and preferences of the guests and the studio audience. No one seemed to mind that only subjective criteria were used to determine the winners. That's postmodern thinking.

The year 2000 brought the United States the first post-modern presidential election. In civics and history classes we've been taught that on Election Day Americans go to the polls and cast their votes, and one of the candidates gets more votes than the other and wins the election. What could be a more objective standard than counting votes? But on November 7, 2000, we awoke to a world where the system had broken down, and we had no clear winner. And as it turned out, the candidate with the most votes didn't win. We discovered that, depending on which side one was on, there were different ways to count votes and different ways to cast votes. Americans discovered that despite all the money, time, energy, and intellectual power put into election law and voting procedures, there is no objective criterion for determining who wins a presidential election that, statistically speaking, is a tie.

Nothing But the Truth

This lack of belief in objective standards or absolutes translates into a form of relativism and a love of tolerance. Postmoderns, to a certain degree, say we have no right to judge the behavior, views, beliefs, or opinions of others because there is no standard outside of ourselves and our communities to tell us what is right and what is wrong. Any measuring stick is simply a human construction born from the biases and views of a particular group.

Moderns believe that all knowledge is good and allows humanity to progress toward something better. If we use our reason to the best of our ability, we can solve any problem and make the world better because there is nothing that human reason cannot eventually figure out. Postmoderns don't subscribe to this view that all knowledge is good, nor are they optimistic about the future. As they look out over their world, they don't see things getting better. They see continuing problems with racism,

poverty, violence, sexism, and morality. They are skeptical about the ability of human reason to solve these problems. And they see the havoc human reason has wrought on the world in the forms of nuclear and biological technology.

Postmoderns believe that reason is not the only way to discover knowledge and truth. Emotions, intuition, and other less reasonable modes are valid paths as well. When I was in college and graduate school, an evangelical college ministry marketed an evangelism tool in the form of a booklet. The idea was for the “evangelist” to lead the “prospective convert” through the pages of the booklet that outlined the plan of salvation. After reading through the booklet, the evangelist was to challenge the person to accept Jesus.

Now there are many aspects of this evangelistic approach that would not appeal to the postmodern mind, but I want to focus on one in particular. At the end of the booklet is a drawing of a train. The locomotive, the engine that makes the train move, represents facts or truth. The locomotive of truth pulls a car that represents faith. The faith car is followed by the caboose of feelings. This illustration is meant to symbolize the process of faith: Once you know the reasonable truth (God loves you, you're a sinner, Jesus died for you, etc.), you will be led to have faith in God and accept Jesus as your Savior. A person has to believe these facts in order to become a Christian. Consigning emotion to the caboose is the warning that we can't trust our feelings and can't possibly know God through an emotional connection. A person holding a post-modern worldview would say that's a ridiculous assumption. Postmoderns put as much credibility into feelings, intuition, mystery, and other affective means of understanding as they do reason.

I once heard a well-known film critic dissect the Hollywood mind for his audience, and he expressed concern

that the moral of many films made in the latter half of the 20th century was that a person should always follow his heart. These films tell us that our hearts will guide our choices so we don't need to be concerned about the consequences, he said. This critic was uncomfortable with the concept of personal truth and the idea of trusting emotions rather than human reason and objective standards of behavior. His discussion illustrates one of the points of conflict between the modern and the postmodern mind.

A Certain Line of Thinking

One of the popular criticisms of postmodernism is that it is illogical. To say there is no absolute truth, critics contend, is to state an absolute truth. A postmodern might respond, "So what? A premise doesn't necessarily have to be logical for me to believe it's true." Postmodern minds make interesting connections between data in what is sometimes called "loopy" thinking. The writers of *Seinfeld* understood completely this kind of thinking. Each episode consisted of several seemingly disparate plot lines that eventually crisscrossed each other and came together into a somewhat coherent (yet nonlinear) whole. In one episode the story was told in reverse chronology, starting at the end of the story and ending with the beginning.

A recent independent film, *Memento*, took this conceit to the extreme. It's the story of a man with short-term memory loss who's trying to avenge the murder of his wife—but the whole thing is told backward, starting with the murder and moving back through time. Along the way viewers are introduced to characters who we know will die because they were dead a few moments before.

The recent movie and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours* jumps back and forth between time periods as it tells

the story of three women deeply affected by the same Virginia Wolff novel. The novel is beautifully and compellingly written, and its nonlinear style allows the novelist some plot twists that could not have happened with a more straightforward narrative. *Seinfeld*, *Memento*, or *The Hours* couldn't have been created 25 years ago. Viewers would have found it ridiculous and illogical to play with the chronological, linear order of things.

Real Reality

Moderns believe it is possible to know what is real and what is not. Postmoderns aren't so sure about that. The line between reality and nonreality is blurred and porous, if there is even a line at all.

I have had the opportunity to attend several conventions held at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. The huge, opulent theme hotel has gone to great expense to provide its guests with the experience of being in the lush environs of the Deep South. The central part of the hotel is built to create the world of the Louisiana delta. A river complete with boats winds its way through green and flowery vegetation, passing a street filled with shops designed to resemble New Orleans. The reality is that guests at the hotel are in a suburb of Nashville a few yards off of Interstate 40 and across the street from a Shoney's restaurant. But after spending a few days inside the hotel, it's easy to forget all that and instead enter the world of the Deep South. After a visit to the hotel I feel as though I've experienced the Bayou without ever traveling to the real place.

Disney spends millions of dollars simulating reality for children and families in their theme parks. Computer games and simulations are becoming more and more lifelike. Some people in Hollywood worry that computer-simulated

actors might become so real that they will someday replace human actors. What is real and what isn't? How do we define real? Each day, advances in technology and science make these questions more difficult to answer.

Most of the children in our churches are immersed in this culture and are developing a worldview or way of thinking about things that reflects these postmodern tenets. Remember my earlier note that roughly 60 percent of millennials can be considered postmoderns? This percentage will probably be greater for the next generation, those babies who populate your nursery and toddler ministry. We need to realize that these children—known as adaptives (we'll talk more about them in a moment)—will not see the world the same way we do or even the way postmodern children in their early teens do. These children will not value the same things we value. These children will not understand the things that happen around them in the same way we do. They will not view concepts of truth and reality in the same way we do. This does not mean their outlook on life is wrong and must be changed. It's just different. If we are to minister to these children and their families, we have to understand their way of thinking and change our ways of doing things.

The Coming Generation

The current generation of children has been described as the most protected, most wanted generation. These kids are watched over. They grew up in car seats and seat belts. They all wear bicycle helmets. Their play is organized and regimented. They toddled around childproofed homes. Their teachers and caregivers are all screened with criminal background checks. Video cameras are installed in homes so parents can keep tabs on the baby-sitter. We do everything we can to ensure their safety.

Most of these kids were the result of planned pregnancies. The ease and prevalence of birth control enabled this generation of parents to have children when the time was right rather than have children foisted on them by a random act of nature. Many of these children are chosen children.

The millennials are cyberliterate and technology dependent. These kids were exposed to computers and high-tech gadgets from their earliest days. The Internet culture exposes these children to life around the globe. They can easily communicate with a child from Japan or get information on the Middle East. Exposure to more than a million Web sites reinforces the concept that truth is what one chooses to believe, not some objective standard that stands outside of us. Surfing the Net or hitting links from one screen or Web site to the next actually trains the child's brain to process information in narrative images. It fragments their thinking, which contributes to loopy or nonlinear thinking patterns. Computer usage also contributes to a child's ability to multitask. Every 13-year-old I know can instant message, e-mail, and surf the Web while watching television and talking on the phone. At a summer camp for older elementary school children, I asked how many had CD players, phones, computers, and/or televisions in their bedrooms. A high percentage of them owned two or more of these devices and had easy and somewhat unsupervised access to them. This is a generation of super-multitaskers who will move on quickly to new stimulation when they find boredom creeping in.

This generation is also shaping up to be passionately tolerant of differing opinions, cultures, and lifestyles. They believe in inclusion, not exclusion. Millennials have an emotional and intellectual openness not seen in previous generations, and they value highly personal freedom of choice. Millennials seem to believe intuitively that each person should do what is right for him; that each person

should discover his own truth, his own story of the world, and live that out with integrity. This tolerance of other views and values is classically postmodern. These attitudes will be frustrating to those who hold to an objective standard of right and wrong. But this is the way most millennials think. Those of us who teach and love them will have to work hard at developing innovative ways to help them think through their own personal truths and values.

Generation Y is experience oriented. These kids find meaning and value in immediacy and in living in the moment. They want to experience something before they learn about it. Their mantra for life and learning and acceptance of views and values is “I want to try it.” Only then will they decide if they like the experience or not. They’ve grown up with theme parks simulating every imaginable experience and event and with virtual reality computer games that transport them into fantasies and scenarios they could never access in real life. They want to use all their senses as they learn, and they want their learning environments to provide experiences, not just facts and formulas. They want to do in order to learn. And when it comes to developing a spiritual life—and they are spiritual people—they want to experience God, not just learn about God. They want mystery and mysticism. They don’t just want to be entertained. Theologian Robert Webber quotes a youth director, who says,

What appeals to this new generation is the cathedral and the stained-glass window. Take the pews out, let them sit on the floor, burn incense, have Scripture readings, lots of music, chants even, and have communion, and they say, “Wow, this is me.”²

This generation is not quick to trust adults. Millennials have sensitive truth detectors and they can tell quickly if they are being conned. While they will give adults chances

to prove themselves to be trustworthy; if they are let down by these adults they are unlikely to offer a second chance. They value integrity and honesty. They want people to be authentic with them. In *Kidscreen* magazine a 12-year-old girl said, “Goody-goody characters are very BORING. I like watching characters like Bart Simpson because it’s funny when they get into trouble and then get themselves out of it. They are more real.”³ Because millennials are tolerant and accepting, it doesn’t really matter what you are being real and authentic about—homework, troublemaking, religion—just as long as you are real and authentic.

Because they tend to trust themselves and their own opinions and truth, they don’t put much stock in the directives of authority figures. As I speak with people who work with and teach millennial children, I hear consistently that these kids don’t automatically give their respect to people who are older or in positions of authority. But if one wins their respect through being real and truthful, they will listen.

Even the “truths” about the millennials are open to interpretation. Neal Howe and William Strauss, the gurus of generational studies, say this generation mirrors the World War II generation, known popularly as “the greatest generation.” They say millennials have the potential to be the most civic-minded generation since those of the early to mid 20th century.⁴ Anecdotal evidence seems to bear out their thesis. Just weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I heard a professor from a small college report about her students and their desire to make the world a better place. In talking with them about their futures, this professor found that they wanted to serve their country and help others. Doris Kearns Goodwin, the historian, talks of how one of her young adult sons joined the military after September 11 because he wanted to do something to make a difference for his country.⁵ Recent interviews with

the very young members of our armed forces reinforce this possible millennial desire to make our country and world a better and safer place. There are statistics that suggest that this generation values hard work but not necessarily career prestige; according to one survey more than 92 percent of millennials place high value on volunteer work.

But other researchers disagree. In his book *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, Don Tapscott suggests that this generation will be like Generation X only more so. He believes their independent values, their need for tolerance and inclusion, and their thirst for immediate experience and authenticity will actually act as impediments to their ability to be civic minded and other centered.⁶ In reality the jury is still out on this aspect of the millennial generation. After all, many of them are still children whose identities are up for grabs. Richard Tiplady sums up these contradictions in a newsletter article:

The “millennial” identity is not yet fully formed. They can be seen as currently a mix of “reactive” and “civic” (unlike Generation Xers, who are largely “reactive”). It is possible that millennials will be similar to Xers, but perhaps with more of a leadership orientation. We cannot yet say whether millennials will be a “civic” generation.⁷

What the experts do agree on is that children of this generation have the potential for living unselfish lives. We would do well to expose them to areas of service and mission in our churches.

Pollster George Barna notes that this generation is a spiritual one.⁸ But simply being spiritual does not make one Christian. Millennials are open to the idea of God, but because of their acceptance of all points of view, they don't really know which God they believe in or want to believe

in. They tend to have a pick-and-mix approach to spirituality, not necessarily buying into the complicated systematic theologies or step-by-step discipleship plans of the other modern generations. They are willing to accept certain tenets or values of Christianity, but they see nothing inappropriate about pairing these with ideas culled from Buddhism or other world religions. As postmoderns they don't believe that any one group or religion has the corner on truth. They are looking for an authentic spirituality or faith, one that reflects their stories and experiences, and that works for their lives.

The Adaptives

The personality of the millennial generation will become clearer as they move through childhood and adolescence and become young adults. What we do know about them and their postmodern worldview can help us shape our children's ministries for the next 10 or 15 years. But as I mentioned, we also need to be concerned about the generation coming after the millennials, the babies and toddlers in our churches. People who study generations name this group the "adaptives" or Generation Z. Nearly all of what we know about them is speculative because they are still too young to exhibit any group characteristics. But given the world they've been born into, we can make a few assumptions.

Each generation of the last 50 years has contained more and more members with a postmodern worldview. So it stands to reason that the adaptives will exhibit a greater percentage of those with postmodern sensibilities than even the millennials. So while the millennials will be leaving our spheres of ministry over the next 10 years, the adaptives will be with us for the next 20 to 25 years. This means that as we look to the future of ministry in our churches, we

need to be serious about understanding this worldview and tailoring our visions, plans, and ministries toward the unique challenges of this generation.

The adaptives were (or will be) born after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. They will never have the chance to see the twin towers of the World Trade Center dominating the New York City skyline. These children are born into a world where foreign-born terrorism is no longer an abstract concept or something that happens oceans away. These children will know a world of color-coded terror alerts and the anxiety produced by the stark reality that we could no longer believe we are safe from mass destruction in our own country. It is possible that they will live in a country of diminished civil liberties. This new national uncertainty may lead parents to become even more protective than the parents of millennials. Parents may be reluctant to travel by air or to foreign countries with these children, reluctant to let them take school trips to large cities, and may be more fearful for them each time they are out of sight. Parents may try to provide a safe world for their children in a real world that is increasingly unsafe. Emotionally, this could have a tremendous effect on this generation's ability to trust other people and themselves.

While early millennials were born into a world on the cusp of technological revolution, adaptives come into a world where amazing technology is commonplace and available in some fashion to most everyone. They live in a world where a digital device can record one's favorite television shows without commercials and then, based on those preferences, make assumptions about what other shows one might like and record those, too. They will view VHS tapes as relics in much the same way their parents view 8-track tapes as blasts from the past. They live in a world of DVDs and will never find it curious that the movies they rent and

watch at home come packed with extra materials, directors' commentaries, and behind-the-scenes footage. It's likely they will never have to wait for their pictures to be developed. Their computers and handheld devices will be faster than anything the millennials have.

Rapidly changing technology will continue to allow these children and their parents to tailor life to their needs; you don't need to be home at a certain time to watch a particular television show, and cell phones let parents do a visual check-in with the kids. These children will be more techno savvy than their predecessors and, perhaps, more dependent on technology than earlier generations. New technologies may even redefine how we conduct relationships and how we teach children in all spheres of life.

Adaptives are born into a more ethically murky world than millennials. The tsunami of societal change brought on by postmodern sensibilities has made any pretense of certainty about ethical issues a precarious position to hold. The mapping of the human genome, debates about stem cell research, and strides made in cloning technology have fired up the age-old debate about the way life is created. These kids will grow up in a world hotly debating the nature of marriage and family. The sex scandals in the North American Roman Catholic Church send these children into a world where the traditional moral arbiters of society are seen as suspect and duplicitous. Like the millennials, the adaptives will need to be shown what a good life looks like, not simply taught moral lessons. Competing moralities and competing ethical systems will offer these children a wide variety of choices for making values-based decisions. Continued scientific and technological discoveries will make belief in the certainty of any kind of absolute truth a leap for these children.

Early millennials were born into a country in economic recession and then grew up during the go-go recovery and

economic expansion of the '90s. They saw people not much older than themselves making millions and millions of dollars in dot.com IPOs. Some later millennials may continue to benefit from the economic harvest reaped by their parents during the boom years, but they face dimmer prospects for quick personal wealth.

Adaptives are born into a shaky national economy that—partly because of the threats of terrorism and war—wavers between sliding back into recession or moving into a strong, but curiously jobless, recovery. These children may not have the monetary advantages of their millennial predecessors. They may have to settle for state colleges and universities rather than the Ivy League. Vacations may not be as frequent or as lavish, and these children may live with the effects of a parental employment layoff or career change. Adaptives may not develop the expectations for large salaries and luxury lifestyles that their parents or early millennials did.

Adaptives come into a world where media continues to blur the line between reality and fiction, truth and untruth. More and more television programming is taken over by the reality genre purporting to show regular people acting naturally in contrived situations. But what's shown to the public are outrageous, salacious behavior sometimes engineered by the shows' producers. Journalism scandals at major newspapers call into question the truth of what is reported about world events. Filmmakers' special effects and computer-generated images are so real that we sometimes don't know if we are watching a live actor or a CGI creation. This generation will need to explore and answer questions about what is real and what isn't. And maybe, more importantly, the question: Does it even matter if it's real? This is a generation, even more so than the millennials, for whom the whole nature of truth as we've always known it and thought about it will be called into question.

As I said, during the last 25 years children's ministry in the church has gained respect. Like youth ministry before it, it has become a discipline, a specialization, something those training for church ministry aspire to do. And we've become pretty good at it. But the North American church stands at the crossroads, and those of us who work with children and families stand with it. We can continue on the path we're on, the one cleared by our ministry celebrities and parachurch children's ministry organizations. Taking that path will continue to garner us success for a while. But if we ignore or, perhaps worse, fight against the tidal wave of change taking place in our world and in our children, the respect and influence we've gained will come to a quick end. This is the path that will do damage to our children, our churches, and our faith.

The other path is uncharted. Some seminal, creative thinkers and practitioners have begun to clear the way, but the path is still overgrown with brambles and can lead us toward false turns. It's the path of embracing and understanding postmodern sensibilities, not fighting or denying them. It's the path of thinking creatively about bringing a discussion of faith and the Christian story to our children in both new and old ways. It's the path of rethinking how we help our kids experience the story, how we help our church communities and families experience the story with their children, and how we find in the story new and delightful and unsettling ideas about God and God's relationship to creation and the future.

Notes

1. Middleton, J. Richard and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, InterVarsity Press, 1995, 71.
2. Youth director quoted by Robert Webber "Faith: New Generation Is Looking Back," Uwe Sieman-Netto, United Press International.
3. From *KidScreen* magazine, quoted in *Children's Ministry*, July/August 2003, 3.
4. Strauss, William and Neal Howe, *Millennials Rising*, Vintage, 2000.
5. Doris Kearns Goodwin interview, Don Imus Radio Show, 2003.
6. Tapscott, Don, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, McGraw-Hill, 1999. Quoted by Richard Tiplady, *Global Connections*, June 2000.
7. Richard Tiplady, *Global Connections* newsletter, June 2000.
8. Barna, George, *Generation Next*, Regal Books, 1995, 18-21.