

## After Weeklong Retreat With Youth Group, Pastor Shares Impressions About Teenagers

### In the News

David Gushee, interim pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia, recently had what he describes as "a weeklong immersion experience" with his church's youth group while they were on retreat together in Panama City, Florida. Afterward, on the church's website, he shared with his congregation what he called "a completely unscientific set of impressions about characteristics of today's teenagers." That article was then picked up as a column by *Religious News Service*, where it was published under the title, "My Visit to the Land of Teenagers."

Gushee started by noting that just about every one of the two dozen kids in the group was born in the 21st century, and thus have no memory of 9/11 and were too young in 2007-2008 to be aware of the financial crash. "I wonder how much their consciousness has been shaped by historical events at all," Gushee said.

What the kids seemed to know a lot about, said Gushee, were the words of every contemporary song they heard from every music collection they listened to from multiple iPhones during the six-hour drive to their retreat site. They were also up on the latest memes from YouTube, Twitter and other media, the pastor said.

The pastor was pleased to see that the kids were completely and unself-consciously racially inclusive. "They are real easy with each other across racial lines, almost as if the lines no longer exist for them," Gushee said. "I thank God for where they are on this. They have much to teach their elders."

Of concern to Gushee was the fact that only about half of the young people had any real familiarity with the Bible, and even those who did, "apparently hadn't been taught much," he said. But, he credited those kids for bringing with them friends who had no religious background.

The agenda for the retreat gave Gushee five sessions to give the kids an overview of the Bible, but he found that he had to start "almost entirely from scratch," explaining the organization of the Bible, including such basics as the book/chapter/verse system, the main sections and "the whole Israel and the church thing," the pastor said.

This led Gushee to conclude that for most kids, Christianity is no the longer the language spoken at home, as it was for many of today's adults when they were young. "Ariana Grande, Beyoncé, Ed Sheeran, and the meme of the week are this generation's native language, while everything else is a second or third language," Gushee said.

Thankfully, the kids seemed eager to learn, Gushee observed, but added that the challenge is daunting. "How do we communicate the Christian faith in such a way that kids will care enough to first make the effort to learn this new language, and then decide that they want it to become the central language in their own life?" Gushee asked. "Are we attempting a direct challenge to the mainstream culture that is wired directly into their brains via their earbuds, or are we merely supplementing it with a new addition? And in a cultural moment relentlessly tuned to the new and latest, how do we make a 2,000-year-old religion seem anything other than musty and ancient?"

From what he observed at the retreat, the pastor concluded that it's necessary "to draw meaningful connections between what is going on in their lives and what is said in the Bible." Gushee explained that "Job's question about why innocent people suffer, Ecclesiastes on whether life is really meaningful, Song of Solomon on romantic passion, and the prophetic cry for justice, Jesus' teachings about love of God and neighbor -- these and much more still speak if we know how to help students draw the connections."

**Every generation is an opportunity for the church to grow, or die. How can we ensure that the Youth of today become the church leaders of tomorrow?**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Galatians 6:2**

*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (No context needed.)*

Each new generation has its own challenges, and in a sense, any meaningful ministry to a younger generation needs to try to understand what it's like to be young today -- which can be a burden-bearing of sorts.

**Questions:** What "burdens" of youth can we in the church help them bear? What of our "burdens" can they help us bear?

### **Deuteronomy 6:4-7**

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (For context, read 6:1-9.)*

Note the instruction to recite the commandment to love God to one's children at home. Ideally, the church's religious instruction supplements what is done in the home, but in reality, for some young people, the church is the only source of such teaching.

**Questions:** How well do you understand the real pressures of youth? When you were a young person, what, if anything, helped you embrace the Christian faith for yourself? What can you personally do to help teens in your church learn the importance of faith in Christ now?

### **Ephesians 6:4 (NIV)**

*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (For context, read 6:1-4.)*

This is part of Paul's instructions for Christian family life.

**Questions:** What does it mean to bring up children in the Lord without exasperating them? What about Christian instruction can be exasperating? Give examples from your own experience.

### **2 Timothy 3:16**

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness ... (For context, read 3:10-17.)*

Most Christians affirm the importance of scripture for living a life of faith, but sometimes we allow the young people in our churches to pass through without being exposed to much teaching about the Bible. Pastor Gushee noted that even the kids raised in his church didn't have a lot of Bible knowledge.

**Questions:** What are some ways we can include Bible teaching in youth group activities? Who is a good person to do such teaching? How can we highlight the relevance of the Bible for young people today?

**Prayer for Young Persons (BCP p.829)**

God our Father, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you, and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*