

Gen Z is made of zombies — less educated, more depressed, without values

By [Todd Farley](#) August 21, 2021 8:27am [Updated](#)



Each new school year, Jeremy Adams, a teacher in Bakersfield, Calif., gives the same lesson. When he shows pictures of celebrities like Kendall Jenner or Miley Cyrus to his students on a screen, they immediately recognize them. But faced with photos of policymakers like Mike Pence or Nancy Pelosi, the children stare blankly.

That ignorance is no joke to Adams, he writes in his new book, [“Hollowed Out: A Warning About America’s Next Generation”](#) (Regnery Publishing), out now.

“We need to brace ourselves for what lies ahead. I write this book as an alarm bell ... a project born out of worry, concern and frustration.”

A National Teacher of the Year nominee, Adams frets that today’s youngsters are “barren of the behavior, values and hopes from which human beings have traditionally found higher meaning ... or even simple contentment.” Adams calls them “hollowed out,” a generation living solitary lives, hyperconnected to technology but unattached from their families, churches or communities. He cites statistics showing teen depression rose 63 percent from 2007 to 2017 while teen suicide grew 56 percent. Tragically, he writes, suicide has become the second leading cause of death for the young.



While teachers once helped students become their “best selves” by putting the focus on curriculums, lesson plans and test scores, he writes, that’s given way to trying to “understand” young people through programs emphasizing suicide and depression awareness, human trafficking concerns, or bullying, gangs and shootings.

Adams blames the dissolution of the American family for this shift, with marriage rates down and the number of traditional two-parent homes plummeting. Although studies have shown that regular family dinners leads to less youth “smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use, violence, school problems, eating disorders and sexual activity,” most of Adams’ students say they eat dinner alone each night, focused not on family but the device in their hand.

“The neglect of family life is one of the greatest causes of the hollowing out not only of students, but of American life,” Adams writes.

He also bemoans the evaporation of religious life. While only 2 percent of Americans identified themselves as “atheists” in 1984, that number was 22 percent by 2020. A college religion professor notes that when he discusses Matthew from the Bible, many students think he’s talking about Matthew Perry of “Friends.” And Luke? His students assume it’s the guy from “Beverly Hills, 90210.”



Adams writes that kids easily recognize celebrities, but have little familiarity with our country's leaders — and most couldn't pass a citizenship test.

Religion has been replaced by “a mass culture of ‘banality, conformity, and self-indulgence,’ ” Adams writes, not to mention an obsession with technology. He notes that in the 1970s, more than 50 percent of high schoolers hung out with friends “every day,” but by 2020, that number had dropped below 33 percent. Modern high schoolers regularly forgo traditional activities like Friday night football games to hunker down alone, “watching Netflix, Hulu, or Disney+.” That helps explain why in 2012, 49 percent of teens ranked “in person” as their favorite way to talk, but in 2018, only 32 percent did.

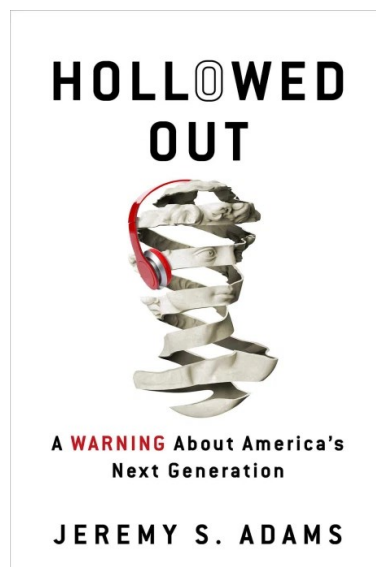
Modern students constantly text during classes, Adams says, or watch streaming services during Zoom meetings, living in a state that psychiatrists call “continuous partial attention.” Studies show the average Gen Z student uses five electronic devices and has an 8-second attention span, which results in “lower grades, diminished ability to concentrate, and stunted academic achievement.”

Adams predicts that today's young people will be unprepared for the future. In 2014, a US general was [quoted](#) saying “the quality of people willing to serve has been declining rapidly,” with 71 percent of current 17- to 24-year-olds ineligible due to obesity, criminal records, or mental health or drug issues.

Meanwhile, a recent survey highlighted that while 70 percent of senior citizens could pass a US citizenship test, less than 20 percent of those under 45 could, Adams writes.

Not that today's youngsters seem to care.

“I never hear young people professing love for their country,” Adams writes. “I used to. But not lately. That is when I really think teachers have a front row seat for America's decline.”



Gather and go: Youth ministry in a pandemic world

The first week of quarantine, way back in March, I received a text from a youth ministry friend in Colorado. She asked if I'd be willing to hop on a Zoom call with the youth ministers in Denver to offer some insights in how to navigate doing ministry with teens and young adults in the midst of a pandemic. I jokingly replied: "I mean, I don't know how to do ministry with teens and young adults in the middle of a pandemic, but I can act like I know how to do it. So sure."

A week later, 35 faces on a Zoom call stared back at me as I shared a few ideas on how to stay connected with teens while providing challenging and engaging content to help them continue to learn the Faith, all in a digital and socially distanced way. We talked about how to help young people process the uncertainty and fear surrounding cancelled events and an abruptly ended school year, especially for graduating seniors who wouldn't be able to put a period to the end of their high school education sentences. We chatted about what we could do to help a teen feel special, such as dropping off a favorite Sonic drink or sending a handwritten note in the mail. We even discussed ways to specifically pray for young people right now, lifting them up and begging for fortitude, wisdom, patience and understanding to fill their hearts.

But even with a good conversation and fruitful and helpful ideas being shared, I hung up the Zoom call still greatly worried that there really is no way to answer the question, "How do we minister to teens and young adults in the middle of a pandemic, and in the following months and years of a pandemic?"

And perhaps that's OK.

It's not like any of us have ever done this before. Unless we hire the few remaining centenarians who lived through the Spanish Flu in 1918, we're sort of flying blind here. I'm not entirely sure that's a bad thing.

In the face of uncertainty and confusion, while standing on the precipice of a global crisis that's affected everything from the education system and the economy to how to buy groceries and ways to worship while keeping congregations safe, perhaps we have a chance to completely and entirely change the youth ministry game, throw out the rule book, and approach our young people differently than we ever have before.

The traditional structure

For years, we've relied on really two central things when it comes to youth and young adult ministry: gatherings that seek to form community and spend time in worship, and events where we can build excitement, learn and consume content, and provide a space for those gatherings to take place. Whether big or small — a national event in a football stadium with 20,000 teenagers to the small Bible study in the parish hall, tube lights flickering overhead, highlighting the hideousness of the '70's linoleum floor — the events and gatherings of youth and young ministry have been the backbone of how we've connected with, ministered to and worked with young people.

In the blink of an eye, those gatherings couldn't happen, and those events (at least for the spring and summer of this year) were cancelled, and we have found ourselves quickly scrambling. Because those are the things we do in youth ministry: We gather and we go. And now we can't gather or go hardly anywhere.

So Zoom calls and FaceTimes and Instagram Lives were thrown on the schedule. Online conferences became an industry unto themselves. We have tried to recreate the ways we normally connect in a digital way, and with some small measure of

success. Online events and small group gatherings have helped keep young people connected and feeling less isolated, to be sure, but they will never replace the high-five a youth minister gives a teen after he walks out of confession for the first time since second grade or the jumping up and down at a concert after adoration is over at the summer youth conference, a joyful community celebrating God's goodness exposed to them all. Watching Mass online will never be as good as sitting in a basketball arena with a few thousand peers, worshiping joyfully, resolved with a new commitment to take faith seriously at home. Showing up for a movie night in the backyard of the parish youth house, a Chick-fil-A spread in the kitchen and sodas in the fridge, is not something we can really do from our own homes. Weekend retreats and summer camps and Bible studies can happen in some small measure, sure, but it hasn't been the same for a while, and it doesn't look like it will be in the near future.

But we can still talk, and share and listen. We can still help young people read Scripture, learn to pray, listen to the wisdom of mentors and teachers, and talk with their peers about their struggles and fears, hopes and joys. We can still help young people listen for the still small voice of God himself, who comes to us in the quiet and softens our hearts as we hurt.

Walking with them

Moving forward, in the post-pandemic world (or at least the post-shutdown/quarantine world), walking with young people will still be an absolutely essential work of the Church. Pope Francis tells us in *Christus Vivit* that young people are a holy ground by which God can be encountered, and walking alongside them is a privilege — the very work of Christ himself who walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Perhaps that walk, with just two disciples at a time, is what we have to do now (6 feet apart, of course).

Jesus asked questions on the road to Emmaus; he wanted to know what was on their minds. This is a job we must do as we leave quarantine and begin to slowly gather back together, whenever that might happen. Asking how our young people have been doing, and what they're feeling, is an essential first step in rebuilding connections and helping them feel safe and part of the community once again.

But Jesus asked the questions and then had the patience to listen to the answers. This will be an essential part of our youth ministry work as well — letting young people process, tell us how they feel and express their confusion, anger, doubt and worries without fear of immediate judgment or correction.

As they walked on that road to Emmaus, away from Jerusalem, Jesus gave these two disciples place and space to gather their thoughts and go, even in the wrong direction. In some sense, he did with them what we have traditionally done in youth ministry — gather our young people and go places to do things. Even in this post-pandemic world, we can gather and go, but perhaps it's gathering together with dialogue, discussion and going somewhere new and different, to understand the present moments.

Jesus begins to teach and unpack the present moment only after he has listened to the two disciples. He teaches both eloquently and with force, and he is able to do so because he's earned a measure of trust, because he listened. At some point we'll begin to gather together again, and as we do so to process thoughts and feelings, and reunite our communities of young people to begin to pray, worship and play together, we'll be called upon to offer insights about what has happened and offer hope for what is to come. And that must be done with a hopeful, joyful, even challenging force, to help young people find some stability and structure after months (perhaps) without it.

Jesus earns himself a dinner invite as they walk to Emmaus that day, and he stays a while with them. They break bread, and it is then that they immediately recognize who he is — the risen Lord, present in the time they've spent together and in the bread blessed and broken at the table. Their hearts burn within.

Our gatherings and our goings will be to places within hearts and minds, not just youth rooms and well-produced events. Our gatherings and goings will be in smaller groups, with more intentional time spent on conversations about hard things. Our gatherings and goings will be to Mass together that we missed. Our gatherings and goings will look different, but perhaps that's a good thing.

From here on out, in a world vastly different than we've seen before, our gatherings and goings with young people will not just look like they always have. Instead, we have a chance to focus more intentionally on each young person's journey — how they're praying, where they hear God's voice, what hopes they have and fears they carry. It's good that our approach has to change to one that is more personal, intentional and focused on forming a disciple. Perhaps that's what the Church has needed for a while: youth and young adult ministry that doesn't just gather and go, business as usual, but one that gathers, grows the heart and goes out to set the world ablaze with the love of the Lord.

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