

Part

I



Raising
Ministering
Youth

PART ONE INTRODUCTION



Vision for the Joshua Generation

The age-old saying remains true: “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” The early years of home life exert powerful formative influences on our children. Many of today’s youth require extensive healing from wounds inflicted in the home or from the absence of healthy parenting. Our primary goal as Christian parents must be to raise our kids in homes free of influences that tear them down and filled with influences that build them up in the Lord.

The chapters in this section highlight some of our adventures in child raising, both at home and in other significant spiritual contexts. As we parented our kids, we had no idea they would become dedicated ministers at such early ages – in their teens. Looking back, we can discern some family practices, parental attitudes, and church experiences we feel contributed to making them who they are in God. With humility we offer these to you. The last thing we want, however, is for our readers to take these concepts as an ironclad formula for producing ministering youth. Please be sensitive to the Spirit’s prompting if you choose to adopt any of our suggestions. Only if He anoints them to you will our ideas bear healthy fruit in your situation. We know full well that God’s grace and mercy account for any profitable parenting we have done.

Everything begins somewhere. Ultimately, of course, this book’s account of kids who grew into teen ministers began as God’s idea. We believe the Lord is raising up ECA and similar youth ministries across the world because it is His intention to send forth a vast army of radical young disciples at this time in history. Through them He intends to shake and harvest the world for Jesus. We know from Scripture that what He intends to do He first announces prophetically: “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). It is appropriate, therefore, that we begin by sharing a prophetic message given to Lynn when she was a teenager herself.



THE VERY EARLY YEARS

At age nineteen, I realized that Jesus Christ is God and invited Him to be my Savior and Lord. This was during the Jesus Movement, a move of God's Spirit that drew thousands of American countercultural youth to Christ in the early seventies. Bruce accepted the Lord at nearly the same time, when he was twenty-two. We started attending Immanuel Baptist Church in Wilmington, Delaware, where we received warm nurture and foundational discipleship from Pastor Ed Miller and many wonderful Christians.

In a short time we were given responsibility as leaders of the Jesus Movement in our city of Wilmington, Delaware. Pastor Ed, seminary-trained and every bit the professional clergyman, displayed an exceptional ability to trust us to manage our ministry as we believed God was giving it to us. This trait was God's sovereignty at work. Had this special pastor not displayed it, we could not have learned to minister as we did. We had almost complete use of the church resources — including office space, meeting areas, and counseling rooms. That generous congregation even housed a few of the brothers among us for many months in the third floor of their office building, without charge. Clearly Pastor Ed and Immanuel Church modeled for us then what we ended up doing for our own youth ministry, ECA, some twenty-five years later. Thank God for this excellent example of adults who trusted ministering youth in the early days of the Wilmington Jesus Movement. Our present was exciting and our future seemed filled with unlimited possibilities.

Within a year, however, through a series of difficulties, we left that caring church home. I was already estranged from my own family because I had married Bruce before finishing college. The good times turned rough. We were isolated from the Body of Christ, expecting our first child, living with Bruce's stepmother (who was experiencing marital difficulties), and Bruce was making a hand-to-mouth living selling vacuum cleaners door to door. Our present was dismal and our future looked bleak.

One hot afternoon in June, I was reading upstairs in our room at Bruce's parents' home. I was not feeling particularly spiritual because I was very wounded emotionally and not thinking much about God at the time. I say this to show you I was not in the most responsive mood for a visitation from the Holy Spirit.

As I was reading Leon Uris' *Exodus*, a book about the rebirth of Israel as a nation in 1948, the Holy Spirit suddenly started speaking clearly into my thoughts, almost as an audible voice: "Yours is the Moses Generation," I sensed Him saying. "You are carrying a child who is part of the Joshua Generation. It is this generation that will go into the Promised Land. Your generation will give birth to the Joshua Generation. It is your generation's responsibility to train and prepare the Joshua Generation to go into the promised land." I put my book down in amazement.

This event took place in 1972, long before any generation had been referred to as "the Joshua Generation." Although this was definitely a strong and memorable spiritual experience, frankly it didn't mean much to me at the time.

I was nineteen years old, very pregnant, discouraged about my own family's alienation from me, and not excited at all about the next generation! I was going through enough of my own problems dealing with my new marriage and my own personal life. My present felt awful and I had no desire to think about the future.

Time passed. Bruce quit selling vacuum cleaners. Both of us enrolled at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware, Bruce as a graduate student in English and I as an undergraduate in the same field. From 1972 to 1978 we led informal praise and prayer meetings; first at our

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university apartment and then in various leased facilities as more people attended. In 1978 Bruce was ordained as a minister by Immanuel Church and commissioned by them to start a college-age mission church. We then formally founded Newark Christian Fellowship (NCF), where both of us now serve on the pastoral staff.

Years passed. The rest of our five children were born and raised in the context of the ministries of NCF. Throughout this time I didn't think at all about the prophetic word given to me in 1972. Then the mid-nineties arrived. Our church youth were starting to be released as radical, fiery disciples of Jesus. Previously shy youth started to preach, prophesy, evangelize, and do warfare against the enemy as fearless warriors of God who had purposed to take their generation for Christ. Youth would speak words that would change the spiritual atmosphere. I recognized a revival anointing settling upon them. God was clearly doing something new among them, but it felt somehow

familiar. Was God starting a new move of His Spirit? Then I remembered the Lord's word to me in the summer of 1972. This was that — the fulfillment of His prophetic word. The Joshua Generation had arisen! ECA and similar youth revival ministries now emerging in the Church worldwide are being birthed by God, I believe, as part of His grand design to sweep an entire generation into the Kingdom.

The Lord is asking my generation a crucial question in this hour. Are we — adults from the Moses Generation — willing to fulfill our part of His vision for the Joshua generation? Are we willing to turn our attention away from our own concerns to what is a divinely given

assignment: to nurture and train the youth in our churches so that both generations — Joshua and Moses — can go into

the promised land together? Will we be partners with youth in the worldwide harvest now coming on the earth? Our church and Bruce and I have said “yes” to this question. Will you?

MY TIME OF ANGUISH

This book concerns what has unfolded among our youth since we answered that question in the affirmative. But the job hasn't always been easy, particularly for me as a mom. I'd like to share a very personal part of my journey with you and hopefully encourage you parents who may be going through similar situations.

When one of our children was fourteen, he started to go in an unhealthy direction. For the next several years, we watched him make choices that negatively affected his spiritual life. Try as we did through prayer, counseling, and various forms of discipline, we seemed to be powerless to stop his series of bad choices. I often had dreadful, graphic pictures in my mind of each of my children going over a cliff, falling to their destruction, while I stood by, helpless to rescue them.

But God has been faithful. Those dire mental images did not materialize. In fact, three of my five children are currently core leaders of ECA, and my prodigal has come to know the Lord. My fifth child is only ten years of age but is already demonstrating a strong desire to serve God. The Lord did not leave me in my desperate condition but through that situation gave me two specific keys to help prepare our children to go into the Promised Land.

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KEY #1: RELEASE YOUR ANGUISH TO THE LORD THROUGH INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Like barren Hannah in the Old Testament, in my darkest moments I believed I might be fruitless in my effort to raise my children for God. As my son made more and more wrong choices, I grieved more and more. I was desperately fearful for him and concerned that he would set a negative standard that all my other children would follow.

In her grief, Hannah made a good decision: she decided to bring her intense sorrow to the Lord. As she did this, her praying was so unusually focused and consuming that Eli, the priest, concluded she was drunk. He changed his opinion later, though, and said to her, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him.” She saw this as God’s answer, thanked Eli, and happily returned home (1 Sam. 1:10-18). Something had shifted in the spiritual realm for Hannah. She no longer grieved

in prayer before the Lord. Somehow, through her agonized praying, faith had come. She had, as the veteran prayer warriors call it, “prayed through.”

It happened like that for me too. As I became more and more concerned for my son, I asked several other parents of troubled teens to fervently and diligently pray for all our kids with Bruce and me. They agreed. Things looked pretty dismal for us all at the beginning. It seemed the more we prayed, the worse our kids’ situations became. Two of our group’s teens ended up in prison and two became pregnant. Not an encouraging start!

On one particular night, however, as we were praying as usual, suddenly we all sensed something shift in the spiritual

realm. Collectively we started to laugh and laugh, before that particular phenomenon had become commonplace. As we parents ended our many minutes of laughter, we knew something had changed. Like Hannah, without anything being different in the visible realm, we could go our way and be confident concerning the concerns of our hearts. Through months of praying, somehow we had pulled down heaven’s substance of confident faith. This faith was now in our spirits as a sure promise — an unshakeable assurance of God’s good work in the lives of our difficult children.

So the first key to reclaiming your kids and preparing them to be released as the Joshua Generation, is this: pray, pray, and pray some more! I don’t think you have to be real eloquent at prayer (we weren’t), but you do have to be committed, diligent, and fervent. You have to mean what you pray — really desire the answer, based on clear knowledge of His will from Scripture. God delights to reward those who approach Him with this kind of focus and dedication in prayer.

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KEY #2: RELEASE YOUR CHILDREN FULLY INTO HIS HANDS

America has the longest adolescence in the world. Unlike other cultures, we do not establish an exact age of transition when our children become adults. Many Christian parents whom I have spoken with believe that their children do not become adults until their mid-twenties. This confirms some of the research that shows that most Americans see adulthood as occurring around age twenty-five. This is quite different from the expectations of certain other times in

American history and of other present day cultures. During the agricultural age in America, youth understood that they became adults in their late teens. As boys became adults, they graduated to working with their dads on the farm or in the family business. Girls married and found purpose in their new adult roles as housewives and mothers.

In the past, religions in America also clearly marked the transition between youth and adulthood. Catholics did this through confirmation, Jews through bar and bas mitzvah events. While still conducted, these ceremonies no longer seem to be as meaningful in American culture as markers from youth into adulthood.

It seems that the closest Americans come to celebrating this transition is the high school graduation party. But this occasion is not a true transition marker because it does not bestow any more responsibility or status on the young adult. The adolescent is further confused because he or she is treated either as an adult or youth depending on the situation: driving at sixteen; voting at eighteen; drinking at twenty-one. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin has labeled the adolescent in contemporary society a “marginal” person who is trapped between childhood and adulthood.

Other countries more successfully mark a distinct transition between childhood and adulthood. Japan, for instance, holds an “Adults Day” celebration for all youth who have reached age eighteen. On this day the mayors of each Japanese city welcome these new adults into community life. This establishes a clear line of transition between adolescence and adulthood.

Because contemporary American society fails to offer this clear transition marker, entrance into adulthood for American youth is an ambiguous event. This ambiguity produces serious repercussions. Possibly the widespread generational rebellion of the sixties was partially caused by youth attempting to establish their own unique rites of passage into adulthood, the more traditional ones having become meaningless. Perhaps some of the present

generation’s choices — violent gangs, body piercings, drug and alcohol abuse, and experimentation with bizarre forms of spirituality — are adolescents’ attempts to make their own initiation rites into adulthood. I believe Christian adults must give youth clear transition markers and better ways of celebrating their transition into adulthood.

Another obstacle in a teenager’s growth into maturity is that American parents often have their kids’ futures mapped out for them in meticulous detail. It is part of the American dream for children to graduate high school and college before entering the work force. This standard parental expectation may or may not be a good thing, depending on God’s will for that child.

However, many of the Christian parents I have advised as a guidance counselor view their plans for their kids as non-negotiable. God’s will does not really enter into the equation. Parental will is presumed to be God’s will.

A further hindrance to a smooth transition from youth to adulthood is that Americans require their youth to go from one stage of life to another with little or no training. Developmental psychologists call this a high degree of discontinuity in our contemporary society. Youth are expected to graduate from high school and enter adulthood with little real-life preparation in how to be responsible in adult roles. They are also expected to know how to be mature marital partners as well as nurturing parents with little training in either area of life. In other words, life stage transitions are abrupt and confusing for American youth, with no continuity from one stage to the next.

Many other cultures manage life transitions in a more continuous way. In Samoa, for instance, older adults understand the importance of mentoring children and youth. Young children have a functional place in the society from early childhood; they are given meaningful tasks that have relevance to what they will be doing later in life. Young children take care of younger children. They also plant and harvest crops, working alongside adults to learn from an

early age the expectations of adult life. Understandably, their transition into adult roles is smooth and much less stressful than for American youth.

Sadly, I don't see a pattern of life stage continuity within most churches either. Most Christian youth do not believe they have places of significant value and ministry in their churches. This must change. We adults must learn to give our youth a place within our churches, and we must give them meaningful work to do alongside adults. Once we make the paradigm shift from a discontinuous to a continuous culture within our minds and spirits, new ideas about bringing our youth into adult church roles will start to flow.

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I believe the Joshua Generation (X and Y) has a special call on them as an entire generation. I believe many of them will not go the normative route into marriage and career. They are destined to serve the Lord in unconventional ways. Some will indeed be directed by the Lord to go to college to become business executives, doctors, etc., but many will be told just as validly by Him to become missionaries or worship leaders, Christian artists or youth pastors — perhaps without higher educational training as a prerequisite. We must not dictatorially decide God's will for our children's futures. We must give serious attention to their own heart desires and their personal sense of leading from the Holy Spirit.

We parents must completely release our plans for our children to the Lord so that His will can be done in their lives, no matter how unusual the unfolding of His will may appear to us. We must prepare this generation to follow God's destiny for them, not control their decision-making to fulfill our own needs or dreams. We must allow the Joshua Generation to be who they are

meant to be, to walk out their special destiny in God in their unique way. Certainly we can and should guide and counsel them to help them discern the Lord's will in their lives. But we must be careful not to dominate them by imposing our personal expectations on their life paths. The Joshua generation in Scripture did things very differently than the Moses generation. We must be willing to come alongside this new generation and do those things necessary for their growth, without compelling them to do things our way.

My prodigal is now a Christian and part of our church. He is married to a lovely Christian woman who is expecting their second child. My son serves the Lord by giving witness to his faith in the context of a secular rock band. His fellow band members report that he is unbelievably stubborn and tenacious about his Christianity! God graciously heard my anguished cries.

Are we willing to cry out and intercede for the Joshua generation? Will we then be willing — as we see Christ formed in them — to give them fully to the Lord's plans even if their ways or methods don't meet our needs or go along with our plans? Are we willing to set them free to follow their call to lead their generation and others into the Promised Land of worldwide revival and harvest? Let's resolve to do our part so we can all go in together!

Please consider the "What Do You Think?" questions on the next page.

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What Do You Think?

Parents

Examine your heart. Are you truly willing to pay the price for your kids to come to God?

How much influence do you think parents have in shaping their kids' spiritual destinies?

If you knew that praying every day for your kids would bring them to God, would you do it?

What stops you from doing this now?

Can you trust God to do what He needs to in the life of your child?

Have you released your children's futures fully into the Lord's hand?

Are you willing to accept God's call to career for your kids instead of your idea of His call?

Do you think you can advise your older children without controlling them?