

## Reaching & Ministering to “Spiritual Orphans” in Your Community

The rise of “spiritual orphans” in our communities is a reflection of the true state of the family in today’s American culture. I define this category of student as those who have come to Christ, but who do not have the spiritual support system in place to grow in Him, or they are young people who do not have any Godly adult influences in their lives.

According to a recent national survey, almost 65% of Americans come to Christ between the ages of 4 and 14<sup>1</sup>. This is an important reality for any church to think through. If your children’s ministry and student ministry are reaching young people for Christ, you undoubtedly have connections with spiritual orphans as a part of your ministry.

Plus, we are living in a culture today where most likely the “good, Christian family” does not exist. According to recent statistics, more and more couples are living together without being married; the number of single-parent homes in the US is growing dramatically; there is a changing definition of “family” and there is a growing number of households in America that do not fit the classification of a “traditional” family; and the number of dysfunctional or fractured families is also increasing<sup>2</sup>.

Theologically, of course, there’s no such thing as a spiritual orphan:

- God loves us so much that He sent His Son so that we can have a relationship with Him – John 3:16 and 1 John 4:10.
- Through Jesus Christ, we are adopted into God’s family – Ephesians 1:4-5.
- Also, through a personal relationship with Christ, we become children of God, and are actually “heirs” of God – Romans 8:16-17.
- God Himself cares deeply for human orphans – Psalms 68:5.

Humanly however, the likelihood of us having the opportunity to minister to spiritual orphans is great. If we are seeing kids come to Christ, there will be several of them who are from households with very little Godly influence. This fact presents our ministries with a huge responsibility to help these young people become assimilated or integrated into the Christian community.

### Ministering to “Spiritual Orphans” –

Here are 5 strategic suggestions for your church to consider:

1. **Creatively and effectively present the Gospel.** We must never forget the truth of Romans 10:15, *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* God brings people into His family through His Word, and people grow in Christ through His Word. Because we are very likely to have a growing number of kids without any other spiritual influence in their lives, it will be imperative for us to make the clear communication of God’s Word a top priority in our ministries.
2. **Provide Godly adult mentors.** Most of today’s students will respond positively to the influence of significant adults who care enough to build growing and healthy relationships with them. (Of course, it is imperative to build safeguards into our ministries including a well-defined and implemented “child protection policy<sup>3</sup>”.) However, Godly mentors can provide a new layer of inter-generational relationships in your church’s ministry to young people<sup>4</sup>. Many of the kids you reach for Christ today will be from households without the positive influence of significant adults. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for the church today to be inter-generational<sup>5</sup> in its ministry philosophy and programming.
3. **Show them God at work in the lives of their peers.** One of the key advantages of any local church is the larger community of God’s people. Positive peer pressure is so important for kids. If we can help spiritual orphans see God at work in and through the lives of other young people, they will begin to see this activity as the norm. Churches must never be dominated by fun-and-games, nor should they be entertainment-driven in their programming. Activities like that are important of course, but only as a way (along with other means of programming) to show the reality of Jesus Christ in life. All new believers need to see that other Christian can have fun, and that it is exciting to serve the Lord and to live out their faith in real-life situations.
4. **Help them connect with the total church.** God designed His church to be inter-generational. The end result of student ministry is not participation in youth group. It must be that kids grow up on and go on for God as

adults<sup>6</sup>. We must grasp the fact that youth ministry was never designed as a terminal program where our students graduate from high school and then walk away from God’s church. We can help connect them to “big church” via intentional involvement in serving, giving, worship, teaching and preaching, outreach, and other means of developing sweat equity. Young adults are much less likely to walk away from involvement in church when they become adults if they have been personally involved in church-wide activities when they were kids.

- 5. Encourage good families to “adopt” spiritual orphans.** It’s interesting that the world grasps this idea and yet the church falls behind in implementing it. The general community where you live probably has programs like “foster kids” or “big brothers & big sisters”, where solid families take an active role in building relationships with kids from broken or dysfunctional households. Why shouldn’t the church lead the way in this kind of ministry? Probably churches leaders will need to paint the vision of how this could work. But the concept is sound - and it works. Good parents can be motivated to “adopt” kids who need to see what positive family relationships look like by including them in typical family activities like meals, sports, movie nights, etc.

May the Lord bless you as you seek to reach out to the “spiritual orphans” in your community.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nae.net/when-americans-become-christians/>

<sup>2</sup> A great resource on the current state of the family in the US is: *Households of Faith*, by Barna Research. <https://shop.barna.com/collections/family-kids/products/households-of-faith>

<sup>3</sup> I recently wrote a post on my blog about building safeguards into our mentoring ministry. Check it out. <http://melwalker.org/mentoring-safeguards/>

<sup>4</sup> See *Mentoring the Next Generation: A Practical Strategy for Connecting the Generations in Your Church*, by Mel Walker, published by Vision For Youth Publishing, 2019. <https://goingonforgod.com/product/mentoring/>

<sup>5</sup> See *Inter-Generational Youth Ministry: Why A Balanced View of Connecting the Generations is Essential for the Church*, by Mel Walker, published by Vision For Youth Publishing, 2013. <http://intergenerationalyouthministry.com/the-book/>

<sup>6</sup> See *Going On For God: Encouraging the Next Generation to Grow Up and Go On For God*, by Mel Walker, Published by Vision For Youth Publishing, 2108. <https://goingonforgod.com/product/going-on-for-god/>