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Becoming the Justice Generation

By: Zach Hunter

Zach Hunter is a teenage abolitionist and activist, spending much of his time working to end modern-day slavery and inspire his generation. He's the author of Be the Change (YS) and student spokesperson for The Amazing Change Campaign, inspired by the film Amazing Grace.

I'm a teenager, and I'm an abolitionist.

An abolitionist is someone committed to ending slavery. Do you believe slavery was eliminated a long time ago? That's what a lot of people believe. Unfortunately, it's not true. An estimated 27 million people are slaves in our world *today*.

I first heard about the plight of modern-day slaves about three years ago, and it made me very angry that one human being could "own" another. But I knew it wasn't enough to be angry or sad—I knew I had to *do* something about it.

So for the last few years I've been doing what I can to bring justice and end these oppressive practices. I've discovered that students like me can make a difference by using their voices to speak up for victims of slavery and oppression and by helping raise money for organizations bringing them freedom.

My Justice Generation Dream

I really do believe we can abolish slavery once and for all, and that my generation is the one who can do it. My dream is for my generation to be known as the "Justice Generation," or JGEN, and to be known as the generation that put others above ourselves and gave ourselves for the poor.

Why my generation? We're so expressive, and we care about the world when we're confronted with the issues of suffering and oppression. I'm

inspired by the many students I meet who want to show their love for God by loving people.

I know many people complain that my generation is selfish, how little we listen, and how we are rebellious. But those problems aren't unique to my generation—we've had a lot of models that came before us. Rather than complain, we need older people to come alongside us and be better examples, to inspire us to dream big and not accept apathy. I believe my peers want the bar set high, and that's part of what I'm trying to do.

I meet youth leaders who agree and also believe God just might use my generation to change the world. If we can harness the power of young people—take our strengths and passions and use them for good—just imagine what we could get done working together with God.

God's Plan Is Us

Gary Haugen, president of International Justice Mission once said, "God has a plan to help bring justice to the world—and his plan is *us*."

I think it's really cool that God chooses to use us to alleviate suffering. God doesn't need us but wants to use us, to include us. How incredible is that? I believe that if youth workers grasp this idea and help their students move beyond the ski trip toward acts of sacrificial service, we'll find students meeting God in new and deeper ways.

In Ecclesiastes, the poet describes how the oppressed are crying out for help and how power is on the side of the oppressor. I know that God hears the cries of the oppressed. If we open our hearts, we can be the answer to their cries for relief and make sure their enduring isn't in vain. And as a result, students will experience incredible joy in being God's tools to turn the balance of power toward the oppressed.

Small People for Big Jobs

Throughout history God has used young people to accomplish great things.

Think about David—too young and too small for a job that bigger and older men had turned down. Men would have passed him by, but God used him to slay a giant.

What about Mary? She was just a teenager, but God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. God could have chosen Elizabeth—someone older and more experienced who really wanted to be a mother. Certainly, Elizabeth would have been more qualified by the local gossipers' standards. But Mary was God's choice.

And what about the kid with the sack lunch? Instead of having the disciples go fishing or providing food for the massive crowd in another way, Jesus decided to share a young boy's basket with a crowd of 5,000.

Right Now

I believe God wants to use you and your students *right now*. Many of your students think about making a difference *someday*. But I think God wants us to make a difference *today*—not next semester or when we’re done with school. Encourage your students. Remind them that God can use us all to bring about amazing changes in the world.

And while talking about reaching out to the oppressed in the world, remind your students that they can start by being leaders in their current spheres of influence. That can be scary sometimes. But the Bible is filled with people who dared to stand up for what was right.

Few of us will ever have to risk our lives to save a whole race of people like Esther did or face a fiery furnace like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for refusing to renounce our beliefs. Still, your students might risk popularity by standing up for a kid who’s being picked on; they may risk not being part of the “in” group by refusing to compromise their values; or they simply may risk their free time because they’ve dedicated themselves to serving others, raising money to free slaves, or educating people around them about the plight of the voiceless and powerless.

Standing Up

Rosa Parks kick-started the civil rights movement for rightly refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. While it’s popular to say that she was so weary she couldn’t stand up, that’s not the case. She wasn’t tired physically; she was tired of surrendering. When she sat down, she was really standing up for an oppressed people. Her people.

A lot of us are willing to stand up for ourselves, for our own rights and concerns. But are we willing to stand firm on behalf of others? Many students stand up for their favorite bands, brands, and their personal “rights.” But are these things really worth our time, energy and commitment? What if we put more energy toward things that really matter instead of spending so much energy on petty things?

Plain and simple: We should stand firm for what’s right, just because it *is* right.

Starving for Significance

As you consider the issue of justice and how you might bring it into your youth ministry, consider this: *God loves justice and despises oppression*. I believe my generation is hungry—in fact, starving—for significance and a God-sized task that will impact the world. What greater gift could you give your students than showing them that God is close to the oppressed and the enslaved, and that by helping such people, they’re getting closer to the heart of God?

I’ve seen the faces of students transformed when they discover the issue of oppression and believe God can and will use them to bring relief. I’ve seen kids who believe the lie that they are worthless, not smart enough, not

pretty enough, not strong enough, not old enough. And I've seen those same students moved to tears, walking taller, speaking boldly, and praying convincingly when they discover the joy of being the Justice Generation.

I think there's something special about this generation. I hope you do, too. Will you help us *be the change*?