

The young and the generous

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

Some sociological studies suggest that today's young adults are selfish, greedy and narcissistic. Marketers and advertisers use this stereotype; they understand the enormous persuasive power of transforming wants into needs and legitimizing the fulfilling of every want. They've done this before, with the Me Generation and slogans like "This Bud's for You," "Do Yourself a Favor Today" and the bumper sticker: "The One Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins." The latter phrase provided a wealth of sermon fodder at stewardship time, and I used it generously.

But the young adults I know don't fit this stereotype. My own children and their friends were anything but greedy and selfish as young adults. What I saw and continue to see among this generation are thoughtful people who are generous and committed to social justice.

When I arrived at the church I served in Chicago, I inherited a program that shaped my views of young adults. The church pairs a needy youngster with a volunteer tutor for an hour and a half of academic study once a week. The program grew from 75 children and young people to nearly 500, and most of the tutors have been young adults; in fact, many are young lawyers, bankers, brokers and doctors. They hear about the program through friends and social networks, decide to volunteer and become superb tutors. In many cases, significant relationships develop, some of them lifelong.

Why, I wondered, were these greedy, selfish, narcissistic young adults doing this? The answer became clear. They are not greedy, selfish narcissists; they are generous. They want to make a difference in the world and in a young child's life.

Those young adults contradict another stereotype—that they are a lost cause to the church. As it turned out, the tutoring program was the church's most effective evangelism tool. The new member classes always held a few young adults who would speak about the child they'd met through the program and come to care about.

Maybe these tutors looked up from helping their child with math and saw a picture of Jesus on the wall. Maybe they heard the choir rehearsing. Whatever it was, something resonated: the child, their own gifts, the love they were beginning to experience, Jesus and the church. It was one of the best experiences of my life to preside in worship as those young adults affirmed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ and promised to live in a way that reflects his love.

In their article “Millennial Searchers” (*New York Times*, December 1), Emily Esfahani Smith, a New York editor, and Jennifer Aaker, of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, report that millennials are far more concerned about living a meaningful life than about making a lot of money. Reaching that goal means being connected to something bigger than self—to others, to work, to a life purpose and to the world itself. Meaning, they discovered, results from being a giver rather than a taker. It sounds like something Jesus said about finding your life by giving it away.