



ON THE LEVEL

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Matt Dascenzo
takes youth's
candid inquiries
about God
very seriously

**DVULI 2019
THINK TANK**

offers best practices
for handling the tough
theological questions
Gen Z youth are asking

**Warming up
for Reunion
2019 in
Phoenix**



2019
WILL BE OUR
HOTTEST
REUNION YET!

WHEN YOUTH QUESTION TRUTH

DVULI Think Tank 2019 is fully armed for tough theological inquiries from **Gen Z**

Ronald Bell (Kansas City 2003)

Whether captivated, curious or skeptical, posing questions about God spans every generation from the fall of man. The cultural shift of social media and one's ability to Google or YouTube any question on any topic—garnering responses in the millions—has ignited a flurry of interpretations of hearts and minds of Gen Z leaders to sort out.

Questions teens are craving to continue. Even so, the DVULI Think Tank on this topic would say, "Bring the questions, bring the who, where, when; and especially the why."

Think Tank argues deep Biblical truth is one of the best entry points for young disciples. Therefore, a youth should never resist the opportunity to engage in tough theological questions with youth.

Q: How can God claim to be love and send His children to burn in hell?

Q: Since God created sexual desires, why should it be suppressed for a ring?

Q: What is grace and how can you really tell God has given it to you?

Q: If two people are in love, why does their gender matter?

Q: Why does Christianity seem so judgmental? So exclusive? So hypocritical?

"This isn't a naïve generation," offers Think Tank member Chase Grogan (Boston 2016). "They are experiencing the same racial and political issues as we adults are. They are very interested in what is going on socially, politically and spiritually. They are raising questions as to why people are, or are not, doing something about the things that are happening in our world."

A youth pastor at Roxbury Presbyterian Church and faculty member in Boston Public Schools, Grogan remarks how passionate today's youth is about helping people and effecting change in the world. "But it's not because the Bible says so, but because it feels good or they think it's right," he says.

From the lens of the Lead Pastor at New Vision Church, Pete Contreras (San Diego 2008) believes youth are asking questions through their own experiences, which may not be the same as the adults in their lives. He says a large part of the questioning comes from feelings and what they believe is right for them.

"Our languages are two different languages," Contreras exclaims. "There is a language barrier as it relates to what is going on in our world. Most unchurched kids don't know what we are talking about. When they begin to ask questions about culture, they don't see [certain sins] as morally wrong."

The good side of this challenge is what Cara Martin (New York 2010) has observed from her work as both a youth pastor and educator at Amani Public Charter School in Mount Vernon, New York, "Young people believe that God exists! They just have their own theology about who God is."

Martin insists youth must see truth lived out in a way that can be emulated, but this will only happen when they know they can trust the



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WHEN YOUTH QUESTION TRUTH

DVULI Think Tank 2019 is totally armed for tough theological inquiries from **Gen Z**

by **Gerald Bell** (Kansas City 2003)

Whether captivated, curious or cynical, posing questions about faith in God spans every generation since the fall of man. The cultural shift to social media and one's ability to Google or YouTube any question on any topic—garnering answers in the millions—has presented a flurry of interpretations for the hearts and minds of Gen Z and others to sort out.

And the questions teens are craving answers to continues. Even so, the DVULI Think Tank on this topic would say, "Bring it! Bring the questions, bring the who, what, where, when; and especially the why.

The Think Tank argues deep Biblical inquiry is one of the best entry points to making disciples. Therefore, a youth worker should never resist the opportunity to engage in tough theological questions from any youth.

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Q: Since God created sexual desires, why should it be suppressed for a ring?

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Martin insists youth must see truth lived out in a way that can be emulated, but this will only happen when they know they can trust the

youth leader or the adult who is doing life with them.

She says that if all youth ever see is their minister standing behind a pulpit or leading some training, then they are only exposed to their leader's comfort zone. Martin shares what has worked for her is allowing youth to be exposed to the true person she is. Past mistakes and all, the exercise in transparency goes a long way.

Youth may not say it or show it, but they highly appreciate being able to ask questions openly and not be judged, says Matt Dascenzo (Columbus 2017). He contends the "asking" part is not where the rub is. As an Area Director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Dascenzo says the struggle for his youth is they can't relate to consistently following Christ for the long haul. Many see a relationship with Christ as optional or as a nice thing when they need Him. "They all believe in this loving God, but think He is also legalistic and focused on the law," Dascenzo says. "There is a disconnect with being a disciple of Christ [and living] in this culture."

Who Can't Handle the Truth?

Gen Z youth would see it as a waste of their time and yours to tip-toe through the hard topics. When tough questions are presented, they are God's cue for youth leaders to represent the Christ who can handle any question.

The DVULI Think Tank concluded anyone discipling youth should never give the impression they have all

the answers to difficult theological questions. No matter what scriptures support or reinforce, help youth see the truth and leave space for God, by His spirit, to make the truth attractive to a young person.

1. View "Can I ask you a question?" as a chance to build a deeper relationship and trust. Martin, who is passionate about trust building says, youth must have the opportunity to get to know you and your real story. "If you hide who you are, that makes it hard to even begin a discussion [with youth]," explains Martin. "It begins with trust."

2. Identify why they are asking what they're asking. "We want to engage them, pique their interests, see where this is coming from and why it is coming up," says Dascenzo. "We want to be able to have a conversation rather than just tell them the right answer." Therefore, get to the core of why they are asking the question before offering responses.

3. Affirm where they are within the realm of what they're questioning. Whether its questions about sex, fear, grace, identity, or hell, assure them these are real issues and welcome their questions. "The way Jesus answered questions was intriguing. Out of contempt or curiosity, He asked questions in return," says Dascenzo. "He engaged with them. He didn't just tell them the right answer."

4. Empower youth in what they are questioning. "It's not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing," Grogan said.

"Their needs are always changing. We provide them with the tools necessary for day-to-day stuff." He said it's critical to steer youth toward trusting God and understanding He's put them on earth for a purpose. But that must be coupled with empowering them because there is a human side to why they have the questions they ask.

5. Follow up for sustainability. Contreras leans toward the fact that ultimately God wants to reveal Himself to every individual. Youth leaders are to live out the fruit of the Holy Spirit but must allow the Spirit to reveal the truth youth are seeking. "Each of us came to faith through revelation," Contreras affirms. "When kids come to a revelation, that's where the transformation takes place. I cannot give them that answer. Our job is to help them discover God; to help them get revelation in some sense. Speak the truth in love and extend grace when there is tension between the two. Let them discover [the] truth themselves. Then they'll walk in the spirit."

Listen to the full 60-minute Think Tank conversation at: dvuli.org/2019thinktank

The 2019 Think Tank members for the spring issue of *On The Level* are: Pete Contreras (San Diego 2008), Matt Dascenzo (Columbus 2017), Chase Grogan (Boston 2016), and Cara Martin (New York 2010).

The Think Tank



CHASE GROGAN



CARA MARTIN



MATT DASCENZO



PETE CONTRERAS

Keeping it Candid

TRANSFORMING THE INWARD MINDSET OF GENERATION ME

Opinion by **Matt Dascenzo** (Columbus 2017)



Unfortunately, as youth ministers, we can be quick to jump to getting youth to their destination and forget they are on a journey.

We are ministering to a generation that has been sucked into themselves. They're suffering from an inward mindset – a concept I learned in the DeVos Urban Leadership training. As youth workers in the urban context, we see a lack of relational depth, impatience, and hearts at war with one another. Fights break out often between youth both physical and virtual. Listening has become a lost art form. Impacting this generation of urban youth is difficult, and that is an understatement.

I long for youth to approach me with their pressing theological questions—and you should too. Realizing every moment with a young person is precious, as ministers to this generation we should be extremely wise in responses to make the most of every opportunity. The way we respond to youth communicates more than we realize.

New Testament scripture says, "Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be

always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6). If our approach lacks wisdom, youth may make negative assumptions about God, pastors, and the church.

It is time to stop offering canned phrases to our youth's candid theological questions. Giving youth the "correct," "churchy," or "classic" scriptural answers is the easy way out and a recipe for disaster in their faith formation. This approach doesn't engage young people or meet their desire for relationship. Furthermore, church jargon fails at growing their mental capacity—problem-solving and critical thinking skills—and it makes youth workers seem like know-it-alls. Unfortunately, as youth ministers, we can be quick to jump to getting youth to their destination and forget they are on a journey. When we gloss over questions, we also miss out on an amazing opportunity and may

communicate exactly the opposite of our intentions in ministry.

Just as a teacher doesn't like to give the answer to a math problem or solve a problem for students, youth workers should not be quick to provide theological answers for young people. The math teacher helps the student learn how to go through the problem on their own, become an independent thinker and problem-solver, and, ultimately,

confusing the people in the story who need you and the readers of the Bible, too." If Jesus was perfectly loving, there must have been a good reason for his tactics.

Jesus approached people not as projects to finish as soon as possible, but as people who needed compassion and their thinking challenged. Jesus offered them truth and grace to help people grow their critical thinking skills and gain wisdom. Jesus was willing to have deep discussions with people, not just give them answers so he can get back to his "real" ministry of teaching the masses. He saw each person as the image-bearer of God and His ministry and gave them the time they needed.



a more mature and confident math student. Certainly, we want the same result for our youth: to become independent thinkers, problem-solvers, and mature followers of Christ. Yet, if we do all the work for them, it's a disservice to their own growth and maturation process.

HWJD (How Would Jesus Disciple?)

It's no secret that with the proper support and encouragement on their journey, youth can develop into mature, well-rounded individuals. Jesus provides a solid example of how to have a ministering conversation with young people. Rarely do we read in scripture Jesus ministered to someone by giving them a quick answer and then going on his way.

What did Jesus do? He often asked questions. Occasionally, Jesus' questions leave us wondering, "Jesus, why did you ask that? You obviously knew the answer. You're just

If we want to be effective in our approach to relate with urban youth, we need to challenge ourselves to ask them questions. We need to get to the root of what young people are thinking and feeling when they ask deep theological questions, like an archaeologist carefully uncovers valuable history. With each new discovery, we can empathize and show care to whatever negative experiences or beliefs our youth have encountered. When the student makes a discovery about God and themselves, we can celebrate the achievement as a journey taken together. Lastly, we can probe deeper like Jesus to help youth problem-solve independently, think critically, grow spiritually, and gain an outward mindset. Then, we can know we planted, watered graciously and lovingly, and nurtured their process and watch God bring forth their growth.

Matt Dascenzo (Columbus 2017) is an Area Representative with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Columbus, Ohio. He volunteers at his church, Zenos Christian Fellowship, as a college small group Bible study leader and mentors both youth and young adults one-on-one. Matt is a member of the DVULI 2019 Think Tank.

Got an opinion about subject matter impacting your work as an urban youth leader? Email: staff@dvuli.org Attn: Alumni Push Back

Who Else Knows YOUR REAL STORY?

The benefits of sharing the authentic you rather than projecting the image of the perfect Christian leader.

by **Rachel Weaver**, Staff Writer



"Young people don't always realize that we've gone through similar things or we have similar questions [about God]. We say that we have, but we haven't shared our experience. There are so many [youth workers] that say, 'Oh, I've been where you are. I know what it is to be a young person,' but we don't share our stories. We don't share our slipups, mishaps, and all of the things we have gone through that have made us who we are."

-Cara Martin

Sitting in her classroom at Amani Public Charter School Cara J. Martin (New York City 2010) confides, "I never wanted to be a teacher. My mom and dad were teachers, and my grandma was a teacher." Martin has worked for more than 20 years in education and youth ministry in the largest city in the nation. Out of all the students and young people Martin has worked with, a young man named Tyreek was a notable challenge.

Often under the influence of a substance, "Tyreek was a rough kid," says Martin. Nonetheless, she knew Tyreek had potential and could overcome challenges with academic support and encouragement. As the Dean of Students, Martin began a relationship with Tyreek. Martin told him she was going to lovingly push him to succeed and then hold him accountable. Lacking commitment, Tyreek ping-ponged between Future Leaders Institute Charter School and the nearby alternative high school. The turning point in their relationship came when Martin

embraced authenticity and shared her personal testimony with Tyreek. "If I can live through it, so can you!" said Martin.

In her youth, Martin overcame significant academic hurdles. She wrestled with God and ultimately came to terms with His plan for her life.

"My first year [in high school] was a wake-up call. I wasn't used to working hard," said Martin. Fear and self-doubt took root, and she failed two classes. Martin felt like an imposter and questioned God and her abilities. While she had loving parents, they were busy with their own struggles and did not offer much support. Her failures began to snowball.

By her junior year, Martin was going to night school, summer school, and summer night school to keep from falling farther behind. Four weeks from graduation, Martin quit high school. "I was scared I wasn't going to pass," shares Martin.

From there, Martin worked to get her life back on track. She earned her GED and went on to graduate college with honors. While leading her church's youth ministry and working as a teacher's aide, Martin also earned two master's degrees.

After two years under Martin's tutelage, Tyreek graduated from high school. Several years later, Martin received an Instagram message from Tyreek. It said, "Thank you so much, Dean Martin." The time spent, and the effort spent [didn't] go unnoticed," says Martin.

"What encourages a young person to listen to us? It's that they see something similar, something similar between us and them that will cause them to listen," she continues. "We're not just some holier than thou person trying to proselytize the world. No, I've had an experience. I've had multiple experiences. Let me tell you about them. This changed my life."

Martin advises youth workers to do two things:

1. TELL YOUR REAL STORY

Knowing what you have been through and rose above, helps youth understand the transformative power of God and legitimizes your voice. Martin says, "They might hear you, but they will take what you say with a grain of salt because they haven't been able to see how your experiences can connect to theirs." Be authentic and transparent.

Martin uses her personal testimony to demonstrate how God has redeemed her life. She starts by saying, "Let me tell you my story. Let

"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Revelations 12:11 (NIV)

me tell you how it worked out for me." Martin chuckles and says, "Right now, I'm talking on the phone with you, and all the students in my [class]room are hearing my story!"

2. SET BOUNDARIES

While sharing your story is a powerful connection tool, Martin also says youth workers need to set boundaries with youth to protect themselves and their ministries. She encourages pastors to set time limits on their availability and tell youth, "You have access to me in this way." Giving young people a Google phone number, rather than providing a personal cell phone number is another safeguard Martin uses. "It's O.K. to set parameters," affirms Martin.

What things have you gone through that have made you who you are? Rather than saying you know what it is to be a young person, share your story and faith journey. In doing so, youth workers will build trust with their youth and demonstrate how God has moved mountains in their lives. The benefits of sharing your story outweigh the risks of keeping it secret.

Cara J. Martin (New York City 2010) serves as an Elder at Benaiah Ministries in Brooklyn, New York, and is the STEAM Instructional Coach at Amani Public Charter School (grades 5-8) in Mount Vernon, New York. In her education role, Martin coaches 13 science, technology, art, and math teachers on their pedagogy, praxis, and curriculum implementation. Cara is a member of the DVULI 2019 Think Tank.

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JOIN US MAY 1-4, 2019

Reunion 2019 will offer
explosive worship, keynote
speakers, empowering workshops,
new relationships, prizes, lots to eat,
rejuvenation, and so much more!

LOCATION

Sheraton Grand
at Wild Horse Pass
5594 W Wild Horse Pass Blvd
Phoenix, Arizona 85226

REGISTRATION

Visit dvuli.org/reunion to register

PRESENTERS

Pastor Chris Brooks
A. C. Green
D. A. Horton
Brian Jenkins
Lucas Leys
Gordon & Gail MacDonald
Michael & Tina Mata
Chris Sumner
Karen Woodward

ACTIVITIES

- Alumni artist showcase
- Outing to authentic western town
- Delicious meals
- Jogging & hiking trails
- Equestrian center
- Golf course
- Four outdoor pools
- Spectacular waterslide
- Tennis courts
- Day spa
- Fitness center

Visit dvuli.org/reunion
for more information.



God Space:

Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally

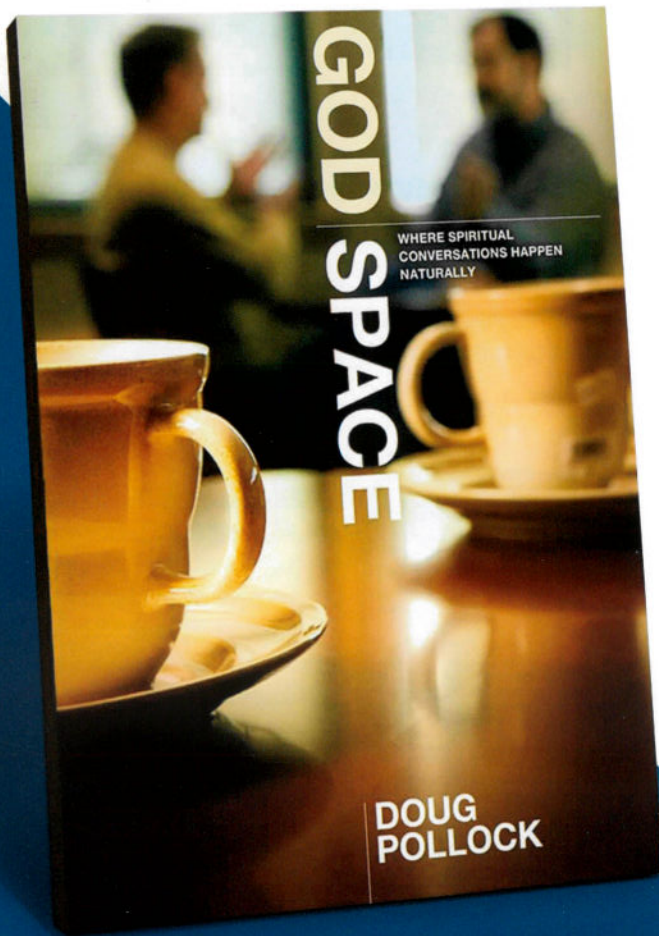


Resource recommendation
by Matt Dascenzo (Columbus 2017)

Often, my heart yearns to share my faith with others, but I don't. What do you say? What do you not say? *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* by Doug Pollock offers practical ways to create room to talk about God in everyday conversations.

Filled with great stories, *God Space* shares real-life examples of how to initiate more in-depth faith conversations with close friends and strangers alike. The author also challenges readers to think outside-the-box, express humility, listen well, and word questions in a non-aggressive way. Rather than give shallow, forced, or defensive statements about God or church that turn people away, Pollock encourages us to be curious and ask questions first.

Throughout the book, Pollock demonstrates how expressing curiosity is a more effective approach to engage the listener. Inquiring about people's experiences with God, Christians, and church—knowing they may have bad experiences or negative perspectives—enables you to compassionately engage them in an ongoing conversation about love and grace. *God Space* teaches readers how to eliminate debate-style exchanges and communicate in a way that wins the person for Christ.



AT UMN I UPDATES



Santos O'Neill (Orlando 2010) completed his Masters in Theological Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.



Jeanette McKinley-Bowen (Memphis 2013) went home to be with the Lord on December 12, 2018, following a car accident.

Stephenie K. Smith (Kansas City 2016) joined NourishKC as its new Chief Strategy Officer in January.



Daniel Sanabria (Youth for Christ 2018) and his wife, Diane, welcomed their second child, Madison Rae Sanabria, on November 17, 2018.



Kelvin Jackson (Grand Rapids 1998) joined Covenant House as a Lead Resident Advisor in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

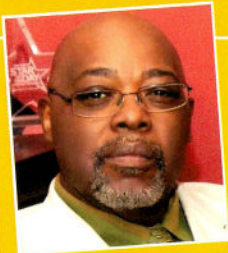
Geston Pierre (Oakland/SF Bay Area 2017) married Jacqueline Clemmons on December 9, 2018.



Esther Delahay (Fresno 2014) and her husband, Nathan, are celebrating the birth of their third child. Callum Carver Delahay was born on September 17, 2018.



Yammilette Rodriguez (Fresno 2014) was recently named a 2019 recipient of The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award.

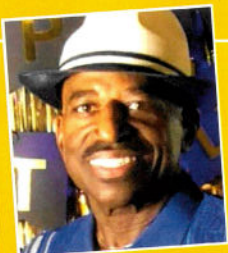


LeRoix Hampton III (Boston 1998) went home to be with the Lord on January 7, 2019.

Nate Landis (San Diego 2008) released a book titled, *God Wants His Kids Back*.



Esperanza Martinez (Miami 2008) completed her Doctor of Ministry degree at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri.



Former City Coordinator **Roderick "Rod" Walker** (St. Louis 2017) went home to be with the Lord on February 2, 2019.

Calvin Sodestrom (Oakland/SF Bay Area 2017) and his wife, Mackenzie, are the proud parents of a baby girl, Elliana Hope Sodestrom.

