



Neil O'Boyle

Catching the Wave

How Your
Church
Can Reach a
Spiritually Hungry
Generation

“Packed full of practical wisdom, theological reflection and cultural engagement, this book will grow your knowledge of and passion for younger generations. It is biblically rooted, powerfully authentic and packed with real-life stories of hope. Moreover, Neil O’Boyle is the real deal. I know few people who have served in gospel work amongst teenagers so faithfully and in such a diverse range of contexts. Readers will not only ‘catch’ his distilled wisdom but some of his contagious passion to see a lost generation encounter Jesus.”

PHIL KNOX, Evangelist, Evangelical Alliance

“This is more than a book—it is a heartfelt call to action, a roadmap for potential revival and a compassionate invitation to rediscover the church’s mission to young people. With clarity and conviction, O’Boyle combines robust research, personal testimony and biblical insight to illuminate the spiritual hunger rising among today’s youth. This must-read book will stir your heart, challenge your assumptions and launch your ministry into deeper waters.”

DAVE NEWTON, National Director, Scripture Union England & Wales

“*Catching the Wave* is an honest field guide for churches that want to love Gen Z and Gen Alpha with care and clarity. O’Boyle puts prayer first and then lets the research and practice speak without reduction or hype, offering simple, credible steps any church can try. I commend it to pastors and youth teams who want a shared starting point that is spiritually serious and practically doable. *Catching the Wave* is for those of us who need to swallow our pride, me included, and try what actually works.”

ALANZO JULIAN PAUL, Speaker and Tutor, The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics; Director, Reboot

“This book lands at just the right time. Grounded in real stories, fresh research and Scripture that steadies everything, it will lift your faith and challenge you to join in with what God is already doing among our nation’s young people. Read it prayerfully, expectantly. And get ready—not just to ride the wave that Neil describes but to help the church become a place where the next generation doesn’t just visit but truly encounters Jesus.”

RACHEL GARDNER, Director of Partnerships, Youthscape;
Youth Innovation Lead, St Luke’s Blackburn

"If you are wanting to see young people's lives changed by Jesus in your community and wondering where to begin, then this book is for you. Beautiful in tone and wonderfully practical, it gives insight about a generation alongside a vision of what transformation through Jesus could look like in your community."

LAURA HANCOCK, National Ministries Director, British Youth for Christ

"An inspiring and practical introduction from an experienced practitioner on how local churches can catch up with what God is doing with young people."

STU GIBBS, Newday Generation

"An essential guide to the challenges and opportunities for churches aiming to engage with Gen Z and Gen Alpha. Neil captures the essence of understanding the worlds these young people inhabit, marked by their unique values and struggles. *Catching the Wave* is a heartfelt call to connect authentically with younger generations and make faith accessible in today's rapidly changing world."

DAN BLYTHE, Global Youth Director, Alpha

"What is the faith of the next generation worth to us? It should be everything, right? And after decades of difficult and even depressing news about the church and our nation, it does seem God is doing a 'new' thing. People—especially young people—are arriving at church in search of God. In this book Neil provides a resource and inspiration that is rich in research, story, example and challenge. He calls the church to a season of readiness and a posture of expectancy. Let's catch the wave!"

LEON EVANS, Founder, Further Faster Network;
Lead Pastor, Lifecentral Church

"*Catching the Wave* stirs faith, speaks to the real needs of young people and equips the church to respond with both compassion and conviction. A move of God is stirring among Gen Z-A, and this book helps us step into it!"

SAMMY JABANGWE-HANTON, Youth Evangelist, The Message Trust

Neil O'Boyle

Catching the Wave



How Your
Church
Can Reach a
Spiritually Hungry
Generation

the goodbook
COMPANY

Catching the Wave

© British Youth for Christ, 2026.

Published by:

The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz

Unless indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 2011 Biblica. Used by permission.

Some names have been changed in the real-life stories in this book.

Every book published by The Good Book Company has been written by a human author and edited by a human editor. While AI tools are sometimes used to assist with research and support certain processes, all content has been created by a human author and thoroughly checked by our editorial team to ensure it is biblically faithful and pastorally wise.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Neil O'Boyle has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

Cover design by Drew McCall

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781802544169 | JOB-008576 | Printed in India

Contents

Part 1: Starting Within

- | | |
|----------------------|----|
| 1. Ready for Revival | 11 |
| 2. Making the Effort | 19 |
| 3. We Go Slow | 29 |

Part 2: Going Deep

- | | |
|-------------------------|----|
| 4. Gen Z-A and Family | 43 |
| 5. Gen Z-A and Morality | 57 |
| 6. Gen Z-A and Value | 73 |

Part 3: Looking Wide

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 7. Gen Z-A and Digital Technology | 85 |
| 8. Gen Z-A and Social Media | 97 |
| 9. Gen Z-A and Mental Health | 109 |

Part 4: Reaching Out

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| 10. Going into the Community | 121 |
| 11. Working with Schools | 133 |
| 12. Welcoming at Church | 143 |

Conclusion: Now What?	155
-----------------------	-----

Acknowledgements	163
------------------	-----

Notes	165
-------	-----

About the Author



NEIL O'BOYLE HAS spent more than three decades walking alongside young people and church communities in the UK and around the world. His heart is to see the church live out an invitational and missional culture, where both churchled and unchurched young people encounter Jesus in everyday life. As National Director of Youth for Christ Britain, Neil has championed evangelism and discipleship that are rooted in Scripture, Spirit-led and shaped by real cultural understanding.

Author's Note

IN THIS BOOK, you will often see the terms Gen Alpha and Gen Z.

Generation Z refers to those born approximately between 1996 and 2010.

Generation Alpha refers to those born from about 2010 up to the mid-2020s.

Throughout this book, Gen Z and Gen Alpha are often referred to collectively as Gen Z-A or simply as Z-A.

1

Starting Within

Chapter 1

Ready for Revival

“WE JUST BAPTISED three young people this weekend, and there are even more lined up to be baptised in the next few weeks!”

I was visiting Dan, a Youth for Christ staff worker in the north of England. When I arrived, Dan had just wrapped up a meeting with the local pastor, who was buzzing with excitement.

Not long ago, this church had been hanging on by a thread. It had mostly elderly members, a few coffee mornings and a leaky roof. But something had shifted. The church was now growing—and it was growing with young people! Teenagers, to be precise.

Not long before my visit, Dan had run a mission week in the local school and invited pupils to a Friday-night outreach event at the church. There was no flashy band, no smoke machine, no hype. It was a simple event, but something powerful happened. Dozens of young people showed up wanting to know more about Jesus. They specifically wanted to know how to become Christians.

Fast-forward two months, and after conversations with their parents (who weren't churchgoers), these same young people were getting baptised. Others had already joined the church. There was something happening in this community.

And it isn't just Dan's community. There is something happening in this nation: a gentle awakening to faith. It's been documented across a range of demographics but particularly among the young. Every week, stories are bubbling to the surface of teenagers without any faith background simply turning up at churches to discover God.

At the organisation that I have led for the past decade, British Youth for Christ, we weren't satisfied with anecdotal evidence; we wanted to understand the data behind the stories. We commissioned a research company to find out just how spiritually open today's 11-18-year-olds really are. Our report, published in the summer of 2025, was called *Z-A: Growing Spirituality*.

Back in 2020, approximately 4% of young people in the UK were attending church.¹ Five years later, when we asked 11-18-year-olds across Britain, "Is attending church part of your weekly activity?" a staggering 8% said yes.² That's double the number from five years ago! Twice as many now attend church. Similarly, in 2020, roughly 52% of young people believed in some kind of spiritual being greater than themselves. That openness has increased; now it is 68%.

From 2020 until now, there has been a 12% rise in young people who identify as followers of Jesus, a 12% rise in those who pray, and a 12% rise in those

who pray daily.³ In 2020, only 8% said they viewed the church positively, but when we asked again in 2025, the dial had shifted considerably; 65% now viewed it positively, though there were still concerns around its institutional authority. What happened in those five years? A pandemic for one, but perhaps a stirring of the Holy Spirit for another.

At around the same time, the Bible Society conducted some similar research called *The Quiet Revival*. This report found that there are over 2 million more people attending church in the UK than there were six years ago. Significantly, the charge is being led by the young; 16% of 18-24-year-olds now attend church at least once a month.⁴

You don't have to be a youth worker to be excited about these statistics. We have an amazing opportunity here! The question is: are we ready for it? There's a wave coming, but will we catch it?

Running to Welcome

Perhaps one of the most familiar stories in the Gospels is the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A young man runs away from his family, rejecting his father and heading off to seek a life of pleasure. Drinking, parties, sleeping around—the works. This boy is a disgrace. But when he finally runs out of money, ending up as an underfed pig-keeper, he decides to go back to his father.

The son is looking for safety and security—a place where life will make sense again. Riddled as he must be with regret and shame, home seems like the only possible source of what he desperately needs. But he goes there

without expecting much of a welcome—he knows what he has done. He plans to offer himself as a servant. He knows he's not worthy to be called his father's son.

But what happens? Don't let familiarity rob you of the beauty of this moment!

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.

(Luke 15:20)

The father welcomes his broken son. Not only that—he runs to meet him! This father goes out of his way to find his lost son and welcome him home.

It's a picture of our heavenly Father welcoming those who have (knowingly or unknowingly) turned their back on him and pursued another way, but who are now seeking forgiveness. But it can also be a picture of us. Are we not God's ambassadors here on earth (2 Corinthians 5:20), called to reach the lost, broken, uncertain, disconnected and marginalised?

Young people today are all of those things. Yes, they are starting to come back to church, and it's exciting. But there is still very often a hesitation or even hostility about Christian things. An increasing openness to spirituality comes alongside a distrust of authority and institutions and a perception that the church hates gay people. There are ways in which the very values of society seem at odds with biblical belief. Meanwhile, the sheer distraction of the digital revolution can make it hard for young people to engage with the good news of Jesus.

What's my point? Young people may be coming back to church, but we shouldn't expect them to just slot in easily as if they've always belonged. Nor should we expect every young person to be able to make the first move themselves.

Like the father of the prodigal son, we need to run to meet them!

Starting the Journey

If you are not seeing unchurched young people engaging with your church, don't panic or feel disillusioned—you still can! In fact, this entire book has been written for those who would like to see more unchurched young people walk through their doors. We're going to talk about lots of different things you can do to reach out to those who have no connection with church yet. This book also provides assistance for those who already have young people in their church but aren't sure how to integrate unchurched young people.

Section 1 calls us to look *within*: what is the situation, and what do we need to ask God to do within us, both as individuals and as the church? At the opposite end of the book, section 4 has the most practical chapters, with a focus on going *out* and finding ways to engage with unchurched young people, whether in schools, in the community or in our church buildings. But before we do that, in sections 2 and 3 we're going to try to understand this generation better. We go *deep*, focusing on what matters to Gen Z and Alpha and how to communicate with them about God. Then we look *wide*, with an exploration of some of the particular struggles

and challenges young people are facing, and how we can care for the whole person as we reach out to welcome. It's the wider-angle view that we need before we can get really practical in section 4.

This book is a starting point. It's not a comprehensive guide to every model of youth work or every facet of youth culture. Instead it's designed to help you take the first steps in a journey of sharing Jesus with a generation that desperately needs to hear his good news.

Are We Ready?

Rodney Gypsy Smith was a famous revivalist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He travelled up and down Britain, crossed the Atlantic 45 times (no easy task in those days!) and met with two different presidents at the White House. He preached to millions of people and saw many respond to Jesus. Unsurprisingly, other Christians would come to Smith and say, "How can we have the same revival impact as you do?" But his reply may have been unexpected:

Go into an empty room, close the door, draw a circle on the floor with chalk, kneel within that circle and ask God to revive everything inside the circle.⁵

I want us to take Smith's advice as we begin our journey. Before we look out, we need to look within. Are we individually ready? Furthermore, are we collectively ready? Is your church both hopeful and prepared? What would it take for it to become so?

When Jesus approached Simon and Andrew, who were fishing on the lake, he called out to them to follow

him. Because we know the story well, we may breeze past it—but their decision to drop everything and obey Jesus' call is rather dramatic when you think about it. Did Jesus' reputation precede him? Was his personality so infectious that one felt compelled to comply with his requests? We don't know. What we do know, however, is that the fishermen acted on the invitation. So when Jesus said, "Come, follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19), Simon and Andrew said yes! They were all in!

We, too, can be fishers of people—we can see our nets fill to excess as young people turn to Jesus in their droves. It all starts by simply saying "Yes" to Jesus' call.

Chapter 2

Making the Effort

“HE’S NOT MY God!” shouted the teenage girl on a packed train.

She had my attention; I was fixated on the heated discussion taking place behind me as the girl’s friends mocked her: “Yes he is! You believe in God!”

“No, I don’t!” she replied.

But they were unrelenting. “Yes you do—why are you denying it? You go to church, we know you do!” Their laughs and comments were unflattering.

At last she admitted it. “Yeah, okay, I do believe in God! So what?”

“Only stupid people believe in God today!” the others scoffed.

There was so much I took from that conversation. It was only a few days after we’d got our research back at Youth for Christ. I had been so excited to learn that belief is up and around a third of all young people in the UK want someone to tell them about God. But to imply that there is a complete softening

and receptivity to God among young people would be misleading. The door to spirituality has swung open, and there is a stirring—a wave of the Holy Spirit. But it isn't straightforward. In this chapter, we're going to look in a bit more detail at why that is.

A Complex View of Church

“Boring.”

“Don't get it.”

“Toxic.”

“Misogynistic.”

“Hateful.”

“Judgmental.”

These are just a few of the responses young people give when asked about church. While Z-A is generally positive towards churches and most believe they would be welcomed, there are still significant negative stigmas to get past.

When Gen Z was asked why they don't turn to religion in tough times, 60% said they didn't agree with aspects of what religious groups were teaching, 58% wanted to figure out faith for themselves instead of having it handed to them, and 56% felt they didn't need a faith community—they could find meaning elsewhere.⁶

In other words, today's teens don't agree with the church on issues of lifestyle, don't want a construct of someone else's faith, and don't need a faith community to find meaning and connection. On the one hand, there is a rise in church attendance among Gen Z, yet on the other, an overwhelming uncertainty about whether religion and a religious community are the answer.

This isn't a simple "we love church" or "we dislike it", but rather a complex, mashed-up bundle of thoughts. While some with no church background are certainly turning up to church, the majority are not, and nor are they likely to. Therefore, the burden rests with the church community as to whether we wish to engage with this spiritually hungry generation of young people.

In the 1990s, an indestructible bridge was built in Honduras, a nation hit frequently by aggressive weather conditions. Using state-of-the-art infrastructure and Japanese technology, the Choluteca Bridge was designed to withstand a hurricane. Within the very year the bridge was opened, Hurricane Mitch swept through Honduras, destroying anything in its way. With the exception of the bridge. As per its design, it endured very little damage; however, the roads on either side were completely demolished and disappeared. Meanwhile, the hurricane had been so aggressive that it physically altered the flow of the river, which no longer passed under the bridge. The Choluteca Bridge stood alone, with no road connections and without even a river underneath it. It was now known as the bridge to nowhere.

From the perspective of many young people, the church, too, seems like a bridge to nowhere. It stands alone; its days might appear to have come and gone. Young people are seeking other ways to "cross the river"—to find guidance, answers or solutions to life's problems. Take WitchTok, the collective name for witchcraft-related videos on the social media platform TikTok, which is proving to be a major attraction

for young females seeking to connect spirituality with feminism.⁷ WitchTok videos had gained 64.8 billion views by mid-2024.⁸ Meanwhile, in the States, research shows that young people are more likely to feel connected to nature than to a higher power.⁹ These are just two of many examples.

Here's the reality: the good news of Jesus is seen as only one option in a whole host of competing spiritualities. And it may well not seem the most appealing of those options.

Something Is Broken

When something is broken on a car or machine, we often know because of the noise it makes. It might clang, bang or crackle, but whatever the sound, it's certainly not the same gentle hum it gives off when all is well.

Such a noise surrounds Gen Z-A today—and this is the second reason I want to highlight as to why welcoming young people into church is not necessarily straightforward. Here are six news headlines from just one month in 2024 that show how dramatic things can get.

Pupil behaviour “getting worse” at schools in England, say teachers: Nearly one in five teachers in England has been hit by a pupil this year, a survey commissioned by the BBC says¹⁰

What is really going on with Gen Alpha boys ... Inquiry into the rise of misogamy among boys and young men¹¹

*Suicide is on the rise for young Americans, with no clear answers*¹²

*Children as young as 13 sold knives and blades in police sting operation*¹³

*Girl arrested on suspicion of attempted murder after teachers and pupil stabbed at school*¹⁴

*England child alcohol use tops global charts, finds WHO report*¹⁵

Of course, these headlines only show part of the story. Positive news doesn't always make the front page. Yet it's clear that something is significantly broken when it comes to today's generation. Violence, misogyny, underage drinking... What has gone wrong?

All of this profoundly bothers me. I am not comfortable knowing how troubled many young people are and how much they need love, acceptance and care. I long for youth outreach to receive the focus and attention it needs. I fear that, too often, we just don't care enough.

Scum and Scorn

In Jesus' day, there were plenty of broken, troublesome and dysfunctional people around. According to the religious leaders of the time, they polluted society and went against the laws of the Torah. We can see their attitude in Luke 5:30, where the Pharisees and teachers of the law complain about the people attending a huge party held in Jesus' honour. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

they ask in disgust. For the Pharisees, these people are scum. They aren't religious, don't act in accordance with the teachings of Scripture and have little to no respect for religious law.

But Jesus responds:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:31-32)

The passage has my mind racing. How likely is it that in today's society, young people could be looked at with similar judgments? How often have you heard that today's young people are troubled, wayward, misguided, lazy, opinionated and digitally addicted? That they lack social integration and have questionable values? Aren't these the same things (with the exception of digital addiction) that could have been said about tax collectors?

This comparison leads to a challenging question: if today's teens are the tax collectors, what is their experience or expectation of today's Pharisee equivalents—those who are established, well educated, affluent and religious?

Many teens are not hearing the radical welcome of Jesus—the gospel call to repentance and faith. Instead they hear the church's message as one of judgment.

There is a concern among Gen Z and Gen Alpha that the church lacks authenticity and is judgmental of people's lifestyles. Of the young people in our Z-A: *Growing Spirituality* research who did not feel they would be welcomed at church, many of those assumed

they would be unwelcome due to lifestyle preferences; others thought it would be over the fact that they didn't believe.¹⁶ That's a sobering reality. The ranking by young people in the report placed the church a fraction above the government, which is often seen as just another institution to distrust.

It's true that Christians' views on certain issues clash with modern secular expectations. The Bible has messages that today's young people may not want to hear, on everything from sexuality to identity to sin. But there was a clash between the tax collectors' lifestyle and the biblical commands too—and it didn't stop Jesus from talking to them.

The question for us is: do we write young people off in the same way the Pharisees wrote off the tax collectors? Perhaps we don't actively dismiss them, but we do remain apathetic, letting them assume the worst of us. Do we leave them in their broken, abandoned, sin-stained state? Or do we reach out, as Jesus did, and invite them in?

Seeking to be relevant and effective in our witness to young people does *not* mean we need to deconstruct our faith and throw out the authority of Scripture. Just as Jesus did not hesitate to tell the tax collectors that there is a better way, so we need to stick to our commitment to demonstrate and declare Jesus and his gospel—the whole gospel, with its call to die to self and follow God's ways.

Yet we need to look at that gospel truth through a different lens. We need to be aware of the noise caused by brokenness—the harmful influences, broken

relationships and deep confusion that so many young people are experiencing. We need to care enough to make the effort to consider how we can meet young people where they are, how we will come across to them and how we can help them experience a taste of life as it's really meant to be.

I am reminded often of Jesus' words in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy". Truly, the enemy is killing, stealing and destroying in our own day. But Jesus went on, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

The mission is clear; the how becomes our challenge.

We Need the Holy Spirit

In the spring of 2024, I was late for the youth leaders' pre-meeting. One young person had already arrived: a 13-year-old boy whom I knew well—I had spent lots of time with him, helping to address major bullying in his life. I quickly asked, "You okay?" and he raised his eyebrows with a smile. He was tucking into a well-known brand of fast food. I apologised for not chatting but said I would be back out in ten minutes or so.

After the meeting, I found the boy slumped. Something had happened. "You okay?" I asked again, with a greater degree of clarity than before. The answer was no. In the brief time I had been in the meeting, the boy had received news that one of his friends, a 13-year-old girl, had overdosed and taken her own life. I sat, listened and said very little while he told me the story. He concluded by saying, "We shouldn't have to deal with this stuff."

What disturbed me the most that day? Perhaps surprisingly, it wasn't the tragic death of a 13-year-old girl who had lost hope. Nor was it the boy overwhelmed by pain and confusion. It was my own reaction. To my shame, I was barely moved.

I understood why. When you work with hurting and vulnerable young people, challenges often follow. This wasn't the first teen suicide I had known, and I am sadly convinced it won't be the last. One of my own daughters has lost three friends (all teenagers) to suicide. That's three funerals, three devastated families and three young people who just couldn't cope. I was becoming immune, desensitised, hardened—whatever label you want to give it—to that which is unthinkable: a young person ending their life.

I went home and prayed that God would break my heart, remove the callouses, and help me do all I can to fight for a generation facing sizeable challenges and changes that no previous generation can fully understand or identify with. A generation hearing a thousand competing messages that seem so easily to drown out the good news they could encounter in Jesus.

I want to encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit to examine your heart as you read through this book. To point out areas that may be hardened, or where biases have formed that may not be in line with Jesus, or where apathy has taken hold. The Holy Spirit does not condemn, but he will convict—and that conviction can transform us.

This book will help with the next steps, but permission and willingness for the heart's examination

are entirely with you and the Holy Spirit. To catch and be part of the wave moving through this nation, there can be only one starting place, and that is prayer—as we will explore over the following pages.