

RESCUE A



REACHING THE LEAST,
LAST, & LOST

GENERATION

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About the Author



Jose Rodriguez

Growing up in the inner city, Jose Rodriguez was faced with many of the same challenges students are faced with today. Impacted by his environment, he made some poor choices. He joined a gang, got arrested for stealing cars, and was regularly suspended from school. His story is one that many teens growing up in an urban setting can relate to today, but it's also a story of a complete turnaround.

Jose is the founder and CEO of Rescue a Generation Inc., a non-profit that focuses on reaching students who are struggling in school due to behavior, suspensions, and family issues. He is a sought-out communicator who speaks to students in a variety of venues across the nation. His passion for young people, authenticity, and boldness gives him the tools to effectively help all of us reach and rescue this generation.

Introduction

Have you ever had a student in your ministry who gives you a migraine every time they are around? A type of student that seems as if they are always looking for reasons not to listen or to get in trouble and be rebellious? I'm sure every time you saw this student coming, you were filled with grace and mercy and wished nothing but the Lord's richest blessings toward him or her.

Nah, let's get real. Maybe if some of those students didn't show up, the event might go smoother, other students might be more focused, and you would be able to give attention to the ones who are there for the right reasons, correct?

Have you ever asked why this student is this way? It's possible they are this way because of deep pain in their lives. It's possible their environment has shaped them to act like this. It's possible they are drowning and need rescue. The truth is, these hard-to-reach students need the hope of the gospel just as much as everyone else.

The challenge is that sometimes getting past the walls they put up seems nearly impossible. It seems as if they just won't get it. Is the effort you are putting in worth it? Will you really see the change you are praying for?

I know it is hard. I know it gets frustrating. I know there are moments you just want to give up. But what if you're the only person who won't stop believing in them? In this book, we will dive into how to reach some of the hardest to reach students in your youth group, on your campus, or in your community. Many of them do not need to be reached; they need to be rescued. Let's dive in and see how we can rescue the least, the last, and the lost.

Foreword

In the spring of 2014, I had an opportunity to teach and train a group of emerging urban leaders on a systematic approach to developing an effective and efficient urban ministry program at Biola University in Southern California. This training aimed to provide leaders with some practical tools and strategies that would help them assemble the proper structure to fit their specific cultural context and teach them how to empower the right leaders to fulfill their godly vision and mission. There were so many incredible and gifted leaders in the training who were passionate about reaching the next generation. Little did I know that one of the cohort members would end up having a profound impact on my life. The cohort member I'm referring to was Jose Rodriguez.

At this point, I had served for the past twenty years as a youth pastor and executive pastor in an urban church in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I had the privilege of crossing paths with many exceptional leaders, there was something uniquely different about Jose. While many other youth leaders only talked about reaching the next generation, Jose had a multi-level vision for reaching and rescuing a generation.

Jose and I connected, and I got a chance to hear his story. Now, in an effort not to spoil what you're about to read, all I can say is: when I heard Jose's story, I was blown away. Despite Jose's upbringing, trials, and tribulations, there was such a joy that came over him as he shared his testimony on how his encounter with Jesus changed the trajectory of his life forever! Ever since our first meeting, I have watched Jose spend his life living out the principles of what it means to rescue a generation.

After meeting Jose, two things were clear to me. First, Jose is a gifted leader that God is using in an extraordinary way.

Second, Jose has a deep love, passion, and compassion for marginalized, under-resourced, and overlooked students—students like he was. The least, the last, and the lost. Jose isn't just talking about it, he's being about it!

Some of you picked up this book simply because you thought the title was pretty cool and catchy. However, I promise you, as you read through it, you're going to find that Jose does a masterful job of challenging and inspiring us all. He encourages us not only to join the movement of rescuing a generation, but he will also stretch us to step outside of our comfort zones to become the leaders God has designed us to be. Many people create resources that are one-sided and only discuss the "what," but not many people will deep dive and teach the "why" and the "how." This book will provide a road map that will equip you with the necessary tools to learn how to reach students many people feel are hard to reach or even unreachable.

Jose continues to inspire me to be a better leader. He inspires me to remember that God is still a God who specializes in making the impossible possible! Jose's story may not be your story; however, so many students like Jose need leaders like YOU to accept the challenge of rescuing a generation. No matter where you live or what your student ministry context is, this book will fundamentally equip you with the tools you need to connect with those hard-to-reach students your church is missing.

Jeffrey Wallace

Executive Director of the LIFT Tour & Youth Pastor Summit
Student Leadership University

PART

01



WHEW




Chapter 1

Why Rescue?

I'll never forget my first time on a cruise ship. I was so nervous about everything. I knew that the vast majority of cruise ships made it to their destination and back without a problem, but I couldn't seem to shake the "what if" thoughts. What if we sink? What if there's bad weather? What if there's a medical emergency? I put up a good front the entire way to the ship. I could have won an Oscar for my performance! I acted as if I was only excited and not nervous at all. After all, I was a newlywed and was about to spend a week on a boat with my wife. Truth be told, I was terrified. My thoughts kept drifting back to the worst-case scenarios. It was like Titanic was replaying in my head and my wife and I were Jack and Rose.

Once we boarded, we went to our room to get settled in and then we explored what the boat had to offer. It had restaurants, activities, and even jacuzzis to take it easy in. Finally, I began to relax. My anxiety started to be overtaken by genuine excitement over all the fun we could have together on the ship.



Later that evening, we were summoned to a large room with the passengers on the boat from our same deck. Once we were in the room, they gave us a presentation on the safety protocols for the ship. They described where to go in case of an emergency, what to do if the boat began to sink, and what to do if you had a problem while on one of the day excursions. At this point, my anxiety came rushing back, and my worst-case-scenario thinking took over again. All I kept thinking about was that we were going to the middle of the ocean, so who would make it in time to rescue us if we needed to be saved?

We ended up having the absolute time of our lives as a newlywed couple and thoroughly enjoyed all of the amenities the ship had to offer. Once we made it back to land safely, we had incredible stories to tell from our experience on the cruise. However, the more I reflected on this trip, I discovered a strange parallel to student ministry.

REACHING AND RESCUING

When I was in college studying youth ministry, I learned so many valuable principles about effectively reaching students. I learned not just about students but about reaching their families as well. One particular class taught me the importance of properly communicating with parents as well as students. As I sat in that class, I fully agreed with what was being taught, but I had a tough time applying what I was learning to the situation of the students I was ministering to.

At this time, I served a youth ministry that was considered an urban youth outreach ministry. Each week, we ran eight buses into the inner city of Tulsa, Oklahoma. We would bring in around two hundred to two hundred fifty inner-city students from various neighborhoods in our community. To give you a better context of what this ministry looked like, police and armed security were required at each worship service due to the population of students we were bringing in. They would

often bring their drama, gang issues, and drug paraphernalia to church to do what they were doing in their neighborhoods.

On several occasions, we found ourselves in the middle of breaking up fights, both gang-related and just over an offense that happened at church. We had to keep our eyes open from beginning to end to ensure students could manage their emotions and behave appropriately. These were the types of students who have a hard time trusting anybody—especially somebody in authority. That meant if I wanted to reach them effectively, I had to take the time to get to know them in a personal way. They did not care if I was a pastor or not, or if I was in ministry or not—they only cared if I took the time to get to know them.

If I wanted to reach them effectively, I had to take the time to get to know them in a personal way.

Each week, to build rapport with the students on my particular bus, I would go for a few hours into a section eight housing apartment complex to hang out on the basketball court and in their environment. As I began to get to know these students, it was very apparent that they lacked parental guidance and leadership in their lives. These young people were pretty much able to do whatever they wanted to do, whenever they wanted to do it. Unfortunately, most of what they desired to do involved them finding their way into some trouble.

As I spent more and more time with these students, I learned why their parents let them do anything they wanted—they either weren't there or didn't care. It was then I realized these particular students were already bombarded with pain, trauma, and abuse from their households, communities, and peers. They were already drowning in the unstable situations of their homes and everyday lives.

That was when I realized these students did not just need to be reached; they needed to be rescued. They needed to



be rescued from pain and trauma. They needed to be rescued from their broken family systems. They needed to be rescued from the toxic gang culture that they so easily bought into. They needed to be rescued by the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Youth ministry is not a safe ministry to serve in. It involves rolling up your sleeves or pant legs and getting in the trenches with students. It requires us to do things like Jesus did—leave our comfort zones and live among the people. It's messy and chaotic, but also fulfilling when you realize you are answering the call of reaching and rescuing a generation. It's kind of like my cruise experience. If I was only afraid of what could happen and I gave into my anxiety, emotions, and fear, I would have missed the reward and joy of being on a memorable trip with my wife. Ministry is messy, but the reward of seeing students turn away from their old lives and follow the life that Jesus has for them is one of the most rewarding feelings you can experience in life and ministry.

LIFEBOAT

Every cruise ship has a lifeboat. You hope to never be in one, but you're glad they are there if they are needed. It's the idea of the lifeboat that I would like to present as a paradigm for ministry to urban and at-risk students today. Youth ministry has evolved over the last few decades. Students today are dealing with so much more fear and anxiety than in the past. In many ways, youth ministry in the 90s was different—safer. Overall, the church had a reputation as a safe place. It was a place students knew they could go when their lives got chaotic. It was regarded as a lifeboat, or a place where a student could go to be safe.

When I was in college, I heard an alarming prediction. Ron Luce, founder of Acquire the Fire, said that if something did not change, only 4 percent of the next generation would be Bible-believing Christians.¹ I heard this in 2007. I am not sure people realized how prophetic that statement was. In 2018, the Barna

group came out with a study about Gen Z and Millennials that said only 6 percent of Millennials and only 4 percent of Gen Z are Bible-believing Christians.²

This is where my heart is and is the framework for my whole ministry. I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to God apart from Him (see John 14:6). I also believe Luke 5:31-32, where Jesus said He did not come for the healthy but for the sick. Therefore, the local church is designed to be a lifeboat to rescue the drowning. Since both of these understandings reflect our responsibility as believers, that means only 6 percent of Millennials and 4 percent of Gen Z are safely in the boat. However, 96 percent of Gen Z students are drowning in a world of pain, trauma, depression, anxiety, suicide, fatherlessness, drugs, and so much more. We can no longer be comfortable just trying to keep safe the 4 percent in the boat. Our responsibility as youth workers is to go after the millions of other students in this generation dying from their issues. There is a generation drowning that needs to be rescued.

MY JOURNEY

At the end of my time in college, I just knew God was going to open up big doors for me at some megachurch and be a radical youth pastor who reached hundreds of students overnight. Instead, God had different plans for me. He sent me to San Bernardino, California.

I'll never forget moving into a new city full of ambition, hope, and Jesus. I just knew God would use me to grow our youth ministry from twenty students to hundreds within months. After all, that is what God sent me to the city to do, right? However, in 2012, the city of San Bernardino filed for bankruptcy. At the time, it was the largest city of its kind to file for bankruptcy and the second poorest large city in the nation, second only to Detroit. I knew I had the gifts, the skill set, and



the passion for reaching this generation. I got to my new home and was handed the keys to the youth ministry to run with it full-time. I began to take all of my knowledge from serving inner-city students for the previous ten years and the things I learned in college. It was now time to live it out.

It was not long before I realized the training I received, while essential and necessary, didn't quite apply to the students I was serving. I realized that for me to impact their lives, I would need to show up for them. Showing up did not necessarily look like going to their basketball games or track meets. These were the type of situations that I was used to. Showing up for these kids looked like being in the courtroom so the student knew I was with them and God still had a plan for them despite whatever crime they had committed.

These students have given me my fair share of courtroom experiences, hospital visits, and even police encounters. No matter where serving them takes me, I am committed to them until the end. No matter the cost, the crime,

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Tulsa, Oklahoma.**

or the situation, I will be there to make sure they know they are not alone and can be rescued at any moment. If I'm being honest, I've had quite a few frustrating moments—the types of moments that make me want to quit and walk away from the very thing that God has called me to do. It is in those moments that I—and you, too, if you want to serve students like this—must

remember the “why” and find small victories to celebrate so the feeling of failure doesn't become overwhelming. Remember, our responsibility is to be obedient to what God has called us to do. If you will be faithful to that, then you can trust Him with the results.

RESCUE?

I am fully aware that on my best day, I cannot rescue anyone. Ultimately, it is by the grace of God that any of us find ourselves saved. However, God has always had an answer for the issues that have plagued our society. From Genesis to Revelation, God has always had a response for every problem we've faced. He has used people to bring about His plans, will, and desires.

Consider the Hebrews, trapped in slavery and oppression. God raised up Moses to be the answer and a deliverer of an entire generation. If you look at the rebellion of all humankind and God's grief at even creating humans in the first place, God raised up Noah to build an ark and save his family, saving all of humanity. If you look at the corrupt leadership of a country that was supposed to be His chosen people, God raised a man after His own heart—David. If you factor in a church with issues and perversion among believers, God raised up Paul to be a missionary and to write letters to bring correction to the house of God. If you factor in all of humanity's sin and the rebellion and fall of humanity, God sent Himself in the person of Jesus to pay the ultimate sacrifice so that we all should not perish but have everlasting life if we believe in Him. God is never without an answer to the pains of a generation, and He uses people to help in the rescue that only He is able to achieve.

Ultimately, the only reason I'm writing this is because God, in all of His sovereignty, saw fit to rescue a little, broken, Hispanic boy from the inner city of Tulsa, Oklahoma. A boy who was already drowning in a world of trauma, sin, and poverty. Jesus never came out of the sky to appear to me. Instead, He would raise up a lady named Nancy who would knock on my door over and over and over again to invite me to church.

If God never raised up Nancy, I have no idea where I would be today. I know that God is still empowering and using people around the world. The whole reason you have this book now is probably because there is a burden in your heart for

this generation that God has placed inside of you. You are not satisfied with the 4 percent in the boat. You know He wants to use you to get in the trenches with this generation so we can see God raise up youth workers to be rescuers of students in every neighborhood, every demographic, and every socio-economic status. There is a generation that needs the rescuing only God can offer. I am convinced if you have been in youth ministry for longer than five minutes, you know it is not going to be an easy job. It will involve you getting messy as you do life with students who need the hope of the gospel.

As we work through the rest of this book, I pray you, as the rescuer God can use, find hope, resourceful ideas, and motivation to continue to fight for this generation. They don't just need you; they need God. I believe that together, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can and we will rescue this generation.

Chapter 1 Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the ways students you work with need to be rescued and not just reached?

2. How have you seen ministry change since you've started in student ministry?

3. In what ways have you had to go beyond your standard programming to help students who are struggling?



Scan the QR code for teaching videos from author Jose Rodriguez.