

THE OBAMA FACTOR

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Abstract

The candidacy of Barack Obama and historic presidential election revealed some important lessons to us about our country and its future. One of the most interesting elements of his election was the way in which this campaign was able to engage youth and young adults. In the general election Obama won 66% of 18-29 year old voters. Much of his organization and support for youth was done by collegians on college and university campuses around the country. At a time when the Christian church is hemorrhaging 70% of young adults ages 18-22 Obama's ability to galvanize and win the youth vote could be instructive to churches. How was his campaign so successful in winning the youth vote and what lessons can we learn as we seek to engage, preserve and win young adults on public college and university campuses? This paper looks at seven strategies the Obama Campaign used to effectively reach and win the support of collegians and suggests five strategies that we can use as a church in public campus ministries.

Introduction

The candidacy and historic election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States in 2008 has raised several issues for America. Many have suggested that his election signals a transition in America around the issue of race. For some it signals that we are now living in a post-racial era. The old biases and divisions of our past have been swept aside by his election and reveal that we have finally climbed the steep mountain of racism and bigotry. But is this assertion true? Are we living in a post-racial America?

The Southern Poverty Law Center's annual report titled, "The Year of Hate," found the number of hate groups are growing and blame their ire on the election of Barack Obama and the economy. Don Black, former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard claims the number of registered readers on his white nationalist website has surged to unprecedented levels in recent months. On the day of Obama's election more than 2,000 people joined his website.¹

While Don Black and individuals of his ilk do not represent the vast majority of Americans, it does remind us that while Barack Obama's election does represent a change, it certainly does not signal that America is post-racial. We still struggle with the vestiges of old racial tensions. However, there is something we as Christians can learn from this historic election. And it was best evidenced when the nation was introduced to Barack Obama in 2004.

It was during the Democratic National Convention of 2004 that a relatively unknown named Barack Obama, democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate of Illinois, was given the plumb assignment as keynote speaker for the convention. What catapulted him into national prominence was his call to set aside our differences, transcend the "red state" and "blue state" divisions that separated us and become the "United States of America." Obama had found a theme that resonated in the deep recesses of the American Spirit; the desire to become "One" America; a truly "United" States of America. This theme brought Obama national attention instantly. His message of a truly united America became a rallying cry for his presidential candidacy. And it was this theme that especially attracted collegians to his cause.

When President Obama's candidacy was in the exploratory stage, one of the strongest groups pulling for him to run was young people. Ben Waxman, a young adult 20-something wrote, "I've been amazed at the number of students who ask me about Obama and can't wait for his campaign."² Waxman states further, "...he also excites kids who have never voted in their lives."³ And lest someone thinks the Obama support was coming from non-white youth Waxman says, "Most of my fellow students are white and grew up in rural areas. Yet many of these students are eager to vote for a black guy from Chicago with a self-described funny name."⁴

Once his candidacy was announced the Obama campaign aggressively went after the youth vote. Early polls in 2007 had Obama leading his closest democratic rival among college students 43 percent to 23 percent.⁵ Obama would use this huge collegiate support to help him win the Iowa Caucuses. During the Iowa caucus the number of young democratic voters increased by 135% from the 2004 caucuses and young voters preferred Obama to his next closest competitor by more than 4 to 1.⁶

Though conventional wisdom told Obama not to depend on the youth vote because of its unreliability, the Obama campaign refused to allow this to determine its investment in young voters. And the investment paid off. In speaking of the phenomenal draw that Barack Obama had among young voters, David Von Drehle wrote, "His opponents promise fight, but Obama promises healing."⁷ This aggressive attention to the youth vote helped to sweep Obama to key victories on Super Tuesday, eventually winning him the democratic presidential nomination. In the general election Obama won 66 percent of the age 18-29 vote compared to McCain's 32 percent. The only age group that Obama lost in the general election was 65 and over.⁸

Obama won nearly every demographic group in America during the general election. He also won every cultural group, except white Americans. And while he did not win the majority of the white vote he won the highest percentage of white votes for a democratic candidate since 1976. Even more noteworthy; he won the majority of white voters age 18-29 by ten percentage points above McCain (54% to 44%).⁹ Obama's historic election has changed the landscape of politics for years to come and has now placed a new demographic (18-29 year olds) among those who every candidate must court to win elections at the local, state and national level.

The big question is, "What does this election mean for Christians as we consider a strategy to effectively win and keep collegiate age young adults in the church?" According to Thom and Sam Rainer 70 percent of churchgoing young adults drop out of the church between the ages 18-22. The third highest reason they list for dropping out is, "moving to college."¹⁰ It is during their stay in college that a

good amount of young adults stop attending church. Before we jump to conclusions about the spirituality of young adults, it is important to note that the church dropout rate is pervasive among all age groups of those who claim to be Christians. While 52 percent of Americans claim to be members of a Protestant church only 28 percent actually attend.¹¹ So the problem of absenteeism is larger than generational. Christians in general seem to be attending church less and less.

Neither is it college attendance alone that is the cause. According to one report, 69 percent of those who attended college between the ages of 18 and 22 stopped attending church for a year, while 71 percent of those who did not attend college in the same age span did the same thing.¹² So whether they went to college or not young adults leave the church during the years of 18-22 at about the same percentage.

What do we know about collegians and their spirituality? The Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA found that, "Most college students have a very high level of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning of life." It is not a lack of spiritual interest that is the cause of the drop-off from church. The study also notes that "Freshman have a high expectation for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development. They place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their spiritual expression of spirituality."¹³

Collegians also have a high degree of spiritual interests. Three-fourths say they are "Searching for meaning/purpose in life and similar numbers have high expectations that college will help them develop spiritually. Many are engaged in a spiritual quest with nearly half reporting they consider it 'essential' or 'very important' to seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually."¹⁴ Collegians come to college with high expectations spiritually, but for some reason the church has not been effective in capitalizing on this interest.

The quest for meaning and purpose comes from God. Ecclesiastes tells us, "God has planted eternity in the human heart."¹⁵ And God promises us He will fill that void if we seek Him. He says through the

prophet Jeremiah says, "If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me. I will be found by you says the Lord."¹⁶ If that is so, why is the church failing to help collegians find the void in their lives that only God can fill? Rainer notes, "The church is not capturing and engaging these students' spiritual interests. In fact, the church is doing the opposite. We're losing them because the church is uninteresting to them."¹⁷ The church has not made young adults their priority, so why should we be surprised that they become disconnected from the church when they go to college? If the church is to regain its place of primary importance in the lives of collegians it must change its approach to ministry. Instead of focusing most of its time on those 65 and older, the church must take the "Obama approach."

No matter what you think politically of the newly elected president, we all have to be impressed with his gaining 66 percent of voters 18 to 29. How did he do it and what can we learn from his strategy? There are seven strategies that the Obama campaign used to galvanize young voters.

First, was his message of change. Unlike his opponents, Obama presented a message of reconciliation, bringing the nation together and bridging the divide that separated the nation into red states and blue states. It was not just bridging the ideological differences of political parties, but also the racial and cultural differences that have haunted America from its inception. One noted, "His is the language of possibility, which is the native tongue of the young."¹⁸

Ben Waxman gives three reasons for Obama's appeal to collegians. First, was his positive vision for the future and moving beyond partisanship. Second, was his ability to transcend many of the past political and social battles that young people no longer care about (such as the Vietnam War and many other volatile issues from the 60's). Third, they are looking for a national figure that can advance the conversation about race in America.¹⁹

Waxman states further, "Every poll shows my contemporaries constitute the most tolerant demographic in the country. A sizable majority says that race does not play a factor in how they would vote for president. This is an incredible departure from past behavior."²⁰ It should be noted that all

three emphases are relational. About this phenomenon *Time* writes:

Obama... radiates the new. He doesn't just talk about change; he looks like change. His person and his platform are virtually indistinguishable. Obama, like Tiger Woods and Angelina Jolie, has one of those faces that seem beamed from a postracial future, when everyone will have a permanent, noncarcinogenic tan. He has small kids and a low BMI... His campaign is crawling with cool young people, and the candidate fits right in. We've yet to see Obama flustered or harried; instead, he gives off the enigmatic Zen confidence of the guy who is picked first for every game.²¹

Second, was Obama's use of technology.

Eight months before Obama announced his candidacy for president, a Bowdoin College junior, Meredith Segal created a Facebook group that reached full-fledged PAC (Political Action Committee)-status with nearly 62,000 members and chapters at 80 college campuses. When Obama announced his candidacy this well-structured organization became a part of the Obama campaign. By October 2007 Students for Obama with more than 600 chapters were formed on college campuses and high schools across the country. Before the Iowa caucus the Obama team had established chapters on nineteen college campuses and 144 high schools across Iowa.²²

This internet organization was used to mobilize hundreds of thousands of youth and young adults to work for the Obama campaign.

Melissa Dahl writes, "Through a steady stream of tests and Twitters, experts agree Obama managed to excite young voters by meeting them where they live—online."²³ The Internet has become the community of choice that many millennials use to stay connected and build consensus. Morley Winograd, co-author of "Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics," says, "This is a group of people who are constantly checking in with everybody else in their

circle to make a decision.” “This is a generation that doesn’t tend to think about asking experts for opinion, they tend to ask each other, and then that becomes the truth.”²⁴

Obama became known for his Blackberry. This knowledge highlighted to many young adults that Obama was in tune with their generation. He understood and lived by the same means of communication they lived by. Throughout his campaign he used the Internet to communicate directly with his supporters and even announced his vice presidential choice for running mate on the web, before he made the official public announcement.

Obama’s use of the Internet dovetails into his third key strategy, empowerment. In speaking of Obama’s Iowa strategy, Drehle notes, “Obama did something unusual in politics: he made them (youth) a genuine priority. After his rallies in towns across the state, he met backstage with student leaders from the area—a privilege most campaigns reserve for local VIPs and fundraisers.”²⁵ Obama gave young adults quality time and invested in their involvement and leadership. “He also hired as his youth-vote coordinator Hans Reimer, a veteran of Rock the Vote, which has been working to mobilize the student vote for years, with increasing success. Reimer extracted a promise that his work would be an integral part of the overall campaign, not a lip-service, photo-op’ed afterthought.”²⁶ This intentional decision by Obama would translate into huge dividends during the primary season and the general election.

The Obama campaign empowered young people to not only get involved in his campaign, but also assume leadership positions in reaching their peers. Meredith Segal’s initiative was rewarded when she was invited to leadership in the campaign. Her vision spawned several key initiatives to enlist youth volunteers into the Obama campaign. A winter internship program was launched, an ID program targeted at college students was begun, youth canvassing and a text messaging program was instituted all when the creative juices of the collegians who were interested in the Obama campaign were empowered.²⁷ Michelle Stein, 20, was media coordinator for Obama’s youth campaign in Missouri.

These collegians represent a sampling of the many 20-something’s who assumed key leadership roles throughout the Obama campaign. Psericks notes, “The Obama campaign has shown the commitment and organization not only to turn out youth voters...but to offer opportunities for leadership training.” He continues, “Young people are not just votes...they are the future of this country.”²⁸ Marissa Cumpton, a 20-year-old junior at Iowa State said, “I think part of the reason why Obama is so popular is because he encourages young people to participate, he is very inclusive of young voters.”²⁹

Fourth, the Obama campaign directed his resources toward the effort to win youth support. Drehle writes, “Obama put his money where his mouth was, spending precious radio and television dollars on ads specifically at Iowa students.”³⁰ The Obama campaign took the risk of investing in the most unreliable age demographic, 18 to 29 year olds. Conventional political wisdom had defined that age group as least likely to show up at state caucuses and voting polls. Ann Selzer, a veteran Iowa pollster noted, “the majority of those who do show (to caucuses) are usually over the age of 55...habitually, the younger people don’t show.”³¹ Obama invested in the youth vote and it would pay him huge dividends in the primary season and the general election.

Fifth, was Obama’s appeal to unity. Millennials have a natural unity bound by their desire to build consensus and make group decisions. To this point Winograd notes, “No decision is made without dozens of e-mails, texts, Facebook messages to check whether an idea works for the whole group—which could explain why Millennials so firmly latched onto Obama’s message of unity.”³² Michael Hais who co-wrote “Millennial Makeover” with Winograd explains, “They (Millennials) are naturally inclined to be unified...they were reared to believe that everyone has a role to play, everybody is the same and everybody should look for group-oriented solutions.”³³

Millennials have been called the “Barney Generation.” “Countless afternoons during their childhood, millions of Millennials sat down to watch a big purple dinosaur teach problem-solving to a diverse cast.”³⁴ To this point Hais says, “They solved their problems by the end of the half hour, and they

all accepted one another...Millennials, because they are much more collegial...will figure out a way to incorporate everybody's point of view."³⁵ Early in his campaign Obama emphasized diplomacy in dealing with our nations enemies, while other candidates bristled at the idea. While older voters questioned Obama's policies, his approach of diplomacy first resonated with young voters.

Sixth, the Obama campaign was intentional about building community. The Obama campaign used an old adage in politics. Face-to-face contact. It has been known for decades that the best way to get voters to vote is through face-to-face communication. Many recent campaigns had abandoned this old tried and true method for mass-mailings and phone banks. In the 1990s Yale University published several influential studies proving that personal canvassing is more effective than direct mail or phone calls from strangers. They discovered that voters are more likely to go to the polls if they are asked face-to-face by someone they trust.³⁶ Michael McDonald notes, "It's really the same way we organized back in the heyday of political machines: know your voters and turn them out personally. Obama has keyed into this and applied it on campus, using students to recruit other students."³⁷

Obama's campaign used this personal approach for a generation that craves community among its peers. Obama's young loyalists organized "dorm-storming," a canvassing technique that matches student volunteers with dormitories where they live or have friends. Kevin Wolfe, a 19-year-old Washington University Obama organizer says, "It's a very intimate interaction because they're hearing about Obama from someone they already know."³⁸ Couple this with Obama's use of the internet and one can see how he was able to build a community among collegians.

Seventh, Obama was able to inspire collegians. Gordon Fischer, former Iowa Democratic Party Chair, said, "I have not seen young people as excited about a candidate...He's just on a different level. He's so energized young people, and it's not just young people—there's minorities, independents, even some Republicans..."³⁹ When Claire McCaskill, the highest ranking Democrat in Missouri hesitated to endorse Obama, it was her daughter who convinced her to. After watching her mother's emotional reaction to

Obama's moving speech after winning the Iowa caucus, Maddie Esposito, McCaskill's 18-year-old daughter said to her mother, "You know you believe in him." "It's time to step up...You have to do it, or I'm never talking to you again."⁴⁰ Caroline Kennedy confessed that her three teenagers, "Were the first people who made me realize that Barack Obama is the President we need."⁴¹

Not only were collegians inspired campaigners for Obama, they also supported the effort with their finances. 24-year-old Jade Baranski...gave \$200 to the Obama campaign. She reasoned, "Compared to what some people donated, its nothing, but for me it was definitely a sacrifice...I honestly feel this election could come down to one vote, one person, one dollar—so hopefully all the money and time I've put in will be worth it."⁴² And 53 percent of those who supported Obama's candidacy described him as inspirational.⁴³ There can be no doubt that inspiration was one of the key factors in Obama's appeal among all demographic groups and especially to collegians.

Translating Obama Strategies to Church Strategies

So what strategies can we use and implement from the Obama campaign?

We must begin by realizing that our future lies in the next generation. We must be intentional about making youth and young adults our number one priority. Let us remember that the original Jesus movement some 2000 years ago was a youth movement. Jesus himself began his public ministry at the age of 30. John the Baptist, his cousin and forerunner was just a few months older and together they were able to begin a revolution that would change the course of human history.

It is that revolutionary spirit that we must capture and direct with the same fervor and dedication as the Obama campaign did. The memorable words of Ellen White are appropriate for today, "With such an army of youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Savior might be carried to the whole world!"⁴⁴ How might we go about that "right training" today? Let me suggest five approaches that may be particularly effective with collegians.

First, we must build community. As mentioned above, the Obama campaign understood the importance of building community in order to successfully attract and engage collegians. Millennials who become disconnected from the church cite the lack of caring and feeling welcomed as a reason for falling away from the church. The Rainer's write, "Dropouts left because they felt disconnected from the people of the church; those who stayed did so because they felt connected."⁴⁵ They say further, "There is a clear correlation between how young adults perceive the people of the church and whether they drop out...young adults connect to churches where the people are open, positive, and caring. Conversely, young adults drop out of churches where the people are indifferent or critical."⁴⁶ We cannot expect to minister to collegians unless churches become engaged in building community with them. "The church, which is supposed to be the locus of community, does not provide a sense of community for many of the dechurched...as a consequence, these young people move to different places to connect with others."⁴⁷

Friends and family play a huge role in keeping collegians connected and reclaiming the disconnected. "For the dechurched to become re-churched, a gentle nod often came from friends and family. One-half or 50 percent of the re-churched attribute their return to the encouragement of friends and family."⁴⁸

"Today's collegians are the Starbucks generation. They gather and chat at places often called third places which can often take the place of the church."⁴⁹ Some churches have become innovative, by setting up parachurches in coffee shops and the like. This has become an effective way of reaching those who may feel alienated from the church but not from alternate gathering locations.⁵⁰ If we are to effectively build community with collegians we must think outside the box, meet them where they are and dare to try something different. Jesus, our perfect example, was always where the people were—so much so that he was accused of always being among publicans and sinners. If our perfect Lord risked Himself and his reputation to meet the unchurched where they were, should we, His sin-filled disciples, do less?

Second, the church must become more technologically savvy. George Barna notes that technology is fast becoming the latest driving force behind what is often called the "generation gap." The generational divide brought on by the digital tools is significant. While all Americans are benefiting from the use of technology, Barna points out, "Each successive generation is adopting and using technology at a significantly greater pace than their predecessors. Studies show the exponential reliance on digital tools among Americans under the age of 25."⁵¹

The use of technology has become the most important advancement that has impacted the communication world. "Facebook, the largest Internet social-networking site, boasts a market share of more than 85% of four-year U.S. universities, with millions of members averaging 20 minutes per day on-site exploring."⁵² Friends and relationships are built by collegians on the Internet and information is passed to one another through various forms of technology.

Barna notes that while all generations use technology, none use it more than millennials (or "mosaics" as he identifies them). Barna identified 14 digital activities used by society for communication. Elders and Boomers use only two (email and search), while the Mosaic generation uses eight (email, search, texting, hosting personal websites, tweeting, instant messaging, blogging, watching online videos and downloading music). This expanded use of technology is vast and the gap between the use of technologies by collegians and their parents is ever widening.⁵³ If we are to build community with collegians and reach them where they are the church must expand its use of technology.

Third, the church must strive to become united. Unity is not uniformity, but rather interdependence. It is recognizing that there is a place in the Body for everyone. Just as the body has different functions and plays different roles, each entity functions cooperatively under the guidance of the head. If the church is to reach collegians effectively, it must get beyond its old divisions of the past. It must put aside notions of racial privilege, class distinctions and social status. Paternalism, cronyism, chauvinism and nepotism must be surrendered to Christ. We must begin to live out the admonition of

Philippians 2:5 and let the mind of Christ live in us.

Jesus said in John 13:35 that the identifying mark of his disciples would be their love one for another. In Jesus' only recorded prayer in John 17, He asked the Father in verses 20-21 to bring His disciples into unity. "20—I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me because of their testimony. 21—My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as You and I are one, Father—that just as You are in Me and I am in You, so they will be in us, and **the world will believe You sent Me.**"⁵⁴

Ellen White made this comment about the prayer of Jesus:

The instruction given me by One of authority is that we are to learn to answer the prayer recorded in the 17th chapter of John. We are to make this prayer our **first study**...to **learn** the **science** of this **prayer**. My brethren and sisters, I ask you to heed these words and to bring to your study a calm, humble, contrite spirit, and the healthy energies of a mind under the control of God. Those who **fail** to learn the lessons contained in this prayer are in **danger** of **making one-sided developments**, which **no future training will ever fully correct.**⁵⁵

One of the things collegians yearn for is unity. Frank Lutz, the conservative pollster found that "The most compelling issues for today's students were not the hot-button issues of their parents: abortion, crime and affirmative actions. Instead their concerns were the nature of politics: the perceived gridlock of parties, conniving of special interests and shallow biases in media. When Obama talks broadly about changing those dynamics, what strikes some older ears as airy and substance-free hits young voters as the chime of insight."⁵⁶

Matt Adler notes, "What Obama brings to the forefront is the issue of process. It's not just what gets done but how it gets done; the morality of the process matters. Being honest open and inclusive is an issue in itself."⁵⁷ Many young adults have moved beyond the arguments that their parents still engage in, like music, jewelry, women's role in the church, the race of their leaders and the like. They are more concerned about our ability to truly exemplify the character of Christ as a community of faith. They are

drawn to character that believes and practices true unity and equality.

Fourth is Empowerment. Young adults are looking for meaningful leadership in the church, not lip service. The "Let's Talk," initiative by our General conference President, while well meaning, did little to change the perception of young adults about their church. While talking is good, it is meaningless if there is no real change in the leadership and structure of the church. Young people today want more than activities; they want to be active. The Rainers' note, "While most students are participating in church activities, relatively few have actual responsibilities in their church. Only 37 percent had regular responsibilities in their church and only 25 percent held leadership positions in their church."⁵⁸ "Those churches that have students thinking in terms of service, giving, and missions are more likely to retain the younger generation."⁵⁹

If we are to be effective in keeping collegians we must find ways to engage them in meaningful ministry in the church. We must recognize that they are the key to reaching humanity for the future. In speaking of the impact young adults can have Ellen White writes, "You can do a work that those who minister in word and doctrine cannot do. You can reach a class whom the minister cannot affect."⁶⁰ We must find ways to empower the next generation for meaningful ministry and service.

Finally, we must inspire young adults in order to reach them. Jesus is the center of all inspiration. He has promised in John 12:32 that if He is lifted up, He will draw all people unto Himself. Christ-centered ministry will bring the inspiration that collegians are looking for.

Our worship should be inspirational to collegians. The 63 percent of collegians that stay in the church agree that the pastor's sermons are relevant to their lives and 69 percent say the worship is appealing to them. There can be no doubt that spiritual inspiration must be at the center of our approach to winning and retaining collegians. It might mean changing our approach in how we communicate the Gospel and how we worship.

One essential church pastor said, "We are not compromising the Word, but we are making the changes to reach this age group. Our worship style has changed, and we have a Tuesday night worship

service that is specifically geared as a place of reentry into the church.”⁶¹ The Rainer’s conclude, “Encouragement from friends and family for the young adults to return will be of little value if the church is mired in a time warp in the 1960s or 1970s.”⁶²

If we are to be effective in reaching, retaining and rechurching collegians we must regain our sense of mission. We must become excited and energized about the sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone. When the church becomes vital to us, more than a country club or resting place, the church will become vital to young adults as well.

I will close with this concluding statement:

“Essential churches are multiplying churches because they constantly seek to look and reach beyond themselves. They thus multiply with the presence of new Christians and with the return of the dechurched. Many are multiplying churches because they start new churches, new campuses, and new ministries. That outward focus attracts and retains young adults. They want to be a part of something that is making a difference.”⁶³

So let us not shrink from the challenge God has set before us. Let us remember that with God, “All things are possible.”

Endnotes

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