

# **Voices: Meeting the next generation where they are**

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The church needs young adults. It's always needed young adults. The truth, however, is most churches struggle with reaching, discipling and releasing young adults effectively.

Little is written about contextual young adult discipleship, and what is written often is dismissed as irrelevant, out-of-date or out-of-touch. Without a proven system or a clear record of best practices, even the most earnest pastors and church communities are left shrugging their shoulders when trying to minister to 20-somethings.

I've spent nearly a decade ministering to young adults. In that time, I've learned young adulthood is far too transient a target for pinning best practices. The truth is, there is no silver bullet when it comes to young adult ministry. Every church, context and generation creates a unique context within which to minister.

Instead of chasing the elusive young adult ministry silver bullet—and coming up discouraged by the vain pursuit—I'd like to propose a mindset shift away from more simple approaches centered around the belief young adults are looking for coolness, flash, fun, celebrity and charisma.

## **The right question**

What does it mean to minister to people? We should follow Christ's example. He starts by meeting us where we are. The driving question for ministering to young adults should be, "Where are young adults?"

I don't mean where they are physically, but where they are spiritually, mentally and emotionally.

What motivates young adults? How are they being challenged by culture? What's different about their generation's spiritual climate from the generation before? What are their doubts and fears? Where do they want to make their mark? How do they want to make the world better?

It's a terrible mistake to assume the next generations' 20-somethings are or will be filled with the same mental, emotional and spiritual dynamics ours were. They are not. This false assumption leads to bringing Jesus to the next generations based on where *we* were, not where *they* are. That approach has not worked very well.

## **The right conversation**

When consulting with pastors and church leaders, one of my favorite biblical illustrations centers on John 3 and 4. In these two chapters, we see Jesus engage in two conversations.

In John 3, Jesus engages a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who asks intellectual and spiritual questions. Jesus seems to speak in riddles as he connects to and confounds Nicodemus. In this way, Jesus is meeting Nicodemus where he is—a learned, religious leader who lives in his head and interfaces with God intellectually. His conversation reflects that.

In John 4, Jesus engages with a Samaritan woman at a well. Their conversation is markedly different. While Nicodemus struggled with his intellectual and academic approach to Jesus, the Samaritan woman struggled with self-worth and her relational identity. Jesus adjusts in his conversation with her.

While he lands both conversations beautifully with a message of life in the

Spirit, the conversational pathway to that message was markedly different. Like the chat with Nicodemus, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman where she is and brings her life-giving news.

What Jesus doesn't do is try to force a Nicodemus-style conversation onto the Samaritan woman. Not because the Nicodemus-style conversation is wrong or inadequate, but because it wouldn't have met the Samaritan woman where she was.

When it comes to the next generations, it's important to meet them where they are and to understand the conversation they are having. Like Jesus, we too, must learn to adjust.

## **Seek understanding**

One of the difficulties young adults have with receiving what older adults say comes from feeling like the two parties are having two completely different conversations. "Nicodemuses" are chatting with "Samaritan women," and no one's making the adjustment. As a result, they're completely missing each other.

It is not a spiritual compromise to seek understanding. It's through understanding that we meet people where they are and bring the gospel to their narratives. You can't get to this understanding without active and curious listening to the real questions, deficits and struggles of the next generation.

Before you seek the blueprints for the best program to build, my encouragement is to break out into the wild adventure of curiosity when it comes to young adults. Seek out young adults in your church or neighborhood and listen to their stories and struggles.

Don't presume. Don't defend. Listen. Ask follow-up questions. You're going

to hear things you disagree with. You're going to see things differently than they describe. It's OK. Meet them where they are. Often, once you do, the next steps become clear.

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