

Vocation is a calling for every age. With a right understanding of vocation, young leaders become an important part of serving God and each other.

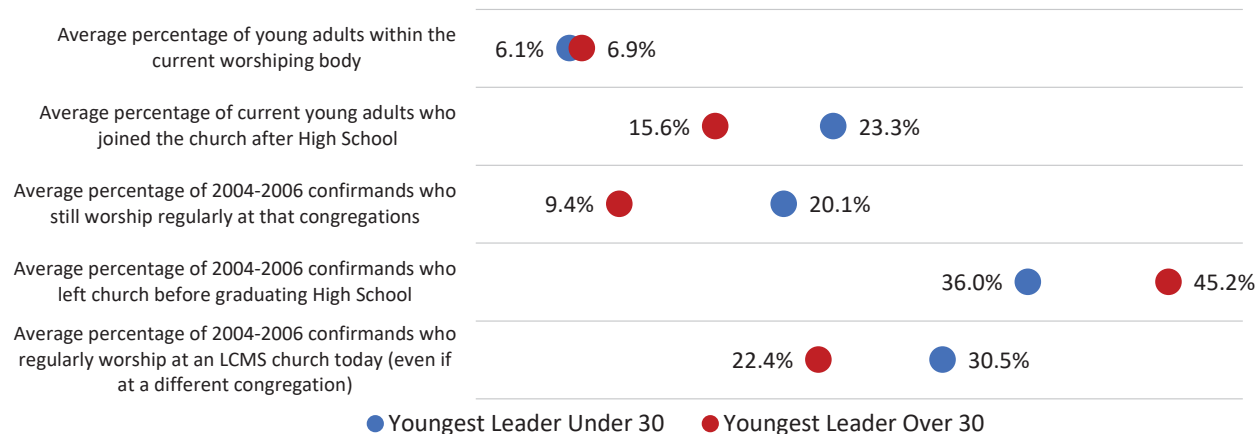


Young Leadership Matters

by Julianna Shults

Millennials have taken a bit of a beating in our pop culture over the last few years. As they moved through their 20s and 30s, Millennials have been mocked, joked about, and criticized. Articles come out each month with some industry Millennials have “killed.” Their food choices are blamed for their financial difficulties. Boomers and Xers have shared publicly and privately their concerns over Millennials’ professional and leadership shortfalls. Millennials are entitled. They received too many participation trophies and don’t know how to work hard. They don’t know how to communicate well face-to-face. Millennials are selfish and aren’t invested in institutions.

The reality is that Millennials are different, but neither better nor worse, than generations before them. Every young adult sitting in your pew is different and cannot be boiled down to a stereotype. They are sinful humans trying to navigate a broken world in need of redemption from Jesus Christ.



This effect is controlled for size of the congregation, so that is not influencing the correlation. Also, the percentage of young adults in the current worshipping body is statistically not a significant factor, so it is not influencing the other elements as well.

Our world is changing at a tremendous rate. As a result, Millennials and Generation Z who follow them will challenge the Church as they move into leadership. God has gifted this generation as He has every generation with the tools to share the Gospel.

Our Congregational Survey asked the age of the church's youngest leader and what role that leader has. We chose this question to echo one from our earlier research. We polled the Young Adult Volunteers at the 2016 LCMS Youth Gathering. 91.6% of Young Adult Volunteers at the Gathering say they feel equipped to serve their congregations. 25% of those YAVS report having a leadership role of any kind in their congregation.

Of the congregations who responded, 57% reported their youngest leader was under 32. This age proved to be an important threshold for retention. Congregations with a leader under 30 years old showed increased retention compared to those with only older leaders. Churches with a leader under 30 report a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation. They also show a lower rate of young adults leaving before graduation. Having a leader under 30 increased the number of young adults who are still worshipping in the LCMS, even if they have moved congregations. The first line of the chart above shows these impacts are not influenced by congregations simply having more young adults overall.

Truly, the impact is about empowering young leaders.

The leadership roles described were not exclusively staff or board members. Some were youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and even ushers. The positive effect of young leadership in retention is also seen in other research. Barna's research found that 45% of Millennials active in the church agreed, "I learned to view my gifts and passions as a part of God's calling." Only 17% of Millennials now inactive in the church agreed. In *Growing Young*, Fuller Youth Institute reports that growing, healthy churches can be characterized by empowering young people into leadership roles.

The importance of lifting young adults into leadership reminds us of the importance of vocation. Vocation gives us a critical understanding of how God uses us as His hands and feet in the world. Congregations should get a refresher course in vocation often. It is too easy to see our gifts, abilities and time as our own, and not as a part of God's work in the world. Vocation is a calling for every age. With a right understanding of vocation, young leaders become an important part of serving God and each other.

Finding and empowering young leaders isn't simple. Many of our congregations don't have young adults actively worshipping. Perhaps the first step is to search for those young people who have walked away and reach out to new young adults. As you do, it may be tempting to immediately engage them in leadership. Before you raise up young leaders, ensure they are well grounded in their faith, attached to the vine that is Jesus Christ. If they aren't regularly in worship and personal faith practices, take the time to encourage that growth before you lift them into leadership roles.

Existing church leaders can struggle to put aside their own ego or agenda to empower new leaders. Instead, young leaders are engaged in poor-fitting, powerless or token positions. Young adults can spot this a mile away. Asking them into leadership only to be decoration can lead them to avoid leadership in the future. Experienced leaders can be nervous and undercut young leaders. They hand off then take back responsibility. When experienced leaders anticipate failure rather than success, the young leader knows they are not trusted and will quickly walk away.

Millennials can be the source of struggle as well. They are chronically over-prepared and under-utilized. Many are strapped with student debt and struggling to find success in the marketplace. They may pass on church leadership to prioritize work. They may turn down a leadership role they feel isn't important. We may see similar struggles with Generation Z. A recent study

by Barna said that Gen Z identifies professional and academic achievement as most important to their sense of self. At its root, these generations feel immense pressure and often feel they aren't using their gifts and abilities like they could or should. The church and leadership within it can help form an identity in Christ that helps to right this distorted sense of disappointment and self-justification.

Millennials and Gen Z are less likely to show institutional affiliation. Rather, they are looking for a sense of authentic community and purpose to their service. Teens and young adults are likely to ask why a certain program or ministry is important. If they can't get an answer, they are unlikely to feel invested. Empowering young leaders may mean being open to challenging questions and new ideas. It also may mean redefining success together so that the church can share the Gospel in new ways. Young leaders can bring new energy and excitement to a ministry, but only if they can bring their unique thoughts and gifts.

Young leaders need mentorship and guidance, but done right, this can connect them into even deeper relationships and community. They do not need to be micromanaged, but they do need a listening ear and a safe space to learn. Make sure to debrief young leaders, especially after big responsibilities are done. It doesn't have to be formal or time consuming. New, young leaders need to have someone talk through the experience with them. Part of this debriefing will mean being honest about your leadership experience, both good and bad. They need to hear that you messed up a time or two before and lived to tell the tale. They also need to see confession and absolution practiced by you and other leadership when things go wrong. Unlike competitive academic and professional settings, young leaders should find the church is a safe place to lead, fail, and find forgiveness and redemption.

When I talk to high school students and young adults about leading in the church, I remind them to be patient with the process. Church structure, both written and unwritten, can be difficult to navigate. It can suck the enthusiasm out of the most seasoned leader. If they must be patient, you must be willing to help forge the way forward to keep leaders moving. Have their back when people struggle with new ideas and changes they propose. Give encouragement when they try something new and even when they fail.

For those who have empowered and supported young leaders, be encouraged. This action alone has a significant impact on the Kingdom of God. Not only does it use the gifts and skills of that leader, it helps children and teens have a vision for how they can serve in the near future. Embracing young leaders helps a congregation to stay vibrant and healthy. It has meaningful impact for the church today and tomorrow. ■

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Discussion Questions

- What is the average age of your congregation? Of your pastor(s) and church staff? Of your lay leaders?
- What is the age of the youngest church member in a leadership role? What is being or could be done to involve more young adults in congregational leadership?
- What concerns do you have about young adults serving in leadership in your congregation?
- What is something your congregation is not doing in ministry that a young adult might have the gifts, skills, or knowledge to make it happen?
- Who in your congregation would make a good leadership mentor for young adults?
- To what extent are adults currently serving in leadership open to young adults partnering with them in leadership roles?
- In what way(s) is your congregation equipping youth to form an identity in Christ that helps them develop skills to cope with disappointment and to have a proper view of success? What is being done to help them develop their identity in Christ?

“I never found a church where I felt like I felt in where I'm living now. The congregation I attended for a while was just a little older than me, and I never felt like anyone cared about me. No one took the time to say hello or get to know me. I just didn't feel like I belonged.”

21-year-old female
believes, but not affiliated with a church