

Mentoring Matters:
Creating Authentic and Sustainable Intergenerational Mentoring Relationships

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Introduction

Another statistic flashing across the screen. This one came in Barna's newsletter update. The title: "52% of Teens are 'Very Motivated' To Learn about Jesus." A quick hitting post, the update read as an encouragement to the church that—hallelujah!—teens still want to know about Jesus! However, the update went on to read:

Still, many remain hesitant to embrace religion or churchgoing. The Takeaway: Church leaders should recognize that teens' openness to learning about Jesus represents a significant opportunity for meaningful engagement—but this requires a thoughtful approach given Gen Z's hesitancy toward religion and the Church. Leaders would do well to create spaces for open dialogue where teens can explore their questions about Jesus without pressure. It's also crucial to understand that while teens express interest in Jesus, they may approach faith differently than previous generations. Furthermore, authenticity and relevance are key. Be prepared to address difficult questions honestly and demonstrate how Jesus and the Bible relate to the world we live in today.¹

For a quick trends update whose headline read as an encouragement, for many churches, this "trend" is once again actually a call to action: to engage teens requires changing church culture and the approach to ministry with teens and young adults. *This is not new.*

Over the past fifteen years there has been much published about this type of call to action, both the problem preceding it and the need for a shift within the church to encounter it well. Barna, Fuller Youth Institute, Pew Research, Springtide Research, and more have

¹ Barna, "52% of teens are 'very motivated' to learn about Jesus," *Trends* (blog), January 30, 2025, accessed September 12, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/trends/teens-curious-about-jesus/>.

conducted thorough research and written extensively about the deficits and felt needs in our church communities in order to come alongside teens and young adults.

In 2011, with *Sticky Faith*, Fuller Youth Institute's researchers gave credence to the alarm bells that the church's teens and young adults were falling away from faith post-high school. At that time the research keyed in on the importance of intergenerational ministry: connecting children and teens to adults in their congregations beyond just the youth leaders and volunteers. They also introduced the idea of flipping the age-old "five-to-one" youth group ratio on its head and encouraged effective youth ministry as one wherein churches work to surround each young person with five authentic adults ready to have relevant conversations to support them.² In a follow up study and publication, *Growing Young*, researchers sought to answer the question as to how to stop the proverbial bleeding and start growing and retaining young people. They found that intergenerational relationships within a church not only help faith to thrive, but can help an entire church become a place of growth and vitality. As such, Powell et al. suggest six strategies for helping churches achieve this goal: empowering and sharing power with young leaders through a mechanism they call keychain leadership, taking time to empathize with young people, taking the message of Jesus seriously, building a warm, intergenerational community, consistently prioritizing young people in church life, and being active, compassionate neighbors in the local and global community.³

Springtide Research Institute's 2020 *Belonging* study noted that the youngest generations are the most lonely and isolated generations to have ever existed, that being part of a religious group has no effect on loneliness, and yet relationships with trusted adults are key for helping

² Powell, Kara Eckmann, and Chap Clark. *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011.

³ Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin. *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2016.

young people to feel like they belong and can cut severe isolation in half. However, they also noted that forming relationships with adults was a process: one must first feel noticed, then feel named, and then, and only then, can they feel known.⁴ However, according to a Barna study, only 19% of Christians say their church provides opportunities for cross-generational interaction.⁵ It is nearly impossible for a young person to feel known by the older adults in their church if there is no opportunity for interaction. It is in the midst of this conversation that Generation Spark has emerged.

Generation Spark: Fostering Intergenerational Relationships

Generation Spark supports congregations to create intergenerational relationships because we believe it leads to all generations flourishing in God’s Kingdom. Alongside of the data listed above we find rationale to support our mentoring efforts in Scripture. From the Old Testament (Genesis 15 and 28 and Deuteronomy 6) to the New Testament (1 Timothy), God has made it clear that faith is best fostered when we are together across generations. Faith is meant to be taught, encouraged, and practiced mutually and alongside one another.

A study released by Emory University highlighted that one of the top predictors of resiliency in children and teens was a then-unusual one: knowing their families’ history through stories. Researchers wrote, “Family stories provide a sense of identity through time, and help children understand who they are in the world.”⁶

⁴ Springtide Research Institute, Ellen Koneck, and Josh Packard. *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation*. Springtide Research Institute, 2020.

⁵ Barna. *Aging Well: A Renewed Vision for Ministering to Aging Adults*. Barna, 2023.

⁶ Duke, Marshall P., Amber Lazarus, and Robyn Fivush. *Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report*. *Psychotherapy* (Chicago, Ill.) vol. 45,2 (2008): 268-72. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.45.2.268

Throughout the past decade the findings on repeat studies have stayed the same. In the anxious height of the COVID-19 pandemic Emory released a blog article confirming “when children learn family stories it creates a shared history, strengthens emotional bonds and helps them make sense of their experiences when something senseless happens. When we don’t know what to do, we look for stories about how people have coped in the past. ... Such narratives help build a shared capacity for resilience.”⁷

Delving a little deeper, we see that the sharing of these stories is not meant to be prescriptive. No, the *way* that grandparents endured in the midst of unspeakable hardship may not be the same way that we endure today. However, these stories are formative. The fact that they did endure gives us the knowledge and trust to believe that we too have that capacity. The road might be different but the strength is the same.

As people in God’s story this should not be a surprise. Throughout the Bible we see God continually weaving together a shared narrative—a family history—of God’s people, both the hardships and the blessings. We read the story, through time and space, of God’s faithfulness to generations of God’s people. In the book *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, long lauded as a “must read” for those in the praxis of intergenerational ministry, Jane Vann references this in her chapter entitled “Intergenerational Story Sharing.” She states, “Sharing the biblical narrative and our personal spiritual narratives across the generations will form our identity as God’s people as perhaps nothing else can.”⁸

⁷ Clark, Carol. "How family stories help children weather hard times." *Emory University, Emory News Center* (blog), April 2020. Accessed September 10, 2025.
https://news.emory.edu/stories/2020/04/esc_covid_19_family_stories/campus.html

⁸ Allan, Holly, Christine Lawton, and Cory Seibel. *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023.

In our modern context of church, our team recognizes the need to support congregations as they foster intergenerational relationships, and we work to help develop a vision of discipleship wherein the lived out stories of the Holy Spirit's transformational work encourages healthy faith formation throughout the entire congregation. The primary way we recommend doing this—and indeed the model we use to come alongside churches to train them in intergenerational faith formation—is mentoring.

Mentoring serves as an effective mechanism for spiritual growth in both mentors and mentees while also creating relationships that contribute to belonging. Furthermore, we have found that mentoring makes a unique contribution when congregations wrestle through cultural change to bring balance to the congregation so that all generations are on mission together, faithfully serving and living into their God-given calls. For established churches, mentoring also provides a mechanism to experiment with intergenerational faith formation that is amenable and practicable within accustomed contexts.

While we are practitioners and not researchers, we have worked to listen deeply to the voices of young people and to adapt our support for congregations to better serve the reflected desires of youth and young adults. After actively interviewing over 60 young adults from all over the United States and Canada, inquiring about their reasons for staying or leaving their congregations, our team found that the two most common replies for why these young people left were: “I can’t be myself” and “I don’t see the church showing up in the places that really matter.” One student shared with us a painful story of her parents’ divorce and the church’s failure to come alongside them. “My parents were getting divorced; my father was the one that cheated, but we were all asked to leave.” Other students cited things like “I don’t feel like they want to know everything about me.” When we asked if they felt listened to at their church, someone said, “Nope. The church is too busy doing church.”

Through Generation Spark, as we equip congregations to experiment with mentoring, our faith communities have begun to see young people wanting to stay connected. Consistently over the last eight years, 70-80% of the mentees surveyed reported feeling a sense of belonging and a willingness to stay connected to their congregations. In our latest round of follow up surveys from 2024, 93% of mentors and mentees surveyed said that mentoring had a positive impact on their sense of belonging after being a part of a Generation Spark Mentoring Ministry. Seventy-seven percent said mentoring had a moderate to major impact on their faith; 50% of those surveyed said that being a part of a mentoring relationship positively impacted the person's relationship with their church community; and 80% said that mentoring makes the person want to stay connected to their church long term. Notably, these responses include those of mentors, not just mentees, reinforcing again that intergenerational mentoring has a positive impact on the entire church, not just the teens or young adults. Unlike other mentoring programs the purpose of our training is *not* about completion of a program; rather, it is to support forming the relationship, promote intimacy with Jesus, and awaken missional purpose.

Meaningful Relationships Establish Belonging

Within the Generation Spark methodology, we define mentorship as being intentional, mutual, and meaningful relationships wherein both mentor and mentee are engaging in life together. We believe mentoring creates occasions for dialogue and relationship—and that it must be done intentionally by setting aside time and space for *relationships*. Intentionally setting the stage for good conversation. Intentionally safe. Intentional in communication, boundaries, and expectations.

Through our mentoring relationships we emphasize mutual relationships, not hierarchical ones like old mental models would suggest. This approach results in younger generations feeling like they can belong and participate in their church. In this reciprocal format both mentor and

mentee bring a curiosity and an expertise into the relationship; neither person is the expert. We train our congregations to support mentor/mentee pairs to adjust away from the power dynamics that often exist among older generations (and cultures) to establish a reciprocity of relationship wherein both parties have something to contribute to the conversation; everyone's voice matters and everyone has a place at the table. In this way, we all get to grow in response to God's work in the world, the church, and in our lives in a way that is different from regular didactic teaching. Combining the legacy of our elders with the energetic passions of younger generations allows the church to grow, imagine, and act on new and expanded visions.

Through mentor/mentee pairs doing life together, both our oldest and youngest generations go from "overlooked" to belonging. Being a mentor allows that person to have a meaningful role in the congregation as they develop a new relationship. Long gone is their previous experience of being stuck in the back row of the church where the handicap seating was; now they have a designated place to welcome their mentee to come sit alongside them. Long gone is the quick exit out the side of the church for the young person who doesn't know anyone; now they have a friend who greets them by name and invites them into a familiar place where they can worship together. What a beautiful world where young and old can sit down together to experience a sense of belonging created through their relationship.

Intimacy with Jesus Is Deepened in Both Mentors and Mentees

Through authentic relationships mentors and mentees also grow in their intimacy with Jesus. As suggested by Barna at the beginning of this paper, creating spaces for open dialogue where teens can explore and voice their difficult questions or doubts is key for helping them grow in their spiritual walk with Christ and stay connected to their faith community. Though not as common but still frequent, in our listening sessions we heard young people state that they left their church because they felt they could not voice their doubts or questions. Mentoring creates a

space for these intentional questions to be voiced. For our mentors, we encourage them to practice intentional listening skills by always asking “one more question” instead of saying “what they think” or “what they know.” As a result, our mentees were able to experience feeling listened to as they also grew in their faith. In addition, because of the space for open dialogue, mentees are supported in finding their voice in their church communities and are inspired to give testimony and share about their faith with their mentor.

Lastly, mentors are also challenged to grow in their own faith when they share their own stories. Frequently our congregations voice that their greatest struggle in beginning mentoring relationships is not identifying young people, but instead, recruiting older people. Their excuse is often that they do not feel qualified or that they “know enough.” Yet, one mentor shared with us, “I feel more comfortable talking about my faith now after participating in a mentoring relationship.” When we intentionally create space to share our faith *and questions* together our intimacy with the living God and our capacity to testify to it deepens!

Awakening Missional Purpose Enables All Generations to Lead

How do churches help young people find their purpose? Furthermore, how do our churches help young people live into that purpose? Mentoring creates a unique opportunity. With Generation Spark, we suggest sharing the stories of mentoring such that churches then elevate the capacity of their young people so that they might be empowered to better live into their missional purpose within their churches and communities right now. The 2018 study *Renegotiating Faith* calls on mentors to be “reintroducers.”

To continue on in a faith community, young adults need to renegotiate their childhood roles as adult roles. Mentors can help with this renegotiation by reintroducing young adults to a church community currently familiar with them in their childhood roles framed by their family of origin. Through this reintroduction, mentors use their status in

the community to help young adults forge new roles, and in doing so they provide a means of differentiation within the church community.⁹

A teen does not have to wait until they graduate, nor does a young adult need to wait until they become a more “adultier” adult. Similarly, no one needs to wait until they are nominated for their congregational board or have been asked to be a part of a leadership committee. Right now our young people have something to contribute. Mentoring allows their voice to be both known and heard; and, in the language from *Growing Young*, mentoring allows for leaders to hand off keys to those stepping into new leadership positions.

But the church also must awaken the missional purpose of the beautiful older man who has done coffee set up for the church for the past 40 years and thinks that his role in the church is to “just” be the coffee person. The coffee man may make great coffee but his purpose is about a lot more than just coffee! Asking him to be a mentor creates an understanding of his missional purpose. The same is true for pastoral leadership. When we invite ministers who have been in ministry a while to step into relationships with younger participants, suddenly their sense of why and how and what their ministry is about is awakened as they begin to see the world in a new way. Questions we all must begin to consider: how do we help all who have been in their careers a while, or whose retirement has hit, awaken what else God has yet to do? For those in their third third of life, the way that they used to live their mission in life is changing, but Jesus is not done with them or their story. This is all part of what we get to do when we talk about intergenerational mentoring in the church. Mentor and mentee can be on mission together.

⁹ Hiemstra, Rick, Lorianne Dueck, and Matthew Blackaby. *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: Faith Today Publications, 2018.

Focused Content Supports the Pair in Beginning Their Relationship

Utilizing a foundation of intentional and mutual mentoring relationships, Generation Spark holds the belief that content-focused conversations or projects are pivotal for developing effective, sustainable, and authentic intergenerational mentoring relationships. Part of our training works to help congregations develop the type of content they wish mentor and mentee pairs to interact around as they do life together.

Ultimately we have seen repeatedly that having established content to focus conversations decreases levels of social uneasiness when mentor/mentee relationships are in their initial formation. Decreasing the levels of social uneasiness from the start of the relationship creates a positive “spark” for the trajectory of their meeting time and increases the likelihood of a sustained relationship beyond an initial meeting. In addition, it is from this spark of a relationship that conversations can expand beyond the scaffolding of the content into authentic discovery, story sharing, and life together.

When Generation Spark first started it was suggested that all mentor/mentee pairs meet around the concept of doing a literal project. Mentor/mentee pairs would work through a framework wherein a mentee would identify a problem in their church or community that they were passionate about and together the pair would scope a project to aid in making positive change. This involved planning the project, assessing the current solutions, reviewing and suggesting other possible solutions, and sharing their solutions with their faith community. This work is done from a place of mutuality in the relationship. From this framework many positive mentoring relationships developed wherein the voices and abilities of mentees were elevated in their congregations and strong bonds and discipleship occurred, and continue to occur today.

This formulaic method is not necessary for all mentor/mentee relationships. At present, churches experiment with mentoring in many different contexts. Examples include using

mentoring as a way to intentionally guide teens and young adults through faith professions and baptisms, utilizing mentoring when inviting younger people to take on leadership roles, reading and reflecting on Scripture together, or perhaps churches have other content that they would like mentor/mentee pairs to interact around. Regardless of what the content focus is, we recognize that this content focused technique directs conversations, helps in the intentionality of relationship, and allows for a mutual “ground floor” starting point for all mentor/mentee relationships.

Elevating Young Adults Into Leadership Takes Mentoring Too

Emerging out of content focused projects we specifically recognize the catalyst garnered through mentoring when inviting younger people to take on leadership roles. Mentoring is a primary way to elevate and share power with young leaders as we seek to pass the keys of leadership from one generation to the next. Leadership invitations need to be authentic and personal. From our experience when a blanket invitation is initiated toward young people, the request can feel as though the congregation is looking for a warm body to serve in a role. When the ask comes from a personal connection there is a genuineness that assures the young person that they are seen, valued, and most importantly that they have gifts that contribute to the whole faith community's flourishing.

When a request is extended to emerging adults through the context of a relationship the mentoring takes on the “coming alongside of” journey where intentional and mutual support for the younger and the older take root. The younger, in taking on a leadership role, will do so with more confidence when they know someone (their mentor) is their corner, cheering them on, serving as an advisor, being available when and if they have questions. This does not mean the older leader simply complies with all of the younger leader's desires and wills; instead, there is

enough relational capacity with the emerging leader to offer consistent feedback and support when they are trying to lead upward alongside older adults.

We could write a much longer chapter on the inner workings of power dynamics within a congregation as it pertains to elevating emerging adults; for now we will simply share the work of the older leader external from their mentoring relationship with an emerging person who is responsible for “sponsoring” their mentee. Often systems are designed to resist change, particularly change that comes from places that are considered “disrespectful” or too different from the current structures. Perhaps you have been a part of a leadership board that experienced the “fresh new blood” coming into the room only to see their attempted suggestions or ideas rebutted or refuted. To the young leader this communicates “you don’t belong here,” or “wait your turn.” The role of the older leader is to lend their credibility to the young leader by offering support of the younger leader’s ideas, creating space for them to sit at leadership tables, and recommending the younger person to serve in higher capacities of leadership throughout the congregation. Hopefully by now you can see just how important having a mutual and trusting relationship is in enabling this particular strategy!

Mentoring Matters

Christian intergenerational ministry is a mosaic of multiple age and gender communities who, in addition to learning in peer groups, experience mutual reciprocity within the various generations of known community. Through intergenerational mentoring young and old alike experience spiritual growth and find belonging, purpose, and support. The entire church body encounters cultural change wherein young voices are valued and utilized for the benefit of Christ’s kingdom. Intergenerational mentoring allows for the lived out stories of the Holy Spirit’s transformational work to encourage healthy faith formation for all. Put concisely: mentoring matters.

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