

## Growing Younger

A discussion of the challenges and opportunities presented in the book:  
*Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, by Powell, Griffin, Mulder (of Fuller)

As the introduction explains,

“Many churches are both shrinking and aging as more young people disengage. Based on research with over 250 of the nation’s leading congregations, *Growing Young* provides a strategy to involve and retain young people. It profiles innovative congregations engaging 15- to 29-year-olds and is an important new addition to research on engaging and retaining students and young adults.

“The share of U.S. adults who identify as Christian has recently dropped from 78 to 71 percent. No major denomination is growing. Further, 18 to 29-year-olds make up nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population but only 10 percent of church attenders. Taken together, this can seem like a pretty bleak forecast. But in the midst of this storm, Jake Mulder, Brad Griffin, and I wanted to study the bright spots—250 exemplary churches doing remarkable work with 15 to 29-year-olds. What we found was both surprising and hopeful. Based on our team’s 10,000 pages of data and 10,000 hours of research, we’ve identified six core commitments of churches that don’t age or shrink, but grow, and grow young.

To our delight, the 250 congregations nominated by denominational leaders, seminaries, and other national leaders showed great diversity in every category we analyzed. In size, they ranged from 100 to over 10,000. In age, there were some less than five years old and others more than 100 years old. Ethnically, nearly half were not predominantly white. Theologically, these churches showed a great variety of denomination, or sometimes lack thereof. Our data confirms that God is working—and can work—through churches of all types.”

The book then engages the following six core qualities that were found (in various degrees) in churches that were developing connection with younger lives.

### **Six Core Commitments:**

#### ***Unlock keychain leadership***

In this definition, *keys* refer to the capabilities, power, and access of leaders who carry the potential to empower young people. *Keychain leadership* refers to pastoral and congregational leaders who are both acutely aware of the keys on their keychain, and intentional about entrusting and empowering all generations, including teenagers and emerging adults, with their own set of keys. Beyond simply launching a student leadership team, *keychain leadership* is a spirit and commitment demonstrated by both paid and volunteer leaders that permeates every area of the church.

### ***Empathize with today's young people***

Instead of judging or criticizing, step into the shoes of this generation...empathizing is “the work you do to understand people...it is your effort to understand the way they do things and why, their physical and emotional needs, how they think about the world, and what is meaningful to them.” In other words, it's *sitting on the curb of a young person's life*, celebrating their dreams, and grieving over their despair.

### ***Take Jesus' message seriously***

Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus-centered way of life. This commitment was both a demonstrated action and overall spirit or ethos of churches in the study. Jesus' message is not contained in just one core commitment; rather the Good News of Jesus permeates and indeed animates all other commitments. As one example of how this core commitment emerged during the research, when interview participants were asked, “How would you describe the central message of the gospel or good news, of Christianity?” nearly 70 percent of respondents specifically mentioned Jesus.

### ***Fuel a warm community***

Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships. In the team's analyses of the terms young people and adults used to describe their churches or parishes, words such as *welcoming, belonging, authentic, hospitable, and caring* were repeated regularly and were categorized as the “warmth” cluster. Across various statistical analyses, the warmth cluster emerged as a stronger variable than any one program in relationship with vibrancy and effectiveness.

### ***Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere***

Instead of giving lip service to how much young people matter, look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve them in all facets of the congregation. Churches in the study made teenagers and young adults an institutional priority not only for specific youth or young adult programming but also across the life of the congregation. This institutional commitment was demonstrated across the study, including the first stage of research where pastoral leaders were asked to name up to three characteristics of their church that account for its success at engaging young people. The top response category was coded as “making young people and their interests a priority in the church,” representing approximately 50 percent of all responses.

### ***Be the best neighbors***

Instead of condemning the world outside the church walls, enable young people to neighbor well locally and globally. Churches in the study recognized the careful dance that values both fidelity to Scripture's commands for holiness and knowing and graciously loving their neighbors. This dance affects how they serve, pursue social justice, help teenagers and emerging adults find their calling, interact with popular culture, and respond to heated cultural issues. Beyond developing detailed policies or releasing theological position papers, these churches train and

infuse their young people with an integrated discipleship that enables them to thrive in a complex world.

“...you may think young people are staying because of beliefs, but it’s more often about finding an experience that feels like family. For teenagers and emerging adults, depth of relationship opens the door to deeper exploration of belief. First relationship, then formation. First belonging, then belief. And eventually these blend into one fluid movement.”

## **Engaging Some Key Issues Further**

### **1. Keychain leadership**

If you are willing to entrust your keys to young people, they will trust you with their hearts, their energy, their creativity, and even their friends. Yes, it can sometimes seem like more work than it’s worth— but if you give them your access, you have the opportunity to touch a whole generation.

Churches that grow young are brimming with staff, volunteers, and parents who demonstrate keychain leadership. By keys, we mean the capabilities, power, and access of leaders that can be used to empower young people. By keychain leaders, we mean pastoral and congregational leaders who are acutely aware of the keys on their keychain and intentional about entrusting and empowering young people with their own set of keys.

Keychain leaders can be volunteers, senior pastors, parents, youth pastors, associate pastors, Sunday school teachers, and more. Beyond any particular role, keychain leadership is a spirit and commitment demonstrated by both paid and volunteer leaders that permeates every area of the church.

The Four types of key leadership discovered include: Key-less leaders: Often young and inexperienced, without much authority or access, they spend their time proving they’re worthy to possess keys. Key-hoarding leaders: Always holding the keys and refusing to give others access, they run the show. Key-loaning leaders: Often taking keys off the keychain and letting others borrow them temporarily, they make sure the keys are returned quickly. Keychain leaders: Very aware of the keys they hold, they’re constantly opening doors for some while training and entrusting others who are ready for their own set of keys.

The research revealed six essentials of keychain leadership. Keychain leaders are mature, not always young; are real, not “relevant”; are warm, not distant; know what matters to people, not just other pastors; entrust and empower others; they don’t try to be a “Superpastor”; and take the long view, not shortsighted steps.

### **Next Steps**

At the Vineyard we have the *Wimberson*: “Everyone Gets To Play”. What are some of your fears and apprehensions when it comes to applying this value with the younger generations?

In the spirit of helping your church grow young, list teenagers or emerging adults who already hold, or could receive, the keys of leadership in your congregation.

## **2. Take Jesus' Message / MTD problem**

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism Still Threatens to Distract Young People from Jesus

“You might have heard less-than-inspiring news about the faith of today’s young people. “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.” These stinging words from practical theologian (and project advisor) Kenda Creasy Dean sum up one of the central findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Sifting through hundreds of discussions with American teenagers, researchers identified the dominant, de facto religious belief system of teenagers today as moralistic therapeutic deism. It is moralistic, meaning that religious young people equate faith with being a good, moral person (generally, being nice).

It is therapeutic, so faith becomes a means of feeling better about themselves. And it is deistic, meaning God exists, but this God is not involved in human affairs with any regularity.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to moralistic therapeutic deism, or MTD for short, God has essentially become a heavenly butler for teenagers, inspiring them at best to become cordial to others. While a more passionate faith would provide young people with the anchor they need to ground their identity in Christ, this halfhearted religious worldview leaves teenagers and emerging adults adrift in a ho-hum sea of bland religious niceness.”

### **Overcoming this involves...**

- Capturing the larger story... providing a more cohesive grasp of the Biblical Story as it is often dis-jointed...and then irrelevant
- Be saved not only “from”...but “FOR” something
- New Ways to Identify with Carrying such an identity

“Many of yesterday’s evangelism tactics sit like awkward lawn decorations in the front yard of American Christianity. While plastic pink flamingoes seemed attractive to our neighbors a few decades back, today we would only put them out on a dare (or to prank a friend). In the same way, suggesting to young people that they confront their friends with propositions about sin and separation from God often feels about as winsome as gaudy yard art.”

- Embrace that faith is a journey
- Embrace that faith involves doubts

### **3. Warm Community / Prioritize**

Structure is necessary for growing young, but it's not enough. Churches that grow young sometimes actually program less in order to free up more space for relational connection.

Warm is the new cool. More than flashy worship, young people want authenticity and connection. When they talk about their churches, they talk about people and warmth. Regardless of whether you meet in an auditorium or a house, consider how your worship service can feel more like a family room.

Churches grow young by weaving warmth into their DNA. The most common phrase people used to describe their churches was "like family." Other words describing warmth included welcoming, accepting, belonging, authentic, hospitable, and caring.

Honest relationships and the ability to be real or authentic are not only preferences for young people; they also build stronger churches.

Intergenerational relationships grow everyone young by helping them break out of the silos of age- and stage-based ministry and create connections across generations. Two of the most common ways churches invest in intergenerational relationships are through mentoring and corporate worship. • Fueling warmth helps us live out good ecclesiology, our theology of church. The relationship of the Trinity and the metaphor of the body of Christ remind us that we belong to one another.

#### **Practical Applications**

Consider asking a handful of young people to gauge the relational temperature of your congregation.

One of the most practical ways churches and families can boost intergenerational relationships is to rethink our ratios. Often in ministry we say we need one adult for every five children or teenagers. But what if we flipped that ratio and sought out five adults for each young person? How would this look like in your context?

### **4. Being Good Neighbors**

Younger want a more positive relationship to the world and culture around them...and churches which cultivate a place for those younger develop such a church culture and practice.

Patient Neighbors Respect the Journey as Much as the Destination

"While the churches in our study are anything but theological lightweights, they often demonstrate a generous spirit when it comes to differing opinions. When interview participants describe their church, they are eight times more likely to mention the diversity of beliefs in their church than the similarities. At Flood Church, young people were quick to share that they feel

comfortable bringing their friends because they know the teaching will proclaim biblical truth without judging people who are not yet ready to embrace that truth. “Our youth pastor is big on saying, ‘Come as you are.’ That makes it easy to promise our friends they won’t be judged for not being Christians yet,” one high school junior shared.”

Courageous Neighbors Embrace **Ethnic Diversity**...and **Socio-Economic diversity**

#### **Avoid 4 pitfalls**

- **Aiming for Perfection** (it was okay to sense that there was a ways to go...if they knew there was real effort)
- **Copy and Competing** – young people don’t like simply trying to be relevant in superficial ways like entertainment style
- **Condemning and Critiquing** – while sometimes essential, did not over due
- **Finding the “One Right” model**, etc – found that successful churches were engaged in a wide type of work...some more local...some more global.

#### **Ideas for Action**

- Know Your Neighborhood
- Diversify Your Contact
- Systematically grow in becoming more culturally current (know what is new)
- Conduct surveys of your congregation
- Craft a Theology of Culture
- Tackle a Difficult Topic with Grace
- Start Locally...Expand Globally
- Partner Up (with local services)
- Launch a Vocation Group
- Give them a “why”