



The Orphaned Generation

The Father's Heart for Connecting Youth and Young Adults to Your Church

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The Opportunity Right Beside Us

Mr. Harding's seat was taken—the aisle seat on the seventh pew from the front, right side. It was his seat nearly every Sunday for over thirty years, the pew where he'd sat with his wife and kids. But his kids had grown up and moved away. And since his wife had died three years ago, he'd sat alone.

Over those thirty years Mr. Harding watched the church change. The faces changed. The service changed. The music changed. The pastor changed. Everything changed.

Except Mr. Harding's seat.

So now he stood in the center aisle beside the seventh pew, right side, trying to figure out what to do about the dark-haired kid who sat slumped in his seat.

David had come to church looking for his friend and some food. The friend was a classmate who had invited him to come to this church a couple of weeks ago. He had assured David he was welcome anytime and that there would be free doughnuts and muffins. David had blown off the invitation, but after last night he reconsidered. His stepfather had come home drunk again. The shouting started, and David knew better than to get involved. He'd learned that the hard way, so he'd left and spent the night on a neighbor's deck in a padded lounge chair, sleeping some, but mostly looking at the stars and wondering

about his future. This morning all the deep thinking was done, and David was hungry.

He walked to the church, and an older gentleman showed him where the doughnuts were and poured him a cup of weak coffee that looked like tea. David stood alone and ate two doughnuts, watching the people arrive. They were mostly older folks who seemed harmless enough. David had been in a church for weddings and a couple of funerals, so he decided to stay for the service. He was hoping to see his friend from school, but mostly he was just curious.

Two men in dark suits stood guarding the doors. One was talking about his vacation plans; the other listened and nodded. When David slipped between them, the silent man handed him a program and nodded. The other man kept talking. David moved up the center aisle and at the seventh pew from the front, right side, he sat down.

A few moments later, David became aware that someone was standing in the aisle. He turned. An old man was looking down at him. In one hand the man held a program in front of him like a shield. With his other hand, he patted his lips nervously. His face seemed sad, but in his eyes David recognized disapproval. He'd seen it often in other adult faces. David turned back toward the front and ignored him as long as he could. Finally, he turned and said, "Can I help you?" sounding a little meaner than he intended.

"Uh . . . that's my seat," the old man said flatly.

David grunted and slid wearily to his right, regretting that he came here at all. Mr. Harding claimed his seat, and the two of them sat—only a few feet apart, but the gap between them felt huge. They both sat silently—a lonely older man beside a frightened teen who

was losing hope that he'd ever find his way. This morning each was unaware of the needs of the other; each was blind to the glorious opportunity orchestrated just for them . . . and for the church.



Inertia

Mr. Harding's story may be our story. What happened to him on a Sunday morning probably happens in our lives every week at church, at work, or at home. God disrupts the comfortable routine of our lives with an opportunity to reach out to a younger person who needs some healthy influence in his life.¹

There are Davids all around us. Many of us think they are the youth pastor's responsibility. That thinking will kill your church. Young people are leaving our churches because of that thinking, and those outside the church are not reached at all, because of that thinking.

¹ For convenience and clarity throughout this book, I will avoid the use of "his/her" and use the singular masculine pronouns (he or his) to represent either gender.

Though most people come to faith before they are 18 years old, the traditional model of youth ministry is no longer working in most churches. It no longer attracts significant numbers of unchurched teens into relationship with Jesus. Nor does it keep the active kids in the church into adulthood. Many studies demonstrate that young people who were active in a church as children are leaving in significant numbers by the age of 25. Most American studies put the range between seventy and almost ninety percent. The future of the church is bleak—unless we implement changes.

But we move through our lives in a particular direction for particular reasons at a particular speed, reluctant to change unless acted upon by some force, some outside interference. In physics it's called inertia—the resistance of any object to change its state of motion. It's a principle that can also apply figuratively to our movement through life and our reluctance to change our thinking and our behaviors.

Inertia affects churches as well. The collective inertia of the individuals in your church tends to cause it to continue in a particular direction at a constant speed, unless acted on by an outside force. Most of us think the staff and lay leadership of our church alone should be that force, but that thinking will kill your church. In most churches, leaders struggle to manage the amount of change they currently face. They are reluctant to initiate more or faster changes that might attract young people for fear of further alienating the older members.

Consequently, the Church is losing people on both ends of the demographic: Young people are wandering off, and older members are becoming less active or pass away.

If churches intend to reach and keep the next generation as lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ, their

members must renew the way they think about young people, the role of adults in their lives, and the role of the Church. Simply commanding young people to “stay in church” is not enough force to change the direction of their lives. In the same way, commanding adult congregations to “reach out to young people” is not enough to change the trajectory of their lives. We must look deeper. We need to answer three questions:

1. Why are young people leaving our church?
2. Why do adults in our church struggle to reach out to them effectively?
3. What must we do to reach and keep them?

In coming chapters, we’ll learn answers to those questions, but knowledge alone is not the solution. There must be a renewal of our minds that presses us toward something more than just knowledge. We need fresh eyes to see the Davids all around us—in our churches, neighborhoods, and workplaces—the young men and women who have the potential to be heroes in the faith, but lack the guidance to reach their destinies. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, “*We have the mind of Christ.*” (2:16) The mind behind your eyes can begin to more fully reflect His mind. If your church is to reach young people, it must.

Will you pray this prayer?

Father, if I am to be Your follower, my mind must become more like the mind of Christ. Will You use the content of this book in that process? Will You open my heart and mind to find Your message as I read it? Will You show me where my mind needs renewing?

1

Why Are Young People Leaving?

My friend Barry Taylor called hundreds of young people to ask them why they left active participation in their churches. Barry compiled their responses and summarized them in three simple statements he heard over and over:

“They don’t want me.”

“They don’t trust me.”

“They lied to me.”

My experience in youth ministry and church consulting affirms these responses are accurate. So let’s unpack each one, giving full credit to Barry for the effort and the clarity he offered.



2

They Don't Want Me!

Young people won't stay in a community if they don't feel wanted. Consider a normal kid in a typical church: We'll call him Norm. Norm attended an age-appropriate Sunday school class and was active in an excellent youth ministry that he said, "felt like family."

In June, Norm and his classmates are being honored on Graduation Sunday, where the pastor explains they are now part of the adult church. Norm wonders, "Why would I get involved with the adult church?"

He's been separated from it for years, and he has no relationships with it. Furthermore, the adults constantly complain about the youth group's behavior or the mess they leave. Why would Norm join a group that's always been critical of his current group that feels like a family?



Simultaneously, Norm is discouraged from continuing with the youth community. He's told he's a graduate now. His parents suggest that he get involved in the young adult ministry, but it feels awkward to him. The group started as a college group ten years ago, and its members stayed together, so most of the members are nearing thirty years old. They're nice people who told Norm he was welcome to come, which is more than the older adults have done. But he feels too young for the group, and he thinks they were just being polite.

Church programming has pressed Norm into a relational vacuum between communities. Cut off from the youth group and feeling unwanted by the adult church, Norm does the reasonable thing—he wanders off. He doesn't leave suddenly. He's not angry; he's sad. With each visit, he's reminded that his church is not what it used to be. That persistent peck of disappointment makes his heart raw. He feels less motivated to attend. Eventually, Norm avoids his church, except on special occasions, but if no one at those events makes it clear that he is wanted, Norm leaves convinced that his perceptions are accurate: "They don't want me!"

Notice that the church is not just losing Norm. It's losing a cluster of friends around Norm as well. That cluster of friends may feel free to visit some of the "hotter" churches that try to reach people their age, but if they don't connect there, they will most likely end their active participation in a church.

Young people must feel genuinely wanted by your church if they are to stay.

3

They Don't Trust Me!

Stephen doesn't feel trusted. He'll be a graphic designer one day, but right now he's the nearly invisible young man sitting alone in an aging church. His friends have gone off to college, but, like more and more students, he has chosen to attend the local community college before transferring to another school. He sits cringing at the projected slides of misspelled song lyrics and hastily-made sermon outlines on stock backgrounds.

He cringes because he cares. He volunteered to help, but the folks who prepare the slides seemed offended when he suggested he could make them look better, telling him, "They're good enough. We're not trying to be slick in our presentation. Besides, it's easier if we handle it the way we've been doing it."

And with that Stephen learned, not only was he not wanted, he was not trusted. He won't stay there much longer. He's not rebellious; he's just reasonable. Why would he stay where he is not trusted? Why would we expect him to be willing to simply sit there passively and not contribute his gifts to the group? He may visit other churches soon, but he may fear they'll all treat him the same way.

Clearly, the people who sent Stephen that message

didn't intend it as a brush-off. They had reasons: the desire to remain undisturbed; the lack of energy to train a new person; or their fear of losing status or position, etc. But usually people carry the perception that it would be a burden on Stephen to take on responsibility. They're trying to be "nice." If Stephen were bolder, he would have pressed harder and insisted, but he's trying to be "nice" as well.

Young people in your church and community need to be needed. They are not content to sit passively and watch people do church up front. They want to own a part of it. They hope for a job, a way to contribute beyond just showing up. They are lumpy with undiscovered gifts and talents.



The wise church will encourage young people to unwrap those gifts and try them out. They don't need to preach the sermon, but they need to help somehow, to feel trusted with ownership of some part of the church.

Imagine how differently Stephen would feel if someone asked him to help, told him not simply that he was wanted, (which would be great!) but that he was

NEEDED, that the church needed his gifts in order to accomplish the history-making vision God had for it. Stephen would not wander off so easily from that community.