

# CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNGER LEADERS TO GROW

BY LIZ DUMAIN

It is 1985. I am sitting in a small room under a staircase frantically colouring in pictures of fruit and attaching the hook side of Velcro to them with the glue that used to smell so bad, but be oh-so-satisfying to peel off your skin when it dried.

It was about to be a momentous day for me, and the one that would play a significant part in all aspects of my life and faith – I can still remember those 24 hours as if they were yesterday.

Why?

Because I was about to give a talk on a CPAS Venture (or CYFA camp as they were then known). I had never spoken from 'the front' before: never written a 'talk' before, and never designed visual aids before (and this was long before PowerPoint!).

I will be forever grateful to the camp leaders who took a chance on me and invited me to give a talk that week. That camp was the first place I was part of a leadership team, the first time I learned about constructive feedback, and the first opportunity I got to explore what leadership meant and what kind of leader I am.

It was also the place I got things wrong in public, tried all kinds of things that didn't go so well, and on occasion hurt and disrespected the very leaders who had put their trust in me.

In short, that camp was my experimentation ground for who God was forming me to be as a Christian leader.

At home I was just a young person. Cared for by a great church, but just a member of the youth group, just someone who was occasionally asked to hand around



the collection plate or read from the Bible in a 'youth service' – just a young person waiting to grow up.

But at camp – I got to 'do'. I got to plan activities, have crazy ideas, work out that some things 'cost' in more ways than just money.

We were all young and inexperienced once. We have all learned who we are as leaders through success, failure and moments in between. We have all needed someone like those Venture leaders who are prepared to give us a chance.

Whether we're flying along in leadership or still feel like a child inside, our first experiences in leadership have a significant impact on the way we develop and grow into the leaders we are today.

Inevitably, our past experiences will also shape how we seek out and support young people as leaders of the future and of the present.

Maybe we were raised in a 'seen and not heard' environment: young people were seen as 'trainee adults' – there to be educated, entertained, or humoured while everyone waited for them to 'grow up' before they could lead?

Or maybe we had the unusual privilege of coming across someone like the leaders on my Venture who recognised our potential, nurtured our growth and provided opportunities to learn and lead as we spread our wings and grew in the process?

The church has a particular opportunity to



support and envision young leaders. There are so many opportunities to try new things, but I wonder how many of us play the 'long game' with young people rather than being brave enough to take a risk and try something new?

In Matthew 18 Jesus picks a child to be upfront, in a gathering where most adult leaders would have anticipated them taking a back seat. What is our intention in church? Are we proactively seeking opportunities for children and young people to take a lead, or are we hesitantly offering them the crumbs from under the leadership table?

When confronted with Jesus' invitation to enter the kingdom of heaven like a child (18:3), do we look to what we can learn from young leaders, or tip the teaching over like an egg timer and wait for young people to be 'little adults' rather than recognising the vibrant, creative life-exploring leaders that God has created them to be?

My team at Church of England Birmingham has recently been part of a day organised by local schools to develop and support pupil leaders of collective worship. When asked what they would like to do – the answer from the children was unequivocally 'everything the adults do'.

Our schools have got it – how are we doing in church? How are we raising young leaders of worship, young leaders of mission, young speakers, young-everything?

Rather than waiting for people to 'grow up' or trying to create mini-adults, can we turn the tide and commit to being an army of inspiring, nurturing, opportunity-giving adults for the young people that God trusts us with? Without the care and encouragement of those Venture Leaders, I wonder if I would be the same kind of leader I am today – maybe I would; but I imagine it would have taken a lot longer.

Jesus calls us all to an adventure of a life lived in all its fullness in the company of pilgrims of all ages; but so often increasing age robs us of the zest and creativity that sees every day as a new opportunity, every moment as a new challenge, every person as brimming with leadership potential.

Maybe part of the reason we see fewer young people in our churches is that we wait too long to give their gifts a chance to break out? But what if that means our churches are missing out on the richness that comes from a journey shared as we all grow together, and what if our young people are still getting more



opportunities to grow and learn outside the church than within: how do we expect them to square that with the God of infinite possibility that we seek to teach them about?

What could that look like?

### 1. GIVE REAL RESPONSIBILITY

This sounds really simple, but can be a huge challenge. Offering real leadership responsibility to young people has a strange way of triggering all kinds of our insecurities. Young leaders make mistakes – but so do experienced ones. That's how we all learn. Is it risky? Yes of course. But we achieve very little in life by never taking a risk. Consider delegating chairing meetings, heading planning groups, planning programmes to a young leader alongside a more experienced mentor.

### 2. ALLOW THEM TO FAIL – BUT CATCH THEM QUICKLY

We all have things that go well and moments that don't. There is a risk that this is magnified for young leaders who may feel that everyone is watching them and expecting them to fail so that it is proved they were 'too young'. Communicate well that you have their back, and are their safety net, but don't gloss over learning if mistakes occur. A positive and constructive feedback rhythm that both celebrates the things that go well and embraces things that don't will create a secure learning environment for all.

### 3. BE OPEN TO CHANGING

Younger leaders may bring fresh ways of doing things to established routines. Be ready to consider and think through, rather than 'telling them how things are done around here'. Familiarity with technology may bring new opportunities to work together in different ways. Be prepared to change.



### 4. DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

When we expect less from young people than we do 'adults' we are dangerously close to patronising. Our expectations should be age-appropriate, but just as high: lateness or failure to plan isn't a 'young' attribute, its disorganisation or feeling overwhelmed. Think carefully about how you respond to things done well – too often we give young people a round of applause for doing a role usually taken by adults, running the risk of holding the occurrence up as a novelty or unintentionally communicating that we are surprised a young person could do such a thing? Clearly explain your expectations and hold young leaders (kindly) to account.

We all have a humbling opportunity to be part of the leadership journey of the young people God has trusted us with. Brave leaders on a Venture offered me a chance to step up, speak up and mess up: I have no doubt that taking a chance on our young leaders will bring as much joy, excitement and freedom as it will hurt, mistakes and 'oops' moments.

But I am also absolutely certain that if we dare to take that route, we 'adults' will discover we just as much to learn about leadership from young people as we have to teach...

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#### FOR REFLECTION

1. Who is the person/people that have most influenced you as a leader – what did you learn from them?
2. What has been the most formative experience for you as a leader so far?
3. How are you praying for young leaders?
4. What are the areas of great responsibility you could offer young people you lead – where are the areas that you hold back – and why?
5. What do you need from God in order to make a significant investment in young leaders?