

DEVELOPING YOUNGER VOCATIONS

BY EMMA SYKES

Sitting in an evening service, a little sleep deprived and enjoying a small respite from a newborn baby, I was suddenly alert and attentive. The young red-headed jeans wearing curate stood up to speak. She was articulate, thought-provoking and talked passionately about the work of the Holy Spirit. The thought of being a vicar was no longer an abstract idea, here was a person I could relate to, a role model, and it was a key moment in my journey towards ordination.

The Bible is littered with examples of God calling and equipping young people to take up key roles in their communities and churches for his kingdom purposes: the boy Samuel, the prophet Jeremiah, David the young King, Ruth the young widower, Mary the teenage mother, Timothy the young man who people spoke well of. I could go on...

However, despite the biblical picture of God equipping young people to exercise significant responsibility, we still don't see this reflected in our church structures as widely as it could be. The average age of ordination is still around the 50 mark. The knock-on effect has been the age profile of congregations has been increasing and the Church has been steadily losing its connection with what David Kinnaman (from the Barna Group) has described as 'the lost generation' (those in their teens to early thirties).

As churches we need to be connecting with this 'lost generation' more than ever. It is a mission imperative. Young people are the church now and for the future and therefore need to be part of our leadership structures at all levels. To get young people into our leadership structures we need to be effectively



discipling young people. To disciple young people we need to be focusing our mission in the places where young people are and the best people to do that are young people themselves.

Put like that it sounds simple but the reality can be much harder to achieve when looking out over a Sunday congregation with an average age of 60 plus. However, the good news is that as church leaders, in whatever area of leadership and whatever context we are in, we can play our part. We are the role models and mentors that can make a difference.

How? Here are four suggestions...

CREATE A CULTURE OF VOCATION

We sometimes need to be reminded that every Christian's primary vocation or call is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:5-6) and the challenge is to shape our lives in a way that is worthy of that call (Ephesians 4:1). But often when we talk about 'calling' or 'vocation' we immediately jump to thinking about a specific role in church (vicar, youth worker, lay reader) or a vocational career (teacher, nurse, engineer). We

need to remember that we are followers of Christ first and the specific role we play is secondary.

One way of doing this is to be a church that regularly makes space to tell our own vocational stories. As leaders we can model this not only by sharing our accounts of God speaking and guiding in our lives but also by encouraging people of all ages and backgrounds to do the same. This can be done in small groups, up front when we are preaching or by creating space in our worship times to hear stories from different people.

By demonstrating that vocation is intrinsically linked to discipleship, our honest stories of being a disciple will lead to a better understanding of how God leads and shapes us. It takes away the false idea that a 'godly vocation' is a mysterious process that is limited to only a few very 'holy people' in the church.

CREATE SPACES FOR YOUNGER PEOPLE TO HAVE A GO

One of the best things we can do to engage younger people in the life of the church is to make space for them to have hands-on experience of different aspects of ministry. This could be anything from reading the Bible passage and leading prayers, to preaching and leading small groups, being involved with missional initiatives or even heading up certain aspects of ministry.

By allowing younger people to have a go we can:

- Help them to test out and discover their God-given gifts and talents.
- Allow them to grow and be shaped as disciples.
- Enable them to be role models for others (particularly for their generation).
- Create an expectation in our churches that people can exercise ministry at any age.
- Engage with issues that are relevant to them.
- Be challenged and encouraged to take risks to enable a healthier church now and for the future.

BE A MENTOR AND SUPPORTER

Alongside creating spaces for young people to have a go it helps to mentor and support them. I would argue this is fundamental to seeing more younger leaders in the Church.

This involves:

- Investing time in one or two younger people and deliberately praying for and with them.
- Being vulnerable with them, sharing your own stories of joys as well as struggles.
- Sponsoring them and recognising that you are a gatekeeper. Advocate for them and open doorways that give them experiences in ministry they would not otherwise have had.
- Being honest with them, giving good feedback that will help them to grow as disciples and leaders.

If you are an older leader then ask God to help you to identify a younger person to invest your time in. If you are a younger leader, ask yourself who can I encourage and be a positive role model for?

CONNECT

If at this point you are still struggling to see how a younger person can be involved in your sphere of ministry, then how about connecting with those who are. It is really exciting to see an increasing range of initiatives that are encouraging young vocations nationally and across many dioceses and organisations.

Here are a few ideas:

- Connect with your diocesan younger vocation champion or advisor and find out what initiatives are going on in your area.
- Look at the range of church internships that are available. Would your church be able to offer an internship to a young person? Or is there an internship elsewhere that would benefit a young person you know?
- If you have a church secondary school in your area or FE college or university, could you foster a relationship and seek opportunities to talk about vocation in those places?

IN CONCLUSION

A few years after that evening service I was training for ordained ministry, building on the many experiences of responding to God's call that had proceeded that day. May God help us to nurture vocation among younger Christians today, and who know where he might lead them in the future?



FOR REFLECTION

1. How can I create a culture of vocation in the area of ministry I am responsible for?
2. How can I enable younger people to participate in different areas of ministry that I am involved in?
3. Is there a younger person (under the age of 35) that I can commit to praying for and invest my time in?