

Learning From Those Younger Than Us

Mentoring is a word more associated with the workplace than the church, but I'd like us to consider the significance and impact mentoring can have in the life of the church. If mentoring is one person walking alongside others to train them, isn't that what one Christian should do for another?

It's called discipleship. It's something every believer should be doing—and it's something every believer should be doing in service to others. When we invest in the life of someone else, we're not just touching their life and encouraging their growth in Christ, but we are investing in those whom that person will disciple!

Mentoring does not simply need to be "from the top down." Consider what someone younger (or less experienced) might teach you. In the business world, some companies are delving into what is called "reverse mentoring." According to the BBC, reverse mentoring was a technique developed in the 1990s to share technology skills. The Internet was coming into our mainstream culture, and Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, charged younger staff members to teach the older employees about the technology.

Companies are encouraging millennials to teach older employees about work trends and cultural issues. This has significant relevance to the church. With so many churches simply getting grayer with fewer and fewer young adults, we would do well to listen to the voices of the young adults in the church. Even as we have opportunities to disciple them in God's Word and spiritual disciplines, they can teach us about their generation, how the culture has changed the way we communicate, and what is needed to build relationships with younger adults.

Reverse mentoring can dip into how we do Bible study and what we need to focus on in the Christian life. A few years ago, I led a group of young professionals, twentysomethings who were primarily graduate students. We were in the latter part of Ephesians, where Paul addressed relationships within both the family and the workforce (slaves/masters). This was a sharp group, and I was prepped and ready to discuss the issue of submission and love in the marriage relationship. (The group consisted of both single and married adults.) What I was not prepared for was their

interest and focus on what Paul said about slaves and masters!

From my Baby Boomer perspective, the bigger issue was how couples relate to each other. Work was work. What was there to discuss? Employees (i.e., slaves) were to be obedient and Christ-honoring toward their employers (i.e., masters). Period.

From their Millennial perspective, the more important matter was what Paul (and the other New Testament writers) had to say about the ethics and practice of slavery. Why didn't Paul address the dehumanizing nature of slavery? What can we do about modern-day slavery and people who are oppressed?

Biblically, both marriage and the slavery/workplace issues are important, but with some unexpected reverse mentoring, I learned that the more pressing matter for me was not the same pressing matter for them.

We do not change the gospel. We do not change the teaching and doctrine of Scripture simply to fit the ever-changing cultural norms or the interests of a younger generation. But *how* we communicate God's truth can change. How we seek to live out biblical truth can vary. Therefore, it behooves us older adults to learn from the younger adults.

Companies that practice reverse mentoring have also discovered that employee retention is greater. In companies where younger employees feel they are welcomed and listened to, those employees are less likely to search for greener pastures.

What would our churches look like if we started listening to the younger adults in our midst? Welcomed their input ... and followed up by giving them opportunities to lead? They are not the church of the future. They are the church of today. Mentor them ... and let them mentor you.

"Don't let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12).