

STORIES OF CHURCHES GROWING YOUNG

*Illustrations and Inspiration from
Churches Young People Love*

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Fuller Youth Institute | Pasadena, California

A companion resource to **Growing Young:**
Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church

FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

Stories of Churches Growing Young
Illustrations and inspiration from churches young people love

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TELLING A NEW STORY



There's so much bad news about churches today. Legitimately so. The best data shows that most churches are shrinking and aging across the US.

But in the midst of this depressing landscape, there are amazing churches beating the odds. They are heroic. And they are bright lights in the midst of the all-too-often gloomy narratives and research about churches.

Funded by four generous foundations, the primary goal of our last four years of research has been to understand how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging 15- to 29-year-olds.

Put more simply, we studied churches that are growing, and growing young.

Our team invested over 10,000 hours of research personnel time, 10,000 pages of data, and interviews or surveys with 474 young people and 799 adults. Born out of all of that work, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* highlights the six core commitments we've found to be most common in these exemplary churches.

MEET THE CHURCHES YOUNG PEOPLE LOVE



Throughout our research, we encountered hundreds of remarkable and diverse congregations who represent tens of thousands of young people. These teenagers and young adults consistently said they felt "known" at their church. They knew that no matter what happened, their church would still feel like "home."

That was true at the East Coast 1,000-member Presbyterian church that developed a long-term high school ministry team that pours into volunteer adult leaders, who in turn build a web of support around students.

And the 100-member midwestern rural Reformed church that has become so hospitable to teenagers and young adults that being at church is now the highlight of their week.

And the 1,500-member urban multiethnic congregation in the South that launched two leadership training programs for young adults in their city.

And the 5,000-member nondenominational church that responds to young people's core questions and struggles with an authentic exploration of the gospel rather than trite answers.

And the 200-person urban Baptist Latino congregation that integrated English into its worship services to better engage young people. This church is literally *learning a new language* in order to grow young.



HOW TO USE THIS EBOOK

While we've written about our research project and how all these churches' stories fit together in *Growing Young*, we've rounded up this brief collection of quotes, tales, and illustrations for you. Some are from the book; others are from our unpublished research notes. Here are a handful of ways you might use this content:

- Read it as a preview to the book. The content is organized around the six core commitments held in common by churches growing young, which we explore in depth in the book.
- Review it after reading the book. Few of us can absorb and retain more than a few statistics or findings from a study like this. But we remember stories. The words in this ebook come almost entirely from interview participants themselves, and each section begins with a quick reminder of the commitment illustrated by the quotes.
- Use these stories to share the message with others. You may be inspired to post a quote on social media (use the hashtag #growingyoung to be part of the bigger conversation!), include it in an email to church staff or volunteer leaders, or add an illustration to a sermon.
- Pair it with our intergenerational conversation toolkit (available with your preorder) as a primer for your own dialogue with young people. Consider how the young people you know talk about your church and their faith in similar or different ways from the young people recorded here.

We hope you can draw inspiration, hope, and ideas for dialogue within your own context. Perhaps together we can start a new conversation about young people and the church!

SHARING THE KEYS OF LEADERSHIP WITH YOUNG PEOPLE



Churches that grow young are marked by staff and volunteers who demonstrate *keychain leadership*. Whoever holds the keys has the power to let people in or to keep people out. Keys provide access to physical rooms, as well as to strategic meetings, significant decisions, and central roles or places of authority. The more power you have, the more keys you tend to possess. Keychain leaders are both aware of their keys and intentional about entrusting and empowering others with the keys to lead.

"The pastors are all volunteer managers. They equip and empower other people to lead ministry. Which is messy, but they're not afraid of messy. They invite it."

"The main draw is how transparent our senior pastor is. It's the only church I've ever been part of where the pastor shares how he feels and even shares his mistakes. This helps you feel like you can come in your brokenness and can walk with people when they're going through stuff without any judgment."

"Students are invited by the staff of the church to learn a skill or to use a skill they already have to directly participate in the church body. My son was taught how to do some technology that involves the screens, for example."

"I just led a training for preschool teachers last Sunday, and explained to them that a successful Sunday does not only look like a time in which preschoolers experience God-centered teaching and are loved and feel known, but it is also when your co-teacher, a high school student, feels loved and known. What I am trying to do is raise awareness that adults have a ministry opportunity to the youth who partner with them. I have encouraged teachers to give students meaningful jobs, not just to consider them as hands to wrangle preschoolers, but to see them as people who could, for example, provide meaningful input on the lesson, and to teach it. My desire is that youth will have significant ways in which they are serving, not just the stuff that adults do not want to do."

"The leadership style of our pastor has had a big impact on people from younger generations who have come out of dysfunctional churches, myself included. We've all been at the place where we've said, 'I will never step foot into church again.' But because of the patience, love, and mutual trust of our pastor, we have become a sanctuary for those people."

"The staff and volunteers are truly engaged in the community and in the youth. They are real, they're supportive, they're connected with what's going on inside families, they're engaged in schools. They become mentors who partner with the kids, and that makes it real to them."

"I think one of the reasons that we have so many students who come back and so many life group leaders who stay is because the church is very concerned with taking care of its volunteers well. As a volunteer leader, I have never felt a time where I have been so overwhelmed that I did not know what to do, because there is always someone there offering to help. Their trainings are incredible. Every year we go on a leaders' retreat. We are given

outlets to share things that have been bothering us, places to share our success, and I think that that has been a huge part of why the ministry has thrived so much, because while it is about the students, they also make sure volunteers are taken care of, respected, and that their needs are met."

"I think one of the things that originally drew me so quickly to this church, and that really engages young adults, is that our church is very honest and very real and authentic. Every single person I have heard preach addresses his or her own sin. Not past, recovered sin. Current sin. There is not a sense of performance, or of God being 'done' with any of us. It is so clear that we are all in process.

"It is not scary if someone on stage mentions their struggles. That for me is what so quickly draws young people in. It's that leaders are ready to say, 'It is not just you, it's us.' And we need the grace of God together. So there is a real honesty and transparency that I think engages our generation, because we just see through people's crap really quickly. I think our generation is kind of over people telling us how we should live. We want them to start telling us about their mistakes."

THE POWER OF EMPATHIZING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY



Churches that grow young dive into the deep waters of teenagers' and young adults' lives. Both in young people's descriptions of their churches as well as our observations during site visits, empathizing with today's young people bubbled to the surface as a core commitment of growing young. By empathy, we mean "feeling with" young people. Like sitting on the curb of a young person's life, celebrating their dreams, and grieving over their despair. And that curb looks a lot different than when we sat on it ourselves, even if we're just a few years older.

"I don't know what I would do without my church. Honestly, the past three or four years have been really rough for me, and if I did not have my church and my church family, I don't know that I would have made it. It's a big part of my life, and I really love it."

"As a volunteer leader, I try to think about what I would have wanted in high school. Someone knowing my name and checking in with me would have been amazing."

"A man in our church became my mentor right around the time my parents ended up separating. He basically became another father figure that I could talk to, ask for advice, and hang out with. He has definitely been the most important person in my life from the church. I still talk to him on a regular basis for support and advice eight years later."

"We treat single people as equally valid. They have a place in the family of God, not just as second-class citizens. We've never used 'singles' as a label or category for an event or ministry, and as a result singles feel welcome to everything."

"I think if you look at this generation of young people, you see a lot of them are just looking for a deep sense of purpose. And they are looking to engage that purpose in some way. That is what our church is really good at doing—recognizing that everybody has a purpose, a God-given purpose. And then providing a massive amount of opportunities to explore that purpose."

One vivid example of how young people mirror the empathy they experience is Bennett. As nine-year-old Bennett and his single mom, Vera, were looking for a church home six years ago, Vera had one major criterion: that the congregation be a safe place for her son with special needs. When she asked the children's ministry leaders at one of the churches in our study, "Will you take care of my unusual child?" their response was, "Absolutely. You tell us what we need to know and do. Please give us feedback on how we're doing." Vera and Bennett were hooked and have been active members of the congregation ever since.

Vera recounted a memory of picking up nine-year-old Bennett from the children's ministry at the end of a worship service six years ago: "Here's what this church means to me and Bennett. I have a scene playing in my mind.

I am picking up my son, and I see an adult bent down on his level, focused on what my son is saying. He puts his hand on my son's shoulder, nods his head, and says something that I can't hear. Both smile, and my son nods his head back. At school, Bennett never feels that understood and secure."

In a world that often doesn't take the time to talk to Bennett, such empathy was a magnet for both Bennett and his mom. But Vera continued, "Now my son is 15. This church is his home, and he's been invited to help serve in the kindergarten class—something I never thought possible. A few months ago, as I again picked him up after worship, he was bent over, listening to a seven-year-old boy. Bennett was nodding his head. I moved close enough to hear what Bennett said as he put his hand on this boy's shoulder: 'I understand. I've felt that way before, too.' Bennett never could have said that if he hadn't felt like this church had understood him. He is modeling the empathy that he had experienced."

"You know, this woman at church has just continuously reached out to me. She sent me a note the other day—like a handwritten note—that said, 'Hey, I am glad that we are getting to know each other. I am happy you are in my life, and I can't wait to get to know you more in ministry and just as friends.' It was very unnecessary; it was outrageous. Yet welcome."

LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE TAKE JESUS' MESSAGE SERIOUSLY



Young people in our study talked about Jesus a lot more than they talked about propositional belief statements or taking formulaic gospel steps. They long for churches to invite them into a journey of actively following Jesus. Our team was struck by how the commitment to take Jesus' message seriously is both a demonstrated action and an overall spirit or ethos in churches growing young.

"Our church's message is less 'you're a sinner, change now,' and more, 'this is awesome, come be part of this!'"

"I've struggled for years with believing Christianity intellectually. I just keep finding problems when I go down those trails. But lately I've been trying to just 'abide in Christ.' I'm still not sure I believe everything, but I can seek to abide in Christ, and I can lean into Christian community."

"There is never a time, even in just catching a meal with someone from our church, that the gospel doesn't come into the conversation. The quality of the conversation with people from my church is consistently Christ-centered. The gospel comes up everywhere."

"Our church teaches the hard parts of Scripture and you get the whole story, not just the parts you like. We don't glaze over anything."

"The gospel is not a moment or transaction, it is not even simply a message, it is actually a new way of living, a new reality that is intended to pervade everything in this life, and it has both present and eternal implications."

"And I guess the thing that has changed in me from knowing my mentor is that she helped me admit my failures. So, rather than thinking that the reason that people love me is because they do not see my failings, she kind of confronted me with my own failures and showed me that she cared about me despite those things. She encouraged me to be more honest with myself so that I could be more honest with other people about the things I am thinking and the things I am struggling with."

"This is a very grace based, come-as-you-are kind of place. But it's also focused on truth. I know these people aren't going to judge me, but they are going to tell me the truth."

As Immanuel Church of the Nazarene grew over the years, the leaders realized that the regular practice of sharing testimony to God's faithfulness was getting lost. God was no less active in this Philadelphia suburb or in the lives of the people in the congregation, but they needed a way to tell these stories. So nearly 20 years ago, a member built a lighthouse in the sanctuary that was lit whenever someone gave their life to Jesus. Over time the lighthouse was replaced with a lantern, and today the lantern is lit during worship whenever someone has made a decision to follow Christ.

When the current senior pastor began serving nearly a decade ago, a new ritual joined the lantern. A pile of stones sits at the front of the sanctuary on the altar. These stones serve as symbols of answered prayers and signs of God's faithfulness. On any given Sunday, members can take a stone and add it to the pile on the altar. Some even bring their own rocks from home, carrying a physical reminder that God is on the move outside of the church walls. One member explained, "These traditions have helped all generations grasp our church's belief that we are a lighthouse and that God is faithful!"

"It's the love of Christ that leads us to repentance. That's what leads us into these conversations with people who are different. It's Christ's love that leads us to be vulnerable with one another."

"Racial reconciliation is not the goal. The goal is the gospel. The gospel is to love your neighbors, the people in your neighborhood, at work, and at the gym. Those are the people we're asked to engage with as we live out the gospel. We hear, 'What does your dinner table look like? Who are you inviting into your home?' Life change comes when your table has people who are different from you. Reconciliation is just part of the gospel. It's not the goal by itself, but the gospel in the context of your life is the goal. That means you're going to look different."

"What is the central message of the gospel? You are not abandoned."

"The gospel is God being there saying, 'I'm happy you are home.' Wherever you are in your journey. I did not want anything to do with Christianity. But when I read the gospel and listened to my church talk about God, I began to hear, 'I'm happy you are here. I'm happy you are home,' and 'Let's not talk about the old stuff anymore; let's move forward.' That is the good news to me."

"My church provides such a safe, safe place for everyone to feel welcome and to ask tough questions and to speak honestly and real. And I think the fact that they don't use the Bible as a measuring stick is a huge thing for me. It's not a book of judgment, it is a love story, and that is a message that really resonates for me, and I think resonates across my age group."

WARM CONGREGATIONS BECOME YOUNG CONGREGATIONS



We had a hunch at the start of our research that authentic community would be important to young people in your church and neighborhood. But we were surprised by how much of growing young is influenced by whether or not congregations are warm and accepting. Warmth often lives much deeper than your programs and structures—it's the lifeblood coursing through the veins of your church body.

"This just feels like family. I feel a sense of welcome—from everyone—like I belong here."

"I visited other churches with my friends, and they are really great churches, but I walk in and I feel like nobody even notices that I am there. And then I kind of feel like I'm sitting in the wrong spot, and people are watching me like I don't really belong there. But I have heard from my friends who come to my church for the first time that they just feel like people really notice that they are here and that they are really wanted here. It's the only thing that I would say I have heard in every newcomer's story. It's like the common denominator between them all—it's the reason they stay."

"You can relate to people's stories. Everyone has this big heart, and wants to be part of your life. They let you know you're loved. Someone cares. You're not an invisible person."

"'You belong here' is first. Then you might come to believe, and then behaviors might follow that. But belonging is first."

"Young people need adults in order to become adults. They need to interact with adults who love Jesus and are open. It's clear that effective discipleship will mean life-on-life discipleship."

"When I joined this church, I felt like I was joining a family. A multigenerational family."

"We are increasingly moving toward a family metaphor for church rather than the corporate America model. We're asking, 'What does it mean to be the people—the family—of God?' 'How do we as a team of leaders function as family?' That's messy, and hard."

"I cannot emphasize enough that church has got to be real. It is not about a program, it is not about a video, or entertaining, or you know, making the students do this or do that. It is about being real. And if you really care about them, they're going to know it."

The youth leaders at one congregation of under 200 wanted honesty and authenticity to be hallmarks of their ministry. These adult volunteers made a pact with one another that they would simply be there for teenagers and emerging adults no matter what, without judging or criticizing them. They didn't tell the young people about this, they just tried to live it out.

Through our interviews and focus groups on site, it became obvious that the young people feel like they can trust these adults enough to be honest about their struggles. One young woman affirmed, "The adults here actually listen to us."

In other words, the pact worked!

"I tried to leave once to try a different church after I got out of high school, but I came right back because I missed that family feel, that community."

"We do not split ourselves up often between seasons of life or age or things like that. We really try to live together as a family. And so my small group, for example, we have retirees, we have families with older children, we have families with younger children, we have families with no kids, and singles. It's a picture of family."

"My husband and I have taught the same kids' Sunday school group since they were in second grade. And we have moved up with them every year. This year we're freshmen. Now we're in high school."

"Our church is my family. I lost my parents seven years ago, and the people who make up the body of the church, they are my family. And that is what I would say to someone about my church. I go to them when I am hurting; I go to them to celebrate the victories."

THE POWER OF PRIORITIZING YOUNG PEOPLE



One early and ongoing surprise in our research was how important it is for churches to make young people and their interests a priority everywhere in the church. Throughout our surveys, interviews, and site visits, leaders, parents, and young people themselves all named prioritization as a core reason their churches are successful with young people. When churches prioritize young people—and their families—everywhere, they take a step beyond both empathy and warmth. They allocate resources, energy, and attention to teenagers and young adults both inside and outside their walls.

"Young people are like salt. When they're included, they make everything taste better."

"I guess I really enjoy the young people who attend our church because I feel like they bring a sort of energy around them. I just love the way they're so passionate about things. It's contagious to people around them, and it becomes a great benefit to everyone who attends our church. I think visitors can feel it as well. The other thing I appreciate is that young people have a lot of great ideas. I feel like they're able to give us new, young, innovative ideas."

"The church doesn't just put resources into a building, but into people. We've been to churches with better facilities, but we've never been in a healthier environment."

"I may have hinted at this, but I think what really makes our church

effective is our commitment to young people. I mean, it sounds so simple, but it is not easy to just replicate commitment. There is such a passion for young people, and it is just part of the culture, the environment, the emphasis of the church. It's a dedication."

"Young people in inner cities have had a lot of disappointments in their lives, in their community structures, their family structures, and a lot of inconsistency. I think consistency is what young people see in our church. When young people see that you are true to your word and that no matter what you are going to show up and you are going to be there, whether they are there or not, they tend to gravitate to that. You have to earn that trust. With kids you can't fake it. You have to be who you are and who you say you're going to be. You've got to take your time with them. You've got to be patient."

Ella is a young person whose church valued her enough to carve out a special niche for her. Feeling as though she had "aged out" of her church's youth group by 14, she didn't simply fade away. Instead she redirected her investment to an area that felt natural: the church choir. This all-adult group (until now) was not attempting to attract young people. They were a traditional choir in every way, right down to the graying heads above the blue robes.

Not discouraged by this reality, Ella appeared at choir practice one Wednesday and quickly made herself at home amid the group. She was an avid singer, and her voice boosted the spirits of the vocalists as much as her warm smile and easy laugh. Choir became not only Ella's place to serve, but also her primary community within

the church. When her mother endured the trials of breast cancer a year later, one older couple (who had been giving her rides to and from choir practice each week) faithfully stood by Ella in a way that bonded them like family. Now in college a few states away, Ella makes a point to visit this couple when she's home on breaks because they made such an investment in her during high school. What's more, she found a church in her college town and again joined the choir as her portal to community. Worshiping and serving with adults became her model for how church should be. As churches have prioritized Ella, she has in turn prioritized church.

"My church has loved me like God loves the Church. This congregation has not seen me as the 'divorced person' but instead has loved me for who I am today because of my past. They have opened my eyes to a love that gives and a love that commits."

"Our church reserves the front middle section for young people during all our worship services. The invitation to them is, "We've saved the best seats in the house for you! You are the headlights, not the tail lights in our church family!" As a result, our young people have really led the way in worship. They are the first to raise their hands or stand as they sing, the first to go and pray at the altar. This has dramatically changed the climate of our corporate worship, and connected many of our young people to the older members of our congregation."

"Young people are woven into the fabric of the church, not siloed off."

"Our leaders intentionally see young people as the church of today, not the church of 15 years from now. That means they have gifts that they have to offer, and they have things that they can help the church body with right now. Not just on down the road when they go off to school and become adults and have children. No, right now there is something they can vitally contribute to the church that only they can give. Having that awareness allows us to begin to look for their gifts, recognize them, and affirm them."

"We decided we wanted to treat high school students like young adults, having high expectations, giving them real responsibilities, expecting them to participate in the body on Sunday mornings and otherwise."

"We constantly express gratitude to adults from the platform by acknowledging they are very likely giving up some of their preferences around dress, music, and formality in order to reach younger people. We thank them for that gift."

"Young people are vital. As I think about the next 20 years of our church, young people's passion, creativity, idealism, and hope all fuel our momentum. I'd put everything on being a place where young people can get involved and thrive. The opportunity for involving young people is always going to be right in front of us—there are always new high school students, always new college students, new college grads. It's such low-hanging fruit to say to folks over 40, 'Let's mentor young people!'"

NEIGHBORING WELL AROUND TOWN AND AROUND THE GLOBE



Churches growing young strive to be the best neighbors, both locally and globally. They recognize the careful dance that values both fidelity to Scripture's commands for holiness as well as 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. Much more than 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 our complex world.

"Because of the vertical realities of the gospel, there are horizontal demands. I can't not look at my neighbor differently because of the gospel. When the body of Christ is functioning well, we are a countercultural family on mission that demands a 'why' from the culture around us."

"We're bold about multiethnic ministry and caring for the city, and that tends to attract socially active young people. Our young people are incredibly involved in the city. The end zones of our success are focused on the city—crime going down, kids getting out of foster care. Encouraging massive volunteerism across the city. We're not trying to figure out how many times a week we can get people in the building. That emphasis on the city seems to encourage and motivate young people."

"What I love about our parish is that during a recent mass, in one of the back pews sat a man I know who is homeless. Sitting right next

to him was the vice president of one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the country. One is a multimillionaire and one has next to nothing, but they're in the same pew. That's what our parish is all about."

Flood Church in San Diego holds worship services in a public high school auditorium. Far beyond simply using the space, Flood sees its school partnership as critical to being good neighbors. The pastoral staff and school administration have built strong relationships—so strong that the principal actually provided a location for one pastor to hold regular on-campus office hours! Several church members work or volunteer in coaching roles for high school sports teams. The church donates back-to-school supplies and provides parking volunteers for graduation.

When the federal funding ended for an afterschool program at the high school, the school approached the church about sponsoring it. Flood offered finances, but also people—staff and volunteers—to help keep it going.

The church and high school even cosponsor a weeklong summer sports camp for elementary kids staffed by high school students and church members, many of whom take vacation time to lead one of the most meaningful ministries of the year. The church's pastor of global impact reflected, "We try to give young people opportunities to serve meaningfully. Sometimes

young people are drawn to things that surprise us. We never would have guessed that being good neighbors in the community through hosting a summer camp with the high school would be so important, but young people name it as the thing they love about our church."

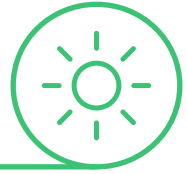
"We are committed to our community. That takes us to uncomfortable places."

"I think what really keeps me here is the fact that we actually do outreach, like real outreach. I believe it is the church's job to take care of the community and to take care of their people."

"I am African American, and growing up all I ever knew were all-black churches or all-white churches, all-Hispanic churches, or all-Asian churches. I had never seen all races come together and worship God until I started going to this church. I thought it was weird at first, but then being exposed to something different, it kind of opened my eyes, and I was like, 'Wow, okay, so this is what heaven will look like. It's not just about divisions, it's about unity.'"

"We love the city we minister in. Rather than take our stand in a 'culture war,' we engage in the culture we minister to, while acknowledging our city's beauty along with its brokenness."

"My friends and I need more than the cynicism we're offered by the world and wider culture. Our church offers more, and that's why it's attractive to younger people."



OUR ULTIMATE HOPE

Someone recently asked us, "What's your greatest hope for the Growing Young project?"

This question gave us pause. Not because we don't have much hope, but because there is so much to be hopeful about.

We could have answered the question by focusing on how we envision more and more churches involving and retaining young people in the congregational community.

Or our hope that more and more young people would not only discover churches they love, but also would discover Jesus in those churches through the living Spirit of God at work among the community.

Or perhaps our hope to impact hundreds of thousands of churches across the country through resources and training in the years to come.

But we are ultimately reminded of another hope, one that drives so much of what we do at FYI.

We want to change the way the world sees young people.

Our greatest hope for the impact of Growing Young is that when any adult in any church sees a teenager or emerging adult, their first response is NOT:

- ... to shrug their shoulders in ambivalence.
- ... to roll their eyes in distaste.
- ... to throw up their hands in bewilderment.
- ... to tear up in grief.

We are convinced there is too much missed potential in too many churches because we tend to start with the negative. We get discouraged that our church might never change. We become cynical when we see young people leaving, or look at our aging buildings and outdated models of ministry. We feel stuck. Then we project all that onto young people themselves.

AT FYI WE ENVISION A NEW REALITY.

Instead, when adults see young people, we hope their first response might become:

- ... to smile in welcome.
- ... to learn a name and listen to a story.
- ... to empathize with the challenges of becoming an adult today.
- ... to be inspired by their energy and ideas.
- ... to be filled with hope about the potential of the church.

In short, we want adults in congregations to see the possibilities when it comes to engaging young people, not just focus on the obstacles. And we want them to know that helping young people discover and love the church is not just a far-fetched dream. It can become a current reality.

We can't wait for you to read *Growing Young*. We think it can change the conversation about young people—in your church, and perhaps in your own head and heart.

It's time to unlock the potential and passion of young people in your community. Let's do it together!



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