

A man wearing a dark hat, glasses, a light blue shirt, a dark bow tie, and a grey sweater is looking out a window. The window has a grid pattern. The background is dark and moody.

HOW TO BE HEARD:

A young adult's guide to
intergenerational advocacy and
church leadership

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YOU'VE BEEN INVITED

Perhaps your church has read the book, *Growing Young*. The leadership is beginning to seriously consider the stories of young adults. Older adults are catching the vision of prioritizing young adults everywhere, but so far it's still in the dialogue stage.

They have asked you to be part of the conversation, adding your voice to help them understand, empathize with, and reach young adults in their context. Perhaps they've invited you to join an important meeting, visit a small group of older adults, or go to coffee with a key leader.

Now what?

The following pages offer inspiration and practical steps to captivate the imagination of a listening church.

Meet Rebekah Here

CHOOSE YOUR STORY

Before you enter into this conversation, consider taking a moment to choose your story. There are so many things you could say. I can relate.

Start gently, and utilize structure if necessary. Select your words intentionally. If you rush into your story in a stream-of-consciousness style, your listeners may not be able to absorb your message as clearly. But if you pause to reflect before sharing your story, you will likely be asked to tell more stories.

Think about your narrative the same way you think about the images you post on social media: there are many to choose from, but you don't dump every photograph onto your followers. You edit from all of the options and post the one that captures the most authentic moment of your experience. And you save the play-by-play for your best friend.

What is the moment you want to share with your listening church?

Selecting a key representative moment is crucial. Maybe it was when you visited your church for the first time after graduating high school and moving to a new location. You may have experienced new emotions walking back in after some time away. What was that like? How can that story help create empathy in your congregation for college students?

Maybe it was when you felt stirred to action on behalf of an issue in your community, and your church truly supported you as you took action. What could it look like to be moved to action together as a congregation?

Maybe it was when your senior pastor asked for feedback and you sat in the crowd wondering whether or not they were talking to you. What sort

of invitation would help you trust that your senior leaders are talking to you and valuing your input today?

Or, maybe it was when you stood at the back of the worship gathering, wondering where to sit, and all of a sudden found your seat. Where was that? Who were you sitting next to? How does your story point towards either the celebration or absence of relationship?

Some possible questions to ask in choosing your story:

- Where and how is my church already empathizing with or empowering young adults?
- What are adults of other generations already doing that, if they leaned into that practice even more, would make a difference for my peers?
- What obstacle is keeping adults from leaning in? How might my story help them find a way to overcome it?

A story I've shared

In my context, my church has long been supportive of young people, especially as some of us struggle and flail. It is rare to hear an adult dismiss a teenager's challenges. Instead, to quote my church's Youth Ministry Team Leader, Hal Hamilton, "We work together to create a culture of relational scaffolding that creates a safety net for young people to fall into, so that their struggle doesn't smash them on impact." Time and time again, the message for teenagers is, "You can fail here. These relationships will hold."

The challenge for young adults is that my church has accidentally defined "young people" as birth through eighteen. For us, it's not a problem of unwillingness but of unawareness. If this scaffolding continued and

pivoted to make room for spiritual struggle as well as peer and parent-centered struggle, it would make a lasting and deep impact on my age group.

The arch of my story, then, is that twentysomethings are young people too, and still need their church to be their net.

I've been blessed to have someone in my life who already believes this. My story is of a person thirty years my senior who has let me struggle, flail, and be uncertain for years. A person who lets me be uncertain still. Who literally has a couch that I call "the curb" where I go and sit and she sits next to me, seeing the world through my eyes for a time.

She also happens to be a peer of those to whom I tell my story. So in my narrative, I highlight twenty-six-year-old me and fifty-six-year-old her, both engaged participants of the same congregation, both holding one end of the rope of a dear and deep friendship.

My story ends with the question: "Whose safety net are you?"

GROWING IN CONFIDENCE AND ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY

Storytellers become leaders. Our stories build momentum and cultivate collective motivation. Don't be surprised if after sharing your story a few times, you are asked to share it a few more. Don't be surprised if you're increasingly invited to tables where you have not previously sat.

When this began to happen to me, the compliment was frequently swallowed up in nerves. "Can I be my real self here?" I wondered, the question quickly being answered by my own thought, "Probably not, that's why you've never been invited."

I upgraded my wardrobe from youth missions t-shirts to "ministry business casual," and wore makeup more consistently.

Still. Even when I looked more like I was going to a meeting than a middle school cafeteria, I didn't trust my own voice to contribute to the conversations around me. What authority did I have, anyway?

Finally, a leader in my congregation prayed (without prompting) at a lunch with nearly fifty people for me to "step into my authority." I felt both the hot blush on my face and the conviction in my gut that it was time to identify what that authority might be.

Our authority as young adults is our presence.

This realization was built through many small interactions over time: quiet, occasionally awkward, and occurring without fanfare or announcement.

It happened when an older man prayed quietly before a service: "Make us hospitable and help us to remember that we were never their age."

When an older lady explained she was "Just trying to be a good listener."

When after a church town hall meeting some adults of a different generation said to the young adults, "You are asking the right questions. We need you here to push us. Keep asking."

It happens every time the older folks ask, "How are our Millennials doing?" because they are saying "our" instead of "those".

It even happened one time when the seventy-year-old in worship next to me said, "I like your nose ring," because by speaking that compliment, she had committed a cross-cultural act of identification.

Over time, these little moments of transparency, empathy, and intergenerational community helped me see that my congregation was only ever asking me to be who I am as a young adult WITH them.

That's it: Be present with older people, be present with our peers, and work to narrow the gap between generations.

I am the youngest adult some of my colleagues know. They are asking me not to leave their world, but to help them transform it into a hospitable place for others my age.

Owning my authority means to stop acting quiet and insecure and like I don't know what I am doing. Do I know what I'm doing in a boardroom? No. But when I fixate on my age and insecurity, imitating the seventy year olds for lack of context or a clue, I always feel like a fraud.

But I am spectacular at being twenty-six. I can be twenty-six while the seventy-year-old is seventy, and we can bring our different expertise conspiring together on how to reach his grandchildren, my friends, with the everlasting embrace of Jesus.

Consider being present and showing up this week through:

- Lingering an extra five minutes if you go to church this week. Say hello to an adult of a different generation in those five minutes.
- Asking a person of a different generation to “tell me more” if they start to share part of their story.
- Accepting an invitation you might typically decline such as dinner with a relative, attending a church function, or engaging in a hallway conversation with a person of a different generation.
- Letting someone into your world. If you find yourself in conversation with an adult of a different generation, tell them about the classes you’re taking at school, a hobby you have been curious about trying, or a project you’ve been working on at your job.

WHEN THEY'RE STILL NOT HEARING YOU

Sometimes you choose your story, own your authority, and show up faithfully—and they do not hear you.

This is when you want to say, forget it. I'm getting brunch next Sunday instead.

I've been there, too. Right after I had shared a story from the stage at the Growing Young Cohort Summit, a young colleague and I confessed the loneliness we felt to the rest of our older team. Instantly the more seasoned members of our team explained the way out of loneliness from their perspectives.

We tried again. "It's just, that's not my experience," and, "That's not what I meant," we said almost in the same breath. As loneliness moved from experience, to subject, to abstraction, we gave up: her trying once more, me getting another slice of pizza so my mouth would be full.

They were not hearing us.

Later, in the hotel, the other young adult said, "We were the bravest of the brave back there. Most young adults wouldn't have tried so hard or hung in there that long. We tried really hard, and they still didn't even know they weren't hearing us."

Three weeks later I was at a gathering of older adult volunteers, hosted by someone who was at the prior dinner. I said my piece about building trust with young adults through empathy, feeling the irony as I said it.

But then the host spoke up. "Yes, and empathy doesn't mean what you think it does," he began. "A few weeks ago I was at dinner with Rebekah and another young adult, and they took a risk to share something with

us. At the time I remembered the struggle they were expressing from when I was a young adult myself, and it made me so uncomfortable to go there that I tried to fix it for them. I realize now I was not practicing empathy. I should have said, 'Tell me more,' and then listened."

I sat down amazed. My friend and I had never told him or anyone else that we felt unheard, but he had figured it out. He then apologized in front of a crowded room where I was yet again the only young adult. In doing so, he was modeling for a generation what it looks like to listen. He had heard us after all.

I am asking you as a fellow young adult to hang in there, to try again and again, to be the bravest of the brave even when others are not hearing you.

Because maybe they will.

While you wait for your voice to bear fruit:

- Show up strategically. Back your voice with your presence by being there for issues you care about. Is your church hosting a town hall discussion on race? Be there. Are you passionate about songwriting? Show up for worship practice. Like what your church is doing online? Follow them.
- Talk to someone who gets you. Before my church heard me, my friend with the couch I call the curb heard me and sat with me in the frustration of the in-between spaces where I had spoken up, but not yet been understood. This is not the fun part. But you don't have to do it alone. A mentor, a teacher, a friend, your mom: someone already gets you. Lean into that relationship while you wait.
- Trust that it matters. Dr. Jay Moon says, "Words create worlds." The culture of our communities of faith is not static but shifts and adjusts, often in response to what is repeatedly said or unsaid. Your voice deeply matters.

You've been invited. Gather your courage, show up, and take a next step toward being heard. I'll be cheering from my corner.