

# Thoughts on forming leaders for a church that does not yet exist

Isaiah Friesen and Andy Brubacher Kaethler

The conversation was one part sobering and two parts inspiring as five young adults aged twenty to twenty-six discussed their experiences of leadership in the Mennonite church via Google Hangouts on an evening in early fall 2017. It was a timely conversation: Most denominations in Canada and the United States are declining in membership and involvement, with young adults being the largest demographic disengaging from church. Simultaneously, questions frequently reemerge about who will take on the mantle of leadership in the church in decades ahead.



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## **Stereotypes of young adults as leaders**

In September 2014, the private company that held a seventy-five-year lease on the Indiana toll road filed for bankruptcy. The company, which had held the lease for just eight years, reported lower highway usage and revenue than anticipated, citing among the top reasons for this reduction in toll-road traffic the fact that young adults are not using the interstate as projected: they wait longer to buy their first car and are more likely to carpool and use public transportation.<sup>1</sup> These trends make the personalized vehicle transport industry nervous.

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1 Sean Slone, "Impact of the Indiana Toll Road Bankruptcy," <http://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/content/impact-indiana-toll-road-bankruptcy-new-transportation-reports-asceeno-pew-nam-us-pirg>; Melissa Etehad and Rob Nikolewski, "Millennials and Car Ownership? It's Complicated," [www.latimes.com/business/autos/la-fi-hy-millennials-cars-20161223-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/business/autos/la-fi-hy-millennials-cars-20161223-story.html).

This report illustrates a common stereotype of young adults today: they are co-dependent, self-centered, and passive; they are simply not taking leadership and pulling their weight in a consumer culture.

But there is another view of young adults. In 2015, Canada's voters elected Justin Trudeau prime minister. Born in 1971, Trudeau is not exactly a young adult, but young adults in Canada broadly identify with his progressivism, his suave but informal style, and his personable and accessible way of communicating. They respect him for including in his cabinet a large number of women, representatives of minority groups, and young members of Parliament. In the United States in 2012, Pete Buttigieg at the age of thirty became the youngest mayor of a city of more than 100,000 residents. As mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg displays a leadership style that is collaborative, inclusive, altruistic, and engaged.

These two caricatures of how young adults view leadership and take on responsibility also exist in the church. Because these stereotypes are in evidence in society and church, we thought it would be good to hear from young adults themselves about the qualities of leadership they value and about the kinds of communities in which they aspire to take leadership.

The young adults who took part in this conversation speak *as* young adults but not *for* all young adults. They provide glimpses of thoughts and feelings of young adults who, despite questions and frustrations, care about their faith, the church, and church leadership. Their perspectives are important and instructive.

### **Those who attend church are often involved in leadership**

Most but not all of the five who participated in our conversation regularly attend a Mennonite church, and all who attend are involved in leadership in some way. Max Kennel (Hamilton, Ontario) preaches occasionally in a small congregation as he pursues a PhD in religious studies; Hillary Harder (Elkhart, Indiana) leads worship and music in her congregation; and Lynea Brubacher Kaethler (Waterloo, Ontario) and Isaiah Friesen (Goshen, Indiana) teach Sunday school. They all acknowledge that their leadership roles don't just keep them involved in their respective congregations; these responsibilities are a factor in whether they go to church at all. "Being actively involved is how I get to know people," Lynea observes. For Isaiah, "it feels right to be there when I can contribute to the life of the community."

Elizabeth Witmer (Harrisonburg, Virginia) reflects on the church involvement of her peers. "One group is very dedicated and invested," while

for the people in the other group the thought of attending is “never a question in their mind.” Max’s experience is similar. “Many of my friends right now are theology students and are highly committed. But I also have friends who are not Christians and do not go to church.” Hillary helpfully complicates things (as she often does in the course of the conversation),



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by adding a third category: “friends who were involved and found church very meaningful but were hurt or burned out and now stay away for their own safety.”

These observations highlight differences between what inspires young adults to attend church and what motivated previous generations to do so. Their grandparents may have been driven by guilt, and their parents may have attended out of habit. Neither guilt nor habit compels these young adults. Those

who remain in or return to the church do so because they affirm and embrace the truth of God’s nondiscriminatory love and vision of inclusion.

### **Balancing gifts and needs**

Being invited to take a leadership role in congregational life is a dominant theme for these young adults, but not the only one. Dona Park (in Cambodia with Mennonite Central Committee’s Serving and Learning Together program) contributed to our conversation by e-mail. She attends church because she needs it to be her “personal family.” The church does for her as a young adult what her biological family did for her as a child and youth: it names and affirms her gifts. She and her conversation partners are not interested in being involved just to fill a demographic void in the church. In Max’s words, “It’s not only about what young adults can contribute; it’s also about paying attention to the needs of young adults.”

Conversely, some young adults who are no longer involved in a congregation report that their gifts and needs were ignored or rejected, or that they witnessed rejection of the gifts and needs of others. Young adults have little desire to be a part of a group that does not model acceptance, openness, inclusion.

This is Elizabeth’s experience. After having a very positive experience in a ministry inquiry program at a socially active church, she is back at university and has not found a church that attends simultaneously to self-

care and care for others, so she is not going to church at all right now. She is forthright about it. Not going to church is a matter of self-care for her, and she finds other ways to “be part of a bigger community, practice selflessness, serve others, and fight for justice.”

These young adults acknowledge the importance of balancing their gifts and needs as individuals and the needs of the larger church. Balancing one’s own gifts and needs with others’ gifts and needs requires us to acknowledge that as humans we are interdependent. The group readily agrees that being interdependent is a strength, not a weakness.

### **Big issues need cross-generational responses**

When asked what the most important issues facing the church today are, these young adults put LGBTQAI inclusion at the top of the list. Other issues they mention include racism, xenophobia, mental health, sexism, gun violence, police violence, climate change, rape culture, and drugs. In their view, the church should be at the forefront in addressing important public and social issues. As Dona puts it, “The church should not be an institution of the privileged but rather a house of refuge.”

We were surprised to hear that most of these young adults believe that fostering understanding between generations is among the most crucial issues facing the church today. And they connect this concern directly to the other issues that concern them. As Dona observes, the other crucial issues facing the church today are not narrowly young adult issues; these issues affect the whole church. Dona and Elizabeth mention that young adults frequently feel like the church does not listen to their perspectives.

Max observes that when there is conversation across generations, young adults and older adults tend to talk past each other, as if they were speaking different languages. They may use the same words—unity, peace, justice, for example—but these words mean different things to older and younger people and are sometimes invoked in ways that drive wedges between people of different generations rather than contributing to shared values and common identity. When the church does listen to young adults, Max notes, it is often in the name of “good process and unity,” which ends up being code for “we like things the way they are.”

Hillary reminds the group that we should take care not to assume that older people in the church have made no efforts for social justice. Hillary admits that “older generations have seen and done a lot.” She recalls conversations with her grandfather, who has told her that “young adults are not the only ones concerned about justice.” Hillary wonders whether

many church leaders are struggling with burnout, after dedicating decades to the mission of the church. Maybe the strategies used to protest the Vietnam War are not the ones needed to address racism and climate change. Perhaps older leaders are simply unsure about how to share leadership or hand it over to younger leaders.

Several participants name the importance of empathy, humility, and compromise. Young adults do a better job of being inclusive and trying to understand diverse perspectives, Lynea suggests, and the group agrees. Still, they agree that young adults need to respect older adults and meet them somewhere in the middle, even if it feels like the middle is elusive or is closer to the older generations' side.

### **Expectations of leaders**

Respecting older adults does not translate into uncritical respect for leaders and those in power. Elizabeth pointedly asks whether we respect leaders and powers too much: "Often our mindset is that we should be quiet and not step out of our place. Instead, we need to be a little more countercultural, and challenge people in power."

Official roles and titles alone do not garner respect among these young people. "I don't respect pastors simply because they are leaders in the church," Dona admits. "I respect them because they earnestly seek to listen, to pursue relationships, and to challenge the church to act." Others agree that the leaders they respect most are those who openly commit themselves to leadership for the good of the local community, beyond the walls of their own congregation.

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If this sounds like a lot to ask of leaders, it is. But if these young adults expect pastors to be role models and mentors, they do not expect them to be perfect. They know that being vulnerable and taking risks to challenge injustice involves making mistakes. Further, these young adults do not expect anything less of themselves and their peers: these are the very characteristics they aspire to embody.

In light of the fact that these young adults look up to leaders because they live out these values and not just because they carry the external trappings—the offices and titles—of leadership, we observe with guarded optimism signs that the church seems to be in a process of slow transfor-

mation, sometimes because of and sometimes in spite of current leadership. None of these conversation participants thought it helpful to mindlessly abandon leadership models that have served past generations well. Church and faith have always been organic and fluid and cannot be con-



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tained in institutions alone. In Isaiah's words, the kinds of leaders we need are "able to deal with tension and complexity," forging a way forward not only in the congregation but also in the community and with people who may never enter the doors of the church.

### **Church of the future**

Will the church continue into the future? Will the future include a church that is relevant for young adults and for the unchurched and the formerly churched? None of these young adults want to be a part of a church that seeks their presence only so that the church

can perpetuate itself. This "instrumental attitude" is a complete turn-off, according to Max. "Young people can sniff it out if they are just the token young adult on the committee."

But young adults also do not want to just take over and run things their own way. They want leadership midwifery, "guidance and encouragement for how to be actively involved," as Lynea puts it.

If the church is to survive, according to these young adults, it will be because it articulates a distinctly true and compelling vision for a meaningful life together in the world. These young adults do not expect or want older adults to articulate this vision for them; they are willing to invest in the process of discerning what a meaningful life together in the world looks like.

And this meaningful life does not appear to include certainty about a set of beliefs to the same degree for young adults as it did for their parents and grandparents. Isaiah reflects, "I hear from my peers that they don't feel like they belong in church because there's a minimum amount of orthodox belief you must buy into before you have a place. I am personally more likely to be part of a church that acknowledges my doubts and questions." "Critical and invested," is how Max identifies this posture:

we should spend less time arguing about rules, and more time exploring meaning and purpose.

Similarly, a relevant church is not primarily physical buildings and traditional institutions. “I hope that the church will be more a way of life and less a building, a budget, a membership list, or a hierarchy,” Hillary offers. “We should be able to know someone is a Christian because of how they live.”

The Mennonite World Conference gathering in Pennsylvania in 2015 was inspiring for Elizabeth. She longs for this kind of Christian community. She notes that outside the US, regardless of religious and political views, most people think climate change is a serious issue, because they are living it. At MWC 2015 people listened to each other with a shared faith and a shared cause.

### **Changing the question**

Is the church preparing young adults to be leaders? This question is not irrelevant, but it may not be the most important question. Perhaps the more important question is, Are we preparing the church for young adult leaders? The question is not only about leadership; it is also about followership.

The kind of church young adults are poised to take leadership in does not yet exist. Are we ready to release our understandings of what it means to be church—understandings that may have served us well for the past fifty years but may not serve us well for the next fifty years—so that young adults may lead it with passion and integrity? Those who care about fostering young adult leaders need to allow them to mold the church rather than expecting them to be molded into the image of leaders of a church of a bygone era.

### **About the authors**

Isaiah Friesen graduated from Goshen (IN) College with a double major in Spanish and peace, justice, and conflict studies. Now in Saint Paul, Minnesota, he continues to learn about contextualized Christian ministry and community at intersections with racial, environmental, and economic justice. Andy Brubacher Kaethler is associate professor of faith formation and culture at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He has two young adult daughters whom he hopes will continue to find a home in a church that welcomes and fosters their leadership gifts. Andy and Isaiah co-wrote this article after convening and facilitating the group conversation.