

Let's do this church thing together

Liz Weber

I was raised in the Mennonite church. I attended the same church from birth until my mid-twenties. During that time I did all the things a good churchgoer does: I attended Sunday school, first as an infant with my parents and then on my own from preschool to youth. I went to church potlucks and ate the wonderful home-cooked food. After church I raced my friends over and under the pews as we waited for our parents to finish talking. I attended every youth event I could. And I was baptized in my teens. I was your typical church kid.

When I went off to university, I—unlike many others my age—stayed connected to my home church. It helped that I was only a thirty-minute drive away. During my time at university and for a few years after, I remained quite active in my congregation, coordinating and teaching children's Sunday school, being a youth sponsor, partaking in many inter-generational mission trips, and serving on the vacation Bible school planning committee. These were all activities that I enjoyed. I poured a lot of time, energy, and emotion into them. They are what kept me excited about church and wanting to be a part of it. But even these couldn't stop me from leaving.

The young adult thing?

A couple of years ago I left the congregation I grew up in. I didn't leave because I think the church is irrelevant, unimportant, anti-science, fails to adapt, or for any of the many other reasons people have come up with to explain why young adults are leaving the church. I left because I was being put in a box labelled "young adult" and I wanted to get out. I wanted out of the predefined idea people had of me that didn't allow me to be me.

After leaving the congregation I grew up in, I dreaded conversations in which people would ask which church I was attending. These probably cropped up more for me than for most people, because I worked in a church organization. I dreaded this question not because I didn't have an answer but because when I did answer with a general response about being between churches, people would look at me and say, "Ohhh, you're doing the young adult thing." Again, I was being put in the predefined box as one of those "young adults." My situation was being likened to that


of many others who were thought to have a similar experience but who in reality are all vastly different.

The adult thing.

Although I didn't like the phrase, it did get me to think more about why I left the church. As a result, I came up with a response that has helped generate some discussion on the topic. Now when people characterize me as doing the "young adult thing," I'll respond with, "Sure, but if you're going to recognize what I do as the young adult thing, then you have to recognize that it is because others have done the adult thing." This response usually catches people off-guard and makes them pause and then ask what I mean. The initial exchange opens up an interesting conversation around the role that adults can play in helping young adults feel part of the church.

I realize that by using the phrase "the adult thing," I am doing what I say I don't like and putting adults in a predefined box based on their age and on the experiences I've had with a select group of them. But I use this phrase to make a point and generate some discussion.

What exactly do I mean when I accuse them of doing "the adult thing"? I'm referring not just to one thing that is being done by adults but



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rather to a number of things that have created experiences that pushed me (and likely others) from the church. Adults often lament that young adults aren't in the church, yet the adults aren't creating a space for young adults to be who they are. (By "adult," I mean mainly people forty years old and older; these are the ones most of my experiences have been with.)

Let me out of the box

Adults want young adults to participate in what is happening at church, but they are terrible at knowing how to engage

with us. If there is a young adult in the room who hasn't said anything, the go-to question tends to be "Tell us, what do young adults think?" This is a question that should never be asked. I find it to be segregating, degrading, and impersonal. It segregates because it singles out a certain

age group and categorizes them as all the same, which we are not. It is degrading because it asks for an opinion based solely on age, a trait that one has no control over. And it is impersonal because it asks for a generalized opinion rather than an individual's opinion. No one asks people for their "middle-aged" or "senior" opinion on things; in fact, people of those age groups would likely be offended if that did happen. If you want to hear from me, ask me for *my* opinion. And when I give it to you, be sure to listen, truly listen, even if you don't agree.

When I would share my "young adult" opinion (or what others thought it to be), people would listen, hear what I had to say, and affirm

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it. When I'd share my personal opinion, I never felt truly heard, especially if I was questioning something or showing any sign of faith-related doubt. Often others would respond in a somewhat joking way, saying, "You were raised in the church, you should know."

Admit that you sometimes don't have an answer

Or sometimes my questions were labelled as unimportant or answered in a way that indicated that the responder didn't know the answer but was afraid to admit it. Why are we, adults young and old, so afraid of not knowing the

answer and of being wrong? One of the reasons I love working with kids is because if I don't know the answer to something, I feel fine saying "I don't know" and they accept it. Mind you, I usually follow up my "I don't know" with a "But let's try to figure this out together."

Doing something together means that we have to find a way to talk with each other. When there are few young adults in a congregation, it can be easy to talk *about* them: why they've left, what they're up to, how to bring them back. But when young adults are actually in a congregation, older adults seem to struggle to know what to say *to* them, aside from the inevitable "What do young adults think?" question. We are not a foreign species who speak a different language. We are human beings, looking for relationships with other human beings.

Take the time to talk *to* me

If you want me to stick around and participate, then take the time to ask me about me—who I am, where I come from, what I do, etc. Stick with the basics to start with, and eventually we may find something we have in common that we can go deeper with. And don't wait for me to make the first move. If I am new to your congregation, then I likely feel that I did my part by coming in the doors and staying for the service. If you've never had to do that on your own, you don't realize how terrifying it can be. Come and say hi and introduce yourself. Engage me in a conversation, no matter how short or random it may be. This effort will make a world of difference.

When I talk with others about what I mean when I say “the adult thing,” I find it amazing that so many admit to having asked for “the young adult” opinion. They tell me that they have assumed that those who grew up in the church know everything. They admit that they are afraid to say “I don't know.” I am okay with their responses. Just having the conversation with them gives me greater hope for the church, hope that someday age won't be such a defining factor and that relationships will be more real and authentic.

So stop putting me in a box, listen to what I have to say, talk *to* me rather than *about* me, and don't be afraid to say “I don't know.” Rather than doing the young adult thing or the adult thing, let's do this church thing together.

About the author

Liz Weber is hopeful for the church in the way that hockey fans in Ontario are hopeful for the Toronto Maple Leafs: they hope their team will do great, even though it continues to disappoint. Part of her hope comes from having worked at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, where she got to hear many stories of amazing things churches are doing.