


Gifts and challenges for young adults in the global church

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The global character of the church has been central to my life experience, and it continues to be relevant, now that I am a young adult. With an awareness of the church's global character come important gifts and challenges for young adults. One of the most important gifts is a widespread and deeply felt desire to serve others in a context of support by a caring community. Our service enables young adults to be connected with the church around the world. This gift also comes with challenges—specifically, the challenge of not finding a role when we return to our home congregations. In what follows, I will explore this gift and the challenges that go with it.

Gifts of service in the global church

I was born in Colombia and moved to Ecuador at age eight, when my parents began to work with Mennonite Mission Network. Some of my most formative experiences during those ten years when I was a young



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girl and then an adolescent came from seeing the work done through Quito Mennonite Church. The church was a hub for serving the food, health, and housing needs of a rapidly growing Colombian refugee population. We were also involved in serving the needs of children and youth from marginalized neighborhoods through a peace education program, and serving the needs of members of the congregation through church relationships and pastoral care.

Those who were engaging in this type of work were mainly people from Ecuador and Colombia, and they also included some service workers from the United States.

Having such service work modeled for me for so many years influenced steps I took as a young adult. After completing my university edu-

cation in social work and sociology, I decided to do a year of intentional voluntary service work. Out of the many agencies geared to those who are fresh out of college, it was the Mennonite Voluntary Service program that drew me. I was attracted to a program that not only provided participants with a voluntary service experience that stressed making peace by doing justice but also added to this experience a church community of local support.

I was not alone in my search for an experience of this kind. In their desire to serve others and be part of a church community, five other young adults in my service unit in Chicago saw MVS as the best fit. In addition to me, our unit included people from the West, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the United States. The work we did on the south side of Chicago included mentoring middle school students; teaching English to first-generation immigrants; leading nutrition workshops for children, youth, and adults; and assisting a Latino alliance organization in social media advocacy.

Throughout the service experience, my unit was supported by a local church. As a young adult, I felt safe and supported by this church community in doing service work. Even though the environment was new to me and the others in the unit, community care and support made our work easier. People from the congregation invited us to meals and movie nights, to attend rallies for social justice, and to many more activities that demonstrated that a community was taking care of us and standing with us.

When I look at my social circles now, I see that this type of service experience isn't unique to me. Many other young adults I know from churches in Ecuador, Colombia, and the United States are also engaging in service in these countries or in countries much different from their own. In my immediate network of friends are people doing service work in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Canada, and Rwanda through programs such as Mennonite Central Committee's International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) and Serving and Learning Together (SALT) that are promoted and supported by the global Mennonite church. Their work bears witness that young adults are invested in social service and that we bring this gift to the global church.

Challenges of (re)integration into a local church

Now, after recognizing the gifts we bring to the church, it is also important to address the challenges of being a young adult in the global church. We are following the example of Christ in serving others through doing peace

with justice in a variety of contexts in the world, but what is our role in the church? What happens to us when we are not in a distinct service role through a program of the church? What happens with us when we come back to be part of a congregation? The answer to these questions, in my experience, is: not much.

The times when I have seen young adults in meaningful and active roles in the church—roles from the core, not the periphery—are few. This is especially true of those who are unmarried and without children. Sure, we are invited to community meals, to attend worship, or (if it exists) to join a Sunday school class or activity for young adults, but that is the extent of our role in the church. I am confident that we have more than our peripheral participation to offer the church.

How can the global church invest in its young adults?

How can the global church invest in providing ways for young adults to have roles in leadership, in discernment processes, and in decision-making circles that continuously shape the life of the church? I hope this question is taken seriously and that local congregations can find the approaches that work best in their contexts.

In the churches that I have belonged to, mentorship and guided co-leadership could work well. For example, people who have been in church leadership roles could mentor young adults and invite them to co-lead in the spaces where they embody those roles. Young adults could also be invited to participate in a variety of processes of discernment and decision-making, so we can learn to exercise muscles of community learning and contribute with and from our perspective.

I recognize that a challenge in the contexts I have known is that there are not too many young adults participating in congregational life, which makes it

difficult to get those who remain involved in the life of the church. But there are young adults who are invested in the church, and the church needs to be invested in them. Maybe the added voice and input of young adults from the core will draw other young adults to the church. Or maybe not, but that is no reason not to include young adults' perspectives.

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Many young adults are engaging in service work. They are being sent to and received in church communities around the world. We are clearly still a part of the body, and this fact needs to be reflected in representation in core leadership, discernment, and decision-making circles of our churches. In this way, the gifts that young adults bring can shape the life of the global church from within and provide new perspectives for addressing the challenges facing the church.

About the author

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