

## **Groundbreaking Research on Churches which are Growing Young Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church\***

In our post-Christian culture where many churches are aging and/or in decline, you might wonder, **“What’s the secret of churches that are bucking the trend and engaging young people well?”** The researchers wondered the same thing, which is what kicked off this four-year study in the first place. Like them, you might be surprised not only by what these churches do, but even more by what they don’t do.

While many U.S. churches are losing members and vitality, others are bucking that trend by connecting with, serving, attracting and engaging young people and their families. Instead of aging, these churches are “growing young.” But, young people are not flocking to such churches for the music, coffee, or “cool quotient.”

What’s indisputable about these churches that are living this dream? **They’re doing it on purpose.**

They didn’t stumble upon success with young people. They’re making intentional decisions every day through relationships, emails, budgets, sermons, opportunities to learn and serve, interest and involvement in their lives outside of church and meetings to include, love and equip young people and their families. **And young people keep coming back! Why?**

Research by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin (Fuller Youth Institute) shows that reaching young people *doesn’t* boil down to hyper-entertaining programs, trendy locations, or other attractions. **What matter most are relationships, empathy, community, equipping, embodied love and faith in Jesus.** “Thanks to these remarkable congregations, tens of thousands of young people can’t stop talking about how “known” they feel in their church and how, no matter what happens, their church feels like “home,” the authors say. As one young churchgoer puts it: “Our whole church treats us like we are the church of *today*, not just the church of the future.”

A 100-member rural South Dakota Reformed church, shrinking, graying and wondering if they had a future, has become so hospitable to teenagers and young adults that **being at church is now the highlight of their week.** “I feel like I have 20 grandparents at my church.” It began with Vonda (a teacher) and a small team and the church is growing!

The *Growing Young* research focuses on 6 core commitments /strategies these dynamic congregations hold in common. Note they are all verbs!

**1. Unlock Keychain Leadership: Keychain leaders equip and empower.** Leaders entrust others with access and authority, equipping and empowering *all* generations, including teens/emerging adults to help influence and shape a church, present and future.

**2. Empathize with Today’s Young People:** Step into their shoes, build open, caring relationships with them as they grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and purpose; as they experience “systemic abandonment” due to divorce and the self-absorbed adults around them; and as they act out a desire for connection including social media.

**3. Take Jesus’ Message Seriously:** all ages welcome youth/young people and families into and *embody* a Jesus-centered community and way of life. Younger people want to be listened to, engaged, taught and *challenged* to go deeper in Christian faith by churches inspiring them to reflect and act. This

inspiration flows from leaders who model authenticity, humility and extend the *challenge* of following Christ not from a place of superiority or power, but out of an invitation to *pursue* the way of Jesus *together*. One young interviewee said, "The goal for our church is not really effectiveness with young people, but serving and following Jesus. And young people like me are attracted to churches that want to do that." [Note the difference between Jesus focus and an institutional/church focus.]

**4. Fuel a Warm Community:** "Warm is the new cool" in these congregations, where authenticity triumphs over worship style or a multitude of programs. Young people who participated in the research praised their churches for "warm" attributes, such as welcoming, belonging, accepting, hospitable, and caring.

**5. Prioritize Young People (and Families) Everywhere:** These churches' disproportionate prioritization of young people and families breathed life into ALL ages and the whole church. As one pastor put it, "Everyone rises when you focus on young people." Involving young people in conversations, in worship, in every ministry, in mission has allowed these churches to thrive with authenticity and intergenerational relationships..

**6. Be the Best Neighbors:** In these churches, the church community accepts the difficult task of offering young people thoughtful examples, opportunities, a path to love neighbors well. They encourage and provide varied missional opportunities for teens, emerging adults and families to find their calling, interact with the culture, and embody Christ locally and globally *together*.

"What's irresistible about *Growing Young* is that it's not primarily about age--it's about hope. Through story after compelling story, the authors demonstrate how *prioritizing the young* is a church-changing strategy and how *pursuing Jesus* by 'growing young' fundamentally changes the ways congregations interact with their communities and their leaders, as well as with youth and adults. With refreshing candor, this book blows the sanctuary doors open thanks to its insistence on following Christ in a way that prioritizes listening, empathy, and care for *all* young people and families, not just the Christian ones! This book is for the church. At last."

**Kenda Creasy Dean**, Princeton Seminary, Professor, Pastor, Author *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church; Practicing Passion...*

Yellowstone Presbytery and the Goodriches are prioritizing, and want to support and equip our congregations to explore and experiment living out:

- *Being Transformed & Mobilized: Loved & Called – Gifted – Equipped – Sent to join Christ in his mission*. DVD's of this congregational training workshop February 2017 by Dr. Stan Ott have been sent to each church
- *Growing Young*

**\**Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church***, by Kara, Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin of the Fuller Youth Institute. 2016  
*Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generation into the Family of Faith*, Chap Clark, ed

@ **churchesgrowingyoung.com** find resources such as a church assessment, interviews, how to talk to young people, book study guide, prayer guide, video clips & more.

@<http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/posts> Resources for parents, church leaders

Rev. Kathy Goodrich, May 2017