

Is the Era of Age Segmentation Over? An Interview with Dr. Kara Powell

A researcher argues that the future of youth ministry will require bringing the generations together.

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The statistics are grim. Rainer Research estimates that 70 percent of young people leave the church by age 22. Barna Group argues that the figure increases to 80 percent by age 30. The Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest denomination, recently observed that growth in their churches is failing to keep up with the birth rate. Taken together, these findings suggest a startling fact: not only are we failing to attract younger worshippers, we're not holding on to the ones we have.

As executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary and a former youth pastor, Kara Powell has her eyes on the youth drop out trend. She is currently in the midst of a three-year College Transition Project (Lilly endowment), a study that involves over 400 youth group graduates and is focused on understanding how parents, churches, and youth ministries can set students on a trajectory of lifelong faith and service. Though research is ongoing, it is already revealing a promising pattern: youth involved in intergenerational relationships in church are showing promise for stronger faith in high school and beyond.

Leadership editors Marshall Shelley and Brandon O'Brien spoke with Kara about her research and what it means for the local church.

Where did the now popular age-segmented paradigm of youth ministry come from?

In the 1940s and post World War II, there was a real burst in parachurch organizations focused on ministry to teenagers and young adults, such as Young Life, InterVarsity, and Youth for Christ. In many ways, they led the way for the church in realizing that we need to focus on specialized discipleship and teaching for teenagers.

Why did the church adopt this age-segmented model of ministry?

Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, liked to say, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the gospel." So he developed some amazingly creative models of youth ministry that took root and bore fruit. I think a lot of churches saw the success of groups like Young Life and started thinking, If the parachurch folks are tailoring their ministry toward young people's interests, then we can—and probably should—too.

What were the benefits of that move?

The church recognized that teenagers are going through specific issues and have specific concerns. As one youth worker told me, "It's hard for a 16 year old to talk about masturbation with grandma in the room."

What other issues do teens face that make student ministry important?

There is a strong link between kids staying in church and their involvement in intergenerational relationships and worship.

A couple of important things are going on during adolescence.

First, teens are in a quest to figure out their identity. They tend to try on different identities in different spheres, which leaves them feeling like they live somewhat fragmented lives—they're one person on the soccer field,

another person in school, another person on Facebook, and still another person at church and at home.

Autonomy is a second major focus of an adolescent's quest. "How do I make decisions apart from my parents?"

The third is significance. So teens are asking, "Who am I? Where do I fit in? What difference does my life make?" In a sense, those issues are relevant to all ages, but the flame is turned up under those questions during adolescence.

Why did you begin to rethink this common, age-focused paradigm?

We realized in the 1940s that we were not offering teens enough focused attention. So what did we do? We started offering them too much. All of a sudden churches had adult pastors and youth pastors, adult worship teams and youth worship teams, adult mission trips and youth mission trips. And there's a place for that. But we've ended up segregating—and I use that word intentionally—our kids from the rest of the church. Now we tend to think that we can outsource the care of our kids to designated experts, the youth and children's workers.

On my dad's side of the family, there were too many of us to fit in one room or around one table at family gatherings. So we adopted the two table system. The adult table had pleasant conversation, while the kids' table usually degenerated into a Jell-O snorting contest. Theoretically we were having the same meal; but we were having two very, very different experiences. That's what we've done in churches today.

What is the long-term impact of segregating teens?

A lot of kids aren't going to both youth group and church on Sundays; they're just going to youth group. As a result, graduates are telling us that they don't know how to find a church. After years at the kids' table, they know what youth group is, but they don't know what church is.

There are a lot of statistics regarding what happens to high school seniors when they graduate from a youth group. As I've looked at the research, my best estimate is that between 40 and 50 percent of seniors from youth groups really struggle to continue in their faith and connect with a faith community after graduation.

What can churches do to increase the likelihood that our kids stay in church after they graduate?

I think the future of youth ministry is intergenerational youth ministry.

At this point in our research, we've found that one thing churches can do that really makes a difference is getting kids actively involved in the life of the church before they graduate.

There is a strong link between kids staying in church after they graduate and their involvement in intergenerational relationships and worship. It's important, we're finding, to get beyond a token youth Sunday and start thinking about how to involve kids as ushers and greeters and readers and musicians in our services.

We're also finding a relationship between teenagers serving younger kids and their faith maturity when they graduate from high school. Teens should not only be the objects of ministry; they need to be the subjects of ministry as well. It's the 16 year old that has relationships with 66 year olds and 6 year olds who is more likely to stay involved in a faith community after she graduates.

Let's start with worship. What does intergenerational worship look like?

First, it needs to be theologically driven. This is far beyond any kind of politically correct appreciation of diversity that includes age diversity. God intends for community to be diverse in race, gender, and age. First and foremost, then, a church needs to be committed to being a hub where 16 year olds can have real relationships not just with peers but with 36 year olds and 66 year olds.

How that works out in practice will be different in every church. Some churches try to find a compromise worship style that nobody hates but nobody loves and everybody kind of tolerates. Other churches are doing more of a hodgepodge, where there will be a few songs that sound like youth songs and then there will be a hymn. At the root, being intentionally intergenerational means that churches need to be aware of and flexible about things that can be alienating to kids.

The good news is that with the recovery of ancient practices, spiritual disciplines, and kids' growing interest in tradition, there's a lot more common ground for adults and kids than in the past. And we need to celebrate that. I'm not saying that a 13 year old needs to be the pastor's target audience. But a pastor can do things that will engage a teenager. Using drama and video and telling stories, for example. I have sat through hundreds of sermons, and I watch the teenagers, and when they pay the most attention is almost always when the pastor is telling stories.

Youth can also be involved in the service itself by sharing testimonies and leading worship. One thing we're also doing in our church, which I love, is moving toward having families as greeters instead of just individuals. Kids can hand out stickers to other kids to make them feel welcome.

This could have major implications for church programming.

One youth pastor shared with me that he started questioning the purpose of having both a Sunday and Wednesday meeting for the youth group. They were doing basically the same things twice a week: fellowship, worship, and teaching. At the same time, the kids were disengaged from the wider church. None of them were going to a worship service on Sunday. They were just going to youth group.

So this youth pastor canceled Sunday youth group. Now kids show up on Wednesday for youth group, but on Sunday they are part of the larger church. They serve Communion and are ushers and greeters, and now and then they have roles in the sermon. The youth pastor said, *"We knew it was going to be great for the kids; we had no idea how great it was going to be for the church."*

It sounds like you have high expectations of what youth can and will do.

Teenagers are up to the challenge. In our college transition project, we asked high school seniors what they want more of in youth group. Time for deep conversation ranked highest. Games ranked last. That's one example of how we're currently undershooting. Tenth graders study Shakespeare. What are we offering them at church? Nothing comparable to Shakespeare.

How else can churches foster intergenerational relationships?

There's a standard ratio in youth ministry: one adult for every five kids. My colleague here at Fuller, Chap Clark, says we need to reverse the ratio and strive for having five adults build into one kid.

When I say that to youth workers or pastors, they tense up. I'm not talking about five Bible study leaders or five small group leaders per teenager. I'm talking about five adults who care enough about a kid that they learn her

name, ask her on Sunday how they can be praying for her, and then the following Sunday ask her, "How did it go with that science test?" Our study shows that even these baby step connections can make a real difference.

So relationships are as important as worship styles?

More important. And I think one of the real advantages of being a smaller church is that there is a lot more potential for intergenerational relationships and longer lasting faith. It's a general rule that the bigger the church the more segmented the age groups and generations are from each other. So I look at a church of a hundred and think, Man, what potential there is to have meaningful relationships.

Does that mean larger churches are stuck with age-segregated programs?

No. We're seeing real potential for intergenerational relationships with justice and service projects, too. There's richness in getting folks from the youth group and adult Sunday school classes, for example, serving together. Have the youth ministry do a trip with the senior adult class. Lots of churches have told us that that's been really powerful.

I don't meet many adults who want nothing to do with kids, but I meet a lot of adults who are intimidated by teenagers and don't know how to talk with them. Serving together levels the ground. When we've got a hammer in one hand and a paintbrush in the other, all of a sudden we've created a shared experience, and age is irrelevant.

How is this different from traditional mentoring?

Traditional mentoring typically focuses on kids in whom we see some kind of potential, the best and brightest. The danger with focusing on the best and brightest is it's not good for anyone, because it only reinforces an identity based on achievement and performance for the kids who are good at performing. For those who aren't good at performing, it's just one more way that they're being judged and found failing. Some kids may not be verbally oriented, but they show mercy in amazing ways or they have great cross-cultural sensitivity. And there are adults who feel called to step into relationships with those kids.

If adults in a church caught a vision that every kid needs to have their name known by five adults in the church, then an adult who's interested in computers can connect with a teen who is interested in computers. And it's through things like service that we get to know each other and can follow up later to deepen the relationship.

What is the parents' role in this intergenerational vision?

Many parents ask their children about their church experience. How was church today? What did you learn? What difference do you think it makes at school? "Church was okay," "not much," and "nothing" are the kinds of responses you tend to get from your teenagers.

But one of our more interesting findings is that it's also very important for parents to share about their own spiritual journeys with kids. Teenagers don't know how their parents came to know Jesus. During our family devotions on Sundays, we used to go around the table and have our kids share about what they learned in church. Then we'd look at a Scripture passage and pray together. Now, because of our research, we have the kids share first. Then my husband and I share what our senior pastor talked about in the service. We want our kids to hear about our faith and our spiritual journeys and what we're reading and what we're praying about.

What is the pastor's role?

The pastor is crucial. I'm a big believer in the priesthood of all believers. Yet the reality is that the behavior and attitudes of the pastor ultimately set the course for the church.

One youth worker told me that in his large church, the pastor often asks the youth pastor on Monday something like, "I met a girl who plays violin. I don't remember her first name, but I think she goes to such-and-such middle school. Can you give me her e-mail address?" The youth pastor gives him her e-mail address, and he e-mails the girl that he met on Sunday after church. *That senior pastor has a vision for intergenerational ministry and hasn't outsourced it.*

What are some of the obstacles to this sort of ministry?

A lot of youth workers fear resistance from other church leaders, parents, and even the kids themselves.

What advice would you give youth pastors who are eager but fearful?

First, I'd tell them that there's research that backs up the effectiveness of this type of ministry. And parents are very open to research.

Second, I tell them the change process often starts small. Look for a subgroup of parents and kids who will embrace this and can help you bring changes into your youth ministry. I'm a big believer in the axiom that people support what they create. So get people involved from the very beginning.

Then experiment and tell people, "We're going to try this, and if it doesn't work, that's okay." Continue to explain why you're making the changes. If the congregation isn't fully onboard, it may be because it hasn't really been explained to them.

Our church has held a couple of donut focus groups with youth group kids who had graduated. And we asked, "What are the most important things that contributed to your faith? What do you wish we did more of?" Any church can ask these questions of current kids, kids who have graduated, and parents, and learn a whole lot about what God is doing and maybe what's hindering what God wants to do.

Give us an example of an experiment you've tried recently.

Last fall my church did a Sunday school class for six weeks where we invited a handful of high school juniors and seniors to meet with senior adults to discuss the theme of Christ and culture. One of the most meaningful moments was toward the end of the series when the kids brought in examples of how they were trying to influence culture. One student brought in a guitar and played a song he had written. A girl who wants to be a fashion designer brought in sketches of her clothes. The senior adults oohed and aahed over what the kids had done. And then they had a real honest dialogue about how their faith intersects with the way they're trying to influence culture. We had 76 year olds and 17 year olds talking to each other for six Sundays in a row.

Where is the generation gap widest today?

Technology. I'm 38, and I'm on Facebook everyday, and I text and all that; but I still feel like a novice compared to the 13 year olds in our youth ministry.

A question we're starting to address at Fuller is how technology is changing the way kids deal with questions of identity and autonomy. Kids are going to sleep with their cell phone on their pillow so they don't miss that next text. There are kids I know pretty well, but on Facebook they take on a different persona and are experimenting

with different identities.

Technology today is a lot like a driver's license was for the previous generation. When I got my driver's license, all of a sudden I could do things with my friends and have relationships that I couldn't without my driver's license. And cell phones do that for kids today.

What is the upside of young people's familiarity with technology?

I think technology is a way that kids can lead in our churches. There are some interesting stories these days about kids who are expressing themselves more through technology and even being very entrepreneurial. Maybe that's the way to involve that 14 year old by saying, "Hey, we want to start a social networking group. How do you think we should go about it? What's the difference on Facebook between a group and a page?" That generation gap can be redeemed for kids if there are adults willing to explore the possibilities with them.

How can you reassure adults who are worried about changing their church's approach to teen ministry?

I remember what a privilege it was to be invited to the adult table. Adults underestimate how much kids want to be with us. Kids are far more interested in talking to caring, trustworthy adults than we think they are.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What are ways I/we can know, listen, care and build relationships with children and youth of all ages a. in our congregations? b. in the spheres of influence where Christ sends me such as extended family, neighborhood, community, schools?
2. How might I/we see with the eyes of Christ, think with the mind of Christ and act differently to effectively make and nurture young disciples so we more effectively fulfill Christ's admonition to "let the little children come to me"?
3. List names and begin to pray for your congregation and yourself. Who might be 1 or 2 children or teens your are to get to know well, pray for, share about Christ with? Support and partner with the parents?
4. What are the questions, needs of parents and couples in our church, in our community – relational, practical? How might the Holy Spirit be leading us to explore reaching out, listening, caring, building relationships, supporting and equipping parents, sharing the Good News of who Jesus is and the difference He is making in our lives and families,? How can we more effectively nurture contagious, gutsy faith in adults, parents?
5. What comes to your mind as you reflect on this article?

For further articles, resources see - <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/> and <http://stickyfaith.org/>

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