

**Leading Young Adults (*When You Aren't One*)**  
**Misunderstanding Relevancy**  
Randy Jumper

Throughout my ministry, I've felt the pressure to be relevant. When I began working with young adults, one of the most popular ministry resources was titled *Relevant* magazine. When I was a young adult, it was easier to connect with young adults. After all, I was a young adult. I got pop culture references naturally. I already matched clothing styles. Cultural relevancy wasn't something I pursued.

Then one night it happened. Preaching a message, I used an illustration from a popular sitcom from when I was a teenager. Few, if any, in the crowd got the reference. It bombed. After service, a couple of leaders admitted they'd never seen or heard of the show. I was officially "old."

This, and a couple other moments, sent me into a bit of a panic. I was afraid I was losing my ability to speak into the lives of young adults. This fear was, in some ways, a byproduct of my prior bias. I had argued young adults needed fellow young adults to reach them. Since I was a young adult, I was better equipped to reach my generation. What was I supposed to do now that I wasn't a young adult?

Sadly, I overcompensated. I tried to connect through cultural shortcuts. I chased being *like* young adults rather than leading them. I hope I didn't waste too much time studying cultural trends rather than biblical truths.

Now, I'm *really* old. My wife and I have children who are young adults. I'm not alone in being concerned about age and ministry to young adults. Many older leaders question whether their age makes them irrelevant to young adults. This is simply not true.

Rather than losing ground, my wife and I find our influence in the lives of young adults is greater now than it was when we were in our twenties. How is this possible? Do we somehow recapture relevance? I'm not sure our age even has anything to do with keeping or losing relevance. Research supports this. A major study of young adults released in the book *Growing Young* said this,

While there is certainly some value in having young leaders who can connect with young people, it is not the whole story. When interviewed, participants from our study were asked why their church is effective with young people, only one in ten mentioned having younger leaders.<sup>1</sup>

When asked why they attend church, only 13 percent identified relevant leaders while 87 percent identified *authenticity* of leaders or other qualities.<sup>2</sup> Age and

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<sup>1</sup> Jake Mulder, Brad M. Griffin, Kara Powell, *Growing Young* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Mulder, Griffin, Powell, *Growing Young*, 61.

relevance are factors, but authentic leadership overcomes age differences. Let me say that again. You can be old and irrelevant, as long as you are an authentic leader.

**Love trumps relevance.  
Respect beats trendy.  
Care conquers cool.  
Every time.**

If you aren't a young adult, I hope you get this one important takeaway: Jesus-like love, respect, and guidance are more important than anything else. You can do it. Authentic engagement bridges the chasm of distrust.

Rose, a young adult in our group, explained it to me this way, "I think that YAs do not necessarily need a church to think like them to attend, but need the love, respect and guidance that Jesus has modeled for us. He didn't always agree but respected them."

Saying "I love you," and meaning it, is imperative in young adult ministry. As you interact with young adults, express affirmation with relentless *patience*. Be a healer. Healers beat back voices of self-doubt and condemnation. Be a vocal champion, the loudest encourager, and an affirming friend.

Don't misunderstand me. You can become so separated from young adult culture that you aren't able to communicate with young adults. It is necessary to know their world and to be able to communicate in it. I still check out *Relevant* magazine. What I am saying is clothes, memes, and language are not enough. You'll have to do more.

Relevance is way more than knowing the hottest movies or shows. Relevance is way more than clothing styles or musicians. Relevance is about compassion and concern.

**Don't give up on your young adults.**

**Don't give up on yourself.**