

We Must Pass the Baton

A generation of Christian leaders is passing from the scene today. If the younger generation is to take their place, we must learn the art of mentoring.

Within the last several months the Christian community has lost several key generals: Derek Prince, Fuchsia Pickett, Kenneth Hagin Sr. and other giants of faith have passed from the scene. Their deaths prompted an important question: Who will take their place?

Like we would ask in a game of baseball, we must ask who has the better chance of putting the ball in play. Is it the seasoned veteran, who may be a little slower in reaction time but who has succeeded in this situation before? Or is it the rookie all-star who doesn't really know enough to realize the magnitude of the situation but is capable of advancing runners to home plate?

The answer isn't one or the other. The church needs both the experienced veteran and the rookie. We need teamwork!

Yet the problem remains: We have a generation gap in the church. Older Christians don't like the musical tastes and ministry styles of young believers. Many older leaders won't release the reins. Meanwhile younger Christians don't appreciate starchy church traditions. They want to launch out on their own and start something original.

There is constant friction between the old and the new, and between youthful zeal and aged wisdom. These tensions sometimes erupt into messy church splits.

As church leaders in our 30s, we struggle to find opportunity and credibility. Even though we now have marriages, children, home mortgages and , we are still considered “too young” to assume leadership roles. Why is this?

Since we were young teenagers (that was more than 15 years ago) we have given our lives to ministry and serving in the local church. Yet we feel frustrated because we are still teaching the college-and-career group or the youth group but aren't allowed to contribute to adult ministry.

We feel stifled and frustrated because we, as younger sons, are only conditionally viewed as co-laborers in ministry. For me personally (Matt), my pastor and mentor was progressive enough to ordain me (and three others) as elders when we were between the ages of 22 and 24—and he took some heat for that, something I greatly appreciate! The fact that he was criticized for his decision is illustrative of the generational gap in today's church.

In many churches younger leaders are sidelined even when they are in their 40s. The result? The younger ones go out on their own—and sometimes, because of an independent spirit, will end up hurting people.

We believe the church needs a new model of generational teamwork. This new model is called mentoring. Young men and woman need to come under the tutelage of leaders and be given real responsibility. It is only through biblical mentoring that we can effectively carry on the mission of the church from one generation to the next.

Running the Race Together

The apostle Paul used a sports analogy when he talked about discipleship. He said that we Christians are running a race—and he encouraged us to run in such a way as to win.

As runners on God's relay team, we are currently in a season that could be compared with the "exchange zone," the time when the baton is passed to the next runner. The purpose in any relay is to maximize the strength and ability of one runner to the point at which he is spent and has a need for someone else to carry the baton and continue the race.

In a true relay the exchange zone is a small space that only allows limited time for the baton to be passed. Early exchange results in disqualification from the race. Late exchange ends in the same disastrous results, and so does dropping the baton from a lack of focus, a risk for both the passer and the receiver.

When it is time to pass the baton to the next runner, focus must be intense. At the point of transfer, more ground is gained in less time if the team is good. Only in holding the baton too long does lost ground become unrecoverable. What one man can't finish alone he hands off to another who can complete the task.

In generational succession, unlike a true race, the previous runners keep running with the current baton holders. If a mentor slows down his work before properly discipling those who are following him, the work of Christ will be hindered and the ministry of the emerging generation will be slowed. Likewise, if the disciples do not keep the proper pace with the discipler they will find themselves empty handed, running a race they can't win.

Time for a Change

Even though it is true that God is the same yesterday, today and forever, He is also always advancing in new directions. And when He calls His church to advance into new territory, He requires His people to be open to change! This is why there is always tension between generations. The tension is God-ordained and we must be sensitive to it.

Advancing into new territory requires new ways of accomplishing the same goals. The old proverb "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" does not apply. Change must happen. But we do not have to have generational war to see those changes. God has a better way.

In 1950 a popular artist named Max Ernst said, "Significant changes in the arts formerly occurred every 300 years, whereas now they take place every 20 minutes." That statement was made 54 years ago.

If the world keeps shrinking and information transfer gets faster, then significant changes in culture could be occurring every five minutes. That's why older and younger Christians must learn to work as a team.

What one generation perceives to be cutting-edge and fast-paced the next generation views as antiquated. To be a transgenerational church, the lines between the generations and the distinctions between them must blend.

The kingdom of God must include those from every age category. How can we do this? After we learn to bridge the generational barriers that have been erected in the church, we must learn

to relate one to another. And that is where mentoring becomes a powerful strategy.

Mentoring is more than having disciples or spiritual sons and daughters. Jesus had hundreds of followers and disciples, yet it can be argued He mentored only 12 of them (it can even be convincingly argued that He intimately mentored only three of them).

Mentoring has been called one of the most effective forms of leadership development. In fact, it is one of three ways leadership experts have identified as ways to learn leadership: formal education; trial and error; active mentoring.

Since the Greek philosopher Mentor tutored Odysseus' son, the Greeks have considered mentoring to involve not only academic learning but also personal investment. It was a relationship as well as a method of instruction.

In the classic sense, mentoring involves two parties—the mentor and the protégé—who bring equal investment and passion to the relationship. This type of genuine mentoring was prophesied by the prophet Malachi, who spoke of a time when “‘He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers'” (Mal. 4:6, NKJV). It involves a relationship of mutual respect that requires equal risk for both parties.

The Bible is full of mentor-protégé models: Moses and Joshua, Mordecai and Esther, Elijah and Elisha, Eli and Samuel. In the New Testament, Paul and Timothy had a special mentoring relationship. Paul promoted and honored Timothy as a true son

in spite of his youth. Nothing will bridge the generational gap like this mentoring model found in Scripture. Biblical mentoring emphasizes relationship more than teaching. If we take the time to mentor, we will not have to worry about losing our ministry, position, authority or respect. On the contrary, those we mentor will maintain relationship with us and carry on a legacy.

Legacies are not something a protégé picks up accidentally. A legacy is given by a mentor through a relationship, and the protégé is proud to carry it! It is just as if he is carrying the baton in the last leg of a relay race.

Mentoring: A Lost Art

Many Christian leaders today talk about the importance of “spiritual fathering.” But often fathering implies hierarchical authority, and it can be misused to the point that it leads to spiritual abuse.

New believers need spiritual fathers. But when those believers are ready to be trained to be leaders themselves, they need mentors.

Mentoring transcends fathering in that the relationship takes on a more peer-level nature even though the principle of deference never ceases. When teenagers grow to become men and women, parenting is less of an issue and mentoring emerges as key.

When I became a man, my father stopped telling me what to do. I am not obligated to obey his house rules anymore, and if he comes to my house he is obligated to obey my house rules. As a

mature son, however, I choose to honor and obey his rules even when I disagree.

There is nothing more frustrating than to be treated like a teenager when you are an adult. Yet the church is full of protégés who are still being fathered as children instead of being mentored. This leads only to frustration.

Contrary to what some believe, younger Christian leaders who are emerging in leadership today do not want to take the reins out of the hands of their fathers. Though some may be overly ambitious for ministry opportunities, most of us prefer to remain under the tutelage of our mentors so we can glean everything possible from them.

In a recent roundtable discussion about this very topic, I was shocked to hear so many emerging leaders admit their need for fathering. They all listed this as their greatest need.

There has been such a lack of fathering both in the world and in the church that the sons are crying out for it. And more specifically, these young disciples long for the affirmation of spiritual parents.

In Jewish tradition, a father took his son before the priest and presented him on his 30th birthday. This was done so that the father could affirm his son and provide a rite of passage into manhood.

When Jesus turned 30, He presented Himself before the presiding priest of the valid ministry of that hour, John the Baptist. As He submitted Himself to the waters of baptism, the windows of heaven opened and God affirmed His Son before all

who were present. This act of affirmation released Jesus into ministry.

All of us have the same longing for this affirmation. Each person must sooner or later be released to step out on their own into the ministry God has called them to.

But this can't happen without the guidance of and eventual release by the fathers.

If you are an older leader in the church, it's time for you to find some disciples in their 20s and 30s and pour your life into them. They need your instruction and counsel, but they also need your support, friendship and encouragement.

Train them, let them experiment with responsibility and give them the freedom to make mistakes. And then release them on their own to fulfill God's plan for their lives.

If you are a younger leader, learn to be a protégé. Find a mentor and then shadow him or her. Protégés don't arrive on the scene overnight. They begin as servants, then become sons and daughters, and then become protégés without ever losing the values or the lessons of the previous stages.

Hear me, young men and young women: You must learn to "pay your dues." I have heard some great leaders in the church say, "I do not want to serve with anyone who does not have a few battle scars." As I grow in responsibility and influence I have come to embrace the same opinion.

I have had my teeth broken by the bridle of God, and I

probably will break a few more before I can get my spiritual dentures. I have not earned the rights that my spiritual fathers and mentors have earned, but I have earned a few things. I have earned the right to be mentored and to serve alongside my mentors as a co-laborer.

There are many 30-something leaders in the church who have earned the same rights and opportunities. But these rights and opportunities come only because of a willingness to serve.

Our prayer is that the church's generation gap will close as young and old alike learn to run this race God's way.

Matthew Kutz, 32, is a faculty member in the school of education and behavioral studies at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He also serves on the teaching staff of Covenant Centre International church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Jason King, 30, is a pastor at New Life Christian Center in Celina, Ohio.