

Workshop Title: Different needs and Diversity of Gifts: (*Scouting & Recruiting Potential Youth Leaders*)

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Recruiting and Discipling Young Leaders

(All ideas and suggestions outlined in this paper are informed from biblical reading, my own experience, Australian societal trends and academic literature.)

Jesus was the ultimate recruiter! It may seem strange to describe the ministry of God incarnate in such simple terms, but I reckon you would be hard pressed to find many others who could gather around them a group of young adults who would become so authentically passionate (some might say fanatical) for the Kingdom of God. Young adults who were willing to leave behind careers, homes, family and any hope of wealth in order to follow one man, who at their time of meeting didn't appear much more than a carpenter.

When we think about our youth ministry and the prayers and hopes we have for our own young people, I would hazard a guess that we would want the same. Young people who are willing to let go of everything, who are passionate, who seek justice, who want to invite others into the Kingdom of God, who will lead the next generation; young people who are willing to lay down their own daily life for the same carpenter that so many have followed before. So how did Jesus do it? How did Jesus recruit a bunch of misfit young adults and develop them into the foundation on which he would change the world. While I am sure that being God of all creation had much to do with it, there are a number of lessons that we can learn from how Jesus recruited and developed his disciples that can inform our search for and growth of young leaders today.

A major distinctive of Jesus' recruitment style was his ability to tap into the world of his potential followers. Jesus, God incarnate, knew and experienced these young people's context. He knew their culture, their hopes, their fears and their abilities and was willing to push and challenge these potential leaders. So in following Jesus' example, let's examine the world of our own potential leaders? What defines them? What are their hopes and fears? What are the markers and trends of this generation of young people, otherwise known as Generation Y, that are key to empowering them into meaningful leadership?

1. Me a leader?

Many young adults feel unsure about their faith and their capabilities to lead. While Generation Y is one of the most empowered generations that the world has seen, many young adults are characterised by uncertainty and low self-esteem. With major

life decisions being postponed, young adults in their 20s are struggling to discover their own identity.

In terms of faith, for many young adults who have grown up in the church, they have limited bible or theological understanding. With very little personal reading or bible study they often struggle to express their faith and beliefs clearly. These factors often lead young adults to doubt their ability to lead others in a spiritual context or leave them wondering if they have any right to lead others when they are so uncertain themselves.

2. Spiritual consumerism.

Today consumerism is, in many cases, defining our churches and the people who attend. This sense of consumerism is even more heightened in Generation Y and our soon to be leaders, Generation Z. Young adults are gauging their experiences on the benefits that they will gain and their own personal advancement. Even in the realm of volunteerism they are “demanding greater freedom of choice and contained assignments with tangible outcomes.”¹ Mark Sayers, Australian church futurist and cultural researcher, puts it best when discussing the effects of consumerism on our young leaders in church:

“I constantly hear from young leaders who have left church after spending years volunteering their time. They tell me that they feel ripped off, that they have given and gotten nothing back, they view discipleship not as self-sacrificing service but rather a consumer exchange, in which instant gratification is sought.”²

3. Spiritual but not religious

One of the defining characteristics of our post-modern era is a deep distrust of institutions. Truth is no longer considered the commodity of the collective but is found rather in the story of the individual. This means that for many young adults the institution of the church is no longer the primary place to discover the truths of life, instead it is often viewed with suspicion. For many, spiritual truth is found in individual experiences and stories. In this way, young adults often consider themselves spiritual rather than religious as they do not identify with any particular church or denomination, but seek a greater sense of meaning and worth bigger than themselves.

¹ Shields, P. *Young Volunteers: Recruitment Appeals and Other Marketing Considerations*. Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 21:139-159, 2009

² Sayers, M. *Sticking at it. Why Young Adults Leave the Church*.
www.marksayers.wordpress.com

4. Life of significance

While consumerism is a key feature of Generation Y, this is coupled with a deep desire for authenticity and meaning. Since childhood the media has bombarded this generation with carefully crafted advertising tactics and unrealistic claims. This has led to a group of people that, while spend up big, is searching for more than a catchy jingle and a great pair of jeans. They want their life to mean something, to impact the world for good, to be significant to others and to experience a faith that is authentic and truly life-changing. “They are anxious to define what life is worth living for, and find faith refreshing and without the baggage...”³ This young generation wants to be involved in a participatory faith, one in which they join with “God in his restoration project for the whole world.”⁴

5. Choices, choices everywhere

Choice anxiety has become a common term to describe the world that Generation Y lives in. More than any generation previous, this generation of young people is bombarded by possibilities and variety. While initially this ability to choose seems positive, it has led many young people to a certain choice paralysis, delaying major life decisions for fear of choosing incorrectly. “Christian young adults are stuck with a constant splinter in the mind, the never ending nagging feeling that they might have made the wrong decision.”⁵ Words like ‘calling’ and ‘discernment’ have become common place in Christian young adult circles as they seek, often desperately, to walk the unique path that God has called them to. Amongst all the choices, there is a sense that they are called to something counter-cultural, something higher, significant in obedience to God. Yet the weight or felt burden of this ‘calling’ can often prevent young people from moving forward.

6. Social creatures

The explosion of social media sites is a testament to the need for young people to feel connected. While these connections are often shallow they do point to the deeper need for young people to journey with others and feel involved in a wider network. Generation Y know that the road of life can be hard and so seek people who will walk this road with them. For many from broken or strained families it is their friends who fill the ‘gaps’ of community and provide stability and it is with their friends that they share many of life’s experiences. Lyons suggests that this young generation is “committed to experiencing life together, not just by saying nice words but by engaging

³ Pattenden, R. *Shopping for a Self: Finding Spirit in Liquid Times*. Eremos, No 112, 2010, 7

⁴ Lyons, G. *The Next Christians: How a new generation is restoring faith*. Doubleday, USA, 2010, 53

⁵ Sayers, M. *Sticking at it. Why Young Adults Leave the Church*. www.marksayers.wordpress.com

in the hard realities of loving, grieving, serving and suffering with one another.”⁶ While still intensely individualistic, community is vital to Generation Y.

So now that we understand a little more about the generation and societal trends our potential leaders come from, we again look to the example of Jesus as to what next. When it came to recruiting his disciples Jesus was proactive in calling them to follow him into Godly obedience, his vision and wider sense of calling for justice and mercy.

Just ask!

This may seem obvious, but in order to recruit high quality leaders a personal invitation is crucial. Jesus did not stand on the steps of the temple and give a shout out for all those who were willing to walk in his foot steps, rather he went to specific people and asked them to leave their old life behind and follow him. It was intensely personal. Group announcements might raise awareness and profile, but it is the individual discussions and invitations that will move young adults into leadership. Remember young people often don't see themselves as leaders or have confidence in their ability to guide others spiritually; a personal invitation lets them know that you see their ability and potential. As you survey your pool of potential leaders look for those who have influence, who have followers and who are already showing spiritual and leadership fruit. These may not be the obvious upfront leaders, but seek God's wisdom and take time out to discern who are the right people to approach.

Invite them into your vision.

In Mark 1:16 – 17 we get a glimpse of how Jesus approached two of his potential leaders. In one of his very first interactions with Andrew and Simon, Jesus profoundly shares his vision with these two young men in a simple sentence, “Come follow me... and I will make you fishers of men.” Right from the beginning Jesus invited these young leaders to play an active part in his vision, becoming fishers of men. This was no ten point plan, Jesus didn't map out all the details, but he had a strong clear goal for these young men and what they would achieve together. When you think about your ministry, what is your vision, who is the ministry for and how might people participate in this? Can you summarise your vision in one sentence in order to share it with others. When you ask people to consider leadership, invite them to share in this vision, allow them to have a voice, to add to the vision and to make it grow.

⁶ Lyons, G. *The Next Christians: How a new generation is restoring faith*. Doubleday, USA, 2010, 150

Make sure they are involved – up close and personal

Generation Y learns from and values experience; therefore involvement is crucial in recruiting and retaining young leaders. Young adults are no longer keen to sit on the bench and play the spectator, they recognise that they have abilities and want to use them. Jesus also saw this trait in his own disciples and wisely moved them through a process of modelling and teaching, to sending them out in pairs to ‘practice’ and experience what they were taught (Luke 9:1-6), to leaving them with guidance of the Holy Spirit to continue his work. Jesus knew that training was required and ongoing, yet had the disciples involved from the early stages, actively taking part in the ministry. Today “many young volunteers state that they want to volunteer where they can see what they do actually makes a difference. In short, they want their volunteer experiences to be up-close and personal.”⁷ When working with young leaders help them find a point of meaningful engagement and ownership, where they are active in the life of the ministry.

Get to know them – it is going to be a long journey

Jesus didn’t simply develop disciples; he built a community, a community that journeyed together through great joys, loss and fears and that was greater than any one person or follower. It has always seemed interesting to me that after Jesus was killed, rather than the running for asylum in different directions (which would have been the safest option), the disciples first instinct was to find each other (John 20:19). Jesus had lived in community with these young men for three years, and while they still had much to learn, Jesus had established a perfect example of what the church was to be. People growing, serving and supporting each other. We know that young adults enjoy and thrive in authentic relationship and community. Generation Y is wary of any continuing ministry or program where they are just one of the crowd, a number. Rather they want to be known, to share their lives and journey with others. It is important to develop your leadership team as a community accountable to each other, not simply a group of people who meet and work.

Encourage, encourage and then encourage some more.

Encouragement is more than just telling someone that they have done a good job, or giving them a pat on the back. Encouragement is also about recognizing and supporting the work of people and helping them to continue to grow. When we look at the example of Jesus, he was often not polite or politically correct when dealing with his disciples. His mode of encouragement was generally by telling the disciples what they ‘needed’ to hear, rather than what they ‘wanted’ to hear and then journeying with them

⁷ Shields, P. *Young Volunteers: Recruitment Appeals and Other Marketing Considerations*. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 21:139-159, 2009

to bring about understanding and resolution. By setting aside time and resources for young leaders and investing in strengthening their capabilities you are not only developing great leaders but encouraging them in the use of their gifts and talents.

Provide the space for creativity and failure.

It has long been known that young people are creative, with fresh ideas and new perspectives for dealing with age old issues. Allowing space in your program for young leaders to experiment with new ideas promotes valuable leadership experiences and possibilities you may not have thought achievable. However, with space for creativity also comes the necessary room for failure. While the disciples had many great achievements there was also many heart breaking failures. It is hard to believe that after spending three years journeying with the Son of God that Judas could have ended up so far from the truth and that Peter could deny ever knowing his very own Lord, Master and Saviour. And yet we see in John 21:15 -19, Jesus’ ability to reinstate Peter. While I’m sure Jesus’ questioning of Peter was painful, in this moment Jesus was able to instill in Peter the core of his vision and again invite Peter to be a part of it. Dealing with failure is never easy and with any new wonderful idea, success can’t be guaranteed, so when providing the space for young leaders to be creative, do so in a way that scaffolds their learning by modelling good leadership practices. Help them map out their ideas, meet regularly to evaluate their progress, assist them to get others on board and encourage them to take the next step. And if the new initiative or creative response falls flat, be there with the young person to walk through the pieces, help them to evaluate what went wrong, remind them of the vision and keep the space for creativity open.

When looking to recruit young leaders, like most instances in life, Jesus is the ultimate example. He was willing to invest in people, journey with them, share his vision and leave the work in their hands. Jesus was building the foundation for his sole-changing, church-building, world-shaking truth to reach all corners of the globe and he needed young people to help him do this. Jesus’ vision still carries on today, the simple sentence that he spoke to Andrew and Simon, “Come follow me... I will make you fishers of men” is still the vision that we respond to as we endeavour to empower young people into leadership. While there is no formula to ensuring excellent recruitment and leadership it is the example of Jesus and his ministry that propels us forward as we look for young leaders to take his message to all corners of the globe.

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