

Young Adults Presentation
Engaging in Ministry with Young Adults
Annual Conference 2014

Jake Waybright: We are excited for this opportunity that the bishop had asked for a space for some young adult voices to have space here at Annual Conference, and to share some things that are close to our heart and important to us. Part of it is, we talked about this, as the bishop kind of expressed his desire to have a space for young adult voices, one of the questions we asked was, what kind of voices, what questions do we want to ask; what is going to be most helpful; what might be helpful for our churches that would be outwardly focused; that would help us in our mission of making disciples.

What we thought about as we wrestled with this, was that one of the things that may be helpful, and that we are going to try to do this morning, is to look a little bit from the perspective of young adults, and a phenomenon that's been in the news a lot; that a lot of us talk about in our churches; and that is the idea that for many of us young adults are in a way that is different than previous generations, disconnecting from the church and, often times, from faith as well.

Today we are going to use some work from the Barna Group, from author David Kinnaman, from a book that he talked about, "You Lost Me," to kind of as a springboard to begin this conversation. We are going to start off today with Kris Sledge is going to share some statistics and set some context for what we see going on in our culture and our country about young adults. Then we are going to move into a time where we have four young adults, Anna Knox and myself, and Mindy Ferguson, and Luke Harbaugh, who are going to share a little bit and try to provide some stories and some understanding about some of the disconnections and the themes of disconnection that are brought up in the work of David Kinnaman and the Barna Group found.

Finally, we are going to end the time with a conversational thing led by Matt Lake, where he is going to facilitate some conversation – some deeper conversation – about this. And also start to think about what does this mean for us as a church, and what does it look like to create Christian communities that offer authentic community and relationships for young adults.

I think, and I hope, that in some small way, this might be helpful for us in our mission of making disciples, and a desire that many of us have to engage young adults. How many of you have that desire?

I remember the first church that I served, there was a woman there named Nancy. And Nancy was one of those people who was just one of the saints of the church. You know of these women, these men. When I got there she was in her early 70s. She was one of those women who when you met her, you could see that somehow God had done this great work within her over years of Scripture and prayer and study and worship. And she sort of glowed with the light and love of Christ. She had generosity and joy that bounded through her and poured out of her.

When I got to the congregation, she was already fairly sick. At the end of her life, I was visiting her often in the hospital. I would ask her the question that I always ask: What do you want me to pray for? What struck me was that she almost never really asked that I would pray for her health; she always said, you know, what I would really like you to pray for is my grandchildren, because I pray for them every day. And I worry about them sometimes. She talked to me in particular about one granddaughter who had been through some difficult things in her life, and had

completely disconnected from faith and the church. She said, I pray so desperately every day for her that she might have the faith I have.

When I did Nancy's funeral, I had the opportunity to sit with the family. As I sat with the family, they shared and they talked about Nancy's faith and how it exuded out of her, and the power of it. During that time I had the opportunity to share with the family what Nancy had shared with me, and her hope for them that they not only remember her faith, but they might actually have the faith that had sustained her and given her life.

To my surprise, maybe it was a work of God and the prayers of Nancy and a church that was willing to reach out and make connections with all people, about two months later, this granddaughter who she had talked about showed up in the pew with her boyfriend and with a daughter. And to my surprise, she showed up the next week, and the week after that, and the week after that. Six months after the funeral for Nancy, I had the great privilege, one of the most powerful moments of my ministry, of standing up in front of the church beside her granddaughter, who was standing up to once again recommit herself to Christ and the church – to become part of the church – to stand beside the boyfriend, then fiancé, who had never made a public profession of Christ, and stood up for the first time to be baptized and profess his faith in Christ, and to hold in my arms her great granddaughter, and to baptize her into the faith as well.

As we begin and move into this session, what I want you to hear and to think about, we are going to talk about statistics in a moment. We are going to talk about this phenomenon of young adults disconnecting from church and the faith. But at the heart of this, is an issue about our children, our grandchildren, and for those of us who are up here, our peers. We long that they would just no know about our faith, but that they might come to have a faith of their own.

As we begin to talk about that, we are going to start by looking at this phenomenon of young adults, and begin by looking at a video that comes from David Kinnaman, as he talks about this phenomenon of how the church has so often lost young adults.

Kris Sledge: I am a current seminary student at Wesley Theological Seminary. I have the honor of being on staff at Fishing Creek Salem UMC, working with young adults. A few weeks ago I had the honor of participating in a local high school baccalaureate service. As I stood up sharing my thoughts with the up and coming high school graduates, I had this deep fear rise up in me. I had the fear and the realization that for the very first time, or for another time, that the majority of these graduates, the majority of these high school graduates, will never walk into a church again. A bold claim, but a realistic one.

Over the past eighteen months I have had the honor of working with young adults as a director of young adult ministries. And through a plethora of conversations that I have had with these young adults, I have realized that there is a deep disconnect between young adults and faith communities these days. The mere survey of anyone of our congregations in the Susquehanna Conference, we realize that there is a lack of young adult presence. Many of us have asked that golden question before: How do we get young adults in our church. The simple question of why, why are young adults not engaged in the church is often uttered by many of us.

What I have realized of the last eighteen months is that this question cannot be answered with a simple response, or through a mere blog post of the top new ways to reach young adults. Because the problem is deeper and more nuanced. There are currently fifty million young adults in the United States, which makes up about fifteen percent of our population. But who are these fifteen

million young adults? Well, the traditional answer for any one of us would be, well, someone between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Some young adults I surveyed recently, I asked them, how would you identify your age group? I got three responses. The first one, it's a time period. The second one was, it's a season of life. So those two seem normal. The third one was, I think it's just a lifestyle.

The reality is, then, that this age group is so diverse. This group of people consists of college students at any institution of higher education. These are young adults who are working full-time or seeking to work full-time. They are married, they are single, they are dating. They may be parents, they may be single parents. They may already be divorced or they may even be widows or widowers.

So now, as I begin sharing with you some statistics about this diverse generation, I want you to keep two things in mind. The first one is, there are different kinds of drop-outs, as well as faithful young adults who never drop out at all. And we can see some of them here at Annual Conference.

So we first need to take care to not lump an entire generation together, because each story of disconnection requires a personal tailor-made response. I think this is why program language is no longer effective. Number two, I believe that the drop out problem at its core is a faith development problem. And to use church language, it's a disciple-making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.

So young adults are known as the missing generation in the church. According to "You Lost Me", written by David Kinnaman, he would share these statistics: Sixty-one percent of young adult Protestants ages 18 to 29 have dropped out of church after attending regularly. So what this means is, sixty-one percent of our youth groups, sixty-one percent of our church youth won't be a part of the church once they graduate high school.

Another statistic is fifty-seven percent of all young adult Christians say that they are less active in the church compared to when they were fifteen. Once they reach fifteen, then their level of involvement is significantly reduced.

And the last statistic, which I think is the most staggering, seventy-five percent of young adults are currently not attending church on a regular basis. Seventy-five percent of those who grew up in the church or who did not are not active in the church. And because of this staggering statistic, young adults are often known as the "black hole" in church attendance.

So the reality is, the universal church, all churches, churches in our annual conference, are struggling with this issue. And we are struggling to be in relationship with young adults effectively.

So then I looked at what are the UMC clergy statistics? Here are some to share with you. In the general UMC church, there were sixteen thousand, two hundred and ninety elders in 2013. And out of those sixteen thousand, only nine hundred and sixty-two were under thirty-five. So that would give us a 5.91 percentage of young adult clergy. Now in the Northeastern Jurisdiction, there were three thousand, forty-two elders in 2013. Out of those three thousand, only one hundred twenty-six of them were under 35. That would give us a 4.14 percentage, even lower.

Now in our annual conference, in the Susquehanna Conference, all clergy, elders, deacons, local pastors combined, there are five hundred and twenty-nine clergy in 2013. Out of those five hundred and twenty-nine, forty-one of them under 35. Which would give us a little higher percentage. Compared to the average, it would give us a 7.75 percentage.

So through my research and my personal thoughts, and through the David Kinnaman work, I think there are two categories to share with you this morning of why I think young adults are disconnected and why they are not participating in our churches.

Let's start with the personal challenges. The first personal challenge is, we have friends who are just not committed to Christ. If we can believe that seventy-five percent of my generation is not engaged in the church, then we would expect myself and my peers to have friends who aren't Christian. So because of that, that is a personal hindrance for me to be in the church.

The second one: There is disappointment with Ecclesiastical machinery. I think there is some sort of distrust that I have formed with the church and the hierarchy they establish with it.

The third one: We have inconsistent mentors, there's either inconsistency in the mentors personal life, or mentors who are not truly invested in the relationship, so they aren't consistent with it.

Number four: I think there are unresolved doubts and personal fragmentation. So in the midst of our young adult years, this is where our identity is formed. This is where we form who we are and what we believe. In the midst of that, then we have doubts. The myths of our over-educated society where we can learn about anything by going to the Internet, that has established many doubts and fragments of what I believe.

The fifth one: I think we young adults have poor personal choices with ongoing impact. The reality is, young adults make mistakes, we are not perfect, and so because of that, I've allowed myself to just to keep away from the church, because I have felt I have been judged – not saying that the church has judged me, but I have felt that I may be judged because of my lifestyle, or because of the things that are on my body.

The last one: I think there is some type of spiritual sabotage. You can use whatever verbiage you want to, but I think there is an effort out there that is trying to keep this already disengaged generation further away from us.

So those personal challenges, and I think now there are six church disconnections from "You Lost Me," are on the front of your Daily LINK this morning. So young adult, emerging adults, often feel disconnected from the church, because it seems, first, overprotective. Young adults sense that the church does not value their creativity or cultural engagements, which is very crucial to their lifestyle. So their creativity would produce something new, and would presumably be different than traditions.

Number two: The young adults find the church to be shallow. Some young adults find church to be boring and superficial.

Number three: Anti-science. With medicine advancements, personal technology, travel, care of the natural world, young adults feel that church has not helped them interact with science in a positive way. A clear example of this is the battle between evolution and creation.

Number four: Repressive. Religious rules, particularly sexual moors, feel stifling to the individual mindset of young adults.

Number five: Exclusive. Young adults are being shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance. So thus, Christianity as claimed to be exclusive, is a hard sell.

And the last one: Doubtless. Young adults find the church to not be a place to openly share and express their doubts.

All of these things, both the personal and the church corporate ones, I think all of these are a barrier for community, and for relationships to be formed. These are relational barricades. This is so crucial, because these are millions of lives, millions of young adult's lives that are at stake.

So we know Millennials are the largest generation in American history. And also our generation that are disconnecting from church and faith in large numbers that we've seen in generations.

The consequences of not paying attention to our disconnected relationships with this generation will have a significant impact on the church. But more than that, I think it is personal for you and I. For me, my heart breaks when I think about a few of my peers from high school. A couple names that come to mind are Gabe and Arianna and Josh, who have not been able to find the church to be a healthy place for them to be; for them to openly wrestle with a faith and wrestle with God. And they are not even finding the church to be relative to their life. But for some of you, it is not your peers, it is your children. It is your grandchildren or your great-grandchildren. And in the midst of my own wresting and in the midst of my own battling with statistics, I am always drawn to prayer. I am drawn to prayer because that is where I need to find my hope. And I think that is where we find our hope as a body.

So together this morning, now, I think we need to go to prayer. I think we should go to prayer and ask God for wisdom. Wisdom in building relationships of reconnection that will allow all of us, not just me, but all of us to participate in seeing God's faithfulness extended to a new generation. I want you to think of two young adults now. I want you to call to mind one young adult from your church or a grandchild or a child who may have lost the faith. So think of that person now. Then also think about a young adult who is still in the church; still in the church, still engaged with faith, still engaged with discipleship, and let's rejoice, and let's be thankful for that life. And let us pray with urgency. God is calling us to have an urgency for this generation. I think there is something powerful for all of us this morning, praying for all of those young adults that came to mind. I am going to give you a time to pray silently. Then I will conclude our time of prayer with a prayer. Let us pray together: O, God, we are drawn to you for hope. God, we come to you because you have first loved us. You have called each one of us by name, and have given each of us an abundant and full life. You, O God, love and care for your entire creation, for all of your people. And God, we are mindful today for my peers. For a generation who is lost and falling further away from you. For this, O God, we mourn. So God, we pray to you. God, grant us peace, grant us grace, and grant us urgency to be in relationship with a new generation. So God, give us the minds to understand, give us the words to affirm, and give us attitudes to love, because you, O God, are the ultimate source of hope in this life. And God, we pray for every young adult that came to mind this morning. May each one of those young adults come to know you in a deeper and a more holistic way. And God, we lift this all up in your holy and your amazing name. Amen.

Anna Knox: Good morning. My name is Anna Knox, and I am a millennial. I am also the pastor at Hawley United Methodist Church in this conference. As a child in the class of 2000, I consider myself the ultimate millennial. And I say as a millennial, don't put me in a box. Don't put me in any box, even one labeled "millennial."

I have seen what happens to people who are put in boxes: They are buried. I don't know about you, but I want to be alive and free. My "Free to be You and Me" recording that I had as a child, told me that on repeat, that I could be anything, anywhere. That I was unique in my imagination and insight. I had the power with that to change the world. Millennials have been taught since childhood that they could accomplish anything that they set their minds to, not by necessarily submitting to authority, but by using every resource available to us creatively to engage the world.

We have been taught by you to love the world; to explore it, to serve it. Be nice to others, we've been taught. Accept everyone, you told us. Have good self esteem, work in groups, play on teams; everyone gets a trophy, everyone is a winner. And everyone in our generation, from a very young age, has had access to the Internet (O, the blessed Internet), that has made every opinion on this planet available to us at the tip of our fingers. So, we have learned to consider all of the options, and become open to a diverse global perspective. And somewhere along the way, we got the impression that the church was not a space that was open to creativity and questioning.

This generation has gotten the distinct impression that the church is a closed box. So we must ask, have we shown people that the church is a place to go for authentic questioning? Kinnaman tells us that young Christians and former Christians, too, say the church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that faith doesn't always make sense. And with such a broad world view, millennials don't understand when the church says that their way, their traditions, are the only way. When the church tells us that we can't express doubts about a particular theology that seems incoherent, or a tradition that doesn't carry meaning for us, we say don't put us in that box. Let us figure out how we feel about things, and walk with us while we do that. Let us ask questions that may lead to new insights for everyone.

I love my generation. We think deeply and we love widely. But my sadness is, that in our quest to find communities that will engage our questions and our doubts, that are deeply interested in that, we don't even think to open the doors of a church, because we have seen God too often embodied as judgmental and rigid.

In college I got involved with a campus ministry, one that wasn't interested in my doubts and my questions; one that was only interested in telling me what to believe, and telling me who I needed to become to be saved. And if that had been my religious wilderness experience, if that has been what led me to launch out into the world, I am pretty sure I wouldn't have ended up here. And I am pretty sure that I wouldn't be ordained tomorrow.

But I was fortunate.

My mother got ill, and my questioning heart came home; came home to you. And I found in many of you, in this community, these communities in central Pennsylvania, people who were eager and willing to listen to my questioning, doubting, angry, broken heart. And you showed me that you were willing to walk with me and let me explore and question. And I am so sad that I seem to be the exception.

I encounter young people every single day who have not had the opportunity to have amazing, amazing mentors like I have had; to be encouraged. And also to be accountable to a community like that. And in conversations I will often ask them to tell me about the God that they hope for but can't seem to find. And so often, the God that they describe is the one that I know in Jesus Christ. And I so wish that they would see that God, that loving, open God in us; a God that's full of questions and answers questions with more questions. He who welcomes every single Doubting Thomas into his embracing arms.

I am becoming a pastor for life in the United Methodist Church tomorrow, not because somebody told me that I had to fit myself into a particular box of what a pastor or what a Christian or a Methodist looked like, but because people showed me that Jesus was alive in me, and that through the unique combination of my questioning, hope-filled heart and the beloved community that you are, that we truly could come together to transform the world that I love for the good.

And so if we really want to engage with young people, we have to dialogue with the question that Kinnaman asks: "How can the Christian community help this generation face their doubts squarely, and integrate their questions into a robust life of faith?" Consistently I see that if we get out of our church box, if we don't allow ourselves to be buried, if we struggle and question together with millennials, everyone is a winner. And you know millennials love that. And maybe we will find that we have more in common than we thought we did. And that together, we really do have the power to change this world.

Jake Waybright: Originally I wasn't supposed to be on one of these chairs. I am not a millennial. I have aged-out of the young adult category. As we kind of started to solicit young adults and millennials who could answer and respond to some of these disconnections that Kinnaman talks about in his book, we had a young adult who really wanted to be able to talk to two of those disconnections that are about the idea that often times young adults perceive the church as repressive when it comes to sexuality and exclusive when it comes to others who maybe don't share their beliefs, or others, even as Kinnaman often talks about, who are of different sexual orientations, is one of the things that Kinnaman talks about.

The truth is, is that we struggled through five or six revisions of what he might be able to say that might be able to be heard here in front of this huge group of people, and what might be helpful, and what might not put him in a position that might affect his relationships within the annual conference. In the end, just this week, we came to the realization that we couldn't quite get to that place. I think this is, the fact that I am here talking is, actually a demonstration of this disconnection that Kinnaman talks about. These issues are so hot for us right now, that we don't even know how to talk about them among ourselves. And because of that, young adults who want to be able to have conversation and engage about this, and who might come from different perspectives than they do, struggle to find places where they can engage faithfully and honestly with sort of where they are coming from.

So part of what I want to share with you today, not so much from a personal perspective, but from a perspective of what I understand and have heard and know from young adults and millennials in this area, is that I don't want this to come off as about the issues of sexuality that we are dealing with in the church directly, because this about who young adults are, and what it means to engage them faithfully in conversation. But if you are going to faithfully engage in conversation and in faith, and invite them to faith in Christ, one of the things that is really

important to understand about young adults is, that for many of them they just come at these issues from a different place than previous generations.

And the generational shifts have happened so fast, that many of us are left at a loss of even to know how to talk about it.

I read as I was preparing for this, a survey by the Pugh Research Center that came out in February. It was talking about generational differences; about same-sex marriage, for example. It was really interesting to see how wide of a gap there is. When you looked at folks who were over sixty-eight, the statistics were about in the general population about thirty-five percent of folks approved of same-sex marriage. But when you looked at the millennial generation, it was seventy percent. That is a huge gap.

When they asked the question for young adult millennials who had disengaged from their faith and faith communities of why that was, thirty percent of young adults said that one of the primary, significant influences for them was the way that they have seen their friends be treated within the church, and excluded from the church.

This is a difficult reality, that again, just the fact that I am the one sitting here, and not a young adult, speaks to how difficult this is to talk about.

All I guess I want you to hear today is that it is not something here to debate that issue or to say that you need to believe differently, but that in order to engage ministry with young adults as an authentic relationship, this the reality that you have to understand. And that what young adults are hungering for and longing for as they watch their peers as relational generation that values community over rightness and looks for a community in diversity, and hurt for friends they see who are hurting. For a generation that is very comfortable talking about sexuality, but when they come into the church feel like there is a closed door about that conversation.

Part of what they are also looking for is that they are watching the way that we treat others. And that our witness is hurt when they feel that we are hurting those people whom they love. They are looking for places of deep conversation.

It isn't to say, again, that you have to change or rethink what you think, but we need to find ways to be in authentic conversation across our differences. And if we can't, there is a large part of this generation that for which the conversation will never even begin.

The person who wanted to do the presentation ended his presentation with this; and I want to end with his paragraph: he said, "As I ruminated on Kinnaman and his understandings, I wondered if part of the disconnection for us as young adults is because honest conversations about sexuality and about our experiences of that, and our perception of that, and the way that the church deals with that, are never often even brought up; that we struggle to find a place where we can have true dialogue about these things. And it seems that the church has some barriers to starting conversations that young adults are already in. And it is our joint responsibility to learn how to bridge, to have conversations, that bridge this gap, that we can move faithfully ahead together."

Mindy Ferguson: Good morning. My name is Mindy Ferguson, and I am almost completed my first year of ministry. I am serving at First United Methodist Church in Huntingdon. On a typical Saturday night, the majority of my friends are not thinking about going to church on Sunday morning. It's not that they don't believe in God or even that they aren't living out their faith in

some way, but it has been their perception that the church has not been a place that has loved, supported, or encouraged them.

Even the friends that I made when I was in youth group are no longer active members of the church. It is not that their experience was necessarily a bad one, but after they graduated high school, it was as if the church had as a whole forgotten them. And before our creativity, excitement, and unique ideas were valued when planning a youth service, those ideas have not been as easily accepted.

What was once a sweet gesture by the youth is now viewed as a young person who just isn't satisfied with tradition. There is more of a sense of over-protectiveness of what is acceptable to come into the church from the outside than there was before.

It's not really all that surprising that young people aren't in our churches.

More specifically, it has been mine and my peers' observation that sometimes the church seems to struggle with change. It is difficult to consider how allowing music, movies, influences, books, and poetry from the secular world to permeate the walls of the church. The issue with that is, that young people are not leaving those things behind if, and when, they step foot inside our churches. There is not a fine line for young adults about what should or shouldn't be acceptable in the church. But this concern and resistance isn't only directed at young adults. We teach it to our children and our youth. We try to shelter them from all things secular. And while there is a lot of stuff out there in the secular world that we should want to guard our children and our youth from, there is also a lot to learn from. God is in a lot more than simply the things that we deem Christian or acceptable.

This secular world we live in might be on to something. It has become a place where people can express who they are; explore who they want to be. And whether it's from hurt, disapproval, judgment, rejection, community can be found in places that don't cause these types of feelings. It is perceived by young people that the church hasn't been the place for that. So we have gone looking other places.

I found friends with tattoos and piercings who have been asked to cover up or remove them before entering the church. I have overheard conversations about young people wasting their money on damaging their bodies. And this quick judgment hurts deeply to my friends who have used this creative art as a way to honor those who have passed away, or to remember the time that they have served in the military.

For many years now I have participated in dance in worship. Sometimes when searching for a song, my dance teams have used songs that were not written by specifically Christian artists. In College my dance team went to a church to worship through dance with them, and there was a lot of resistance to this type of worship. And it wasn't only because of the song choice, but also because of the dancing. We chose two different types of dance – both ballet and modern – and in my mind there was no issue, because this is how I best connect with God. But from the perspective of those watching, this was not the kind of thing that happened in church.

It is not out of disrespect that young Christian adults are expressing themselves through things considered to be a part of the secular culture. And in many ways, these things help young people to discover who they are and who they were created to be. It helps us to connect to God in a way that things deemed Christian and acceptable cannot.

Growing up, one of the best things that my church did, was allowed a few local bands to play their music in the basement of our building. There were rules. The music wasn't allowed to swear or it had to be respectful of the location, but what a crowd that event brought. There were young people of all ages in attendance. One of our youth leaders hung out in the kitchen as this event happened. And she was there to make sure that everything went OK. But more than that, she showed us that she loved us, and that she supported us. And it wasn't that she loved this particular type of music, but she knew how important it was to those who were there.

Is the solution to the absence of young people in the church allowing any kind of secular music to fill our churches? Probably not. But in inviting this kind of event into their space, the church was communicating to their young people that they cared about them, and that they mattered; that the church was interested in hearing about what was most important to them.

It is not a guarantee that my friends who were once so involved in the youth group, will return if there was a more openness to the secular world that we live in. But I think that being open to the possibility could open some doors. And openness to the possibility that our thoughts and interests and music and poems could be accepted in that space. And maybe it's an openness to allow pieces of who we are to enhance our worship together.

Many young people are simply seeking to be in relationship with people they know authentically care about them, and that authenticity starts with a willingness to be in conversation with one another.

Luke Harbaugh: I am Luke Harbaugh, and I am the associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in the sweetest place on earth, Hershey, Pennsylvania. They made me go last because I have a happy ending to my story, and they thought it would be a good way to go out.

They asked me to share last, because my story is actually the opposite of a lot of millennials. I chose to engage with this idea of shallowness that Kinnaman talks about. And it allowed me to kind of reflect upon a period in my life where shallowness was the essence and was the heart of my faith.

As I grew up, I was given kind of a seed of an evangelical faith by my mom, who told me at a very young age that you got to get right with Jesus, confess your sin, and make sure, basically, that you are not going to hell when you die.

In retrospect, that was a great place to start. That gave me a great foundation. But the problem was that, that seed went un-nurtured, un-watered for almost eighteen years of my life. So what I ended up with was a faith that was very shallow; one that was not engaged in any kind of community; one that never really grew – I couldn't even begin to define discipleship if I had tried when I graduated high school. Ultimately what it led me to from Kinnaman's work was, he talks about this idea of a moral therapeutic deism. I don't know if any of you have heard that term before or not. But basically, this idea that God, the way he is talked about in a lot of our churches, and the way that I certainly grew up thinking about God, is that he is part psychotherapist and part motivational coach. That he is there to help you and maybe make you a little bit of a better person, and when you have trouble, well, that's when you pray to God, and he is there to help you out and get you out of whatever bind that you are in. But unfortunately, when I graduated high school, that was really the faith that I possessed.

But what was interesting was that through some of my friends in high school, I saw a different kind of faith take place and really grow in their lives. And when I graduated high school, ... I say I'm a Christian, but I don't really know what that means. So I began to kind of seek out more answers. The reason I say that it's the opposite of a lot of millennials is, that I went to church. I did not go to church growing up. I'd been to church maybe three or four times in the first eighteen years of my life. And all of a sudden I said, you know what, I think I am going to start going. I want to know more about Jesus; and that's where they talk about Jesus, so that is where I am going to go.

I started attending a Nazarene church and found that my faith grew. And it was due to a couple of reasons. Kinnaman talks about apprenticeships; about the idea that mentoring and really strong relationships with older people in the church are really important. And I established a very quick bond with the youth pastor, and a very quick bond with the senior pastor. It was through those relationships that I really became grounded in that particular community of faith.

So for me, I look at that shallowness that unfortunately that we get a lot of times as Christians, and I think that they way we overcome that for millennials, and overcome that as a church as a whole, is to really focus on building relationships with people; and building relationships with people that aren't in the church.

I think about millennials in our church, and engaging them with one another in Bible studies and small groups; engaging them with children – and those things happen a good bit.

But one thing that is really lacking, I feel often times, is millennials, young adults, engaging with older people in our congregations. That there is so much wisdom out there, there is so much life experience, there are so many people that have lived decades and decades of Christian faith walking with the Lord, that all that experience and all that knowledge never gets passed on to the young adults that are in our churches.

Relationships were so important and so vital for me to connect to the church, that I think one thing that I really am hopeful for, and one thing that I really hope to see, are those relationships take place and have the people in our congregations that are in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s go out into the community and start engaging young adults where they are, and showing them what a life lived with Jesus Christ can truly give you in terms of wisdom, in terms of knowledge, and in terms of a faith to really live on as you go through and grow through life.

Jake Waybright: So you have had a lot to digest already. What I invite you to do, you have one minute and fifteen-seconds to do this, is to stand where you are, turn to a neighbor and share one thing that stuck out to you or was new to you in what you have heard.

Matt Lake: As we gather together here this morning, my name is Matt Lake; I am the pastor at First Church in Williamsport, and I also am here not because I am a young adult (I was asked to give my age, which is approaching forty). My son just said to me the other day ... I got my hair cut ... and he was trying to be nice, but he said, "Dad, do you like grey hair?" I said not particularly. He said, "O, Dad, it's just fading right out." So I am not going to pretend that I am a young adult, but I am here because one of the things that I have learned is we learn not only from those who have gone before us but we learn from those who come after us.

One of the people who have most taught me that is no longer with us; Tom Cartwright did that for me. I remember him specifically seeking me out every year at Annual Conference to hear my

voice and to learn from me. And I am really excited to learn from the people who are up here on stage.

I know that time is always against us. We checked with the bishop, and we are trying to take his command to us very seriously. Yesterday he encouraged us to be real and have dialogue and conversation. And so we are doing that. This is an important moment, because it will pass all too quickly. So we will not be much longer, but we are going to take just a few moments to talk together here this morning, because this is really, really important stuff. This is the future and the present of our church. And there are literally millions of lives and souls at stake. So we are going to spend just a few more moments talking together a little bit about that. Picture yourself – you're around the campfire right now with a thousand of your closest friends. That's kind of where we are, we just want to have a little bit of conversation with each other.

If I heard you all correctly this morning when you were sharing, it was interesting to me when I think of young adult, I think I gotta dress the right way, I gotta get just the right, hippest, coolest worship service. We gotta get the best programs in place. If I heard you correctly, I didn't hear that from any of you here this morning. So you have already shared a lot of information for us this morning. But just in a few snippets, what would you say then young adults are looking for if it's not the cool programming and the hip worship; what are they looking for?

Anna Knox: I think what you heard from all of us repeatedly was the word “authenticity.” I have shared that with my church. We have considered starting a contemporary worship service. And the reality is that we don't have the people to do that. We don't have the technology to do that. It's not us. And so what I have said to them is, young adults want us to be authentically ourselves. They want us to share who we really truly are. And what you've heard a lot around this topic is, is that they are looking for a space where they can be real too. So if we can provide those space, but also go and find them where they are, because, like I said, they are not coming to us, are they? To intentionally create spaces where those authentic conversations can happen.

Matt Lake: So authenticity is certainly one thing. What else are young adults looking for that stick out to you?

Kris Sledge: I think young adults are looking for, almost like, reverse mentoring. I think we want to be mentored by people who are older and wiser than us, but I also want older people to ask us what we think, what we feel. So it's that mutual relationship; it's that mutual growing; it's not just that one-way wisdom, but it's that deep relationship. I think we just want to kind of do life together. We want to live among each other, we want to serve together, we want to grow together, we want to be in conversation together. So it's more than just that program, but it's more of this deep, intimate relationship, knowing that you authentically care. That you really want to hear my voice; you don't want to hear my voice just because you want to have more young people.

Matt Lake: So, authenticity, deeper relationship through form such as reverse mentoring. What else sticks in your minds of what young adults are looking for?

Mindi Ferguson: I think to go along with the relationships, a love with no strings attached. Often we – and this doesn't just go for young adults – but we are quick to judge based on whatever we see about a person. But really taking seriously the way that Jesus taught us to love people, and loving in that way. To build our relationships upon that.

Matt Lake: So when you say a “love with no strings attached,” would it be fair to say love in a very real way, without the preconceived notions of who you may or may not be; those boxes that you talked about, Anna. Anything else that jumps to mind for you of what young adults are looking for and want to be a part of?

Jake Waybright: I am not officially a young adult, but in working this and kind of having conversations with folks in preparing for this and others in ministry, I think authentic relationship kind of came up again and again and again. I think, for me, there are two pieces to that. One piece is, authentic relationship means giving that space where, like, to connecting community, but like be part of the church but not necessarily do everything the way that they did it before. Like not to try and be hipper, but also to allow space for young adults to have a space where they can find their own way in the community and how to express that. I think secondly, like I was thinking, the authentic community kept coming up again and again. In a few minutes we are going to look at a video that we did from young adults in our churches around the annual conference that we asked the question, “Why are you still part of the church?” Like why are you still here?

One of the things that came up again and again was sort of this idea of authentic community. I was thinking about this last night, and I was thinking, in some ways, like, part of what I hear is like these themes are barriers to community, and part of what the answer is sort of like, it’s as easy and as hard as friendship. It’s as easy and as hard as that. What does that authentically look like?

Matt Lake: Let’s touch on that a little bit, because I think all of us would sit here and say, right, we want to be authentic. We do not want to keep young adults out of church. I think in some conversation, the example is raised, Jesus says love God, love your neighbor. We would all say we want to do that. It’s the doing it that becomes the hard part.

So as you all are sitting here today, can you try to give us some examples of what that might look like? Or, maybe something that surprises us of what we would expect for young adults. For example, Kris, I heard you when you were sharing this morning, that you were pretty clear in your presentation with the statistics that it’s not that we are trying to avoid deeper discipleship. In fact, if I hear you correctly, you might almost be calling us to deeper discipleship. And Luke, I’ve heard to talk about that as well. Could one of you or both of you comment a little bit on that?

Luke Harbaugh: I think one thing we kind of underestimate people, and we underestimate young adults, and I think one thing that we really want is a challenge. I think if you look at churches that require a lot of people, whether that requires a lot to become a member or require a lot of service, a lot of engagement in the community to be considered a part of the church – those often are churches that are growing; those often are churches that are very healthy and vibrant. And I don’t think that we require enough sometimes, especially from our young adults. We kind of throw the doors open really wide sometimes, and we say we’re here for you, but once they are in, we don’t challenge one another. We don’t challenge each other in accountability or in holiness. And we end up with a really wide road in but nothing there once they get there. If we think about the people that we really respect in our lives, and the people that I respected growing up, they were teachers and they were coaches and they were my parents, and they were the people that really pushed me further than what I thought I could do.

And in the church a lot of times, I don't think we push people. I think we are afraid maybe to offend or maybe we are afraid to alienate. And I think we have to really engage deeply on a personal level and push people's boundaries a little bit, and say God desires more from you. God desires better from you. And really spur each other on toward holiness and toward godliness.

Matt Lake: For me, there is sort of two things that strike me. My natural inclination would be, I want to make it as easy as possible for young adults. That's sort of my thinking. Along with I can't give them too much responsibility, because I don't want to overwhelm them. But hearing you all, it's the opposite, because one, they want a voice, I heard you say, which comes with responsibility. But also, if I am hearing you correctly, Anna, you are "change the world" people. So, load those expectations on and let you go to it. Am I hearing that correctly?

Anna Knox: Absolutely! We want to see a vital change in the community. One of my favorite things that's happened recently in our community is, one of my atheist millennial friends that I hang out and play Frisbee with, agreed to come and help us with "The Church Has Left the Building" initiative. So I don't know that he really realized what he was doing, but he came. He painted benches with the rest of us on a Sunday morning, instead of being in traditional worship. He was so passionate about it. And he recruited his friends. So, on our church video, from this day we have all these atheists hanging out with us. He is passionately engaged in serving the wider world and wanting to do that with fervor and bring other people along.

They want to see results, though. They may not want to sit on a committee but they want to see results, and they will work hard for it. So, please, ask us; ask them to do things that matter.

Matt Lake: So as you're saying that, if I could just ask one or two of you very briefly to share. Again, if this is not a program thing, where are you seeing examples in church, or maybe after this conversation more specifically, outside the church, where are you seeing authentic community happen? Where are you seeing relationships being built? Where are you seeing the mentoring or young adults being empowered to make a difference? This is great language to throw out there, but our challenge will be to say how do we create authentic community? What's one thing I can do to build a deeper relationship? Could one of you throw out an example or two for us?

Kris Sledge: At the church I am working at, I think my whole role at the church, the whole reason I was hired to be there was to create that sense of community. I have been able to not because of my position but because of my age and my ability to relate to them, just form a community of young adults, they want to meet together. In the summer they have asked to deal with the hard issues; they want to wrestle with them; they want to know what Jesus really thinks. They want to know what it is like to serve the community. So for me, I always felt like they were asking me to form it. They (conversation not clearly understood) I feel like they want to do it, they are just waiting to be asked. They are just waiting to be given that space; to be free, not to terrorize the church, but to grow together.

Jake Waybright: Kris, as you say that, too, it's interesting. My tendency is to avoid confrontation at all cost. That's what I like; a smooth ship. If I am hearing you all correctly, it's not such a big deal to you guys. You would rather be real, even if my opinion is different than yours, you're OK with that. Maybe I'm the one who's not OK with that. Is that fair?

Kris Sledge: I would say that's fair. And I think in the midst of that, I want you to be you so I can be me. So I want you to differ from me. I don't want you to think what I think. So because of

that, I want that community so we can honestly get down to the core and say this is what I really believe. And I want you to accept me so that I can accept you for what you believe.

Matt Lake: Again, time is always against us, so we are going to wrap our time up here. I would like to sit with you guys much longer, and I am going to do that actually. I hope that we can all do that together. But before we go, I am just going to ask each one, very quickly, anytime I come to a conference, part of me is craving give me something to take away. So I am going to ask these folks up here, if there is one thing, if you could wave that magic wand and say I hope this is what we take away today, I hope this is what will happen, you can't go on very long, what is the one thing you really hope today we could take away with us in this regard?

Anna Knox: I would like to see every young adult have the same kind of reception in a church that I had. I was a pastor's kid. I got special treatment; I realize that. But I want to see that happen for every young adult, so that when you ask a young adult a question on a Sunday morning, you stay to hear the answer; and share with them a little bit of your life, too. They will care, and it will make a difference to them.

Jake Waybright: I guess I would say kind of what I said before. I think it's about kind of a hunger for this authentic community that is able to even be in community sometimes across some wide differences. And friendship is easy and as hard as that.

Mindi Ferguson: I would say intentionally seek out and love your young people.

Luke Harbaugh: I think to go along with that, outreach, evangelism, whatever you want to call it, is the responsibility of every single person in the church. It's not up to your pastors alone. It's not up to the volunteers and the leaders of ministry alone. It's the responsibility of every single person in the church to go out and reach out into the community and engage every age group. Not just young adults, but especially us.

Kris Sledge: Tell us your story. Tell us the way that God has worked for you, so we can glean something. And realize that, as you can see, we don't have the answers either. I know you want the answers. So let's work together. Let's be in this community together so all of us can reach young adults together.

Matt Lake: I wish we had a lot more time. Listening to these folks, one of the things I feel like I have already learned is it is my task in helping to serve in a church. These folks are not targets to be conquered; they are people to love. I want to thank you all for helping me learning that evermore. The image you all bring to mind is, I just keep thinking of Jesus meeting the woman at the well. Where she could ask all her questions and have real conversation and be loved as she was and God did something amazing. I thank you all for that.

Having these kinds of conversations gives me hope, and it also gives me hope to have our bishop, because he has created this space to this dialogue. He followed up on what he said yesterday by creating this space. So can we thank him for that?

We really do believe that this is where answers begin. How did God bring the world into existence through his spoken word? And we receive that opportunity this morning.

I received hope listening to those folks. I received hope bishop Park. We want to leave you with a word of hope, remembering that the God we serve is bigger than any obstacles or challenges

we face. So as a final, word of hope here this morning, I invite you to turn your attention to the screen, and to know that God is moving among us; and he is not done with us yet.

VIDEO

Bishop Park: I would like to ask the whole body, would you stand and would you express your appreciation for the leadership that we have seen this morning. Because their presence and ministry and leadership among us, I would like to claim that the young adult generation is not a lost generation, but the generation yet to be claimed by the church, and we will do it together. Thanks be to God. Amen. Let the church say amen. Praise the Lord.