

God's Visionaries  
(Joel 2, 1 Timothy 4)  
by Jeff Taylor  
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Why does God want us to listen to each other across generations? Because God speaks to people across generations and listens to people across generations and if we don't do the same, we don't hear or speak with the full voice of God. We understand things in ways that people of other ages don't and they understand things in ways we don't.

Today I choose a passage from Joel, so effectively read by Clara, in which the prophet makes the general point that as part of His restoration of Israel He will pour out His Spirit on every kind of person including the old and young who will dream, hear, and speak. And from the New Testament I chose this passage from 1 Timothy highlighting the challenges faced by a younger than usual leader.

Timothy was not a child and very likely neither a teen or even very young adult. There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the author's word for "youth" in this passage was used by Greek speakers of the day to mean any person not yet an elder - so perhaps as old as 40, but often much younger. In any case, Timothy was a younger person charged with leading people older than he who apparently resisted his leadership for that reason.

It's important to remember that 1 Timothy was written at least 35 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and quite possibly, I would say most likely, a good deal later than that. Even though we may view all churches referred to in the New Testament as being part of the "early" church - the word "early" is relative. If this letter was written 70 years or more after Jesus' earthly journey, it was at least two generations since Jesus. The themes in this short letter point not to an earlier time when churches were being planted by men and women apostles, when people were mostly new to the faith, and the main controversies were about creating a church out of many cultural groups. Rather, this letter seems to arise in a later stage of the church's development when male-dominated leadership systems seemed to be in place and the main concerns seemed to be about keeping everyone, including bishop Timothy, in line in their behaviour and in their thinking. If this letter is from this latter stage of hierarchical development, it is then all the more striking that the author encourages a younger man to stand up to his elders. Even within this relatively cohesive institution God speaks a radical word - "Don't allow others to dismiss you because you are young."

I gave exactly this advice this past week to some grade 12 students, advising them that their brains are currently going through a developmental stage that is designed for gaining independence. I start all my courses with some learning on brain science. Since every

single thing every human being does, feels, thinks, and believes originates in the brain, it seems reasonable to look at how it works. We don't know nearly all there is to know about that, but in the last 15 years neurologists have made significant progress in understanding the brain's functions and stages of development. In the 1980s we were taught that the brain loses cells but never gains any new ones; but it turns out the brain can regenerate, particularly in response to trauma. And the brain changes: it changes through several significant life stages; and it changes every day, hour, and minute as we choose to change it. There is a sense in which the brain is a self-healing and self-guiding system. You can't fix a broken wrench with that broken wrench, but you are changing and fixing your brain with your own brain! Even better, you can make deep connections to the brains of thousands, millions, and billions of other brains.

In youth there are significant brain changes that seem designed to prepare us to transition from child to adult. Just before puberty there is a massive surge in new dendritic connections in the brain as it talks to all parts of itself, storing information in multiple places. This is why you can teach a grade 4 or 5 kid almost anything: they haven't yet realized that old people are lame and shouldn't be listened to, and their brains are firing at a super high level. That's why even Alzheimer's patients will often remember things from their childhood that were tucked away into multiple corners of the brain during this phase. If you want to know where your keys are, don't ask your spouse - ask your 10 year old: they may not care where your keys are, but if they happen to have noticed them around, they are more able and more likely to remember where they are. We need to hear from our children because they are amazingly good thinkers.

Beginning in or just before the early teens the brain begins to prune away many of those dendritic connections the way one prunes dead limbs from a plant so as to strengthen the still live ones. Why did your kid used to love dance and now has no interest? They can't keep doing everything they used to do and do it all at more advanced levels. They are preparing for the world of adulthood, a world of specialization. By the time my son was a teen he had lost his interest in insects, but his eye for small details found a new home in photography, and he could explain the composition of the universe at the sub-atomic level. He let one thing go in a decision to gain or strengthen something else.

Another change in the brain that happens during the teens and early twenties is that testosterone receptors attach themselves to the amygdala, the emotional centre of the brain. So now we become a bit more prone to being aggressive when threatened. How is that good? Well, as an anabaptist standing in the pulpit it's not easy to spin that one positively. Basic Darwinism would explain that our ancient human and pre-human ancestors needed to be prepared to fight for survival. The way you and I might see the effects of that brain change is in some defiance from young people towards various authorities, especially parents from whom they must learn to separate. And we parents

must keep helping them towards what may feel to us like a too drastic separation. That's a process that puts both parents and young people on high alert and young people might sometimes need to insist that parents make and permit change. "Let no one dismiss you because you are young, Timothy - you're the leader now."

It is only right that leadership in families and social institutions of every type, including the church, should constantly renew itself. It is right because we humans are designed in our youth to want an increasing measure of autonomy so that we can exercise our strengths for the benefit of the community. None of us can afford to allow those gifts to go undeveloped: we need the energy and creativity of young minds to help us solve increasingly complex problems. My wife, Doreen, works as a team editor on the city desk at the ever-shrinking Toronto Star and one of her greatest pleasures has been to mentor young reporters. This last week the summer internship program ended rather sadly as the Star was not able to offer any of these exceptional interns ongoing positions. Even in my profession, which is not yet disappearing, I have become discouraged about training new teachers for jobs that I know won't soon be awaiting them in Ontario. BTW, I realize that I am one of the no-longer-young teachers standing in the way of hiring a great new younger teacher and I don't want to be a hypocrite about that: if you, the good people of Ontario, would simply like to advance me the next seven years salary to bridge me to my pension, I'll leave the classroom right now. No? Okay, well then you and your youth are stuck with me a while longer. Joking aside, I am concerned about the decreased lack of opportunity that the current and recent generation of graduates is encountering. We are all going to suffer for it.

It is right that leadership transitions to young people because the decisions leaders make affect young people more and for much longer. A decision by a 60 year old politician to make only half an effort to stop climate destruction only hurts them, well, possibly not at all. But today's teens will be victims of that decision for 70 years to come. Children and young people suffer more family violence and abuse and more poverty than any other age group, but they have no voice and no political power. Do you begin to understand why they might sometimes get a bit emotional, and why it is a good thing that they are designed to begin to insist that we listen. Young people, don't let anyone dismiss you because you are young.

Look at how our society shares power with young people. Now yes, we do offer the young protections that we adults don't have. I always advise my Law students that if they are absolutely determined to commit a crime that they should do it before they turn 18 while they still enjoy the protections of the Youth Criminal Justice Act. I kid, of course. So sure, we shelter young people from some of the consequences of adulthood, as we should. But even when we grant the powers of adulthood we do so in a way that seems guaranteed to escape their attention. When do we grant the right to vote in this country?

Yes, 18. And where do a large percentage of people find themselves living when they are 18, 19, 20? Yes, on a campus in a town where the government of Canada doesn't know they are and won't be sending voter registration information. Are they supposed to travel back to their parent's ridings to vote? In recent years the Province of Ontario offered voting on some campuses, but not all.

Also, if we want people to do something as adults, don't we train them in youth? Why don't we allow 16 or 15 year olds the power to vote about leaders who will make decisions that affect them more than any of the rest of us? Maturity - sure, that's an issue; but it's also the same reason given for barring women and some minorities from voting in the past. And if it is maturity or civics knowledge we're concerned about, why don't we test everyone of every age for those qualities before allowing them to vote? Those that have power simply fail to underhand the value to themselves and the whole society of sharing it and we all suffer.

But in the church things are different yes?

Yesterday I posted a graph from Pew Research on the TUMC fb page.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154704286829384&set=gm.1078228135560250&type=3&theater>

It's too much hassle connecting equipment for just one slide so I'm not showing it now but have a look at it later if you haven't yet. It shows major Christian denominations and others in the U.S. by four major age groupings of the adults (18+) in those denominations along with their median adult ages - half the adults above that age, half below. You'll see that most of the Christian groups have adult medians well above the overall US adult median age of 46. Just a few examples: Catholic median adult age is 48; Jewish - 50; Pentecostals - 52; Southern Baptists - 54; Episcopalians - 56; and Presbyterians - 59. The main groups that had median adult ages lower than the national average were Mormons at 43; Buddhists at 39, atheists at 34; and both Hindus and Muslims at 33. Now, because Pew, or those denominations, or both didn't bother to ask about children and youth we can only surmise that the churches with high adult median ages have either not had many youth in recent years or that they lost them.

What about the Mennonite church? Now you may find something I didn't and if you do please post it to the fb page; but I could find nothing. I have no idea how we might compare to these groups. And in any case, none of this tells us anything about people under 18. So we don't really know what kind of youth presence we have in our or any other denominations or how it is sustained over time.

We know we're trying. In our little congregation we devote considerable pastoral time to our youth and have a large children's presence in our Sunday School and other programs and in our services where we also focus on young kids' needs, not so much teens' needs, mind you.

As we launch into the new school year, let's be attentive to how this community and our larger Mennonite fellowship attends to the needs of youth, but most especially, how we listen to their visionary voices. And young people, remember: don't allow anyone to dismiss you because you are young.